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## *The Night I Stopped Being a Negro*

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A WHITE LAD once delivered a telegram to our Tuscaloosa home and my grandmother, as was the peculiar Alabama custom, addressed him as “sir.” Her deference to a teenager broke my six-year-old heart. Some will argue, and psychologists among them, that a child of such a tender age could not have been so repulsed by a community custom that his parents steadfastly embraced. But I suffered the incident in silence, and I was indeed only six years old.

Other such contradictions riled me periodically. I once refused to answer “Yes, sir” to a white shoe salesman and my mother slapped my face crisply, and hard. Despite her maternal entreaties, and another cuffing right there in the store, I refused to utter the requisite “sir.” This unreadiness seized me involuntarily, like the hiccups, quite without warning. I had no reasons, only questions I dared not ask. Children in black, working-class families, even loving, fundamentalist Baptist ones like mine, simply did not talk back to their parents. We were to be seen and to obey in silence.

Honorifics were prized among us and had specific application. “Sir” and “ma’am” were reserved for parents, elders, and adult strangers. Youngsters shy of their majority were spared. There were certain exceptions among family. My brothers and I did not, for example, answer “ma’am” to our Aunt Lizzie, or “sir” to my Uncle Edward, whose nickname was “Deadwood Dick.” Both of these family elders had strayed from the teachings of Christ Jesus and, we learned later, drank whiskey.

Strangely, my brothers and I were not required to answer “ma’am” to our mother—with her tacit approval. She was not a backslider and didn’t drink whiskey, so this was puzzling to me, the youngest following the lead, but again, I didn’t ask questions. Later I surmised that it was because mother was a very young woman, looked even younger, and was separated from our father.

This matrix of Southern behavior was straightforward enough, until whites entered our small, homogeneous universe. Race etiquette of the day had white strangers addressing my grandmother as “girl,” or “Annie.” My sixty-eight-year-old granddaddy they called “boy.” Negroes, on the other hand, were required under penalty of law, vigilante violence, and hellfire to address all whites, of whatever age or station, with “sir” or “ma’am” and “Mr.” this and “Mrs.” that.

The telegram boy was the first white person I’d encountered up close. He was not, however, the first teenager I’d met. Teenagers, in my six-year-old mind, were never answered “sir.” Yet here was my grandmother, the person I respected most in all the world, humbling herself before a teenager. It sent my whole world crashing. As for the incident with the shoe salesman, I just couldn’t bring myself to utter the respectful “sir” to a stranger in the presence of my mother.

It would be a stretch to conclude that my childhood refusal to address white strangers by polite titles of respect was some existential reach for justice. Albert Camus majestically argues such a point in his philosophical treatise, *The Rebel*, where the first insurrectionary word out of the mouth of the hero is “No.” Unlike the Rebel, I was quite diffident as a child, though a bit stubborn. I suspect that my unreadiness, initially at least, stemmed from the fact that, like all children, I was born free of racial bias. In my innocence, I also held the naïve notion that words meant something specific and that their application was immutable. This concreteness emboldens some primary students hard

off their first grammar lesson to correct their parents' syntax. I dared not correct my elders, though my knees buckled at certain constructions, to say nothing of the contradictions. We didn't answer "sir" to teenagers, so why did grandma answer "sir" to a white teenager?

My push for justness in conversation earned me a few beatings and some alienation, and cost me a new pair of shoes. Still, my abstinence persisted, not so much as an act of rebellion, but as an outcry for clarity in a confused young life knocked topsy-turvy by race. More specifically, I balked unknowingly at this early parental pressure to get me converted, born again, and socialized into a state of inferiority—to be made a Negro.

I faced my first race-based conundrum.

The Eden into which I was born was the Tuscaloosa of the 1940s, a taut mill town on the disturbed banks of the Black Warrior River. Like most of the state, the city was garnished with the plundered culture and pilfered nomenclature of the vanquished Native Americans, mainly the Choctaw, who once roamed the Alabama woodlands. Tuscaloosa got its name from the chief who was defeated in 1540 by Hernando de Soto. Negroes of my day stood instinctively against the descendants of de Soto, instead identifying—many even claiming bloodlines—with Chief Tuska (warrior) Lusa (black), the Black Warrior.

