

I started kindergarten at Bryn Mawr Elementary School in the fall of 1969, showing up with the twin advantages of knowing in advance how to read basic words and having a well-liked second-grade brother ahead of me. The school, a four-story brick building with a yard in front, sat just a couple of blocks from our house on Euclid. Getting there involved a two-minute walk or, if you did it like Craig, a one-minute run.

I liked school right away. I liked my teacher, a diminutive white lady named Mrs. Burroughs, who seemed ancient to me but was probably in her fifties. Her classroom had big sunny windows, a collection of baby dolls to play with, and a giant cardboard playhouse in the back. I made friends in my class, drawn to the kids who, like me, seemed eager to be there. I

was confident in my ability to read. At home, I'd plowed through the Dick and Jane books, courtesy of my mom's library card, and thus was thrilled to hear that our first job as kindergartners would be learning to read new sets of words by sight. We were assigned a list of colors to study, not the hues, but the words themselves—"red," "blue," "green," "black," "orange," "purple," "white." In class, Mrs. Burroughs quizzed us one student at a time, holding up a series of large manila cards and asking us to read whatever word was printed in black letters on the front. I watched one day as the girls and boys I was just getting to know stood up and worked through the color cards, succeeding and failing in varying degrees, and were told to sit back down at whatever point they got stumped. It was meant to be something of a game, I think, the way a spelling bee is a game, but you could see a subtle sorting going on and a knowing slump of humiliation in the kids who didn't make it past "red." This, of course, was 1969, in a public school on the South Side of Chicago. Nobody was talking about self-esteem or growth mind-sets. If you'd had a head start at home, you were rewarded for it at school, deemed "bright" or "gifted," which in turn only compounded your confidence. The advantages aggregated quickly. The two smartest kids in my kindergarten class were Teddy, a Korean

American boy, and Chiaka, an African American girl, who both would remain at the top of the class for years to come.

I was driven to keep up with them. When it came my turn to read the words off the teacher's manila cards, I stood up and gave it everything I had, rattling off "red," "green," and "blue" without effort. "Purple" took a second, though, and "orange" was hard. But it wasn't until the letters *W-H-I-T-E* came up that I froze altogether, my throat instantly dry, my mouth awkward and unable to shape the sound as my brain glitched madly, trying to dig up a color that resembled "wuh-haaa." It was a straight-up choke. I felt a weird airiness in my knees, as if they might buckle. But before they did, Mrs. Burroughs instructed me to sit back down. And that's exactly when the word hit me in its full and easy perfection. *White. Whiiiiite.* The word was "white."

Lying in bed that night with my stuffed animals packed around my head, I thought only of "white." I spelled it in my head, forward and backward, chastising myself for my own stupidity. The embarrassment felt like a weight, like something I'd never shake off, even though I knew my parents wouldn't care whether I'd read every card correctly. I just wanted to achieve. Or maybe I didn't want to be dismissed as incapable of achieving. I was sure my teacher had now pegged me as someone who couldn't read or, worse, didn't try. I obsessed

over the dime-sized gold-foil stars that Mrs. Burroughs had given to Teddy and Chiaka that day to wear on their chests as an emblem of their accomplishment, or maybe a sign that they were marked for greatness when the rest of us weren't. The two of them, after all, had read every last color card without a hitch.

The next morning in class, I asked for a do-over.

When Mrs. Burroughs said no, cheerily adding that we kindergartners had other things to get to, I demanded it.

Pity the kids who then had to watch me face the color cards a second time, going slower now, pausing deliberately to breathe after I'd pronounced each word, refusing to let my nerves short-circuit my brain. And it worked, through "black," "orange," "purple," and especially "white." I was practically shouting the word "white" before I'd even seen the letters on the card. I like to imagine now that Mrs. Burroughs was impressed with this little black girl who'd found the courage to advocate for herself. I didn't know whether Teddy and Chiaka had even noticed. I was quick to claim my trophy, though, heading home that afternoon with my head up and one of those gold-foil stars stuck on my shirt.

