

INTRODUCTION

My children and I grew up together in Jamaica Plain—a section of Boston that lies between Jamaica Pond and Franklin Park. The children went to the local public schools, then in the process of desegregation, and I went to school as a low-level instructor of creative writing. My adult life began when I met their father in late 1967, only a few months after my father had died of a heart attack. I had been working for CORE (the Congress on Racial Equality) in Roxbury. At first I traveled south with a friend to report on goings-on down there; we went through Mississippi and Selma, Natchez and the Carolinas. Later I returned to Boston to continue working for CORE. My partner in seeking out housing violations and reporting them was Jonathan Kozol, who later introduced me to Carl Senna with the warning, “Don’t fall in love with him.”

Carl was a writer and I was also writing and editing with Bill Corbett the small magazine called *Fire Exit*. We accepted a good

story written by Carl, who lived on Massachusetts Avenue near Columbus Avenue in a building occupied mostly by prostitutes. His apartment was shrouded in blackness with hardly enough light available to see the few political posters on the wall. His front door wore his name on a card: *Carlos Francisco Jose Senna*. His father had been a boxer, a Mexican, deported from the U.S.A. and returned to Sierra Leone under Nixon's Wetback Laws. His mother, African-American, had moved to Boston from the South where she had been a schoolteacher and piano player.

Carl had almost finished at Boston University but was now working as an attendant in a mental hospital, where he was shocked by the abuse of the patients. His mother lived in the Whittier Street projects with his sister and brother, both of them grown and en route to independent lives. It didn't take me long to become involved with Carl and his family, but it was a couple of months before our relationship changed into a romance. We were married a year after Kozol's warning, and had our first child exactly nine months later. We would have three children within four years, and I would spend the seven years of our tumultuous marriage in a skewed relationship to many old friends and family members. Not one of them was rude or overtly racist. But the media and the environs around Boston were so charged with those exact possibilities that any personal exchange on the subject of home life would be marked with symbolic value.

Both of us were needy and uprooted when we met. I was even worse than that: crippled by claustrophobia, riddled with terror attacks, overcome by shyness, and strangely afraid of human beings—especially those in any position of authority. Carl had

no direction as far as a career went, and so we grabbed onto each other in an effort at stabilizing ourselves. It had always been my immersion in the political chaos of those days (and in earlier days, side by side, with my father) that had awakened me to the possibility that I was feeling justifiable despair, not depression: social outrage, not personal anxiety. I was liberated from my own personality to talk and think and walk politics. Carl's and my shared interest in political philosophies (Paolo Freire, Ivan Illich, Franz Fanon) drew us together as much as anything else, and his experience with race and class issues became my education. My father had been a civil-rights activist and my personal ally as well. I missed him. It was always like "one of the comforts of home" to immerse myself in politics.

There were many women like me—born into white privilege but with no financial security, given a good education but no training for survival. Some of us ended up in cults, some in jail, some in far-out marriages. The daughters of white activists tended to become more engaged than even their fathers were, and like certain Greek heroines they drove themselves to madness and incarceration, carrying to the *n*th degree their fathers' progressive positions. Because my family (academic, artistic) had no extra money, there was no cushion for the crash from a comfortable home into the literal cold streets. Somehow Carl and I did manage to carve a niche for ourselves—through marriage and new jobs luckily acquired—just off the streets. We were both somewhat conservative in our habits. No narcotics, no rock 'n roll. Crossing the racial divide was the only radical ingredient in what we were doing. Basically we were in hiding when we weren't working.

Carl was Catholic and his mother, who lived with us, was devout, attending daily Mass on her way to work at the courthouse downtown. We had the children baptized and I began attending Mass with my mother-in-law hovering at the back of the church, and feeling myself excluded and estranged from the rituals. I read Simone Weil, the Boff brothers, Gustavo Gutierrez and a variety of contemporary liberation theologians who incorporated socialist ideals with a Christian preferential option for the poor. And as the children grew older, each took catechism classes and first communion. I grew increasingly comfortable sitting at Mass and participating in everything but the Eucharist, for many years. The skepticism that was like a splash of iodine in the milk of my childhood home began to work its way out of my system.

Encircling this rather quiet and interior domestic quest was the city of Boston and its racist and violent rejection of progress, desegregation, dialogue. Louise Day Hicks and the vociferous Boston Irish were like the dogs and hoses in the South. No difference. Boston, always segregated into pockets of furious chauvinism—from the North End to the South—from rich white sections of Cambridge to poor working-class areas there—did not know how to separate issues of race and class. The poor were set against the poor, while the rich continued to glide around the periphery dispensing moral judgments.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated during the same season I met Carl. Parts of the city were cordoned off. James Brown was called in. We went to his concert, which had been organized to

ward off riots and which succeeded. Although Boston never exploded to the same extent as other cities, the surge of Black Power was unlike anything that had happened there or in the country before. Blackness became the club that many whites longed to join. The raised fists, the street signals, the attitude, the rhetoric, the music—all these produced a change in white consciousness that had the effect of making whites defensive and aggressive on the one hand, or yearning for conciliation on the other.