Like a dagger of the Devil, the railroad tracks split Tuscaloosa between working class Negroes and the whites who ruled everything. On our side were wood-frame shotgun houses, segregated schools, Bar-B-Q juke joints, choke-dusty roads, bootleggers, and, proliferating everywhere, holy roller churches of the Lord. Snaking through the neighborhood, the blue and orange city buses would deliver our parents across town to menial jobs at the Gulf States Paper Mill, Holt's iron foundry, downtown stores, and the white folks' yards and kitchens.

Their side of town featured the lily-white University of Alabama, home of the nationally ranked Crimson Tide football team coached by the legendary Bear Bryant. Though barred from Alabama games, Negroes were recruited at five cents an hour to clean up Denny Stadium and mop the campus dormitory floors. As for Negro higher education, there was Stillman College. Founded in 1876 by missionaries, Stillman was operated by white Presbyterians who graduated black homemakers, ministers, musicians, teachers, frustrated handymen, and more missionaries.

Other than Bear Bryant, the closest thing Tuscaloosa had to a reigning hometown hero was Robert Shelton, the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Whites preached that God Himself had anointed them to rule from their separate Eden. This grand design had Gov. James E. (Big Jim) Folsom as the equal of Charlemagne, Bear Bryant as a plaid-hatted Apollo, and Wizard Shelton as a housebroken Attila the Hun. So beloved was this White Knight in bed tick that an official sign at the city limits announced that Tuscaloosa was "The Home of Robert Shelton, Imperial Wizard of the KKK." Everything in those days was segregated: churches, water fountains, bus and train stations, rail coaches, schools, the hospital, drugstores, toilets, graveyards, the five-and-dime, even the sidewalks. Sheriffs enforced this apartheid by day; Robert Shelton and his hooded terrorists enforced it by night. A caravan of his Klan nightriders once rode through our community and kindled in my young soul more curiosity than fear. Every God-fearing Negro, save my uncle Deadwood Dick, quaked in their brogans for weeks. I got the message.

Despite the breast beating about supremacy, it took those redneck pets of God the dint of church, law, and many weapons to suppress Negro competition that might otherwise challenge this white preeminence. Competition, especially in the job market, was the great fear of these superior beings of Tuscaloosa. Their clown show as the Chosen Ones was orchestrated by a small, seldom-seen elite who had grown wealthy from recent wartime light industry, cotton plantation profits sweated from Old South slaves, and cheap labor of post-Reconstruction sharecroppers. This oligarchy manipulated the more visible mass of bamboozled white proletarians who ran the apartheid goat that chewed up the lives and resources of Negro families. Key to this terror regime was the Alabama judicial system that secretly supported armed bands of murderous, liquored-up, white degenerates like Robert Shelton, and loosed them upon agrarian blacks a generation out of slavery striving to improve their stake in America.

Our parents conspired with this Southern reality. They curbed all signs of rebellion in their offspring, especially in their boys, fearing that it would land them in harm's way. Getting arrested, they taught, was unchristian, yet the white sheriffs made it all but unavoidable. This brutal irony drove some parents preemptively to call the police to haul

their rebellious children off to the penitentiary. Example made, those who stayed home dared not aspire to equal the measure of whites. Adolescence was a twilight zone. Manhood was unfathomable.

This inferiority, inspired in us at the hearth, was reinforced by every shred of evidence on public display: the Little Black Sambo school-books, the billboards, the *Amos 'n' Andy Radio Show*, the drinking fountains, the sales clerks, the hillbilly governor's mansion, and the Jim Crow laws at every turn.

Occasionally, enlightened teachers would confuse us. They proffered the notion that we were just as good and as smart as anyone else—even the white students across the tracks whom we never saw, but whose tattered, second-hand books we were fortunate enough to inherit. What little we learned of those little darlings, whose parents ran our world, was picked up in snatches of conversations from our womenfolk who daily cooked their meals, cleaned their bedrooms, washed their clothes, and sometimes nursed their siblings.

