

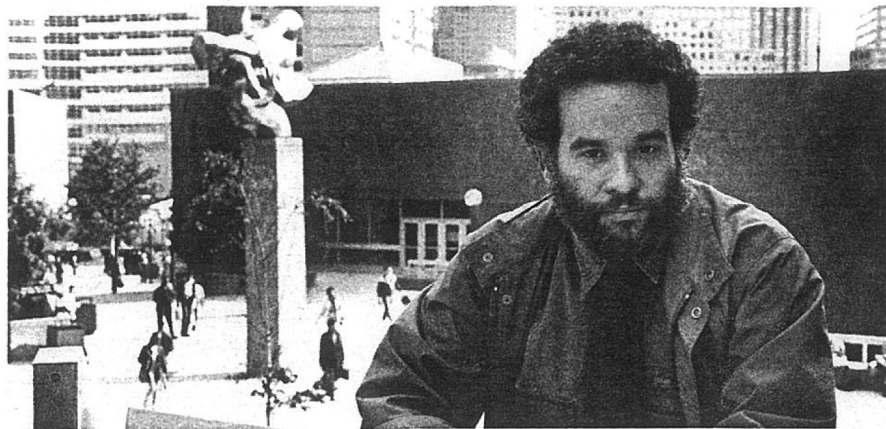
*My father was a black from Virginia, my mother the daughter of Russian Jews from Odessa. They suffered. America was a nation of apartheid in the 1930s.*

## Who I Am

by Dexter Jeffries

It is a common practice to look back at one's life and search for some thread, some theme that has run through it. For me, fortunately or unfortunately, color is the cord that ties up most of my life's successes, failures and contradictions. When Thoreau stumbled upon the gravestone of a slave, he ruminated on the words "a man of color" and remarked to himself, "As though he were discolored." That is how America has always made me feel: discolored. American ambivalence about color has followed me wherever I have traveled. That ambivalence—and my attempts to cope with it—have formed a major part of my life. Yet I feel that I am a richer person for this struggle, a better teacher, writer and friend because of it.

I grew up in the 1950s in a neighborhood with an idyllic name, Springfield Gardens, a small neighborhood in the southeastern section of the borough of Queens in New York City. It is provincial now, and it was provincial 30 years ago. At that time, it was considered a suburban haven for second-generation immigrants from the tenements of Manhattan. The population was a mixture of Italians and Irish, most of whom were blue-collar workers. My father was a li-



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thographer and my mother worked as an executive secretary in a law firm. My parents did not exactly view Springfield Gardens as a sanctuary; it was their second choice. They were learning to settle for second choice with the inevitable consequences: anger, frustration, despair.

My parents, who were married in 1936 and remained so until my father's death in 1977, always had difficulty in finding suitable housing. They were an interracial couple, a real anomaly for their times. My father was a black from Virginia, and my mother was the daughter of Russian Jews from Odessa. They suffered. America was a nation of apartheid in the 1930s. Separate facilities in all areas of society were common. Practically everything worked to keep them apart. When they lived in Washington, D.C., for instance, whenever they attended the movies, my father would have to sit in the balcony, which was for "Colored Only," while my mother sat down in the orchestra. They endured.

I have often wondered about the

source of their courage and strength. Many of my peers, black and white, have suggested that even now, in the 1980s, they would not venture into an interracial relationship because of the inevitable psychological hardships, particularly raising the children of such a union. They are frightened. So were my parents, but something told them, back in the 1930s, that Jim Crow would not remain a permanent facet of American life. They believed that the world could be built anew. My parents were Communists; they had an ideology, a political agenda, a gospel that inspired them with the conviction required for an epic journey.

By 1953 they had become accustomed to following a certain pattern whenever there was a search for housing. My mother would venture forth alone and hope to find something within their means. She would make no mention of my father's being black, relying on her intuition as to whether a landlord or real estate agent harbored prejudice against an interracial couple. My father re-

mained behind rather than be humiliated. He was humiliated anyway. He said to me in later years, "What kind of man allows his wife to look for an apartment or house?" I said nothing.

