



Readers Write

FITTING IN

MY SKIN IS PALE, MY HAIR IS STRAIGHT, and my family is black — African American, if you prefer. When we moved from the South Side of Chicago to Kalamazoo, Michigan, in the early sixties, a neighbor girl told me that I couldn't play with her dog; it wasn't "used to colored people."

I was one of only two "colored" kids in my entire school. I looked just like the white kids, but I wasn't like them. They all had friends to play with at recess, to sit with at lunch, to stick up for them if a fight broke out.

At my Episcopal church, during my confirmation class, another girl told the minister that I was not allowed to come to her house. Though her mother really liked Louis Armstrong, she said, she did not allow Negroes in their home.

In the late sixties and early seventies my black peers told me that I was "not black enough." I tried rolling my hair in hard metal curlers, but it just came out in tight ringlets. I never achieved the truly nappy hair of a "real" black woman. The black kids would taunt me and threaten to kick my ass because I not only looked white; I acted white, walked white, and talked white. (Am I typing white?)

The hippie counterculture offered a place where I could be accepted. For some, I was just a mascot for their rebellion; they wanted to say that they'd gotten high with a "black chick." But for others I was (and still am) simply a friend. We broke rules and defied norms. We smoked weed and dropped acid. We fucked and had fun. And I fit in, for a while.

After college and a year in Spain, I went to work in corporate America. Co-

workers, customers, and people I didn't even know would boldly ask me, "What are you? Are your parents mixed?" *What kind of question is that?* I wanted to say. *Why do you need to know? What does that have to do with anything?*

It has not changed much since then. The shade of my skin, the texture of my hair, and the way I talk are still an issue for black folks. White people sense that I am different, but they can't figure out exactly how. Several times I've had clients assume that I am Italian or Latina and go on to tell me their feelings about "those goddamn niggers." These same people are shocked and offended when I tell them I am black and that they need to apologize very quickly or they will never do business with me again. Yes, *they* are offended.

Marilynne S.
Shaker Heights, Ohio

WHEN I FIRST GOT OUT OF PRISON, I wondered if people could tell that I was an ex-con. I constantly checked myself to make sure I wasn't reverting to my old prison habits.

I joined a writers' group, and when I told the members where I'd been for the past sixteen years, the room went silent. Then the leader said, "Well, I'm sure you will bring some new insights to the group." In time I became their token ex-felon, and, later, just another member.

I got a few crummy jobs, then a better one. My life stabilized. Though still uncomfortable with my past, I felt like I was doing better in the "real world."

The other morning I was driving to work in my white minivan, steering with one hand and shaving with the other. I was listening to *Morning Edition* and thinking of stopping at a McDonald's along the way to pick up an Egg McMuffin for breakfast. It occurred to me that I was beginning to fit in.

David Wood
St. Petersburg, Florida

WHENEVER I'M IN A GROUP OF STRANGERS, I automatically count how many Jews are in the room. If there are too many Jews mixed with non-Jews, I feel uncomfortable: It's shameful the way we interrupt and eat up space, calling attention to ourselves — as if we haven't been sniffed out and marched off to the slaughter often enough. Why don't we keep quiet? If there are too few Jews, however, I feel afraid.

I feel completely safe only when surrounded entirely by Jews. This does not make sense to me. My husband, the person I feel safest with in the world, is not Jewish. Many of my friends are not Jewish. But inside me live my ancestors, and they worry: a late-night phone call might be bad news; a headache might be a tumor; a pain that lingers might be cancer.

And so my ancestors hide under prayer shawls and beseech God, the benign Father: never mind his wrath; never mind that they have been slaughtered for centuries because he chose them; never mind that they have now become victimizers as well as victims. They will protect each other. They will kvetch together and make jokes. They will sing the same prayers, in

the same ancient tongue. I know how they feel, in my body, in my heart.

I've lived in New England for thirty years, and during that time I've become, my sister claims, "less Jewish" — as if that were possible. So I don't yell, "I'm home!" anymore because my Gentile husband believes you only yell if something terrible has happened. So I am a little quieter. So? Inside I'm the same as I ever was — gutsy, playful, ambitious, sensitive ("too sensitive," my mother always said), and always on guard. An aunt from the Ukraine is perched on my left ear, a cousin from Poland at my elbow, a great-grandfather from Austria on my back. I forget that they are there until I am in a room with strangers, and the inevitable counting begins.

Genie Zeiger
Shelburne, Massachusetts

MY WIDOWED MOTHER WAS SHACK-ling up with a black Catholic priest in Haiti. Meanwhile I lived with my grandparents in a secluded riverfront retirement com-

munity in Florida. I was a five-year-old only child, and my friends were all at least sixty.

A year later, my mother returned and, finding me weak and puny, declared that I would have to go to camp for two months that summer. I needed toughening up. She added, gravely, that she was sending me to camp so I wouldn't grow up to be a homosexual. When I asked what the word meant, she said that I would understand when I was older.

