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MY PARENTS BROKE ONE OF the strongest taboos in our society and thereby became outcasts in their native land. This is their story. Their transgression began in 1942 when, against conventional wisdom, they violated the unwritten rule that said Whites socialize with Whites and Blacks socialize with Blacks. When they first met, they felt an immediate attraction to each other. As they explored the nuances of each other's character and personality, their attraction grew into a love so strong that it lasted a lifetime. It was a love forbidden in our society. It resulted in a marriage that was outlawed in many of our American states at the time and was regarded as anathema in the rest.

Despite this opposition, throughout some fifty years of marriage their relationship retained the freshness of teenage puppy love, the romantic spark of newlyweds, and the intimacy of best friends. It was wonderful to watch them even in their seventies, holding hands and flirting with each other while they laughed and joked like kids. They loved to play chess and Scrabble together and enjoyed an intensely passionate private relationship. My mother once confided in me, at a time when I was experiencing some difficulties in my first marriage, that they had made love every day of their marriage except when they were physically separated or ill. Each found in the other a confidant and trusted companion with whom they shared their deepest concerns and feelings. While they had their share of typical marital problems, the deep love they held for each other endured for over fifty years. As a couple they were physically attractive, charming, witty, and intellectually engaging. And yet because he was Black and she was White, they were ostracized.

When they got married, interracial marriage was illegal in twenty-seven states of the union. In states such as Indiana police stopped and either harassed or arrested interracial couples. My parents dared not travel through the South because Black men were lynched for the slightest hint of association with White women. In the two Northern cities of Detroit and Chicago, where they spent most of their married life, they were not permitted to rent hotel or motel rooms except in red-light districts. Rac-

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ist thugs in Chicago verbally harassed them. In Woodstock, Illinois, one of the windows in their home was shattered by gunfire, their canary was killed, and their fellow townspeople eventually chased them from their home. In Detroit they were socially isolated for more than forty years. Their professional coworkers shunned them as soon as they discovered the interracial nature of their marriage.

While interracial marriages have always been part of the fabric of American society, they have nevertheless been rare. I am not talking about the sexual liaisons common between White slave owners and their Black slaves. Nor am I talking about the illicit unions between mixed couples neither willing nor able to become legally married. Legal marriages between Blacks and Whites have been forbidden and discouraged for most of our nation's history. While increasingly common, interracial marriages of all kinds comprise only about 2.6 percent of all marriages in the United States, according to the year 2000 U.S. Census figures. Such marriages are still frowned upon by many Whites, Blacks, and other ethnic groups in this country. According to a survey reported by the *Washington Post Online* on 5 July 2001, 52 percent of interracial couples reported being mistreated because of their relationship. According to the same survey 46 percent of Whites considered it better to marry someone of their own race, while only 21 percent of Blacks considered it preferable to marry someone of their own race. Thirty-five percent of Whites reported that it would bother them if a member of their family were to marry someone of a different race, and an additional 9 percent said they simply could not accept it. Only 9 percent of Blacks surveyed said they would be bothered if someone in their family were to marry a White person, with an additional 4 percent saying it would be unacceptable.

Because such marriages were extremely rare in the 1940s, my parents attracted attention wherever they went. When they were out in public as a couple, people stopped and stared at them, often with disapproving or hostile looks, sometimes worse. Our family attracted as much attention as a traveling menagerie while we engaged in ordinary activities such as shopping, visiting amusement parks or museums, or going to the movies or the public library. Although people seldom made comments, they turned their heads as they walked down the street or drove past us in their cars.

My parents taught us to respond to these situations with humor and a sense of personal pride. After such excursions, we laughed and joked about the events of the day in the safety and security of our home. Mom

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and Dad always let us know that the attention we received was not our problem. It was the problem of those who were ignorant and rude enough to stare. They taught us that there was one race: the human race. We learned that racial distinctions are arbitrary and illogical. Racial prejudice was born out of ignorance and greed and had been encouraged by corrupt plantation owners, politicians, and others in positions of power who stood to benefit by perpetuating racism.

While my parents shielded us in our early years from their personal experiences with racial discrimination, they taught us about the heroic struggle of Blacks against the forces of racism in this country. We learned Black history from our parents in the fifties, long before Black pride became popular in the African American community during the sixties and seventies. They consciously planned to help us take pride in our African, as well as our European, heritage.