At home, I lived in a world of high drama and intrigue, immersing myself in an ever-evolving soap opera of dolls. There were births, feuds, and betrayals. There was hope, hatred, and sometimes sex. My preferred way to pass the time between school and dinner was to park myself in the common area outside my room and Craig's and spread my Barbies across the floor, spinning out scenarios that felt as real to me as life itself, sometimes inserting Craig's G.I. Joe action figures into the plotlines. I kept my dolls' outfits in a child-sized vinyl suitcase covered in a floral print. I assigned every Barbie and every G.I. Joe a personality. I also recruited into service the worn-out alphabet blocks my mother had used years earlier to teach us our letters. They, too, were given names and inner lives.

I rarely chose to join the neighborhood kids who played outside after school, nor did I invite school friends home with me, in part because I was a fastidious kid and didn't want anyone meddling with my dolls. I'd been to other girls' houses and seen the horror-show scenarios—Barbies whose hair had been hacked off or whose faces had been crosshatched with Magic Marker. And one thing I was learning at school was that kid dynamics could be messy. Whatever sweet scenes you might witness on a playground, beneath them lay a tyranny of shifting hierarchies and alliances. There were queen bees,

bullies, and followers. I wasn't shy, but I also wasn't sure I needed any of that messiness in my life outside school. Instead, I sank my energy into being the sole animating force in my little common-area universe. If Craig showed up and had the audacity to move a single block, I'd start shrieking. I was also not above hitting him when necessary—usually a direct fist blow to the middle of his back. The point was that the dolls and blocks needed me to give them life, and I dutifully gave it to them, imposing one personal crisis after another. Like any good deity, I was there to see them suffer and grow.

Meanwhile, from my bedroom window, I could observe most of the real-world happenings on our block of Euclid Avenue. In the late afternoons, I'd see Mr. Thompson, the tall African American man who owned the three-unit building across the street, loading his big bass guitar into the back of his Cadillac, setting off for a gig in one jazz club or another. I'd watch the Mendozas, the Mexican family next door, arriving home in their pickup loaded with ladders after a long day of painting houses, greeted at the fence by their yapping dogs.

Our neighborhood was middle-class and racially mixed. Kids found one another based not on the color of their skin but on who was outside and ready to play. My friends included a girl named Rachel, whose mother was white and had a British accent; Susie, a curly-haired redhead; and the

Mendozas' granddaughter whenever she was visiting. We were a motley mix of last names—Kansopant, Abuasef, Yacker, Robinson—and were too young to register that things around us were changing fast. In 1950, fifteen years before my parents moved to South Shore, the neighborhood had been 96 percent white. By the time I'd leave for college in 1981, it would be about 96 percent black.

Craig and I were raised squarely in the crosscurrents of that flux. The blocks surrounding us were home to Jewish families, immigrant families, white and black families, folks who were thriving and some who were not. In general, people tended to their lawns and kept track of their children. They wrote checks to Robbie so their kids could learn piano. My family, in fact, was probably on the poor side of the neighborhood spectrum. We were among the few people we knew who didn't own their own home, stuffed as we were into Robbie and Terry's second floor. South Shore hadn't yet tilted the way other neighborhoods had—with the better-off people long departed for the suburbs, the neighborhood businesses closing one by one, the blight setting in—but the tilt was clearly beginning.

We were starting to feel the effects of this transition, especially at school. My second-grade classroom turned out to be a mayhem of unruly kids and flying erasers, which had not

been the norm in either my experience or Craig's. All this seemed due to a teacher who couldn't figure out how to assert control—who didn't seem to like children, even. Beyond that, it wasn't clear that anyone was particularly bothered by the fact that the teacher was incompetent. The students used it as an excuse to act out, and she seemed to think only the worst of us. In her eyes, we were a class of "bad kids," though we had no guidance and no structure and had been sentenced to a grim, underlit room in the basement of the school. Every hour there felt hellish and long. I sat miserably at my desk, in my puke-green chair—puke green being the official color of the 1970s—learning nothing and waiting for the midday lunch break, when I could go home and have a sandwich and complain to my mom.

