SEEING MY SKIN

(A STORY OF WRESTLING WITH WHITENESS)

PETER JARRETT-SCHELL

CHURCH PUBLISHING INCORPORATED

Contents

PART I

SAN FRANCISCO

1

I am six. I climb out of the car, through the window. Dad slams his hand on the roof of the car.

"Stop that!"

I hear Mom's voice reply. "He saw it on a show."

I scoff. Not on *a* show. On *my* show, the one that is starting in two minutes. I run inside, down the hall, up the stairs, and through the apartment. I stop at the refrigerator, grab an apple, and dash towards the television. I turn it on and search through the channels. I stop when I see an orange star-striped muscle car barreling through hay bales. Its horn sounds out eleven notes of an upbeat trumpet tune. Dad walks into the room, looks at me, and shouts in exasperation.

"Stop throwing apple cores behind the couch!"

I don't look back at him. "I didn't."

"I just saw you do it." He makes me stand and pulls the couch away from the wall. There is an apple core there. It looks fresh. There are several more there next to it. They look less fresh.

He points to them. "Don't lie to me."

I didn't think I had. I honestly don't remember dropping the apple core. He's frustrated. The show is still on. I turn my head to look. He turns my face toward him. I turn my eyes toward the screen. He follows my gaze. His eyes narrow.

"What are you watching?"

"*The Dukes of Hazzard*."

He sits and watches until the ad break. He turns off the TV.

"I don't want you watching that show anymore."

"What? Why?"

He explains. It's something about history. I don't understand. He talks about a war. I don't understand. He mentions slavery and racism. I've heard these words. I have a vague sense of their meaning. They're bad. I can't see what they have to do with my show. He breathes out and looks up. I know this face. He's thinking.

He looks at me again. "They're bad drivers. They drive dangerously. I don't want you to grow up to be a bad driver."

"Oh. Okay." I guess that makes sense.

His face shows relief and, for some reason, failure.

2

School has just let out. The other fifth graders gather at the bus stop to wait. They talk about the recent scandal: the teachers have banned War Ball. I join in their outrage. It is our main distraction during recess. The game is a variation on dodgeball. We divide the yard in half, split into two teams, and take turns hurling a single ball at one another. If you get hit you are on the bench. If you manage to catch the ball before it hits the ground, your whole team is back in the game.

I was a terrible player. I was told I threw like a girl, though clearly, not like any girl I knew personally. They all threw better than me. I threw like some girl who had no idea how to throw a ball. I was very good at dodging the ball. But I was afraid to try to catch it. This led to frequent and excruciating stalemates. My team would all get tagged out, one by one. I would be alone on the field, dodging every shot that came in, unable to tag out any of my opponents, and unable to bring my team back in the game. From the bench, they would yell "Catch it!" louder and louder each time, until the recess bell rang. Then, they would walk inside without looking at me. Towards the end of fourth grade, a friend, James, tried to teach me to catch.

"Plant your feet. Keep your head up, and your eyes open. Catch it in your stomach, like this, and put your arms around it."

The next day I tried it. The ball hit my stomach. I was not prepared for the sting of the impact. I didn't get my arms around it. It bounced away, I was out, and we lost.

James walked next to me as we entered the building again. "At least you tried."

The day after, I tried again. This time I held on. My team cheered and sprinted back onto the field. I charged the line and threw a slow, weak, and awkward shot directly into the arms of my closest opponent. He caught it and returned it with force. I was not up for the task of catching it a second time. I was out. I didn't care. After the game classmates came by and patted me on the shoulder. That was the last week before summer vacation. I started fifth grade, ready for recess to

be different. When they announced the ban at the opening assembly, I saw my plans for social acceptance evaporate.

We keep talking about the outrage of it. One of my classmates steps out into the street, to see if the bus is coming. He turns toward us and continues the conversation.

"It's this new place. They won't let us do anything here."

Over the summer the school moved locations, all the way across town.

Another classmate weighs in. "At least we've got the store."

He points across the street. We nod in the affirmative. There was no corner store near the old location. This is a definite improvement. Through the open door we see a candy display in front of the cash register. Suddenly my hands are full of coins and my classmates are placing orders. This is tricky. I don't have the best memory. After the last order is in, I repeat them all back. I keep repeating as I cross the street. The list is long and I am concentrating to remember it, which is why I collide with a woman just as I arrive at the store. Coins spill everywhere. I hear laughter from my classmates behind me. She stops, helps me gather the change, tells me to mind where I'm going, and continues walking. I put the coins in my pocket and enter the store.