My parents took pride not only in their heritage but in their marriage itself. They knew they were breaking the paradigm of ethnic isolation most Americans follow. They knew they were pioneers in establishing a new paradigm in race relations. They believed that if other Americans saw how well an interracial marriage could work, it would lessen the fear of—and the prejudice against—such marriages. They hoped that in some small way their marriage would help to bridge the gap between Blacks and Whites in this country. That was, in fact, part of my mother's purpose in setting out to write this book.

Marriage beyond Black and White was started some fifty years ago when my parents decided to share their story with a fascinated yet profoundly ignorant public. Together they drafted an outline of their proposed book and wrote the first chapter—alternating voices—each giving his or her personal perspective. In that preliminary work, written in 1952 after nearly a decade of marriage, my father wrote that this book was

a sincere attempt to place before the American public the problems which face us and others like us in the hope that we can dispel some of the myths surrounding interracial marriage and create some measure of understanding toward it. . . . We believed that society would, in time, take a marriage such as ours in stride. We did not know, but we believed.

About the same time, describing the purpose of the book, my mother wrote,

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We are not alone in our situation—interracial marriages are increasing in number. Perhaps such a book as we propose will help to bring about a greater understanding of and sympathy toward such marriages. We hope so. Anyone who has ever found himself on the wrong side of a wall will know what the feeling is that Carlyle and I have sometimes. But we know where the wall is, and we know what there is on the other side that is worth getting.

Although my parents were committed to each other and believed there was nothing wrong with interracial marriage, the constant struggle to survive in a racist culture took its toll over the decades. My parents began their marriage with bright hopes, buoyant and full of optimism about their union. They dreamed of achieving success in their careers. They hoped that society would gradually learn to accept interracial marriages. While their optimism concerning their own marriage proved to be well founded, over the years they became bitterly disillusioned by the degree of racism in America. My father elaborated on his career struggles:

Now began two years of disillusionment. When I applied for positions ranging from clerical to minor executive in the business world, I was told that although my education and personality were well suited to such work my color made me unacceptable. Eventually I took a part-time clerical job with a research organization, but the pay was inadequate. This was followed by substitute teaching (two calls a week). Then through the state civil service I received an appointment as a social worker, but I was unable to support six people on two hundred dollars a month. Once more I became a janitor. Full circle! Had the struggle for education been a waste of time and effort and hope?

At the age of thirty-two and after four years of college, the best-paying job my father could find was a janitorial position, which was no better than the jobs he had held before college.

My mother entered the marriage with deep feelings about the brotherhood of all humanity. Though she was White, she came to hate White people because of the contempt and hatred so many of them displayed toward her and her interracial family. She came to hate her own race even more as she delved into African American history and learned of the depth of the brutality and constant indignities that African Americans

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have faced throughout their history in this country. She was stunned and enraged by the torture, mutilation, and murder of Emmett Till.* She realized that the same fate might overtake her husband or her children. Finally, the shock of her demotion from first-class citizenship as the respected daughter of an established family in a university town to second-class citizenship as the wife of a “Negro”—caused her to see the stark reality of racism more clearly than many Black people can. Typically, American Blacks can only dream of having the advantages that the majority of Whites hold as their birthright. She enjoyed those advantages for the first three decades of her life and then lost them overnight. Only in her eighties, after decades of reflection and healing, was she finally able again to accept White people as individuals.

For my father, the effect of the lifelong struggle with racism was less obvious but equally devastating. In the early years of his marriage, he dreamed of becoming a college professor. That dream was dashed when a perfectionist advisor rejected his proposal for a master’s thesis. Although my father was a brilliant man, he never believed in himself enough to overcome that obstacle and other similar obstacles. He was accepted at the University of Chicago but never completed his degree. He wrote beautiful poetry in the early years of his marriage, yet his pen was suddenly stilled and his poetic voice silenced forever well before he reached the age of thirty. He never explained why. I never knew he was capable of writing such exquisite poetry until after his death. It was then that my mother shared with the family a much-cherished collection of his poems that she had kept hidden away, like buried treasure, with other family heirlooms. Although his poetry clearly demonstrates his command of the written word, he never believed his work was special. My mother, a published author, often said he could write better than she could, but he was never convinced of the value or quality of his work.

