CINCINNATI, 1963

It had started over something trivial in a dark dead-end street in the downtown slums, a part of Cincy that had once been some mayor's idea of urban development, but that over the years had descended into a series of narrow cobblestone alleys kept in a constant state of darkness by the towering, dirty brick buildings shadowing them.

I was hanging with my friend R.D.—a whip of a guy who gave the impression of a coiled spring ready to let loose. He had one distinguishing characteristic that made him stand out: he wasn't afraid of anyone or anything. We were two young teenagers always out exploring different neighborhoods. On this day we were in a neighborhood we had no business in; we had a habit of doing that. A dangerous thing to do in this part of Cincy, but if you weren't willing to take some chances, you just stayed home.

We were walking past a narrow passageway when we heard a commotion: shouts and sounds of scuffling, underscored by loud music being played. Curiosity got the best of us, and we ventured down a narrow alley that opened into a courtyard, surrounded by tall, dark windows. Debris spilling from overturned trash cans exuded a fetid odor of weeks-old, uncollected, rotting garbage. It was a blistering hot Midwest summer day, the heat so stifling that it sucked the moisture from every pore. Windows were open, curtains billowing and folks hanging out of the windows, watching the scene below like a sporting event. Stevie Wonder's "Fingertips" blasted from one side of the courtyard, the Miracles' "Mickey's Monkey" from the other as a counterpoint. What we saw was a too-common scene in the projects. Two dudes were squaring off in the middle of the street, surrounded by a crowd of people egging them on.

"Come on, kick his ass, man. He ain't no good. You can take that motherfucker."

It was obvious from the attitude of the onlookers that one of the fighters was local, and one wasn't. Judging from their moves, I could tell they were two equally badass bangers who could have, and probably did, rule in most situations.

One of them was a tall, sinewy guy, handsome, with sharp features and a "do," the straightened hairstyle that was popular at the time. He had scars around his eyes and one on his upper lip that told me he was battle-tested, but he still managed to retain his good looks—a pretty boy.

The other fighter had the type of body that indicated he'd spent time in the "Big House": prison tatts and muscles bulging in places where they shouldn't have been, like he had had a lot of time on his hands recently. Nothing good-looking about him; he had a protruding brow, long arms for his size—kinda caveman-looking—and dead eyes that told me he was ugly inside and out, like he was mad at his mother, and the world, for being born so ugly.

Pretty Boy danced and jabbed, bobbed and weaved, like Sugar Ray. He was obviously a good fighter, but more importantly, he looked good—which was crucial 'cause that's how you got your reputation in the projects. Kicking ass was one thing, but if you did it with style, that moved you into a completely different category.

Muscle Man, on the other hand, was all business. The look in his eyes scared me, and I wasn't even involved. He moved in flat-footed, shuffling steps, like he was walking something down, like a panther methodically stalking his prey, intent on one thing and one thing only.

They went back and forth exchanging blows, grappling, hitting the ground, rolling around, back up, back and forth. It was a pretty even fight, but little by little, you could see Muscle Man was getting the upper hand.

Pretty Boy was running out of steam. His do looked more like do-do, hair sticking up all over his head, sweat pouring down his face. He didn't dance as much anymore, and he was staggering, sucking air, trying to figure out how to get the best of this big ugly hulk in front of him. He had hit Muscle Man with everything he had, but he just kept coming—like a bad case of acne.

Then I realized the taunting and shit-talking had stopped, as if people realized this wasn't just another short bout where somebody tapped out and walked away. This was something more serious, these guys had some bad blood between them that was going to be settled that day.

Moving in close, grappling, each trying to get an advantage; Muscle Man managed to get Pretty Boy in a chokehold and held on like a pit bull, exerting pressure through his oversize arms like a vice, digging deeper, putting everything into it.

Pretty Boy struggled to get out of it. Twisting, turning, throwing elbows, trying to break free, all to no avail. After a while his struggles grew weaker. He was running out of energy...and out of breath. He began to lose coordination; his arms became wet noodles.

Then the struggling stopped.

I've seen lots of fights in my life, but I will always remember the look in Pretty Boy's eyes. A bleak look, like prey in the jaws of a predator. In it was the moment of realization that he wasn't going to make it out of this one.