One by one I lift items from the display, drop them onto the counter, and check them off my mental list. After I grab the last item, a pack of Apple Now & Laters, I ask for Red Vines, for me. They are in a large tub with a handwritten sign that reads: "5¢ each." Under the sign, a printed label peeks out: "Not for individual sale." I have a dime, apart from the quarter in my watch pocket. The quarter is for bus fare. I consider at length spending it and walking home, then decide against it. "Two please."

I count out the coins. After I've paid for everything, there are two quarters left over, not including the one in my watch pocket. Someone miscounted. I walk back to the bus stop to distribute the haul. My colleagues dig through the bag and find their sweets. I lift up the two quarters.

"Somebody gave me too much."

A friend peers into the now empty bag then looks up. "Those were for my M&Ms."

I review my chant again. "Snickers, M&Ms, Apple Now & Laters . . ."

I smack my forehead. I had remembered M&Ms, but not the fact I needed two bags.

"Sorry."

I look down the street. The bus has just turned the corner. I dash to the store and grab another pack of M&Ms. As I pay, I see the bus pull up to the stop. I drop the quarters on the counter and take off. I don't wait for the cashier's reply.

"Hold up!" I yell.

My exclamation is unnecessary. One of the boys asked the driver to wait. I get on the bus, pay my fare, and hand off the M&Ms. We all take our seats. I can still hear my yell. I was thin and squeaky; weak. I am angry.

"Why didn't you buy your own candy?" I ask everyone and no one in particular.

"The owner doesn't like us."

I don't know who answered, but the answer does not satisfy. It is only our second day here. I don't understand how the owner could have formed an opinion about them one way or the other. And he was perfectly nice to me. Then, a thought comes all at once: they are Black. Our school's old neighborhood was Black. Our school's new neighborhood is White. The store owner is White. And I am White. That is what they are talking about.

These facts rise like a wall between them and me. I don't like this wall, so I try to ignore it. I try to forget it. I glance around the bus at my classmates. Do they try to ignore it? Are they even given the choice?

3

I am taking my time as I stroll back from the bathroom to Pre-Algebra. I enjoy the sneaky feeling of traveling through empty halls when the building is full. I move with the exaggerated confidence of an eighth grader soon to leave for high school. I turn a corner and see another student coming towards me. I recognize him. We have a couple of classes together. We're more than acquaintances, but less than friends. He's meandering. I imagine he's also enjoying this space between classes.

He calls out. We speak. We joke. He begins to slap-box, playfully. I am small. Awkward. Geeky. I often wonder if I am manly enough. Slap-boxing is a manly sort of thing, so I like that he thinks it's a game I would play. Surprisingly, I do pretty well. Awkwardness aside, I'm fast. But then he grabs me and wrestles.

He's still playing. But he's bigger than me, and stronger. In slap-boxing, I was holding my own. But in wrestling, I am outclassed. Badly. I try to throw him off me and fail. I try again with the same results. I feel my face flush with heat.

"Get off me, n*****!"

His body goes rigid. His arms tighten. Then he shoves me away. I turn toward him. His face is hard.

"What did you say?"

I understand the question. I know its importance. My mind goes blank. I heard the words just spoken. They were my own. But they startled me.

"Get . . . get off me. I said . . . get off me."

He looks at me. Something happens in his face. Then, quickly, it fades. He shrugs. "Whatever."

He turns and meanders on his way. But it is forced now, a caricature of a casual stroll. I wait a moment then walk to class. I tell myself I was just using words I'd heard my classmates use. That is a thing I do. I didn't mean anything by it, I remind myself. But I wonder: Was I only imitating, or was there something more?

We never speak again.

4
(*Northern California*)

The van jostles down a poorly paved road. Our Scoutmaster, Mr. Rose, drove up earlier in his own car to handle the paperwork. His son, the assistant Scoutmaster, drives the van. He is more lenient than his father, which explains Sir Mix-a-Lot's voice buzzing through the static of the radio. He raps something about ladies sticking out their butts, and how even White boys will shout.

The senior patrol leader, Cassius, turns. He is my age. He points to me.

"Even this guy's got to shout!"

We all laugh. As the only White boy in the troop, I'm used to it. Mostly.