My mother described him as a courageous man who proudly stood against society on the issue of interracial marriage. He was able to maintain that audacious stance well into their marriage. However, after decades of rejection by a world of cold, staring strangers, he no longer enjoyed going out in public with his family—the price was too high. For

* Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy from Chicago, was savagely brutalized and murdered in Money, Mississippi, in the summer of 1955 simply for saying “Bye, baby” to a White woman.

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much of his adult life, he was plagued by nightmares of mobs of White men who hunted him down like an animal. My mother said he often awoke terrified in a cold sweat from these nightmares. Although at some deep level he experienced absolute terror of Whites, he never displayed his fears to his family or others. He always projected an image of dignity and intellectual detachment that concealed the fear, anger, and frustration that lay beneath the calm surface.

While I cannot prove that any of these difficulties in my father's life were due to racism, there is no doubt in my heart or mind that racism was one of the root causes. The tragedy of my father's life is that he was a great man who never realized his greatness. He was a nightingale convinced that he was a sparrow, so he hid in the bushes and stopped singing. Only his mate and a few of his friends knew the quality of his voice and the beauty of his soul. The world never knew and will never know the charm and elegance of the melodies it missed. It is my hope that a small measure of his wonderful qualities will be revealed in this book.

Although my parents began this book as a joint effort during the 1950s, the struggles of living soon overwhelmed them, making it difficult to write. While my mother later continued writing and enjoyed the publication of a novel, my father never mustered the psychic energy to write again. When my wife, Kim, encouraged him to write his story, he replied, "It would be like taking a razor to my wrist." He could not bear to relive the years of pain, turmoil, hate, rejection, and failure.

Unfortunately, my mother felt that the story of their marriage would not be complete without his perspective. She wrote about her adventures in China. She created a novel about Detroit's race riots. She even wrote about the tragedy of Native Americans. But she would not write about their marriage. Not without him. Not until after his death. Until that time, it was her steadfast hope that he would join her in sharing their story.

When my father died at home of cancer on February 17, 1995, I thought my mother would immediately follow. They had always said they could not live without each other. Even though she was grief stricken by the loss of the man to whom she had devoted more than fifty years of her life—her best friend, her lover, her close companion and confidant—she was energized by her determination to complete the book they had started together in the fifties. In 1995, from February until July, she wrote furiously, sleeping little and working late into the night. She said openly

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that her only reason for living was to complete this book. She wanted the world to know the story of her marriage. She hoped that by sharing her pain and her struggles, White people in particular would come to understand the damaging and long-lasting effects of racism. She also wanted the world to know that she had experienced great happiness in marriage and that interracial marriages were not automatically destined for failure.

Writing their story after my father's death gave continuing purpose and meaning to her life. It also tormented her. While she enjoyed memories of the ebb and flow of her love relationship with Carlyle, remembering the good times only made her miss him more dearly. Sometimes she couldn't sleep because of the emptiness she felt without him. She often awoke crying in the middle of the night, aching for the gentle touch of his hand or longing for the soothing tones of his deeply resonant voice. When she remembered the bad times, the pain and anger resulting from the racism she experienced flared up as strongly as ever. When she recalled the murder of Emmett Till, she struggled in vain to control her tears as she cried out, "How could they do this to another human being? He was just a child . . . just a child." When these troubling memories overcame her, she needed my father's comfort and support, and he was no longer there.

In the end she never finished the book—the pain of writing her story was too much for her. She could not endure the acute loneliness of living without her husband while daily reliving the intimacies of their life together. She could not stand the pain of their struggles without his supportive presence. She called my wife, Kim, almost daily in tears. She said repeatedly, "This book is breaking my heart. It's killing me to write this book." Although she spoke figuratively, I believe that writing this memorable account literally killed her. She suffered a heart attack in late July and died during the month of August 1995 as her systems shut down one by one. The doctors say that she died of multiple systems failure, but it's clear that she really died of a broken heart.

Ironically, while she would not finish the book when my father was alive because she felt his input was necessary, she could not finish it after his death because she needed his emotional support to endure the painful memories.