When I got angry as a kid, I almost always funneled it through my mother. As I fumed about my new teacher, she listened placidly, saying things like "Oh, dear" and "Oh, really?" She never indulged my outrage, but she took my frustration seriously. If my mother were somebody different, she might have done the polite thing and said, "Just go and do your best." But she knew the difference. She knew the difference between whining and actual distress. Without telling me, she went over to the school and began a weeks-long process of behind-the-scenes lobbying, which led to me and a

couple of other high-performing kids getting quietly pulled out of class, given a battery of tests, and about a week later reinstalled permanently into a bright and orderly third-grade class upstairs, governed by a smiling, no-nonsense teacher who knew her stuff.

It was a small but life-changing move. I didn't stop to ask myself then what would happen to all the kids who'd been left in the basement with the teacher who couldn't teach. Now that I'm an adult, I realize that kids know at a very young age when they're being devalued, when adults aren't invested enough to help them learn. Their anger over it can manifest itself as unruliness. It's hardly their fault. They aren't "bad kids." They're just trying to survive bad circumstances. At the time, though, I was just happy to have escaped. But I'd learn many years later that my mother, who is by nature wry and quiet but generally also the most forthright person in any room, made a point of seeking out the second-grade teacher and telling her, as kindly as possible, that she had no business teaching and should be working as a drugstore cashier instead.

As time went by, my mother started nudging me to go outside and engage with kids in the neighborhood. She was

hoping that I'd learn to glide socially the way my brother had. Craig, as I've mentioned, had a way of making hard things look easy. He was by then a growing sensation on the basketball court, high-spirited and agile and quickly growing tall. My father pushed him to seek out the toughest competition he could find, which meant that he would later send Craig across town on his own to play with the best kids in the city. But for now, he left him to wrangle the neighborhood talent. Craig would take his ball and carry it across the street to Rosenblum Park, passing the monkey bars and swing set where I liked to play, and then cross an invisible line, disappearing through a veil of trees to the far side of the park, where the basketball courts were. I thought of it as an abyss over there, a mythic dark forest of drunks and thugs and criminal goings-on, but Craig, once he started visiting that side of the park, would set me straight, saying that really nobody over there was all that bad.

Basketball, for my brother, seemed to unlock every frontier. It taught him how to approach strangers when he wanted to snag a spot in a pickup game. He learned how to talk a friendly form of smack, trash-talking his bigger, faster opponents on the court. It helped, too, to debunk various myths about who was who and what was what around the neighborhood, reinforcing the possibility—something that had

long been a credo of my dad's—that most people were good people if you just treated them well. Even the sketchy guys who hung out in front of the corner liquor store lit up when they spotted Craig, calling his name and high-fiving him as we passed by.

“How do you even know them?” I'd ask, incredulous.

“I don't know. They just know me,” he'd say with a shrug.

I was ten when I finally mellowed enough to start venturing out myself, a decision driven in large part by boredom. It was summer and school was out. Craig and I rode a bus to Lake Michigan every day to go to a rec camp run by the city at a beachfront park, but we'd be back home by four, with many daylight hours still to fill. My dolls were becoming less interesting, and without air-conditioning our apartment got unbearably hot in the late afternoons. And so I started tailing Craig around the neighborhood, meeting the kids I didn't already know from school. Across the alley behind our house, there was a mini housing community called Euclid Parkway, where about fifteen homes had been built around a common green space. It was a kind of paradise, free from cars and full of kids playing softball and jumping double Dutch or sitting on stoops, just hanging out. But before I could find my

way into the fold of girls my age who hung out at the Parkway, I faced a test. It came in the form of DeeDee, a girl who went to a nearby Catholic school. DeeDee was athletic and pretty, but she wore her face in a pout and was always ready with an eye roll. She often sat on her family's stoop next to another, more popular girl named Deneen.