We were bent like saplings to the circumstance of a permanent underclass. The process was at least as old as the Spartans' art of dominating the Helots by weeding out each generation's allotment of brave warriors who would otherwise break the cycle of fear, passivity, ignorance, and dependency. Without the courageous ones—so brutally ripped away—the others, no matter how deep their intelligence, could not mount and sustain an insurgency against Jim Crow. Police brutality, with its round-up tactic of racial profiling, served the state's purpose of maintaining white supremacy and had the tacit approval of the white majority.

The quiet kitten of self-loathing came subtly upon me as a child. My resignation to this inferior status in America was occurring in sinister, well-calibrated, almost scientific stages. Born free, I was, within the borders of my circumstance, becoming colonized. There were no pitched battles, no changing of the flag, no fanfare of surrender. Indeed, no internal war of the psyche was ever declared. All I know is that by age twelve—the year I found the Lord and was baptized—I was no longer digging in my heels against racial slights, indignities, and humiliations. When my eyes were not fastened on the hereafter, I noticed how few earthly rewards Negroes got for their efforts. In time, I began thinking maybe we Negroes just didn't deserve any better.

Caught up in this zephyr, I began trimming the sails of my dreams and expectations. I scrapped the idea of becoming a train engineer, an artist, a scientist, and even a fireman.

There were no black models to fix on, no tracks on the choke-dusty road. Tuscaloosa had seen to that. The strong men, so indomitable in our world, shrunk to insignificance in the presence of white folks. Proud, boastful lions at home, they were lambs on their jobs across town. Mr. Hughes, my junior high school principal, was so intimidating that when juvenile toughs heard his voice roaring near the boys' bathroom they would swallow their cigarettes, sometimes ashes and all. On those rare visits from white officials, however, the man we called the "Bear" put on his dance of the kowtow. His *basso profundo* would lose its deep timbre and regain it only when the white functionaries cleared the railroad tracks.

At age six, such obsequious behavior might have hit me like fresh manure in a closed stall. Approaching puberty, however, with the stench of segregation still wafting in the air, something within me had changed. I had started out with zero tolerance for the etiquette of Negro behavior. Once it had contorted me like a seizure of the hiccups. Now, at the age of twelve, thanks to socialization within family and community, such petit apartheid drew barely a yawn. My emerging generation was newly primed for our post-slavery role as hewers of wood in a rich, industrialized America.

I had become a rail-thin, down-home, born-again, Tuscaloosa Negro boy.



My family migrated north to Hartford, Connecticut, when I was twelve and going into the ninth grade. Just as the immigrants pouring in from Hungary, Italy, and the rest of postwar Europe, we too were seeking better economic conditions, and escaping political oppression and state terror. Unlike the Russians, the Poles, and the Hungarians, my family had endured eight generations of slavery, oppression, and misery, not in some foreign police state, but down on the Alabama steppes of America.

"I knew I didn't have the kind of boys that could make it down there," mother said of my two brothers and me. Despite careful grooming at home, school, and church, my parents judged us poor candidates

for the kowtow. My increasing lapses in racial deference, my grandmother feared, would surely attract the sheriff's attention, if not Robert Shelton's. The penitentiary beckoned, she warned, and behind it—an early grave.

The Tuscaloosa educational system had not prepared me for the shock of Hartford Public High School. All the teachers and 95 percent of the students were white. Plucked from an *Amos 'n' Andy* world, I had been put down in the classroom of *Our Miss Brooks*. For weeks I could barely speak around classmates I took to be one part Aristotle to two parts Captain Marvel. Though an honors student in Tuscaloosa, I felt totally compromised academically, forsaken, alone, alienated, afraid, country-dumb, and inferior all the way down my genomic chain. I felt even my God had failed me.

The tissue of the indomitable white student, in time, began to peel away from my classmates like a suntan. They spoke proper English, but their answers in class were no better than the ones I was too frightened to utter. Hiding in the second row of Mr. Nathalie's geometry class proved difficult. I was swept up into participation. My first test paper came back marked "92." The white kid a desk over got a 78. How, by the name of Tuscaloosa, could this be possible? Perhaps our test papers had somehow been switched. The scenario was repeated in English, earth science, and civics.