My parents did what they could to resist the general climate of racism and even hoped to share in the popular American dream of moving into Levittown, on Long Island. My father was a veteran of the United States Army Air Corps and had fought in the Pacific in World War II. (When I asked him what it was like fighting the Japanese, he would always say, "The Japs weren't the problem. We were busy fighting with the white guys in our outfit.") And as a G.I., he was eligible for a number of benefits, one of them being a low-interest mortgage on a house with no down payment in places such as Levittown. I remember that my mother took the Long Island Rail Road to this new suburban experiment, that she filled out the necessary papers and that everything looked promising—until my father showed up for the final signing of the contract. At that point, they were informed that Levittown—built with a good deal of Federal money—had restrictive covenants and was to be a segregated community.

My parents despaired nightly at the dinner table. Exposed to these harsh realities early, my sister, Elizabeth, my brother, Gregory, and I quickly became aware of our place in society. We were not wanted. We were not desirable. The problem was compounded by our not being dark enough to be taken as Negro nor light enough to be accepted as white. To this day, people are still confused by my appearance. Students at the college where I teach have asked about my identity. Am I black? White? Am I Hispanic? Because of the recent influx of new immigrants, the guesses are sometimes more exotic. Am I Egyptian? Am I Iranian? No one ever enunciates what I would really like to hear: human, *homo erectus*, a member of the species, just like you.

As an adult, I am politely asked questions. As youngsters, my sister, brother and I were usually expected to behave in a manner consistent with how we were perceived. If people thought we were white, we were expected to act "white." If neighbors suggested that we were black, we were expected to act "black." We all made feeble attempts at dealing

with a society that thrives on racial and ethnic identification. My sister suffered the most because she was the oldest and therefore born a bit too soon as far as American history was concerned.

To the historian, history is a chain of events that only make sense when they are placed in a particular order, in line with a certain theme that is interwoven throughout an arbitrary number of years. History is more than this. History is alive, and it affects the people who live through it. Events are connected when they are examined from the perspective of the individual. The eradication of racism in America is an ongoing process that stems from the early days of the abolitionist movement in the 19th century.

I was born eight years after my sister, and there were some events that occurred that perceptibly changed the general social climate of race relations in the United States and the course of our lives. In 1947, Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers and sports would never be the same. In 1948, the Armed Forces of the United States were integrated, and millions of volunteers and draftees were exposed to the idea of blacks and whites working together. Finally, in 1954, *Brown v. Topeka* was a phrase on the lips of many people who lived thousands of miles from Kansas. These events made a difference.

My sister grew up while these events were in the making. By the time I was born, their reverberations could be felt throughout the nation. But she was to suffer more racial discrimination and hatred than I. And as a consequence, she was hostile and bitter and had a potential for self-destruction. By the time my sister reached her adolescence, she had been so traumatized by growing up in a world of hate, fear and misunderstanding that my mother decided that therapy and a less hostile environment were the only answer. As a child, I vaguely remember my sister going away and my not knowing where she was. My parents never told me, but I figured it out in later years.

I have followed my sister's career as an itinerant artist, student and writer. She knew what it would mean to stay in a country that preached equality but rarely applied it. So, following the path of Richard Wright and James Baldwin, Elizabeth be-

came an expatriate, living for years in Europe and Mexico. To me, at the age of 10, my sister seemed heroic as she left New York in the early 1960s with a pack on her back, a Ginsbergian figure fleeing a contaminated world. I now realize that Elizabeth had problems other than race; yet I also know that these continuing problems have been exacerbated by the anguish of being "colored" and "not colored" at the same time.

My brother was not born at the right time in history either. He felt the full brunt of discrimination as he was not permitted ever to become a part of the youthful male community of Springfield Gardens. Whether it was Little League, Davy Crockett and the Alamo, Boy Scouts or after-school activities, he was always aware that something was wrong. Some children are too fat, too skinny, too short or too tall. You can also be too dark. One of the confounding problems of this situation is the realization that the bearer of this problem can do nothing about it. When I look at my brother, I see that not fitting into a peer group at an important age can leave one desolate. Gregory's reaction was not as drastic as my sister's, but it was certainly negative. My brother was a James Dean-like figure. Had he been thought of as white, he might have been seen as having normal growing pains—mistakes, corrections and adjustment. However, Springfield Gardens was not quite prepared then for a black rebel, and instead, my brother developed into a maladjusted young man: "Juvenile delinquent" was the sociological label of the 1950s. He entered a world of petty crime that he has never really been able to escape. In the 1960s, my brother was to become one of the first casualties of the drug revolution. Since that time, he has followed a heartbreaking trail from one institution to another: drug rehabilitation programs and prison.