Deneen was always friendly, but DeeDee didn't seem to like me. I don't know why. Every time I went over to Euclid Parkway, she'd make quiet, cutting remarks, as if just by showing up I'd managed to ruin everyone's day. As the summer went on, DeeDee's comments only grew louder. My morale began to sink. I understood that I had choices. I could continue on as the picked-on new girl, I could give up on the Parkway and just go back to my toys at home, or I could attempt to earn DeeDee's respect. And inside that last choice lay another one: I could try to reason with DeeDee, to win her over with words or some other form of kid diplomacy, or I could just shut her up.

The next time DeeDee made one of her remarks, I lunged for her, summoning everything my dad had taught me about how to throw a punch. The two of us fell to the ground, fists flailing and legs thrashing, every kid in Euclid Parkway instantly clustered in a tight knot around us, their hollers fueled by excitement and grade school bloodlust. I

can't remember who finally pulled us apart, whether it was Deneen or my brother or maybe a parent who'd been called to the scene, but when it was done, some sort of silent baptism had taken place. I was officially an accepted member of the neighborhood tribe. DeeDee and I were unharmed, dirt stained and panting and destined never to be close friends, but at least I'd earned her respect.

My dad's Buick continued to be our shelter, our window to the world. We took it out on Sundays and summer evenings, cruising for no reason but the fact that we could. Sometimes we'd end up in a neighborhood to the south, an area known as Pill Hill due to an apparently large number of African American doctors living there. It was one of the prettier, more affluent parts of the South Side, where people kept two cars in the driveway and had abundant beds of flowers blooming along their walkways.

My father viewed rich people with a shade of suspicion. He didn't like people who were uppity and had mixed feelings about home ownership in general. There was a short period when he and my mom considered buying a home for sale not far from Robbie's house, driving over one day to inspect the

place with a real estate agent, but ultimately deciding against it. At the time, I'd been all for it. In my mind, I thought it would mean something if my family could live in a place with more than one floor. But my father was innately cautious, aware of the trade-offs, understanding the need to maintain some savings for a rainy day. "You never want to end up house poor," he'd tell us, explaining how some people handed over their savings and borrowed too much, ending up with a nice home but no freedom at all.

My parents talked to us like we were adults. They didn't lecture, but rather indulged every question we asked, no matter how juvenile. They never hurried a discussion for the sake of convenience. Our talks could go on for hours, often because Craig and I took every opportunity to grill my parents about things we didn't understand. When we were little, we'd ask, "Why do people go to the bathroom?" or "Why do you need a job?" and then blitz them with follow-ups. One of my early Socratic victories came from a question driven by self-interest: "Why do we have to eat eggs for breakfast?" Which led to a discussion about the necessity of protein, which led me to ask why peanut butter couldn't count as protein, which eventually, after more debate, led to my mother revising her stance on eggs, which I had never liked to eat in the first place. For the next nine years, knowing that I'd earned it, I made

myself a fat peanut butter and jelly sandwich for breakfast each morning and consumed not a single egg.

As we grew, we spoke more about drugs and sex and life choices, about race and inequality and politics. My parents didn't expect us to be saints. My father, I remember, made a point of saying that sex was and should be fun. They also never sugarcoated what they took to be the harder truths about life. Craig, for example, got a new bike one summer and rode it east to Lake Michigan, to the paved pathway along Rainbow Beach, where you could feel the breeze off the water. He'd been promptly picked up by a police officer who accused him of stealing it, unwilling to accept that a young black boy would have come across a new bike in an honest way. (The officer, an African American man himself, ultimately got a brutal tongue-lashing from my mother, who made him apologize to Craig.) What had happened, my parents told us, was unjust but also unfortunately common. The color of our skin made us vulnerable. It was a thing we'd always have to navigate.