My guidance counselor, Carl Olsen, seemed impressed with my sophomore honor-roll grades, but the tall, bushy-haired teacher grew wary when I told him I'd like to become an electrical engineer. The Soviets had launched Sputnik, and the space race with the United States was on. Engineering was a hot field in Connecticut with key aeronautical firms such as Pratt & Whitney, Sikorsky Helicopters, and Hamilton Standards. Despite my grades, Mr. Olsen recoiled at my ambitions as if I had offended him personally.

"I don't think you should plan on going into engineering," he said. "It's just not realistic. I think you should (take courses that will) prepare (you) for a career where Negroes can get jobs." (When I read later that a Michigan teacher in the 1930s had similarly dismissed Malcolm X's plans to become a lawyer, I thought perhaps there was a national script that these white gatekeepers read from.) Mr. Olsen flatly refused to register me in requisite algebra and advanced physics courses. I don't

know how many other black student wings he had clipped. Grades weren't discussed in my circle of street buddies. We talked girls, baseball, girls, cars, girls, gang colors, girls, pinball machines. Good grades were frowned upon. Some had the growing suspicion that, despite holding up my end in gang fights, I was something of a closet bookworm.

Mr. Olsen was the first in a long line of white gatekeepers to underestimate me.

I encountered Max Putzel as a sophomore engineering student at the University of Connecticut. The first literary essay I wrote for this English professor came back marked "BS." After class, I waited for the white students to clear the area around his desk before politely requesting an explanation of his rather strange grade.

"You know what it means," Putzel said gruffly. "It means bullshit. You know you didn't write that paper."

Speechless, I stood before the honored professor, perhaps, like Melville's Billy Budd, stuttering before Claggert. Unlike Budd, who struck a telling blow, I withered under the hot lights of Professor Putzel's false accusation and turned meekly for the door, tears welling from some place deep down in Tuscaloosa. I couldn't bring myself to plead my case or even to face my accuser.

At semester's end, Professor Putzel's postcard arrived at home bearing my final grade, a prominent B, this time without the S. A handwritten apology explained that he had been "hasty" in prejudging me incapable of writing a competent English essay. My performance convinced him finally, he wrote, that my initial essay had been my "own work."

Authority figures such as Putzel, Carl Olsen, and dozens of others were devastating setbacks. After departing Tuscaloosa, I had worked to overcome my crippling sense of racial inferiority. With no human reinforcement, it was through extracurricular reading that I came to grips with one aspect of my condition. This self-medicated therapy came through reading the works of psychiatrists Frantz Fanon, William H. Grier, and Price Cobbs and writers such as Gunnar Myrdal, Herbert Aptheker, I. F. Stone, Jean-Paul Sartre, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin. These prescriptions set me on the road to a cure. The most meaningful counterattack upon racism in America was Baldwin's magazine

article on the Black Muslims. This was my first glimmer of the possibility of achieving peace, if not parity, on the race question.

My racial transformation, which started in Mr. Nathalie's geometry class, had been only a fleeting, easily reversible sense of academic parity. White students enjoyed no greater insight into Chaucer, Camus, or Dostoyevsky than I, yet they flew in an orbit far beyond my reach. I'd never met a white person, South or North, who did not feel comfortably superior to every Negro, no matter the rank or station. Conversely, no Negro I'd met or heard of had ever felt truly equal to whites. For all their polemical posturing, not even Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., or the great Richard Wright, with all his crossed-up feelings, had liberated themselves from the poisoned weed of black self-loathing with its deeply entangled roots in the psyche.

One night during my college days, I came face-to-face with my own psyche of self-loathing.

It was June 6, 1963.



Entering from stage left, the speaker of the evening loped into such a hush up front that his shiny Stacey Adams could be heard clacking on the oak floor. Settling quickly at the lectern, Malcolm X clenched his teeth against a fresh challenge from the local newspaper to his status as a national black leader.

His subject, that Wednesday night in Hartford, was "God's Judgment of America and the Only Solution to the Race Problem." He had been refining the speech since his "homecoming" appearance at Michigan State University four months earlier. Several of his white childhood classmates had attended that address on January 23. Proud, curious, and disbelieving of the fearsome aspects of his national image, they had not seen Malcolm in the flesh since he left East Lansing for Boston as a gangling teenager, with a twinkle and a yen for the fast life.

