

White Noise

By Irene McCauley

Georgia heat has a way of permeating more than just the sun-bleached shades or the hot-cement steps where middle-aged women fan themselves with old newspapers, watching the children play in the red clay, too exhausted to do anything but sip gallons of saccharine iced tea. Georgia heat sticks to the necks of self-made men as well as their wives, to the children with their browned shins and sour dispositions in the afternoons of any Southern summer. The yards are parched and stiffer than the iron-wrought fences surrounding them—reminiscent of a time not so long ago when class meant more than buying brand-name diapers at the Super-Mart or wiggling into a Chanel skirt for a dinner-party.

Like the heat, class was instinctual for my sister and me. Our belle lessons began before we could remember and in the haze of Atlanta sunshine we learned more about frills and foils than we did alphabets those first few years. Every now and again we'd find our way to the mud and clay in our spacious backyard and dig chips into our pretty polished nails by the stream, searching for treasure or China or whatever little girls search for in their own backyards. And like all little girls, we noticed little beyond the fence that separated us from the outside world of Georgia in 1998. We didn't notice the new school at the very end of our road; we didn't notice the houses for sale and the tacky white-pickets; we certainly didn't notice the color of the shins of the new children next door.

What we did notice were the events of the day our parents sold the outdoor Jacuzzi which had stood behind our plantation-style red-brick home for longer than we could remember. When they had removed it, we were left to play in the shallow hole left behind in the backyard shade. The hole was a damp, flattened dent of a foot deep and thirty feet wide and was only a short sprint away from the extensive briar of blackberry bushes and somewhere the fence and beyond.

My sister and I had found this patch to be dangerous before, harboring hundreds of cruel needles and we had become exceedingly cautious to reenter the thicket even at the prospect of the sweet, overripe blackberries.

Which was why we were so surprised to see a black boy and girl emerge from it calmly one hot July afternoon.

The boy's skin was the color of a chocolate Easter-bunny and he was almost as tall as my mother—who wasn't tall at all by anyone's standards, but was much taller than either my sister or myself at the time. The girl was similarly complected and had pink ribbons in her hair, but she stuck to the boy like a dusky, muted shadow. Her face had a plump, well-rounded look about it and she wore the same skirt as my sister, Becky—pink, dotted, and trimmed with lace butterflies. Becky's skirt was covered in red-mud but the girl's was pristine—as though she'd never dreamed of wrinkles or dust or sweat—things that always marked our clothing as little girls.

“Hi, there.” The tall boy said, flashing his bright white teeth at us. Before I could stop her, Becky was already responding.

“Momma tol' us not ta talk ta strangers,” she said. I shushed her by clamping my warm hand over her mouth and she wriggled under my grasp.

The boy did not seem alarmed by her reaction. “Our Momma told us that we should *always* be nice to neighbors.”

The little girl spoke, then. “We brough' tya some cobbler.” For the first time I noticed the little suburban package in her hands, a tupperware offering of dark pie which had mashed up to the side of the container. I took it, not wanting to appear ungracious. Though I hadn't had to think about it then, I knew that the gesture of bringing gifts to the neighbors was performed with a whole pie, not leftovers. I set the container on the shade of the porch steps for my mother.

Becky stared after it with undisguised longing, but everyone knew that the gift wasn't meant for children.

“Thank you,” I said formally, as my mother had taught me, “It sure is nice of you stoppin' on by like this.” I thought she would have been proud of me, acting as I did so hospitably. “Would you like to come play in our yard?”

“Renie!” My sister exclaimed with shock. I grabbed her plump little wrist to pull her back but she was already talking.

“Momma don't want us'ta play with people like *you*.”

I knew why she said the words, why she staked her pickets in front of them, but I didn't know about the White Citizens Councils or the way my mother would later scrub the “scum” off me with wool. The boy hesitated but at my reassurance that the offer was valid, he pulled his pants up to his knees and dug down in the dirt with us.

The girl stood over Becky on the edge of the hole while went back to our digging, social obligations maintained, and rooted for worms and salamanders with the boy—who introduced himself later as “Adam.” The girl finally told us, shyly, that her name was Rachel and they'd just moved from someplace far north—in Connecticut. The uneasy glances my little sister sent in my direction left a prickle of sweat on my hairline and I knew something was wrong about what we were doing, but no one had contradicted the Sunday –School leniency yet.

The day wore on and the heat became unbearably thick and oppressive, so I decided I'd go on inside and make everyone some lemonade. I managed to get all the powder in the pitcher before my mother stopped me, hands on hips and ready to spank me blue at my use of the kitchen supplies without supervision.