My father's habit of driving us through Pill Hill was a bit of an aspirational exercise, I would guess, a chance to show us what a good education could yield. My parents had spent almost their entire lives living within a couple of square miles in Chicago, but they had no illusions that Craig and I would do the same. Before they were married, both of them had

briefly attended community colleges, but each had abandoned the exercise long before getting a degree. My mother had been studying to become a teacher but realized she'd rather work as a secretary. My father had simply run out of money to pay tuition, joining the Army instead. He'd had no one in his family to talk him into returning to school, no model of what that sort of life looked like. Instead, he served two years moving between different military bases. If finishing college and becoming an artist had been a dream for my father, he quickly redirected his hopes, using his wages to help pay for his younger brother's degree in architecture instead.

Now in his late thirties, my dad was focused on saving for us kids. Our family was never going to be house poor, because we weren't going to own a house. My father operated from a practical place, sensing that resources were limited and maybe so, too, was time. When he wasn't driving, he now used a cane to get around. Before I finished elementary school, that cane would become a crutch and soon after that two crutches. Whatever was eroding inside my father, withering his muscles and stripping his nerves, he viewed it as his own private challenge, as something to silently withstand.

As a family, we sustained ourselves with humble luxuries. When Craig and I got our report cards at school, our parents celebrated by ordering in a pizza from Italian Fiesta, our

favorite place. During hot weather, we'd buy hand-packed ice cream—a pint each of chocolate, butter pecan, and black cherry—and make it last for days. Every year for the Air and Water Show, we packed a picnic and drove north along Lake Michigan to the fenced-off peninsula where my father's water filtration plant was located. It was one of the few times a year when employee families were allowed through the gates and onto a grassy lawn overlooking the lake, where the view of fighter jets swooping in formation over the water rivaled that of any penthouse on Lake Shore Drive.

Each July, my dad would take a week off from his job tending boilers at the plant, and we'd pile into the Buick with an aunt and a couple of cousins, seven of us in that two-door for hours, taking the Skyway out of Chicago, skirting the south end of Lake Michigan, and driving until we landed in White Cloud, Michigan, at a place called Dukes Happy Holiday Resort. It had a game room, a vending machine that sold glass bottles of pop, and most important to us, a big outdoor swimming pool. We rented a cabin with a kitchenette and passed our days jumping in and out of the water.

My parents barbecued, smoked cigarettes, and played cards with my aunt, but my father also took long breaks to join us kids in the pool. He was handsome, my dad, with a mustache that tipped down the sides of his lips like a scythe.

His chest and arms were thick and roped with muscle, testament to the athlete he'd once been. During those long afternoons in the pool, he paddled and laughed and tossed our small bodies into the air, his diminished legs suddenly less of a liability.

Decline can be a hard thing to measure, especially when you're in the midst of it. Every September, when Craig and I showed up back at Bryn Mawr Elementary, we'd find fewer white kids on the playground. Some had transferred to a nearby Catholic school, but many had left the neighborhood altogether. At first it felt as if just the white families were leaving, but then that changed, too. It soon seemed that anyone who had the means to go was now going. Much of the time, the departures went unannounced and unexplained. We'd see a "For Sale" sign in front of the Yacker family's house or a moving van in front of Teddy's and know what was coming.

Perhaps the biggest blow to my mother came when her friend Velma Stewart announced that she and her husband had put a down payment on a house in a suburb called Park Forest. The Stewarts had two kids and lived down the block on

Euclid. Like us, they were apartment dwellers. Mrs. Stewart had a wicked sense of humor and a big infectious laugh, which drew my mother to her. The two of them swapped recipes and kept up with each other, but never fell into the neighborhood's gossip cycle the way other mothers did. Mrs. Stewart's son, Donny, was Craig's age and just as athletic, giving the two of them an instant bond. Her daughter, Pamela, was a teenager already and not so interested in me, though I found all teenagers intriguing. I don't remember much about Mr. Stewart, except that he drove a delivery truck for one of the big bakery companies in the city and that he and his wife and their kids were the lightest-skinned black people I'd ever met.