Muscle Man had won the fight, but it was obvious that his intention didn't end there—he had something more final in mind.

He looked over at one of his boys and said, "Let me know when this nigga's dead."

Finally, one of them nodded; the killer held on for a while longer—then let go.

Pretty Boy fell like a tree. Nothing in his body was able to stop his fall because nothing worked anymore.

When his head hit the ground, it made a loud "THUNK," a hollow popping sound like when you plunk a ripe watermelon. I looked at him lying there and realized he had pissed his pants and wasn't breathing. It wasn't anything like what you see in the movies; not glamorous, not at all pretty.

A reverence fell over the crowd—like a funeral. Curtains were drawn, windows closed, and people started drifting away.

Then R.D. tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Hey, man, let's get out of here before the cops get here."

We walked away because we knew that was when the real ass-kicking would start, and they wouldn't stop with just the remaining bad motherfucker. We didn't want to be collateral damage.

It didn't bother me at the time because I was a different person than I am now. I had seen people die before, and fights were just a part of our neighborhood. But now I sometimes have dreams of the haunted look in Pretty Boy's eyes and wonder if I could have, should have done something. Probably not because I would've ended up getting my ass kicked. I was out of my neighborhood, outnumbered, and fourteen years old—still a kid.

Calling the cops was out of the question; you just didn't. Cops always came in full force and didn't bother trying to decipher who the innocent bystanders were. They assumed if you were in the area, you were involved, which gave them the right to kick your ass. The Protect and Serve part of their motto somehow didn't apply to us.

There was not much we could do about the cops. They'd stop us, slam us up against a car, and rough us up just for being Black in our own neighborhood. We were powerless. In fact, if you resisted or even gave them a dirty look, you stood a chance of getting the life choked out of you. At worst, you might be shot; at best, just beaten up. If it was their word against ours, it was always their word that was taken as truth, so out of our frustration we turned against each other. We fought each other; our dogs fought each other; we stabbed, shot, and killed each other—the second of two wrongs that would never make a right.

There was one cop, Joe Beatty—an oversized, muscular cop who used his billy-club like he enjoyed it. If you looked at him wrong, he'd jam his club so deep in your gut you'd be shitting splinters. If you saw him coming, the best thing you could do was disappear, but he had a way of suddenly appearing out of nowhere, and when he caught you, it was one of those "aw shit" moments. Didn't matter if you were doing something wrong or not. If you were on the street, he assumed you were up to no good, so he felt justified in taking you down.

This was the '60s in Cincinnati, Ohio, which lies just north of what was known as the Mason-Dixon line, an imaginary line drawn in the 1760s that originally separated Maryland from Delaware. It was later extended past Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. The line was first created to settle a dispute between William Penn and Charles Calver over a strip of land between the two states. It also served to distinguish southern slaveholding states from northern "free" states before the Civil War. Cincinnati was also one of the stops along the Underground Railroad, the route that slaves used to move from southern states to escape the constant threat of lynching and other terrible things. Now it's the home of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

Cincinnati was also the destination of poor southern Whites moving north to work in the Cincinnati factories. They brought with them their hatred of Black folks, instilled in them by the southern aristocracy. This hate kept them from mixing with southern Blacks. Combined, the two groups would have been a threat, but as long as the oligarchs could keep the former slaves and poor whites separated and feeling the other was a threat, both groups could be controlled.

The result was a tumultuous and often violent mix of poor Whites and descendants of southern slaves. Between the two groups, there was an ongoing undeclared war, reminiscent of the Civil War era, that refused to die even with the passing of generations. Both groups carried with them all the hatred, resentment, and prejudices they had held against each other in their former locations.

This was a no-win situation for either of these two groups, for although many of these White folks thought they were better than us, they weren't going to get invited to the party either. They were, and still are, pawns, being used by the ruling class to do their bidding. As long as the aristocracy is successful in convincing low-income Whites that Blacks and other minorities are the source of their troubles, neither group will make significant progress.