Never having had much contact with boys my own age, I panicked at the thought of camp. In desperation, I came up with a survival strategy: I would create a self that was beyond criticism. To that end, I added to the list of things that the camp catalog said I should bring: a couple of ascots, some Dunhill after-shave, a stack of *New Yorker* magazines, and three bottles of garlic salt.

The first night there, all the campers assembled in the dining hall. We were to stand one by one and say a few words about ourselves. Most campers named

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Grace	October 1	March 2005
Small Victories	November 1	April 2005
On The Edge	December 1	May 2005
Possessions	January 1	June 2005
Saturday Night Games	February 1	July 2005
	March 1	August 2005

a favorite sport or rough-and-tumble game. When my turn came, I stood and said, "My name is Tony, and I'm here so I won't grow up to be a homosexual."

The next thing I knew, a counselor was carrying me by the elbow out of the hall and down to my cabin, where he took off my pants and whipped my bottom with his belt. When he had finished, he tucked in his shirt (it had come out during his exertions) and said softly, "Good night, son."

I lay there in the dark, wondering where I had gone wrong.

Tony E.

Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

WHEN I GRADUATED FROM COLLEGE, a foundation awarded me a one-year academic fellowship in Africa. I was to research ethnic divisions among rebel groups battling the Soviet-backed regime in Ethiopia. The rebels had been fighting for decades for the independence of Eritrea, a trumpet-shaped former Italian colony, which Ethiopia claimed as a province. For several months I, a lanky, upper-middle-class white kid from the suburbs of Chicago's North Shore, lived among short, stocky, dark-skinned guerrillas with Kalashnikov rifles and unkempt Afros.

The rebels accepted me awkwardly into their world. Some of them didn't believe my story of a foundation fellowship and assumed I was with the CIA. Others had grown to distrust all whites, and with good reason. But many became my friends. I worked hard to speak, read, and write Tigrinya, one of Eritrea's main languages. I conversed with the guerrillas about politics, history, and religion. I learned their jokes and slang. They taught me to shoot a Kalashnikov. I drank *suwa*, their homemade alcohol. (To this day, I have never had a worse hangover.) I danced their swaying circle dances at celebrations. On New Year's Eve, like the others, I drunkenly fired tracer bullets into the sky.

Living in a war zone, I grew used to seeing distant firefights illuminating the night sky, and awakening in the early-morning hours to the sound of anti-aircraft guns. (After a while, I slept through them.) I learned to tell the en-

gine sound of the Soviet-made MiGs from the slow hum of commercial passenger flights. If you heard a MiG, your best bet was not to move. They would fire at any movement. Goat herds often became their targets.

In every village or camp I entered, children ran from me, screaming, "Taliano!" The first whites the locals had ever seen were their Italian colonizers. Mothers in the mountains still warned their children to behave or the "Taliano" would get them. For these children, I was the boogeyman come to life. But after I talked to them and played their games, they would climb on top of me, proudly declaring to adult villagers that I was *their* Taliano.

I had no mail or telephone service, only a shortwave radio. Some nights I would crawl up on the roof of a bunker and listen to American evangelists broadcasting from Liberia, just to hear their voices.

I became aware of how much I had acclimated to my new environment when I met other whites, usually European journalists or relief workers. My initial thought was always: *White people are ugly.*

My second thought was: *They sure complain a lot.*

One particularly pale Brit was so terrified of fleas that he lugged about a thermal sleeping bag, a silk sleeping-bag liner, and a pair of pressed pajamas sealed in a plastic bag. When morning came, he still complained about his terrible night's sleep. Fleas had bitten him incessantly.

Must like white meat, I thought, and then I caught myself. It was the only time in my life I'd ever had to remind myself I was white.

When I returned to the United States, the transition was difficult. For the first month or so, I was perpetually astonished to see all the white people walking the streets. And there were so many gadgets, so many televisions with so many channels. Everyone and everything seemed to exist to make noise.

A few days after my return, my mother took me to a mall to buy me some clothes. She held up a pair of gloves like the ones I was looking for and said, "They're over here."

The contraction *they're* threw me. I tried to disentangle the words. Finally

I reordered the sentence into a Tigrinya structure of subject-object-verb: *They over here are.*

Outside, in the parking lot, I looked up to see a contrail plume against the blue sky of an Illinois summer.

Commercial, I thought.

*Cameron McWhirter
Decatur, Georgia*

MY FRIEND MYRTLE HAS LIVED IN the same home for twenty-seven years now, the last house on a dead-end street that dies into the shrubs and weeds along the bank of a river. For most of that time Myrtle was the local grandma, confidante, and herbal nurse.

Then the neighborhood changed. The gravel was paved, the houses were upgraded, and Myrtle was viewed as the strange old woman in the ratty house at the end. New neighbors pressured her to tame her "ugly" yard and keep her cats inside. Still, Myrtle treasured her little paradise on the riverbank. She had located forty-one edible or medicinal plants within ten minutes of her door.

Last spring a bird flew into her kitchen. Myrtle caught it in a shawl and released it unharmed. Her nearest neighbor saw her and shot her a look. Myrtle realized that the sight of a white-haired lady standing in her overgrown yard shaking birds out of shawls had unnerved the man.

