

Shedding Skin

I don't remember the first time I realized there were other people like me, other people who lived in the elusive world between Black and white. But my childhood self longed to seek us out, to use loose curls and wide noses and pale-bronze skin as maps to each other.

The first person I found using my patented technique was Mrs. Andelsmith, my sixth-grade homeroom teacher. She had short bouncy mocha ringlets, olive skin, a dash of freckles, and a gentle yet stern smile that wouldn't quit.

We already had things in common beyond our shared mixed-race background: our penchant for wearing sweaters, our quiet bookishness punctuated by moments of optimistic extroversion. But what kept me stealing glances at her during lunchtime was how much we looked alike. My skin was darker than hers by a few shades, my hair longer and less uniform in pattern, but I could still tell that we were descended from the same groups of people. I was like a countryman who found myself far from home and longed to recognize my own people in a new land. Only I never really had a country of origin, just a notion that there were people out there somewhere like me.

As an introvert, I had the benefit of being one of the last people to leave the classroom during lunchtime. I didn't care much for recess because I would usually stay inside and read or work on my year-long map of the world project anyway. One day, I finally decided to ask Mrs. Andelsmith if she was biracial. Clad in my trademark fuzzy-sweater-and-headband combination, I squeaked the question to her as I was standing by her desk.

"I am," she nodded with a smile. "Are you biracial too?"

“I am too,” I smiled back, and ended the conversation as awkwardly as any sixth grader would.

That afternoon, my heart’s singsonging made it difficult to focus on my homework. I fantasized about meeting even more Black and white people. Maybe I’d luck out and meet a fellow Caribbean and Eastern European person. Maybe I’d strike gold and meet the long-lost Grenadian-Romanian sibling I’d longed for as a young child.



I began to scout us out everywhere. When interracial couples with mixed-race children passed me and my mother at the grocery store, I would huddle close to her and lightly pinch her arm to alert her to the family. We both pretended to scan the room looking for hickory-smoked bacon or raspberry lemonade, but we both knew we were really looking for our mirror half. With a knowing smile and crinkled eyes, she would lean down to stroke my hair and kiss my cheek. A quiet celebration that I was not the only one.

In these brief moments in passing, I compared myself to these children. Did their hair tumble down their back in uniform ringlets, unlike my frizzy crown? Were their eyes green, blue, or hazel, anything but dark brown?

The comparisons only got more intense as I got older. By the time I entered high school, I began to notice mixed-race people not only on the street but on the big screen. There were actors like Halle Berry and Giancarlo Esposito, who had been around for a long time but were nearly always identified by the public as simply Black. But there were also relative newcomers, like Zendaya and Dwayne “the Rock” Johnson, who were embraced as reflections of a changing America. There was *Belle* (2013), which starred Gugu Mbatha-Raw as the titular heiress born into slavery, the first movie I had ever seen with an explicitly Black and white protagonist. And

of course, there was Meghan Markle, who showed me that I, too, could get a European prince from a sickeningly wealthy family to leave his colonizing brood behind.

Companies, spurred by calls to diversify the models that graced their magazines, suddenly had models of all races and backgrounds where there were previously only lithe white women. It didn't matter if it was Target or Land's End or Versace: inevitably, there would be several models in questionably-comfortable poses who possessed a mixture of different features. Many of these models appeared to be of Black and European ancestry. Often they had the same genetic formula: playfully tousled loose coils, perhaps brown or dark red. Pale skin that, on its own, might have enabled them to pass for white. A smattering of freckles. Broad noses and full lips. A combination of characteristics that were appreciably Black yet palatable for white consumers, but were above all "exotic." They were harbingers of a future in which the sins of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism were washed away, a future in which people of different races mingled freely and readily and invited each other into the most intimate parts of their lives. I did not see myself in this idealistic future designed to fill the coffers of Caucasian capitalists by making white people feel better about themselves for embracing diversity. Nor did I see myself reflected in this mixed-race ideal, even though I had all the requisite genetic ingredients.

Even though I saw myself in every Black and white public figure—every multiracial public figure, even—I could not resist the urge to analyze our features side by side. I would painstakingly lean over my white marble bathroom sink to dissect my face in the mirror. Under the white lights overhead, I would peel back my eyelids as if performing an eye exam. My umber eyes weren't light enough to signal definite European heritage, but if I looked at them through just the right angle, they looked like my white father's. I would admire the nearly-straight hairs at the front of my head and yank at the tight coils in the back, begging for them to loosen and

lengthen before they inevitably sprung back to their original shape. My lips were my pride. When they were chapped, I would lick them to bring back their ruddy shine.

But it was never enough. My seemingly-untameable curls, which refused to fit into neat patterns and hats alike, weren't as loose as those of the Black-and-white celebrities I saw on TV. My skin, though noticeably different colors depending on the season, was always darker. Modeling for American Eagle or Forever 21 was out of the question. I longed for the elusive "biracial look."

And so I rationalized this routine self-examination as an inspection for mixedness. I knew that people saw my Blackness—between the curly hair and the tan skin, it was impossible to miss—but I wanted them to see my European blood as well. I longed to break past the "one-drop rule" that defined my public existence. While no longer legally codified, the rule still had a firm grip on the American consciousness, as my cousin Gem forcefully reminded me on a family trip to our Grenadian homeland. It was the summer after sixth grade, and I was still riding the joy of recognition that Mrs. Andelsmith gave to me.

"Would the police think you're biracial?" she shouted as she chased me around the resort pool. I almost slipped and cut my head trying to escape her grasp.