MY DAD

My father came north from Lapine, a small town in southern Alabama. About five foot eight inches in height, good looking and a sharp dresser. Always sporting sharp creased pants, sometimes with suspenders—sometimes not, long-sleeved tucked in shirts with a pipe hanging from the side of his mouth which was sometimes lit but mostly not, he carried himself with a confidence that was contagious to everyone around him. My dad was a self-described "skinflint" and could squeeze three nickels from a dime. Nothing went to waste in our house and he would even suck the marrow out of a chicken bone to make sure nothing was wasted. He was part of the Great Migration of Blacks from 1916 to 1970, following the promise of freedom and equality in the northern cities. He was a smart man but was relegated to a janitorial position at one of the local manufacturing plants.

Sometimes we'd ask him about the town he came from, his mom, his dad, and his childhood. He never gave us direct answers, only saying things like, "You don't want to know about where I came from" or "The past needs to be left in the past." Then he'd change the subject. It wasn't until many years later, while reading Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*, that I learned about the conditions small-town southern Blacks suffered during those times, and I came to understand why he wanted the past to be left alone. His experience in the South was obviously much too painful for him to want to recall. Despite the racial climate of the times and economic barriers, he managed to support a wife and five kids and at the same time buy our family house in Evanston, Cincinnati and two rental houses.

One of my earliest memories is of walking with my dad through downtown Cincinnati near Fountain Square in the heart of the city. It was a drab southern Ohio day, and the sidewalks were filled with people. We had been walking for a while when I spotted a water fountain and headed over for a drink. My dad quickly pulled me away, saying, "You can't drink from that one."

Looking up at him, I asked, "Why?"

He looked down at me and said, "That's for White people."

I couldn't understand what he meant—there was a water fountain that worked, and I saw other people drinking from it, so why couldn't I?

That incident impacted me so much that I still remember it vividly. I remember the sharply creased pants, gray wool coat, and Stetson hat my dad was wearing and the corduroy parka and little Oxford shoes I was wearing.

I remember the water fountain with the "Whites Only" sign.

I remember the embarrassment of my father trying to explain the difference in class, privilege, and status between us and White people, and why this meant they had certain privileges and we didn't. What I

remember most, though, was the difficulty my dad had in trying to explain this to me and at the same time hold his head high and serve as a role model for his son.

This memory is a part of me and always will be. It is burned into my consciousness and has helped shape who I am and how I feel about this country and my place in it. I was too young to understand the significance of it at the time, though obviously it must have affected me greatly, as I keep revisiting it again and again throughout my life. Like peeling back layers of an onion, every time I revisit it, I find new meanings, new feelings. It is a constant reminder of inequality stamped in my psyche.

That one little incident serves as a reminder of the overall attitude of Whites toward Blacks at the time. It was not questioned or challenged, but just accepted as the way of things. By law, we have moved beyond that, but we all know there are still many out there who would accept and even promote going back to those times if given the chance. It’s a reminder that the fight for equality is constant and must go on. We cannot rest and assume things are okay, as we did for a short time from 2008 to 2016. The election of 2016 and the resurrection of the white supremacy movement since then is the result of that idleness, and our democracy has suffered greatly for it.

FORBIDDEN LOVE 1905

My grandparents, William Smith and Martha Ann Walton, moved to Cincinnati from Louisa, Virginia, a small town in northeastern Virginia that had grown up around the cultivation of tobacco. It was a tidy little town with a main street lined with well-kept shops, and the sweet aroma of tobacco was always thick in the air. There was of course the church where residents could go every Sunday to celebrate the goodness of the Lord and give thanks for all they had. If you asked any of the White residents of Louisa county, they would say, “All is well,” and it was—for them. The town folk exuded the sweet, genteel mannerisms endemic to southern hospitality; a thick façade that masked the horrific deeds that had enabled them to enjoy the privileged lifestyle they enjoyed. Just as thick was the institutional racism: inescapable and ever-present, like an old, ugly suit that should have been discarded long ago.

If you asked the Black folks, they’d tell you about the weight of the souls of generations of slaves who had toiled and died under the unrelenting sun with no reward. They would tell you of the blood and tears that fertilized the profitable tobacco harvests, with no benefit to themselves—the sole beneficiary being the plantation owners. They would tell you about the daughters who were forcibly taken from their parents in the dark of night and raped by plantation owners, their sons, or whatever White man wanted to, while the girls’ mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers listened to their screams with no recourse. They would tell you about the young boys sold off to other plantations with their mothers helplessly crying long into the night.