The next day, Myrtle found her three beloved cats lined up dead on her front porch.

*Iris W.
Durango, Colorado*

MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS AGO I went to work as a nurse for the Indian Health Service. It was my first job after nursing school, and I wanted to be accepted, not only as a dedicated health-care worker, but as a culturally sensitive individual.

My academic training had imparted much theory and few clinical skills. I couldn't start an IV, drop a gastric tube, or set up a pediatric mist tent — and here I was supervising the Native American aides who had been running the hospital for years. The irony was not lost on any of us. I worked longer hours than anyone else, but the aides never volunteered in-

formation that would help me, and they never made eye contact.

Another white nurse, sensing my frustration, told me, "It's us and them. They'll never be your friends. You'll never get invited to a Navajo house."

Early one morning, I was doing intake on an elderly man when I felt nauseated and the room began to whirl. I lost consciousness. Later, an MD who suspected I'd had a seizure advised a neurological work-up. I was granted two weeks' leave. The tests were inconclusive, but I was distraught at the thought of returning to work. Now that I'd had a "fit," I'd be even more ostracized.

I was thinking about packing up and heading back to Texas when a knock came on my door. Two Navajo nursing aides walked in, still avoiding eye contact, and joined me at my kitchen table. They asked if I would let them do a sand-painting ceremony for me. Their cousin, a medicine woman, had been known to cure people who were touched by the spirits.

When I got to the house where the ceremony would be held, I found I was the only non-Native American there. I've never experienced another seizure, and I am still in touch with one of the Navajo aides who visited me that lonely day and invited me into her home.

*A. Nelson
Austin, Texas*

MY HUSBAND IS PARALYZED BELOW the shoulders. When he was appointed to the board of directors at the local disabilities center, I volunteered to help. I thought it was something we could do together.

I was assigned to the fundraising committee. At my first meeting we discussed plans for the center's twenty-fifth-anniversary party. We talked about inviting disabled celebrities. Someone mentioned Christopher Reeve, and everyone laughed except me.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Well," said a man who used a cane, "Christopher Reeve thinks he'll walk again. We need to write him a letter and set him straight."

Everyone murmured in agreement.

"Set him straight about what?" I asked.

"That he isn't going to walk again. That he's disabled just like the rest of us. That all his money and fame doesn't make him any better."

Those who could move their heads nodded in agreement.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Isn't that just hope? A year ago my husband thought he would walk again, too."

As I said these words, I suddenly realized that my husband and I had lost hope. Or maybe we had just accepted reality. I was getting confused. I admired Christopher Reeve and his wife for their optimism and their decision to tell their story. But I was also jealous that they got so much attention and that money seemed to be no object for them. Christopher Reeve probably had a special bathtub in which he could actually take a bath. I realized that if Christopher Reeve ever did walk again, I'd suspect it was because his money and fame had gotten him better care.

"Well," I said, "when you write that letter, let me know, because I want to include a letter to Mrs. Reeve. I've read that she says she can still have sex with her husband. I want to find out how she does it."

Everybody laughed. I had made fun of a man who was more helpless than my husband. Christopher Reeve couldn't even breathe on his own.

I was starting to fit in with the disabled community, and I didn't think I liked it.

Name Withheld

WHEN I JOINED THE MILITARY IN 1962, I was thrown in with a group of good ol' boys from the deep South. One day, Jake, Frank, Jimmy, and I were in the Chicago USO, sitting next to a large plate-glass window. Outside on the sidewalk, a black man in a pinstriped business suit was looking up and down the street and occasionally glancing in through the window. With a smirk, Jake wrote something on a napkin and stood it up against the salt and pepper shakers, where it could be easily seen from the street. "Wait until he sees this," Jake said. Frank and Jimmy laughed.

I picked up the napkin to see what he'd written. There was only one word,

printed in large block letters: **NIGGER.**

My first instinct was to throw it away. But I was a long way from home and needed to fit in. So I placed the napkin back on the table, where I knew the man standing outside would see it.

It didn't take long. The man's expression turned to anger. "Snot-nosed kids," we heard him say through the window.

When the man headed for the entrance to the USO, Jake, Frank, and Jimmy scattered. I ran for the men's room and hid there for ten minutes before I ventured out.

The black man in the pinstriped suit was speaking quietly with the USO manager. They spotted me, and the man stepped in front of me and pushed the napkin into my face. "Is this your doing?"

"No, sir," I said. "Not me."

"Liar," he said. "I saw you. I've worked much too hard to put up with this crap. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"It wasn't me," I said, and I pushed past him and sat down at a table close to the door. He stood there for a moment, then started for the exit. On his way out, he crumpled the napkin and threw it on my table.

Later that day, my friends questioned me about what had happened. When I told them, they all laughed.

What I remember most is the look on that man's face as he caught my eye one last time before walking out of the USO, and the slow, sad shaking of his head.

*Robert H. Cook
Blackwood, New Jersey*

(end of excerpt)