Things had begun to change by the middle and late 1950s. Certain progressive ideals and notions had started to take hold. There were small and evolving changes, but they assuaged the rage and mistrust between whites and blacks just enough so that I did not have to suffer all of the racial indignities that my brother and sister were forced to brave. It might have been the elementary school teacher who acknowledged Negro History Week in the class and

spoke about Paul Robeson, Negro soldiers in the Civil War and Dr. Ralph Bunche. Or it could have been a young white boy who uttered words evocative of a heroic Huck Finn, "Ah, let the colored guy play. They're pretty good sometimes." These were events that would never enter a history text, but they changed my present and future.

However, for the most part, I was a bit befuddled as a youngster, since my parents had never prepared me for—nor could they foresee—the problems I would meet. I loved them, of course, and I did not see them as black or white. They were my mother and father. The issue of race did arise, but it was always in a positive historical and social vein. My father would become rhapsodic as he spoke about his heroes, Paul Robeson, Duke Ellington, Alexandre Dumas, Pushkin and Charlie Parker. My mother was also well versed in Afro-American history. Elizabeth, Gregory and I now know that the education we received from our parents about Negro history was more comprehensive than any book written or documentary produced by the late 1960s, when black awareness became a facet of American culture.

I remember loving school and very earnestly digesting everything that was dished out. One day, a neighbor asked me what I was. In kindergarten I had just learned about the Pilgrims (I loved making those hats), and I replied quickly, with all the confidence and innocence of that age, "I'm an Englishman." That was the last time I ever answered that question so quickly and unwittingly. With just as much confidence and a trace of contempt, this blond Irishwoman said, "Ah, no. You're a little Puerto Rican or maybe colored." It was on that day that the "veil," as W.E.B. Du Bois labeled it, was cast over me. I have never forgotten it. Du Bois also wrote: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." It is. Howard Beach. South Ozone Park. Canarsie. Michael Stewart.

As I grew older, I developed a dualistic view of the world. I viewed things literally in black and white. People were quick to label me, and I spent a great deal of time and energy attempting to live out their visions. This manner of existence would make life bearable for two or three months,

but the inevitable would always occur: a joke about niggers or a frenetic speech about the cheapness of Jews in which the speaker demonstrated that, in the American black ghetto, the Jew was supposedly the cause of all the misery. These insults caused a physical reaction. I would feel faint for a few moments as I realized that the person whom I had befriended had betrayed me. The friends with whom I had eaten hamburgers, played ball and shared the intimate moments of growing up had torn me asunder. With clenched fists, I wept.

Because I had my secret and extraordinary vantage point—black and Jewish—one that allowed me access to the inner recesses of whites and blacks, there was a part of me that felt the jokes I heard were actually on the people who told them. They had taken me into their confidence and believed that I was just like them, black or white. And perhaps I was the one who was the betrayer of trust and faith, for I listened and never said a word. I listened to whites assault blacks and remained silent. Blacks heaped invective upon whites, usually selecting Jews as the specific enemy, and I listened and nodded my head. During the 1960s, I had a front-row seat on one of the most momentous social struggles in America, but the price of the ticket left me reeling. Every derogatory remark about blacks left me weaker. Every anti-Semitic remark left me sadder.

But wearing a mask, being a spy in the enemy's camp, also made me intensely paranoid. I was constantly worried that my fraudulent behavior would be discovered, yet I managed to hide it from my family. I did a lot of thinking. I was invariably in a quandary about what to do if someone wished to visit me at home. This almost always involved the logistical shifting of one parent or both out of the house or an awkward last-minute cancellation of an appointment. And I was wary and cunning. No matter what group I was currently holding favor with, I had to keep myself under control constantly in order not to blurt out, "Jews don't own the banks. That's a myth." Or "How can you say a black person is lazier than a white? What do you base that on?"