The juxtaposition of these two worlds occupying the same space with such different histories exists even into the 21st century. The southern hospitality rings false when seen in this context. The rationalizations and lies were a narrative repeated constantly to justify the unspeakable things the Whites had done to generations of Black families. The collective, selective memory of the White residents of Louisa does not include the reality so fresh in the minds of the Black residents.

I understand that not all White people participated in these horrors, and descendants of these slave owners should not have to suffer for the sins of their fathers and grandfathers, unless they continue with those sins. But the horrible history is there, and we don’t know what to do with it.

Following the end of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, many of the former slaves became sharecroppers, renting small plots of land and growing crops to be sold to the plantation owners. For most there was no alternative. They had nothing else to fall back on, having worked on plantations their entire lives. They had been forbidden to learn to read or write. They had no money and no concept of finance or of how to survive in this White man’s world. What little they knew about this foreign land was learned while in the fields, which wasn’t going to help. It was the equivalent of throwing someone who couldn't swim overboard without a life jacket.

Sharecropping amounted to little more than slavery; the small plots of land did not produce enough income to provide food and clothing, so they had to borrow from the landowner and were therefore constantly in debt to

them therefore trapping them in debt and poverty for their remaining life, sometimes having to pass the debt on to future generations. Challenging the system could lead to violence, imprisonment, or even death.

There was a glimmer of hope when William Tecumseh Sherman and President Lincoln promised forty acres and a mule to emancipated Blacks, but this promise was quickly rescinded by the next administration, and the parcels that had been doled out were forcefully taken back by Whites. Plantations were returned to their former owners by law and by force. To this day, thirty-five to forty-five percent of the wealth in this country is inherited, and real estate remains the largest segment of household wealth. The foundations so many White families would base their wealth on for generations was denied these former slaves and their descendants, forcing them to operate at a deficit that to this day we have never recovered from.

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"Punishment for marriage.—If any white person intermarry with a colored person, or any colored person intermarry with a white person, he shall be guilty of a felony and shall be punished by confinement in the penitentiary for not less than one nor more than five years."

—Excerpt from Virginia Miscegenation Laws, Section 20-59 of the Virginia Code (1950)

To say that nineteenth and twentieth century Virginia was a hostile environment for interracial relationships could be considered the understatement of the century. The laws of Virginia at the time inferred that the African American race was so inferior that it was a felony to allow White blood to be polluted by Black blood.

The anti-miscegenation laws were one thing, and bad enough, but outside of the law was where the punishment was most severe. Black men or even Black boys were hanged or beaten for small infractions, such as looking in the direction of a White woman too long or talking back to a White man. The hanging of Black males was cause for celebration among Whites of the time and was advertised much as one would advertise a musical concert or circus: families would bring picnic baskets and settle in for the show. They'd bring their children to watch the spectacle and to begin their indoctrination so that they too would know how to treat niggers who were "out of line." They would take pictures of themselves next to the dead Black boy hanging from a tree and make postcards to send to friends and relatives. They even sold pieces of the lynched boy's clothing as souvenirs.

And they called themselves "civilized."

This is the environment William and Martha Ann found themselves in. William, a tall, lanky, athletic-looking young man with skin as black as coal, lived in the house of the Walton family. He had no memory of his mother or father. The owners of the house, Joseph and Eliza Walton, were the closest he had ever come to having parents, as he had lived and worked there for as long as he could remember.

Martha, a pretty, young southern belle with strawberry blond hair, pale white skin, and bright blue eyes, was the daughter of Joseph and Eliza Walton. Martha Ann could trace her family tree back to England, from where her ancestors migrated to the Americas in the seventeenth century. William's search would stop at him.

Somehow, whether it was natural attraction, proximity, or just plain love, they found themselves in the extremely dangerous position of being a Black man and White woman in love—in the deep South, in Louisa County, Virginia.

Of course, showing their affection was out of the question. Louisa was a town of around 350 at the time, and, as in any small town, everyone knew everyone else's business. Everything they did had to be secretive: no dates, no walks in the park, no visible displays of affection, no love notes for fear of being caught—the consequences would have been severe. Covert kisses, adoring glances in passing, and secretive embraces had to suffice. Over time, their love swelled like a dammed river threatening to burst its banks. Theirs was a love that transcended all physical and institutional bounds.

