Being a Mixed Girl in America

Abby Slater

I have blonde hair, green eyes, freckles, light skin. I burn after three minutes in the sun. I tell people my racial background and they scoff and don't believe me.

I'm a quarter black on my father's side. His father was 100% black, his mother as Caucasian as they come. This makes Dad half black, half white, which shows in his appearance. He has loose curls on his head and a light caramel skin tone. He is clearly mixed race, but people aren't always sure what his background is.

In my younger years, I didn't even realize I was "different." I presented as white, so I was treated as such. I recognized that Daddy was a different color than Mommy, but it didn't hold any meaning. The most my father's race affected my brother and me was his inability to convincingly dress up as Santa around the holidays.

I grew up in a highly diverse suburb of DC, so the idea of racial diversity was never foreign to me. As a third grader, I could look around the classroom and recognize that Steven came to America from El Salvador, and that Alaah's parents were from Somalia. I knew they spoke multiple languages that I couldn't understand, and that their parents packed them different food for lunch, but I didn't care. They were fellow eight-year-olds in Mrs. Crocker's class. The innocence and simplicity of childhood, along with my little biracial family, allowed for me to look past it, play with whomever I wanted at recess and not give a damn what their skin color was. Unfortunately, not all of of the world thinks that way, something I was unaware of at the time.

It just hit me one day: wait, I'm part black! I was proud of it, of the culture and diversity and background. Proud enough that it didn't bother me much that the kids at school called me a quadroon, "quarter-blackie," or "Uh-Oh, Oreo" (black on the inside, white on the outside). My middle school was white. Very white. White enough that I was the "blackest girl in the grade," a title I held with pride. I didn't see the damage they did in calling me these things, mostly because the names were intended as harmless words. I didn't yet realize that there were those who truly suffered because of their race. These names, and plenty other, much worse names, were used against them by their white peers as a form of hatred and oppression, as an insult and not a term of endearment. I didn't understand that the casual allowance of racial slurs showed a more serious, deep-rooted issue. This is something I'll always be ashamed of.

The stories my parents tell me about their childhoods differ greatly. Mom was a military brat, moved around with her quintessential American family. She was popular, pretty, and hailed from a financially stable home.

My dad's favorite story to tell goes something like this: He was walking down the street in Norristown, Pennsylvania**,** while his parents walked along the sidewalk on the other side of the road, hand in hand. Ahead of him, my father saw two older white women pointing and staring at his parents. "Can you believe it? A black man and a white woman? It's shameful. It's not right."

My father, the jokester, approached the women and joined in on the discussion.

"Isn't that disgusting," he said in agreement. The women turned in time to witness him wave across the street and yell, "Hi Mom! Hi Dad! These women have something they want to tell you!"

"It was a glorious moment," my father says proudly to this day.

There are some other stories he tells me that don't elicit the same reaction in him. He was called names growing up. When it came time to date, girls were banned by their parents from speaking to him. He was able to thrive despite the hateful treatment he received, and relaying the stories doesn't seem to stir too much emotion. His voice remains even and calm while he cracks jokes and simply says, "that's the way it was!"

The tone shifts when he tells stories of his parents' struggles. They were married in 1953, and lived in Norristown, Pennsylvania. My father was born in 1955, 12 years before anti-miscegenation laws were repealed in the South. Every year, my grandfather would head to Virginia for his family reunion, leaving behind his white wife and two mixed-race sons. My grandparents' marriage wasn't yet legal in the state I now live, only 40 years before I was born.

Many people don't realize how recently such laws were repealed. Or they think slavery is some distant memory, one of which no one feels the effects anymore. I'll never forget the conversation I had with a white classmate in high school. We were discussing my background and the racial makeup of my family. A light bulb flickered above her head — seemingly not reaching full luminescence — as she said, "Wait Abby….does that mean that some of your ancestors were….(and she whispered this part)…*slaves?"*

It was such a foreign concept to her. Yes, I told her, my grandfather's grandfather was a slave on a plantation just outside of Charlottesville. I saw the links building in her mind, connecting this white-skinned face in front of her with years of racial oppression and suffering. Slavery was real, I told her. It happened.

Fast forward a few hundred years. My father's voice takes a more serious tone as he tells me a story I've never heard before. We'd been discussing the events taking place in Charlottesville, involving white supremacists and the ensuing counter protests. We were both

disgusted by the violence and prejudice taking place in our home state, a phenomenon to which my father was no stranger.

It was the early 70's and my grandpa was headed to pick up my uncle and his white friend at the train station in Pennsylvania. Grandpa made a perfectly legal U-Turn and two police cars immediately appeared. He was pulled from the car, he and my uncle both handcuffed while the white companion was sent on his way. Both his father and brother were physically unscathed and left the station shortly thereafter, yet my father speaks of the event with gravity, with fear. You can tell it truly scared him; it hit deeper than simply being told he couldn't befriend certain girls.

This was 50 years ago. And here we are, still combating the same deep-rooted sense of racism and hatred. Some people like to turn a blind eye, claim that racial discrimination in America has diminished. Well, in my opinion, the nation needs to do better. Ignoring racism will not fix it; pretending hate doesn't exist does not make it go away. Combatting these divisive issues is only possible with a full understanding of our nation, and the stories of its people.

All of this struggle in my family, all of this discrimination and disadvantage, and the worse I've gotten is, "Wow, Abby, you're so white for a black girl!" All because of my pale skin and blonde hair; all because I'm not black, my family is. That's all it took to give me a better chance at a more successful and easy life than my ancestors.

I'm the result of two interracial marriages, the result of love despite difference.