One white classmate from nearby Mason left the hall, bewildered that this fierce, podium Malcolm had shown no trace of "Harpy," her gentle friend and class president of her eighth grade. That was his last year of formal education, an ordeal his English teacher shut down by berating him for aspiring to become a lawyer. The white teacher proposed

instead that young Malcolm Little make peace with his birthright as a Negro and aim at becoming a carpenter.

On the night of Malcolm X's speech, I was among the audience in the half-filled auditorium at Bushnell Memorial Hall. Connecticut was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, country. His nonviolent Civil Rights Movement was Southern based and he came to New England not to scorn but to raise funds. King acknowledged that Southern history and tradition—codified in Jim Crow laws—had imbued “blacks with a false sense of inferiority and whites with a false sense of superiority.” While King sought to change the behavior of the dominant society, Malcolm X hammered away at blacks' “false sense of inferiority.” He conducted his scorched-earth polemics all over New England and elsewhere in the North, hell-bent on exposing whites as “blue-eyed devils” and changing the mind of the Negro.

Recommending black self-help, Malcolm X exposed the white hypocrisy of de facto segregation in such areas as Connecticut housing and education aimed at its 125,000 resident Negroes and Puerto Ricans. Segregation was not a Southern phenomenon, he argued, but an American one that also infected New England institutions of higher education. Among the 1,700 University of Connecticut graduates in 1960, for example, there were but two Negroes. At the time, I was one of less than sixty blacks in UConn's student population of some ten thousand.

I had first heard of Malcolm X and the Black Muslims in 1959 when CBS televised “The Hate That Hate Produced.” Occasionally I would encounter Muslims “fishing” after North End church services or hawking *Muhammad Speaks* downtown. I had even come face to face with Malcolm X near the group's small, makeshift temple on Albany Avenue, but was too astonished to utter a word. Impressed with Malcolm X, but wary of his leader Elijah Muhammad and his cult, I had followed such news of the Muslims as reached my quasi-cloistered campus life. The image I had of the Muslims was of stereotypical ex-cons in bow ties shoving *Muhammad Speaks* into the faces of frightened white shoppers. Among others, Woody Allen popularized this image in his spoof of a dubbed Japanese movie, *What's Up, Tiger Lily?*

I altered my opinion of the Muslims in 1962 when I read, in *The New Yorker*, James Baldwin's “Notes from a Region in My Mind,” a

prophetic rendering of the writer's encounter with Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. (It was later printed as the best-selling *The Fire Next Time*.) Adding his oil to Elijah Muhammad's fires, Baldwin warmed me to the notion that whites were not fit models for how to live one's life. Negro students across the nation read Baldwin and took in his lectures, but wouldn't dare visit the forbidding Muslim mosques, with their body-and-handbag searches, hard security in the pews, and strict segregation of men from women. For his analysis of the Muslims, Baldwin, who had debated Malcolm X on several panels, went directly to the source, Elijah Muhammad.

At the Muslim headquarters in Chicago, Baldwin stood his ground as a writer when Elijah Muhammad, at his dinner table, asked him, "What are you now?" Refusing to be stampeded into saying "Christian," Baldwin said, "I don't, anyway, think about it a great deal." Elijah replied that, "[Baldwin] ought to think about it *all* the deal."

Despite the word from the top man, it would be Malcolm X, not Elijah, even under Baldwin's hand, who moved me to thinking more than *I* otherwise would have about my circumstance as a young Negro in America.

On the night of the lecture, I noticed that Malcolm X alternated his flat reference to "blacks" with a qualified "so-called Negroes." The former loosed a rustle of unreadiness among the brethren in the mixed audience. We were "Negroes," thank you, and proud of it. Malcolm's revisionism was rejected as name calling, bordering on the dozens. For generations, running back to slavery, black was pejorative—period. It conjured up evil, dirty, lowlife, unwashed, tarnished, polluted, squalid, inferior, and all the other negative connotations so well documented in the dictionaries of the early 1960s—and the one Malcolm X himself had pored over during stints in those Massachusetts prisons. Back home in Tuscaloosa, for example, whenever I would call my oldest brother "black" (though both of us were as dark as a pocket), I'd have to run for my life. If I had thought of calling him "African," God forbid, he would have chased me mercilessly to the ends of the earth.