Repressing these responses and the pain that went along with them ate away at my soul. How long can a man, a young man at that, live a lie? These people hate a part of me,

I would think, and if they really knew . . . I sometimes toyed with that idea. Tell them. Don't hide. Just tell them the truth and see what they say. I am ashamed to say that impotence and paralysis prevented me from taking such action for most of my life. It is difficult to discard love and affection even if it is tainted, to surrender friendship and its bonds for principles when you are confused about the principles yourselves.

I searched for simplistic solutions. I tried to be "white" for six months. I ended up hating all white people. I tried being "black" for a similar span of time and ended up hating blacks just as much as whites. To be a Jew had a specific meaning to me, something different from just being white. There were a lot of rules that had to be obeyed and followed. Anyone can be white. I tried to be Jewish and failed at that also. When I was in my late teens, the remedy became clear. Be nothing. Identify with no one and no group. When I was asked about my racial background, I informed people that I was nothing: "Nothing. I'm just nothing." People reacted in their own peculiar way to me. They were silent. I brooded.

During high school, I became a secretive and withdrawn person in dealing with this issue. I made few friends and avoided the topic of race. I felt that I possessed something of a strange and forbidding nature. I fantasized about meeting people who were like myself, racially mixed or others who were not concerned with racial identity. I spent countless hours imagining how things should be. In conjunction with these feelings of anxiety and apprehension, there was an incredible desire to talk to someone and tell that person about my inner turmoil. By the 10th grade, I had decided to search for this particular someone actively.

In the fall of 1968, I met an English teacher, Paul Golden. He was a young teacher and displayed a particular sensitivity when we read novels, plays or poems. I wondered if he would be just as perceptive if I were to disclose my numerous and troublesome thoughts. I made a decision that somehow I had to approach him. I was completely bewildered as to how to speak to an adult, a teacher. I was terrified of all the possible negative reactions. He could have summarily brushed me aside. He could have politely informed me that I had

made a mistake in approaching him and that as a teacher it was not within his province to act as a counselor. I was scared.

Near the end of the semester he assigned a composition entitled "The American Dream." I wrote with all the conviction that I possessed about my American dream, a place where a person like me could live with dignity and pride, a place where I would not have to live an underground existence. I was tired of being an invisible man. I prayed. I prayed that he would receive my message. I hoped that when he graded the essays he would hear my plea for understanding and compassion. I did not believe in God, but I still prayed. My parents' political beliefs were strong ones, and they always felt that if there was to be a solution to the problem of race in America, it would be political, social and economic, not religious. I still prayed. My God was neither the Christian God nor the Jewish God. He came to the aid of everybody and anybody who was persecuted by a harsh world afflicted with injustice. He was a witness with a vivid memory. My God would always remember the look on the small Jewish boy's face as he was herded out of the Warsaw ghetto by an arrogant Nazi infantryman. He saw the Negro battered by Bull Connor's deputies with clubs, then set upon by German shepherds. And he saw me, not every day, but on special days when the brutality that I was subjected to bordered on the absurd, harassed by militant blacks in the morning because I was too light-skinned to be accepted by them and then hit with a slingshot by some white ruffians for being a "nigger" in the afternoon. He listened.

Paul Golden heard my story and empathized with me. He did not turn away, and we ended up becoming friends. We spent many an afternoon walking around the athletic field behind Springfield Gardens High School talking about blacks, Jews and what I was supposed to be. I felt better just because I had finally found an outlet for my feelings of rage and fear. He hinted at a resolution that I was a bit too immature or too inexperienced to take up at the time, but it did provide some direction: I would somehow just have to be me.

- By college, where social relationships have the potential to play such

a major role in one's life, I realized that a human being could survive this sort of misery for only a limited time. A crisis brought on a final scream for help. I was dating a Greek girl at Queens College. She had met my family on numerous occasions, but I noticed that this exchange was not reciprocal. One night, just out of curiosity, I asked her why she had never invited me to her house. She avoided the question. I should have known. I pushed hard for an answer. She burst into tears. After she cried for a while, we hugged and then she said, "Dexter, my mom said it's all right to bring anyone home, anyone. Jewish, Italian, Irish, anyone. She said I can bring any boy home as long as he's not colored."