How they afforded a place in the suburbs, I couldn't guess. Park Forest, it turns out, was one of America's first fully planned communities—not just a housing subdivision, but a full village designed for about thirty thousand people, with shopping malls, churches, schools, and parks. Founded in 1948, it was, in many ways, meant to be the paragon of suburban life, with mass-produced houses and cookie-cutter yards. There were also quotas for how many black families could live on a given block, though by the time the Stewarts got there, the quotas had apparently been abolished.

Not long after they moved, the Stewarts invited us to come visit them on one of my dad's days off. We were excited.

For us, it would be a new kind of outing, a chance to glimpse the fabled suburbs. The four of us took the Buick south on the expressway, following the road out of Chicago, exiting about forty minutes later near a sterile-looking shopping plaza. We were soon winding through a network of quiet streets, following Mrs. Stewart's directions, turning from one nearly identical block to the next. Park Forest was like a miniature city of tract homes—modest ranch-style places with soft gray shingles and newly planted saplings and bushes out front.

“Now why would anyone want to live all the way out here?” my father asked, staring over the dashboard. I agreed that it made no sense. As far as I could see, there were no big trees like the giant oak that sat outside my bedroom window at home. Everything in Park Forest was new and wide and uncrowded. There was no corner liquor store with ratty guys hanging out in front of it. There were no cars honking or sirens. There was no music floating from anybody's kitchen. The windows in the houses all looked to be shut.

Craig would remember our visit there as heavenly, namely because he played ball all day long in the wide-open lots under a blue sky with Donny Stewart and his new pack of suburban brethren. My parents had a pleasant enough catch-up with Mr. and Mrs. Stewart, and I followed Pamela around,

gaping at her hair, her fair skin and teenager jewelry. At some point, we all had lunch.

It was evening when we finally said good-bye. Leaving the Stewarts, we walked in the dusk to the curb where my dad had parked the car. Craig was sweaty, dead on his feet after all the running he'd done. I, too, was fatigued and ready to go home. Something about the place had put me on edge. I wasn't a fan of the suburbs, though I couldn't articulate exactly why.

My mother would later make an observation about the Stewarts and their new community, based on the fact that almost all of their neighbors on the street seemed to be white.

"I wonder," she said, "if nobody knew that they're a black family until we came to visit."

She thought that maybe we'd unwittingly outed them, arriving from the South Side with a housewarming gift and our conspicuous dark skin. Even if the Stewarts weren't deliberately trying to hide their race, they probably didn't speak of it one way or another with their new neighbors. Whatever vibe existed on their block, they hadn't overtly disrupted it. At least not until we came to visit.

Was somebody watching through a window as my father approached our car that night? Was there a shadow behind

some curtain, waiting to see how things would go? I'll never know. I just remember the way my dad's body stiffened slightly when he reached the driver's side door and saw what was there. Someone had scratched a line across the side of his beloved Buick, a thin ugly gulch that ran across the door and toward the tail of the car. It had been done with a key or a rock and was in no way accidental.

I've said before that my father was a withstander, a man who never complained about small things or big, who cheerily ate liver when it was served to him, who had a doctor give him what amounted to a death sentence and then just carried on. This thing with the car was no different. If there was some way to fight it, if there was some door to pound in response, my dad wouldn't have done it anyway.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, before unlocking the car.

We rode back to the city that night without much discussion about what had happened. It was too exhausting, maybe, to parse. In any event, we were done with the suburbs. My father must have had to drive the car to work the next day looking the way it did, and I'm sure that didn't sit well with him. But the gash in his chrome didn't stay for long. As soon as there was time, he took the car over to the body shop at Sears and had it erased.