The Negroes in the Hartford audience, as elsewhere, brought acquiescence, if not pride, to our contemporary racial group designation. This same year, 1963, a group of Negro students at a Toledo, Ohio, high school organized an angry demonstration after an assistant principal

referred to them over the intercom as “black students.” Like the other Negro Baptists in the hall, I had, with the faith of little children, believed in every Christian tenet and American orthodoxy including—down deep—our own racial inferiority.

Every jot and tittle of this Judeo-Christian-American credo Malcolm X shredded this night with his terrible, swift sword.

Sensing the misplaced racial pride as strong in Hartford as anywhere he had visited, Malcolm X took pains to address the issue head on. “Now I know you don’t want to be called ‘black,’” he said, isolating his targets scattered throughout the mixed audience. I got the feeling he was speaking directly to me. “You want to be called ‘Negro.’ But what does ‘Negro’ mean except ‘black’ in Spanish? So what you are saying is: ‘It’s OK to call me ‘black’ in Spanish, but don’t call me black in English.’”

This simple analysis struck me dumb! Sitting in my cushioned seat, a shiver of enlightenment swept over me. It was as profound as a haiku moving a Buddhist novice to achieve “satori” under the prompting of a Zen master. After shovels of Muslim theology, horse-doctor doses of racial counterrejection, and trash talking about the “blue-eyed devils,” Malcolm had finally done the job with an eyedropper.

My mind raced back to Tuscaloosa and every parent and teacher urging that I was “just as good as white kids,” only to get contradicted by the Alabama reality of the 1950s. The “whites only” signs rolled by, as did the juke joints, the Klan, the railroad tracks, the Jim Crow bus station, the redneck sheriffs, and Mr. Olsen. All of it patched into a crazy quilt of white superiority with the obverse side black inferiority.

If Negroes were “just as good,” then why were we janitors but not landlords, cooks but not city councilmen, pickers but not farmers of cotton, hewers but not owners of the timberlands and lumber yards? Where, I had also wondered, were the Negro professionals: the doctors, architects, lawyers, judges, mayors, governors, and engineers? Where were, as Marcus Garvey had asked in 1916, the black men of big ideas? Why indeed did we so totally reject Garvey’s notion of the African man?

The lightning Malcolm X loosed that night scored a direct hit on the tin shack of my own psyche. That conditioned sense of Negro inferiority, hotheaded during my Alabama childhood, dissipated like ground fog under the bright sun. Perhaps because he had personally undergone

a Damascus Road conversion, Malcolm X was able to communicate—and demonstrate with his life—how Negroes like myself could throw off the damnable curse that blocks our potential and keeps us from taking our place among men.

By the end of the lecture, I felt—and knew—that something within me had changed again, this time irreversibly. Whites were no longer superior. Blacks—most important, I, myself—were no longer inferior. This cardinal message would make Malcolm X a treasure for black liberation and a serious threat to white America.

By stripping “black” of its magic powers to dehumanize, Malcolm X single-handedly reoriented the “Afro-American” masses toward a healthier sense of our color and an appreciation of our African roots. He was the leader most responsible for condemning the term “Negro” to the scrap heap. He also purged and popularized “black” and paved the way for “African Americans” as accepted usage, driving both into the *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*.

My own group birthright, so indelibly stamped upon the souls of black folks in America, was as difficult to remove as a tattoo. It was finally stripped away by Malcolm’s acid bath of racial counter-rejection, tough-love logic, and bottom-up primer on American history. Since Tuscaloosa, I had carried deep within me the mark of the conditioned Negro, the most despised—and self-despising—creature in America. Up until this June night I had been lost, but all praises be to Malcolm X, my dungeon shook, and, as the poet said, my chains fell off.

I entered Bushnell Hall as a Negro with a capitol “N” and wandered out into the parking lot—as a black man.

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