"No! You're Black!" she chanted. "You're Black! You're Black! You're Black!"

I rushed into the refuge of my mother's deep brown arms. She shooed away Gem and continued to hold me as I sat between her legs, rocking back and forth and holding back tears.

What Gem said wasn't false: I was Black. But even though my Blackness and Caribbean-ness were what strangers would see, I craved for everyone to see my full story. I figured that if I was perceived as biracial by others, people would see me as I saw myself: straddling two races and ethnicities, with equal footing in both. I hoped that if people could see

my whiteness, it would be more immediately conceivable to them that I could be Romanian like my father. But I couldn't change my physical features, so this mental torture never led to anything but a shamefully deepening hunger for whiteness.



Up until the beginning of high school, I didn't think much about how my father and I were perceived in relation to each other. He was the man who played baroque music in the car each morning on the way to school while I worked on my IXL math exercises. The man who would extoll the virtues of particle physics and computational biology to me before asking my mom to fix a lightbulb. The man who always had to duck out of school presentations, concerts, and tennis matches because he had to take a call from the hospital. But most of all, he was just my dad. It didn't matter whether or not we looked alike, because the most important thing was that I knew he'd love me no matter what.

As I got older, I felt a growing unease that the world would not see us as father and daughter, especially when my mother wasn't around. Whenever I went out for dinner with my dad, I would scan the room for stares, fearing other customers' judgment. We'd hold hands sometimes while walking, but I'd quickly drop his after a minute or two. When I was with my dark-skinned mother in public, I was fearless. I knew that people would interpret any embraces and kisses on the cheek as a normal, if a bit strange in public, way of expressing our love for each other. But when I was only with my father, I was afraid that people would see a middle-aged white man and a young woman of color and think that we were anything but related. The only time my suspicion bore fruit was when, on a trip to my father's hometown of Timișoara, my grandparents' neighbor thought that my barely fifteen-year-old self was my father's wife instead of his daughter.

I wanted to be seen as my father's daughter, but history made that difficult. Under Ceaușescu's rule, Romania and its people were isolated from the outside world. Nearly everyone was ethnically Romanian, and nearly everyone spoke the language. Even in the years after Romania opened up, the country's demographics remained virtually unchanged. There was no room for someone like me in Romania, as I discovered when I visited the country with my dad in ninth grade. As I walked beside my father and grandmother on cobblestone Timișoaran streets, people would look me up and down as if I were some sort of oddity. Strangers would speak to my father in Romanian and, before I had even said a word, address me in English. I longed to look whiter in order to be more easily perceived as the daughter of my Romanian father. The pride I felt at being Romanian was always undermined by the unfailing question of whether or not I was a "true" Romanian. How could I be Romanian if my fellow countrymen did not even recognize me as one of their own?

I never fully separated my desire to look like my father from my desire to look whiter than I was. Longer curls, lighter eyes, and paler skin would prove that I was half-white and calm the anxious questions in my mind. I wanted to become the type of Black and white person valued by society, desired by modeling campaigns and creepy parents who fetishized multiracial children alike. I wanted to pick and choose my European and Afro-Caribbean features just like them too. I was not motivated by financial gain or Instagram aesthetics, but I was not blind to the privilege that increased proximity to whiteness would give me. But at the end of the day, I just wanted to be perceived as the child of both of my parents.



In my never-ending search for other Black and white people, I presumed that I knew what to look for. The truth is that I didn't really; I just looked for what I thought a Black and white

person would look like: some combination of pale to medium-brown skin, curly hair, and indescribably European-esque features. Hypocritically, I sought out other multiracial people based on the inevitably non-foolproof assumption that the rest of society made. I categorized people even though I despised being categorized myself. Every Black and white person—or rather, suspected Black and white person—became a joyful reflection of myself, but also a rival in a never-ending quest for whiteness. The instant warmth that bloomed in my chest when I saw one of us in public was nearly always tempered by my insecurity at being perceived as less than: less stereotypically biracial, less white, less beautiful, less European, less Romanian. Always deficient.

The truth is that I don't know if I'm perceived as Black and white. I've never asked anyone out of fear that I might not like their response. I just know that I've never felt like enough for the social mold that was made for me long before I was born. Not white enough or Romanian enough because of my appearance and historical and current gatekeeping. Not biracial enough because I don't look like the mixed-race models in magazines. Not even Black enough, as I'm reminded of when I go to Black student events and can't identify the R&B song on the overhead speakers or the AAVE slang that flows readily from sharp tongues. (But maybe, just maybe, I do feel Grenadian enough. Thank you, Mama, for the constant exposure to the world we share.)

I doubt that this chronic comparison game will ever go away completely. Between white supremacy and capitalism, I feel trapped in this perfectly-engineered trap of wanting what I will never have. Sometimes I feel like I want to sell out my mother to be closer to my father, appearance-wise, even though I am the perfect combination of them both. My face carries traces of my family tree: the ridge of my nose passed down to me from ancestors who survived the Roman invasion of Dacia, my heart-shaped lips like those my enslaved ancestors found solace in

amidst a world that tried to use them up until they were nothing. Do I need to be recognizable to anyone besides myself?

Still, I smile when I see other biracial-looking people on the street like they're long-lost relatives. I beam with pride whenever a public figure with mixed heritage does something notable. I'm proud of having a Black Grenadian mother and a white Romanian father who, geographically and historically, were never supposed to meet. I'm proud of the unusual cultural concoction they raised me in and the logic-defying curls that I am forever locked in a battle with. I don't want to be a symbol. I just want to be their child.