“What do you think you’re doin’ there, Miss Renie?” She asked me even though she knew the answer.

“I’m makin’ lemonade for all of us out in the yard,” I replied, my words sticking against my teeth; “It’s hot.” I said by way of explanation, irrationally nervous around my mother. Suddenly I remembered the cobbler with chagrin.

“All of you...” She was at the window before I could count to two. I went to stand next to her, thinking there must have been some accident by the way that her mouth drooped wide enough for flies to dance in, but she pushed me back. “Renie, you get to your room right *now*.” I could tell there was going to be trouble.

But there wasn’t trouble. Not just then, anyway, unless you counted the way our mother smashed the little salamander Becky brought into the house—squeezing all of its grainy-bits onto our kitchen rug. I watched from the window as the strange children talked with my mother, watched what looked like a strong wind was blow at their backs as they cowered and slipped painfully back through that blackberry briar. I watched them disappear into their white house and I watched as the filmy afternoon rain washed away the traces of our footprints in the rusty earth. I didn’t see them again, even after Daddy came home to convince my mother that we weren’t in any danger, after two dark-shinned legs appeared at the front door with a real pie and grown-up smiles. After that, there was such a flurry of activity in the next weeks that there was no time for trouble; we packed our lacy dresses into boxes and went to bed early as our mother and Daddy argued about which buyer to accept.

My parents were racist.

There are hundreds of reasons why white citizens in Atlanta fear black ones: some are deeply rooted in a Confederate racism that has clung to the static Southerners even through

numerous civil rights movements in the area. Some reasons are purely prudent; wealthy Caucasians seek to inhabit environments without poorer blacks, families look to avoid higher crime-rates associated with the urban African-American communities of the South. The unpleasant truth, however, lies in the silence of summer when men and women with bigoted opinions spread them to be absorbed into the exsiccated soil of the moderate citizens.

In June of 1998 Georgia Congressman Bob Barr delivered a speech at a convention of the Council of Conservative Citizens, a noted white-supremacist organization which “routinely denigrated blacks” as well as homosexuals, immigrants, and those of Jewish ancestry (Politicians’ Links to the CCC). The event was highlighted and publicized on National television and its interested led to the exposition of several other Southern politicians’ connections to the CCC, an organization harboring more members than the KKK or other racially-regressive groups. Today’s “White Citizens Councils” (Politicians’ Links) are spun from more resistant material in forums on websites such as stormfront.org, founded by Don Black as a “community of White Nationalists” (Stormfront). Here they post extremist opinions which capture the anger and awareness of liberal media outlets.

The internet forums propagating hatred and intolerance were just in their infancies in ’98, however, as I encountered bigotry in a form I would come to critically analyze later in life. By definition, bigotry means intolerance of a creed different than one’s own; in my backyard, the bigotry reared its ugly head in the stubborn refusal to think about educated African-Americans as good neighbors or influences for little girls. The bias had been wound itself so tightly in my parents’ community that they simply refused to take a bite of the cobbler, to invite the neighbors in for a glass of tea. The barely tangible way they leaned away from the grocers at the market, the hurried rush when passing a family in the park—all were assumed actions of even moderate

citizens in the South—where “tolerance” often takes on a different meaning. The quintessence of the prejudice was in the lack of conscious thought regarding race and supremacy.

It was a calescent August day when we finally left the old neighborhood of fences and self-assumed superiority. It didn't look much different that last day—the lawns were still parched, the old biddies still rocking on their wide porches, the white heat only growing as more and more houses were put up for sale. Years would go by before I would come to the realization that acceptance is nurtured only by awareness and that the subliminal quality of racism in a city as old in Atlanta was not maintained through hateful people but instead by negligent ones. In the summer of '98 even I was far more concerned for the salamanders in our backyard than for the stunned dark-skinned children. I am no longer a child, however, and as the summers grow hotter, the likelihood of interest in change wanes as people of other climates read dusty history of Jim Crow and the KKK, oblivious to all sounds but the squeals of the tires on the moving-van and the heavy silence in the neighborhood everyone would think of as warm.

Works Cited

- Beirich, Heidi, and Bob Moser. "Politicians' Links to the Council of Conservative Citizens." *Politicians' Links to the Council of Conservative Citizens*. Southern Poverty Law Center. Web. 19 Mar. 2012.
- Sugg, John F. "A Kinder, Gentler Racism." *Atlanta Events, Atlanta Restaurants, Atlanta Concerts, Atlanta News*. Creative Loafing. Web. 19 Mar. 2012.