As my mother lay dying in the hospital, unable to speak because of the ventilator in her mouth and unable to write because of a stroke that

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had paralyzed half of her body, we struggled to communicate with her. Through voice and touch, eye contact and notes, we tried to convey our love for her. Three generations of our family—my sisters and I, our spouses, our children, and their children—maintained an almost constant vigil at the hospital during the last month of her life. The doctors told us she had only days to live, yet she proved them wrong. She struggled to regain the ability to complete her memoir. The will to live, however, was not enough to heal her damaged brain and heart.

As Mom slowly crossed the chasm from life to death, we held on to her as long as we could. Unable to stop the inevitable journey, we watched as the gleam of light gradually faded from her eye. Sometime during those agonizing hours, I promised that I would finish her book.

Though she had written furiously during the last sixth months, churning out thirteen well-written chapters, she had only covered the first fifteen years of our family biography. The bulk of her story was untold.

Taking up the story where she left off, I have attempted to finish the chronicle of our family life. While understandably my work cannot reflect the same detail and charm she brought to her composition, I want the reader to know the entire story of their marriage. In addition, I hope that the added perspective of an interracial child who was a product of their union will enrich the reader's understanding of the dynamics of our family life and broaden his or her insight into the disease of racism. I also hope the reader will come to appreciate the depth and beauty of the spiritual teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, especially on the subject of race relations. While this memoir is not about the Bahá'í Faith, it would not be complete if it did not explore the profoundly positive effects that the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and members of the Bahá'í community have had upon my life as an adult.

Finally, to fulfill my mother's wish that my father's voice be included in this memoir, I've inserted some of his poetry. Each poem was selected because its theme reflects one of the themes in the chapter it precedes. While the poems do not add to the details of the history of my parents' marriage, they reveal the depths of my father's feelings on a variety of subjects—particularly his deep love for my mother. I hope the reader will appreciate them.

In my struggle to blend my mother's writing and my work into a coherent and meaningful memoir, one of the challenges I faced was the use of language when referring to Americans of African descent. My

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mother wrote in the language of the forties and fifties, often referring to Americans with African lineage as “Black” but also occasionally as “colored” or “Negro.” Although this language is dated, I have retained it in some places in an effort to maintain the authenticity of her voice and to give the memoir historical accuracy. Similarly, when I write about my experiences with people of color during the sixties and seventies, I use the terminology that was most natural to me at the time, referring to people of color as “Blacks.” Toward the end of the book I use the terms “Black” and “African American” almost interchangeably, reflecting the fact that both terms are common in today’s dialogues and literature and that I use both terms in my conversations. In all cases I use capital letters because I strongly believe that capital letters should be used to denote respect for the group of people being named, just as we show respect for people of all ethnic groups and nations by capitalizing the first letter of their ethnic or national names. I might add that philosophically, I prefer the term “African American” to “Black” for a variety of reasons. The terms “Black” and “White” as applied to people have their origins in our country’s history of racism. They are a purely social construct with no scientific meaning and have been used to separate people legally, socially, and politically. If we are to overcome racism completely, I believe we will have to transcend or go beyond the use of the terms “Black” and “White” to denote groups of people. Paradoxically, it’s impossible to talk about racism in this country without using these very terms that in some measure help to perpetuate separation and division. The terms “African American” and “European American,” while awkward to some, are both more comfortable and meaningful to me. They refer to our ethnic and cultural heritage without invoking the false construct of race. Nevertheless, I have used the terms “Black” and “White” liberally in this work in the interest of using language that is understandable and comfortable to the average reader.

Another struggle I faced arose from the tension that exists between my desire to be truthful about the events of our family history and my desire to protect the privacy of my family members and others who have crossed our path. While I have consulted with them liberally to the extent possible, the final copy of this work has not been edited or approved by any of them. In the final analysis, this work is a combination of my mom’s memoir and my purely subjective interpretation of the events of my family’s history. I offer my humble apologies to any and all family

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members whom I may offend by sharing my interpretation of their personal struggles and by offering very limited and inadequate descriptions of them as people.

Finally, in order to protect the reputation of people whose behaviors are mentioned in this work in a less than positive light, I have changed some names and, in some cases, locations while stating my memory of the related events as accurately as possible. I sincerely hope that these minor changes will not undermine the reader's understanding of the truths that I mean to convey in this work.

—*David Douglas*