This event forced me into therapy. I had intentionally avoided this one possibility of help. Therapy was a strange and mysterious process that my father had attacked for years. He ridiculed my mother for going and mocked my brother and sister for their weekly visits. I felt a certain allegiance to my father, and I automatically surrendered any degree of autonomy I could have in his presence. I was loyal to him at all costs, right or wrong. Consequently, I had joined him and attacked my brother for being "crazy." When I finally went to the therapist at Queens College, I was possessed by a certain fear and loathing. I was ashamed and embarrassed. I made a pledge never to allow my father to know that I was in therapy. He went to his grave without that knowledge. Whenever he, or anyone else for that matter, asked why I was never available Friday afternoons, I lied and said that I was working in the library.

Lying: That's how I spent my first six months in therapy. It was a waste of valuable time and energy, but I imagined it was the normal course of affairs, particularly for someone who had already lived a lie. I walked into the office. The therapist, a middle-aged woman, asked me what I would like to accomplish, talk about or discuss. I said, with dispatch and confidence in my voice, "I have this problem, something to do with identity. I'm sure you've handled many cases like it." (I had prepared a speech.) "It is a little unusual, but I'm sure if you take some time and do some research, you'll find the answer. You see, I have a black father and a white mother and have had a difficult

time finding myself, who I am, what I am. Can you help me with this? How long do you think it will take? A few weeks? A month? What do you think?"

Dr. Hannah Sallinger smiled at me, leaned back in her chair, and said, "Well, it's good that you know what you want to talk about, but do you really think that I should do all the work, read the books, go to the library, research articles? What will you do? Don't you think we could solve your problem a little more quickly if we worked together, like a team, same goals?" Yes, I was to find out that we would work together, a lot of work, many discoveries, exploring, crying, reflecting and mourning. It's a long story with so many different facets and anecdotes, but there is one incident that stands out not just as a paradigm of the workings of therapy but also as a representation of my conflicted views of the world.

Some time in the first year, I became angry at Dr. Sallinger, perhaps because the psychological excavations that we were conducting together were finding too much grist, too much evidence of the sad life I had led. I developed a new strategy and attacked her. My overall plan was to prove that she was a racist and that all the therapy was distorted just on the basis of her being white. It was the early 1970s, and black militancy was still popular on American colleges. Black militants had dominated certain college campuses with their rhetoric, which always seemed to revolve around forcing white people, most of whom were completely innocent of the many petty intrigues that were being foisted upon them, to bear the burden and subsequent guilt for every act of racial injustice committed in American history since the landing of the first 19 African slaves at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. I too was a victim of this distorted ideology. It possessed a certain delicious appeal when the alternative was hard work, honesty and a constant struggle to uphold one's integrity under trying conditions. If I could uncover or detect some evidence of racism on the part of an authority figure, Dr. Sallinger, this would discredit and invalidate all of this person's work, findings and profound insights into my life.

I started to do a little research myself. From the listing in the back of

the college catalog, I found out that Dr. Sallinger had completed her degree at the University of Maryland in the 1950s. The University of Maryland was segregated at the time. There was my evidence. This is what I had been waiting for, the triumph of client over therapist. It wasn't much, but a desperate person does not require that much concrete evidence to convict someone whom he has already found guilty in his heart. I walked into her office the following Friday, swaggering, plopped myself down in the chair, folded my arms across my chest and smiled. She was aware that something was up, but she allowed me to see my fantasy through to its conclusion.

I commenced a barrage: "Dr. Sallinger, you never talk about your college days too much. How was it? Did you meet a lot of black people then?" She shook her head and said, "I get the feeling you found out that I attended the University of Maryland, and yes, you're right. It was segregated while I was there. Segregation always made me feel uncomfortable. I doubt if this is a satisfactory answer, but what special meaning does all of this information have for you?"