It's an old story by now—how Black Power forced individual whites to see themselves as unstable and isolated social products, people who were at the end of the line and who were not the transcendent and eternal beings they had been raised to believe themselves to be. In those days it was a terrible blow to a mass ego. Whites, without even knowing it, had been getting away with murder. The fundamental assumption that they deserved everything they had, or didn't yet have, simply because they were white, had to be rethought. Any knowledge of the history of civil rights in this country would quickly expose race as a national obsession from day one—race as the way to measure intellectual superiority, that is. Mountains of documents supported this belief in white superiority; the very size of the heap revealed the desperate anxiety behind the claims. The Black Power movement showed how quickly and thoroughly a change of self-image can produce a radical reappraisal by one's neighbors, not to mention oneself: this lesson in identity politics ultimately blasted apart many fixed constructs.

Boston, recalcitrant and class-divided, was a poor choice of a place to live as a mixed couple. Even the most enlightened white

academics had no black friends, or tokens only, and fled quickly to the suburbs for the schools. Those who stayed and struggled in the inner city were few and far between, and were both self-interested and heroic. They renovated houses in the South End and Jamaica Plain and involved themselves in school committees and busing and clinics and they did so with the social optimism of an earlier, pre-War generation. Yet many of them had no black friends at the end of the day, only colleagues in the battle for better schools for their children. In the black community there was very little agreement on anything, and because it was a small and old community, hatreds that take time to thrive had taken root, and the disagreements on social action were irreconcilable.

Boston's white upper class was divided between the Republican core group, who were in business, banking, and law, and who owned property in the suburbs, and Democrats, who didn't own much of anything and stayed in the realm of "letters" and political policy, social justice, and academics. Both groups came from Old Money, but the Democrats only had snuffboxes, tea cups, and dusty portraits to show for it, while the Republicans had long driveways, trees, and country clubs where blacks and Jews had been unwelcome for years. These two groups didn't speak and were socially divided into small mutually interested tiers. Even today, stockbrokers see other stockbrokers; academics see other academics. Doctors talk to doctors, and teachers are too tired at the end of the day to talk to anyone but their families. There is very little cross-cultural exchange even at the most privileged level in Boston. From that point down, the divisions have enlarged and darkened and continue to enlarge and darken.

Boston is a parochial and paranoid city; it doesn't admit its own defects, and it belittles its own children as a result. It is a difficult city for African Americans. In Boston, as in much of America, there has always been more interracial interaction among the poor, the working class, churchgoing people, and criminals, including the Mafia, than among the rich and privileged. When self-interest includes racial crossings, in order to sustain certain vital social transactions, then there is more intermarriage too. In Boston, in the early and mid-seventies, there was a group of young, disenfranchised flower children who also intermarried; they were street poets and musicians. They took drugs; they crossed over. But most of them were already breaking apart and going in different directions around the time Nixon was impeached.

My children grew up with other racially mixed children who came out of that period. *Sesame Street* was their imaginary Cuba—an urban utopia that influenced their values for life. By 1980 almost all of their parents had divorced; their single white mothers ran their lives. Until those divorces it was as if we occupied a fleet of little arks that rose with the flood and tossed and sank; and inside our windowless habitats we blamed all the chaos on our marriages. Race war was enacted inside the tight little houseboats—violent language, violent action, intimidation, insult, accusations that made no sense, based as they were in an absolute lack of understanding of each others' cultures—all this in order to create a new society. We went so far out, we passed—on the way—insights and possibilities that were good as well as bad: there are worldly jour-

neys that travel to the end of the possible; they are hellish passions; you learn everything from them.

After a few months of marriage and pregnancy, we moved to a small town on the Salem Harbor, north of Boston. We lived at the top of a very sheer short hill, called Sunset Road, that looked down onto the harbor. Carl's mother moved in with us, commuting by bus to her job to Boston, and we both had teaching jobs at Tufts University. Our decision to leave Boston was based in a certain self-consciousness about our marriage: our home was a hideout. But we had friends who visited us there: the African novelist Ayi Kwei Armah, his then-wife Fatima Mernissi, two friends Joe and Lynn Long (also a mixed marriage), whom we had met in New Mexico, Robert Creeley, and other new and old friends from Boston and New York. The talk steered invariably towards politics and race.

Carl got work in Boston again, now as an editor at Beacon Press, so—much to my mother-in-law's sorrow—we returned to the city. In Jamaica Plain we lived in a large white house on a street called Robeson Street that ran up Sumner Hill to Franklin Park, one of Olmsted's most glorious landscapes. Trees from this parkland spread huge branches over our house and the puddingstone juttings that supported the enormous and shabby Victorian houses on this one street. Roxbury's Hill district has a similar quality, and there are probably five streets in Jamaica Plain that remain in this condition. We loved the house and filled it with Carl's family and Jamaican, Irish, and African friends of friends who needed temporary housing. I helped establish the neighborhood health clinic and became close to the people on the streets

around, and we started a day-care center in our basement, with two teachers and twelve little children, two of them mine: my third was still a baby beside me. In larger Boston, following on Arthur Garrity's court order to the city schools, the black community was developing Operation Exodus, METCO, the Bridge, and Catholic Bridge, programs designed to lift black children out of the inner city and place them in suburban, private, and parochial schools. Blacks and whites together were also organizing magnet schools in certain deprived districts of the city.