The van turns into the camp entrance. There are more Scouts here than I have ever seen. We step out of the van, grab our bags, and assemble in the parking lot. Mr. Rose is waiting for us. A man with a bullhorn tells us to line up by troop. There are about twenty other troops here, maybe three hundred or four hundred Scouts. It seems they are all White.

A boy from the next troop over hisses at me. "Go line up with your troop."

Mr. Rose fixes a stare on him.

"Keep your eyes forward and mind your business." He does not raise his voice. He carries an air of authority that makes it unnecessary.

The other boy's Scoutmaster faces Mr. Rose. "I'm in charge of this troop."

"Then get your Scout in order."

They look at each other. Their faces are hard, but it passes in an instant. I know this is not my fault, but I want to apologize. I'm just not sure to whom. We all stand at attention.

The man with the bullhorn gives a mini pep rally and lays out the camp's rules. He points to a group of a dozen or so boys at one end of the parking lot. They are solo Scouts. They have no troops; they came alone. Like me, they are all White, except for one at the end. He is Asian.

The man with the bullhorn says each solo Scout was randomly assigned to a troop for the duration of camp. He tells us that if a Scout is assigned to our troop, we should receive and welcome him as one of our own. He calls out the assignments. The Asian boy is sent to our troop. I can't quite believe that this was random. The man with the bullhorn tells us where each troop is camping and dismisses us until dinner.

Mr. Rose greets our new addition. We grab our bags and head to the campground. Cassius makes small talk with the new guy.

"What's your name?"

"Mark."

"Cassius. I'm the senior patrol leader. Where you from?"

"Hawaii. But I live in LA now."

"Your family's Hawaiian?"

Mark shakes his head. "Japanese."

Cassius nods.

After we set up camp, Mr. Rose gathers us again. "Mess hall in fifteen minutes for dinner. Dress uniforms."

We groan. Everyone hates dress uniforms.

He repeats. "Dress uniforms."

We relent, get dressed, assemble, and head for the mess hall. As we head down the hill, we fall into a river of Scouts bound for dinner. Cassius is the first to notice it.

"I don't think dress uniform is required for dinner. No one else is wearing it."

Mr. Rose does not look at him. "We wear dress uniforms to dinner." He emphasizes the word "we." There is no further discussion.

We gather for dinner. All of the troops sit together at their own tables. After dinner we go to evening activity. It's a bunch of icebreakers, silly games and stuff. We're dismissed and go to bed.

In the morning Mr. Rose wakes us up. "Red shirts today."

We've each come with two sets of olive green shorts and three t-shirts: red, green, and yellow, each bearing the Boy Scouts' logo. We put on red. Mark doesn't have a t-shirt to match. Mr. Rose is prepared. He was a Boy Scout himself in his day.

"What size are you?"

"Medium."

He produces three shirts from his bag. Red, green, and yellow.

"Wear them in rotation. Do wash each night and hang it up, so they'll be clean and dry two days later. Dress uniforms every night for dinner."

Mark nods.

We head down to breakfast. The other troops are irregular. Their shirts don't match. Most of them aren't even wearing Boy Scout t-shirts. This time I speak up.

"No one else matches."

"We do." Again, Mr. Rose emphasizes the word "we."

After breakfast, we head to the main hall to sign up for classes. I wait for my troop mates to go first, then follow their lead. I don't make new friends easily; I'm not looking to get stuck in a class with a bunch of strangers. I glance over their shoulders to see their schedules. I'm disappointed. There is one merit badge in particular I was hoping to earn this week. I don't think anyone else has signed up for it. I test the waters.

"Is anyone taking Orienteering?"

Charles shakes his head. "We all took it together last year."

I wasn't here last year. I glance across the hall to the Orienteering table, and the line of strangers in front of it. I breathe, walk across the hall, and join the line. As it happens, the first Orienteering class starts immediately after sign-up.

The instructor shouts, "Orienteering, over here!"

I join the group of strangers that gather around him. He leads us to a grove of trees, then hands out compasses and topographical maps of the camp. He walks us through the basics and sends us on our first exercise. We will be divided into groups of three. Each group will start a trail with a different marker. Each marker provides a heading and distance to the next marker. If we follow the path of markers successfully, we should arrive back at our starting point. He hands out pencils.

"Each marker has a word engraved on it. Write them down. That way we can check if you've missed any. The beginner courses all stay on the paved paths of the main camp. So there's no chance of you getting lost." He pauses. "Not today anyway."