I quickly explained that her having gone to a segregated college demonstrated a certain racist sensibility and insensitivity on the part of her family and herself and that it was obvious that she would have a difficult time really understanding a black person's point of view. I should have worded it differently and said a half-black person's point of view, but I was so mixed up at the time I was never quite sure how much I was of anything. Finally, I informed her that her having had absolutely no contact with black people would prevent her from comprehending any of my problems. At this point, and it was probably the only time she lost her objectivity, she leaned forward, gave me a stern look and said, "I want you to know that my father spent his entire academic career at Howard University, teaching black students at an all-black school. Does that pass your test? Now, are you going to keep on wasting this hour or are we going to do some serious work today?"

From that day, I kept on the main track with only some minor digressions. She helped me understand who I was, from a human point of view. And when it comes down to it, race is not human; it's an artificial cate-

gorization employed to justify what is inherently human: weakness, fear, diffidence and timidity. By focusing on the human side—my family, my relationships with my father, mother, brother and sister—I was able to make some substantial progress in consolidating a genuine identity.

In addition, there were other cures that worked in conjunction with therapy and helped bring about my emancipation: friends, my fellow soldiers when I was in the Army, lovers, radical politics, jazz and literature. It was in the last years of high school and then during college that I discovered books. It was on pages with words composed by Camus, Wright, Woolf, Kesey, Kafka, Ellison and Dostoyevski that a voice sounded like my voice. I embraced fictional characters as I watched them confront a world similar to mine, no matter if they were white, black, insane, women or Russian. Books made me feel whole and instilled in me a feeling that I was part of something much larger and more important than Queens, than being white, black or even American. No matter what shape or form the writer's pronouncement took, the message was always the same: Do not allow the external world to denigrate you. Create your own identity. I heard it in Joyce, Thoreau and Du Bois. Literature always affirmed what was best in men and women, and with that affirmation I was able, for the first time, to withstand the onslaught threatened by the world.

It was in the army that I began to take stands. By that time I had been through college, had received my degree in English and had had therapy. My first night in the barracks I talked to young men from California, Texas and Maine. There were Indians, Mexican-Americans, Samoans, farm boys and city toughs. Some were racist, some not. Some were anti-Semitic, some not. However, by that time I refused to tolerate anyone who harbored any prejudice. When someone said the word "nigger" I would tell that person to "get the hell out of here," and if a soldier started to inform me that "Jews shouldn't tell white people what to do," I would say, "Well, you're talking to one now and he's telling you what to do."

I began to write. I kept journals and wrote short stories. I reread my favorite books again and again. I was so moved by the ideas and feelings in these books that I sought opportu-

nities to thank their authors for what they had done, for liberating me, for showing me another way to live, hope, think and feel. When I was teaching at Queens College, I went to hear Ralph Ellison read from his work. The English department managed the affair, and I was happy knowing that I would actually meet one of my heroes. After the reading, I waited on line anticipating the handshake and the few brief words. The chairman and the upper ranks of the department stood by Ellison's side while teachers filed by. I was excited, much like the boy with a Pilgrim hat at Thanksgiving time. It was finally my turn. I shook his hand and said, "I want you to know that *Invisible Man*, especially the part about 'I yam what I yam,' really changed my life for the better." The chairman looked at me as though I had embarrassed him, and the others shook their heads and smiled. I felt foolish for being who I was. But as I walked away, Ellison touched my shoulder lightly and said, "That's the greatest compliment an author can ever receive."

I have frequently thought about what Ellison said to me that evening and other evenings while I was reading his novel and his essays. He not only gave me strength to see and accept myself as a whole human being with inalienable rights to just as much self-worth and integrity as anyone else; Ellison, along with other writers, prepared me for America's continual problem of racial strife.

These times are difficult for the country and particularly for New York City, my home. It seems as if the Kerner Commission's prediction of a racially divided society has arrived. I have heard and witnessed much hate in the last four years. People—whites and blacks—seem always to be on the edge of reacting violently. Which side should I take, white or black?

No American should be coerced into taking either side because both are inherently racist. Those who force us to take sides make things extremely difficult for people like me—black, Jewish and American—people caught in the middle of their ambivalence, their lost dreams and aspirations. □

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