Faced with the possibility of imprisonment or even death, they had no other alternative but to flee north, where there was at least the possibility of being able to marry. So, one balmy June night in 1905, they set a course north toward the alluring prospect of finding a place where they could freely express their love for each other without recrimination. Martha Ann probably took more traditional modes of transportation, and William must have followed the remnants of the Underground Railroad and the Green Book, as so many former slaves and disenfranchised Black folks had done before him.

The journey for William was no doubt fraught with danger; there were few opportunities for lodging and food along the way. He had to rely on word of mouth from Black folks who had made the journey before him. Some of the information was accurate, some not. This was the era of Jim Crow laws, enacted to prevent African Americans from mixing with members of the White race. These laws included such things as:

"It shall be unlawful for a negro and white person to play together or in company with each other in any game of cards or dice, dominoes or checkers."—**Birmingham, Alabama, 1930**

"Any person...presenting for public acceptance or general information, arguments or suggestions in favor of social equality or of intermarriage between whites and negroes, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars or imprisonment not exceeding six months or both fine and imprisonment in the discretion of the court."—**Mississippi, 1920**

"Any white woman who shall suffer or permit herself to be got with child by a negro or mulatto...shall be sentenced to the penitentiary for not less than eighteen months." **—Maryland, 1924**

Clearly there was fear among Whites of being touched or even being in the vicinity of Blacks, much less allowing a Black man to have intimate relations with a White woman. They even had penalties for anyone who was presumptuous enough to suggest a Black person should be socially equal to a White person.

They met up again in Rossmoyne, Ohio, a suburb of Cincinnati. Although they were across the Mason-Dixon line, this is not to say they were free from discrimination. Ohio had repealed its anti-miscegenation laws, but the Klan was active in the area, and mixing of the races was as unacceptable to them as it was to many Whites of that time.

Against all odds they were married in or around 1908, bought a farm, and raised three daughters and a son. He, being the consummate entrepreneur, started the bus line for the area and operated it successfully for many years. Legend says the Ku Klux Klan called him one day, asking if they could use his buses to transport members to one of their meetings. His reply was, "Sure, I don't have a problem with that, but I'm gonna drive to make sure ya'll don't mess up my buses."

I don't know if this is legend or truth, but I do know he was so big that the house shook when he walked up the stairs, and he was not someone you would want to be on the wrong side of.

Their story closely mirrors what the Lovings went through in 1967 in Virginia, which led to the Supreme Court decision that struck down all state laws banning interracial marriage as violations of the equal protection and due process clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution—only this was more than fifty years before the Loving case, and no Supreme Court was going to stand up for them.

William and Martha must have had incredible strength to be able to withstand the pressures of being an interracial couple in a nation that so strongly discouraged the intermingling of races. Their situation is a testament to the fact that true love crosses all barriers.

My mother never talked about being raised in a multiracial family, but it surely must have raised eyebrows. My family just didn't talk much about things like that. We weren't raised to consciously see race as a factor in a person's worth, even though when we stepped outside the door, it was a factor to others. I don't know, maybe it was an embarrassment, but not to us. I think we were embarrassed for people who believed the fallacy that they were better than us because of the color of their skin.

In my parents' view, White people should have evolved enough to feel confident within themselves without the crutch of having to look down on someone else in order to feel good about themselves. I'm sure some of them even believed the myth of White superiority that had been perpetuated, just as some people do to this day, but intelligent people should know better.

It wasn't until much later in my life that what my parents instilled in me began to take effect, but they had planted the seeds. When the time was right for the seeds to sprout, I had the foundation they had built for me: I could be whatever I chose to be if I made the commitment and put in the work to achieve my goals and dreams.

My parents taught me —and I still believe— that racial stereotypes are in other people's minds and are myths created by those in power to maintain the advantages they've enjoyed over the centuries here in the United States. Advantages that have put Black people at a distinct disadvantage that we are still trying to overcome.

Times are changing. I'm glad they are. More and more people are beginning to question and challenge stereotypes, and one by one, they are being swept away as they should be. We've come a long way since Whites-only water fountains, but we still have so far to go.