The group laughs. I chuckle along nervously. He assigns our groups. The other two boys in my group extend their hands and offer their names. "Brad." "Thomas." We head out on the path. There's

silence. Not the comfortable kind. This is why I didn't want to be with strangers. But I should try. Mom says it's best to begin with a question.

"So, what troop are you guys from?"

"Troop 14. Rah!" They say this in unison. Troop 14 is the largest and oldest troop at camp this year. I've noticed already that they always say their troop number in unison. We find the first marker, note the word "Trustworthy," and take a heading. There is more uncomfortable silence.

"You're with the Black troop, right?" The statement is simple fact. But the phrasing makes me uncomfortable.

"Troop 462. Yeah."

"So—how did that happen?"

I shrug. "I graduated from Webelos to Scouts. My mom found a troop for me."

"Wait. Where are you from?"

"San Francisco."

Brad frowns. "That's a big place. There must be other troops."

There is more silence. I hadn't really thought about it. I suppose he's right. And our troop meets halfway across the city. There are probably troops closer to my house. I try to think why Mom chose 462. I don't have an answer—not that it bothers me. Except that with another troop I wouldn't have to answer questions like this.

We find the next marker. We write down the word "Loyal." I laugh. Brad looks up from writing.

"What's funny?"

"The first word was 'Trustworthy.' And the second is 'Loyal.' They're just the words from the Scout law. So the next one will be 'Helpful.' It's kind of dumb. I mean, you could just write down the rest of the law, and head back."

Thomas raises an eyebrow and smirks. "Is that what they teach in 462?"

I know there is something behind this question. I frown and shake my head.

"No. Mr. Rose makes us do everything by the book." They glance at one another. My voice gets higher. "I wasn't saying we should cheat. Just that they made it really easy to cheat, if someone wanted to." I'm talking much too quickly.

Thomas claps a hand on my shoulder. "Relax. I was just joking. Don't take it personal."

I force myself to breathe out. "Right. Right. No, I know. I'm sorry I got worked up."

He nods and smiles. "Don't worry about it."

The third marker is a long walk away. We find it and write the word "Helpful." Brad finishes writing and puts the sheet in his pocket.

"Are you guys competing in the soccer tournament on Wednesday?"

I don't know. I hadn't heard about it before now. "Maybe."

Brad smiles. "Well, I'm guessing 462 is the troop to beat."

I don't know why he thinks this. We play baseball when we're waiting to get picked up after meetings. Some of my troop mates are pretty good. But I've never even heard any of them talk about soccer. Brad is still looking at me and smiling.

I smile back. "Thanks. I'll tell them you said so."

By the time we finish the trail, it's lunchtime. We head back to the mess hall. Brad and Thomas move toward Troop 14's table. Brad tugs my sleeve.

"Hey. Come sit with us."

I look and see my troop mates beginning to gather at a table across the hall. I look back to 14's table. I'm torn.

"I should check in with my troop."

He shrugs. "Suit yourself."

The rest of the week goes well. We meet other Scouts, learn new skills. We enter the soccer tournament and lose. Still, we have fun. Mr. Rose is strict, but he wants us to have a good time. And he's funny. Very funny. Still, he never entirely loses his edge. He checks in with us each evening and follows our progress in the merit badge classes we've taken. On two occasions one of my troop mates says he's keeping up with the rest of the class. Both times, Mr. Rose replies, "Not good enough. You have to be better." This confuses me, because on the second night he asked me how Orienteering went. I told him the other Scouts seemed more experienced, but I thought I could keep up. He simply answered, "Good."

After the first day, troops begin to mix tables at the dining hall. Guests show up, now and then, at our table. But the members of our troop always sit together. For me, it is a matter of shyness: I'm not

comfortable around new folk. I know this is not true for the others. They are all more outgoing than I am. But they stay together anyway. Even Mark, which is odd. We're as much strangers to him as anyone here, but he still sticks close. One morning I go to get seconds on cereal. Bowl in hand, I turn back to the table, and see it: a cafeteria full of four hundred White children. One table with ten Black children and a Japanese kid. I wonder, again, if I should take up Brad's offer and visit 14 at their table.

The last night, after dinner, the camp staff organizes a series of obstacle challenges. We will compete as troops. Mr. Rose gathers us together. He's smiling. "Have fun tonight, gentlemen." He often calls us gentlemen. His faces flashes, not stern, just serious. "But win."

I recognize the face he makes. It's a face I make sometimes. He has something to prove. And we do win. In fact, we're winning by quite a lot. Halfway through the competition he calls us back into a huddle.

"Alright, I still want you to win. But I need you to pull back a bit."

This tone of his voice is odd. Once, he took us to a shooting range. He used the same tone as he went over firearm safety. It occurs to me that he's offering a warning. He's not afraid, just cautious. I wonder what he's concerned about. The other Scouts nod. We pull back a bit. We lose a few events and win the competition by a narrow margin.

The camp director announces the rankings. When they announce first prize, Cassius stands up to take the stage. Mr. Rose lays a hand on his shoulder.

"Shake his hand, take the certificate, and smile. No gloating." He nods and takes the stage. Mr. Rose turns to us.

"Clap. No cheering. And no celebrating until we get back to camp."

We clap. The camp director leads everyone in the camp song. Some of the other Scouts congratulate us. We thank them. Politely. We're dismissed. We go back to our camp. We make a fire and celebrate. Mr. Rose bakes a pineapple upside-down cake in a Dutch oven by the heat of the embers. He's done this before. It's amazing. The campground grows quiet as we eat. He takes the opportunity to speak.

"Gentlemen, you did well. You are remarkable. Do not forget it."

I frown. I like Mr. Rose, but this is cheesy. I look around, expecting someone to crack a joke. No one does. They only nod. This moment means something more to them than it does to me.

5

It is my first day of high school. I find my locker and fit the padlock to it. Another freshman finds his way to the locker next to mine.

I turn and see his face. "Hi, Tim."

His smile falls. "My name is Travis."

I feel my face flush. "Oh, I'm sorry. There's this guy, Tim—he looks just like you."

I hear my own words and wince. I am lying and I know it. They look nothing alike. But they are both Asian.

Travis doesn't respond. He fits a padlock on his locker, shakes his head, and walks away.

6

I'm sitting in Spanish 101. It's almost three o'clock. Finally, Joana, the teacher, dismisses class. We collect our things and stand.

"Espérate." Joana points to me and then to the floor. I gather I should stay. The others file out. She crosses her arms. "Hay que hablar."

God, I hate that. This is Intro Spanish. We're most of the way through the semester, but still, there's no way we can carry on a conversation. She waits for the last student to leave and shut the door.

"I've spoken to your other teachers."

I thank God, not for her speaking with other teachers but for her speaking to me in English. And then I wonder why she is talking to my other teachers. I shift my feet.

"They tell me you're coasting through."

"I don't know what you mean."

"They say you don't work, but you manage to do well on the tests."

This is true. In eighth grade I noticed that I tested well. It's more of a knack than anything else. With finals and midterms weighted so heavily I can get a B with very little effort.

She raises an index finger.

"If I don't see you doing the work every day, I will fail you."

"That's not fair. You gave us the grading standards." I start to dig through my backpack: I have it in writing somewhere. She stops me.

"My class. My castle. I am queen here."

Her tone makes it clear there is no point arguing. I don't reply. I shoulder my bag and walk out. She speaks to my back.

"Don't test me."

I walk downstairs to the front entrance. Students are flooding out of the school. The director is in his office, packing up for the day. I knock on the door. He motions me in and welcomes me by name. He knows everyone's name.

"What's up?"

I explain the situation. He looks at me blankly.

"Her class, her castle." He pauses. "She is queen." His emphasis falls on the word "is." I guess this has come up before. I shuffle out, grumbling under my breath, and walk up the street to the bus stop. A classmate is there already waiting. She sees me grumbling.

"You okay?"

I explain the situation and how it isn't fair. She shakes her head and rolls her eyes.

"White boys."

I don't see what that has to do with anything.

7

It's Christmas vacation. Family and friends have gathered in our living room to chat after dinner. I sip hot chocolate. I set it down and listen. A woman speaks to the whole gathering, a family friend. Like most of our family friends, she is White.

"It's weird though. It's like there's this idea of connection. But it's like an imagined connection. There's no real sense of what it means. Like, my English teacher visited there. She said she was talking to these two women, and she told them, 'I'm African, too.' And then they asked her, 'What tribe are you from?' She didn't know. So they told her, 'You're not African, you're American.'"

It is an odd conversation to have after Christmas dinner and yet, it feels important. Then, for half a second, I wonder why. There are no Africans, American or otherwise, in this room. Why does this conversation matter to us? The thought fades, and I join in as we go on talking about things that have nothing to do with us.