At night I would leave a pot of rice on the stove for people passing through. There were beans, vegetables, and the sound of Motown blasting. The children had a nursery in the attic where they developed intense fantasy lives around their dolls and stuffed animals and my mother-in-law had a bedroom between ours and theirs, where two cribs sat side-by-side and the baby girls conversed in coos and whispers. My mother-in-law, a small dark-skinned woman with sloe eyes and a large mischievous smile, continued to work all day at the courthouse and then returned to help me (like a husband!) in the evenings; but a cancer she had treated with a mastectomy began returning and she became increasingly crippled with pain in the following months. She died two months before I gave birth to my third child. Her illness—and finally her dying—profoundly affected our family. We were never the same without her, and the whole operation disintegrated in terrible ways. It was as if things from outdoors began to grow inside the house, under the tables and in the sinks.

This was a fertile but lonely time. While I was involved in neighborhood politics and my true colleagues were other mothers,

racial tensions in the city subtly invaded the household. More frequently than not I found my point of view no longer fit that of my friends, even though we were committed to the same issues. Some worldview was inexorably shifting in me, and I felt sidelined by conversations and remarks that would have slid by unnoticed before. Many whites were demonstrating against Vietnam and much of the hot talk around that topic spilled into defenses and condemnations of underground organizations that believed in violent resistance. The four assassinations (the Kennedys, Malcom X, and Martin Luther King Jr.) had changed the entire atmosphere of political debate in the country from polite reasoning to justifications for revenge. The Cuban revolution and the liberation of African nations had already indicated to many of us that the only way to produce radical social change was to push the discourse to a criminal-inclusive language.

I quickly learned that white people are obsessed with race, and the subject comes up at least once in any three- or four-hour gathering. One night I went to a small town in Massachusetts to give a reading, and when I entered the room where an all-white group of people had gathered afterwards, they were saying, "If the lines ever get drawn, and the situation gets seriously violent, I know which side I will be on." And then they began to speak (liberals, all of them) about their fear of blacks, and their judgments of blacks, and I had to announce to them that my husband and children were black, before hastily departing.

This event has been repeated so many times, in multiple forms, that by now I make some kind of give-away statement after entering a white-only room, one way or the other, that will warn the

people there “which side I am on.” The situation most recently repeated itself about a hundred times in my presence over the subject of O.J. Simpson. His name was like the whistle of a train coming down the line, and I knew what was coming—vindictive racialized remarks, coming from otherwise socially progressive white people. You would think that he had organized mass murders and guerilla warfare on American streets. Louis Farrakhan is the only other public person who produces the same reaction. On these occasions, more than any others, I feel that my skin is white but my soul is not, and that I am in camouflage. It is clear to me that black men are in a no-win situation in relation to whites, including liberals who perceive them (but never say so) as sell-outs from their “own people” (not revolutionary enough) if they live with a white woman, and who then judge them as dangerous and anti-integrationist if they live with a black woman. It is the white envy of (and fetishization of) black men that has sustained the institution of racism. Integration is not a word that is heard anymore; incarceration has replaced it. Only white women in this country have historically been condemned to a lower status than black men, and that was when they crossed over and married black men. Then they were officially, legally, relegated to the lowest social caste. Many times people stopped me with my children, to ask, “Are they yours?” with an expression of disgust and disbelief on their faces. These were white people. In neighborhoods where there were Puerto Rican families with a wide range of colors and hair types among them, I felt safe; I was addressed in Spanish.

When they were very young, my children decided that they were black despite their fair skin and mestizo features. They decided this, with the help of their father, me, and the city of Boston at

the height of the busing crisis, when the school system divided families according to each child's physical appearance. We decided that race was more a tribal than an individual choice, and we shared our views on this score with the children.

After my third child was in my arms I began to feel that I contained in my body a fourth child, and sometimes I would hallucinate, hearing the sound of this missing child crying. In some way this sensation began to correspond to the experience of "covering" and soon I could honestly and deeply feel myself to contain another self, a shadow.

There were at this time in Boston "women's groups" where small gatherings of friends would meet to talk about the condition of being female, of mothering and marrying. These groups more often revealed economic differences between us than ties that bound us, and they often wound up (disappointingly) as discussions of fat, breast size, and hormones. Yet something important happened in those gatherings anyway, feelings of intimacy and respect for each other emerged—feelings that women had rarely had for each other before in their scramble to catch men. It was in these funky meetings that some insight was gained into the assumptions being made about our gender, by ourselves as much as by men, and so a refusal to collaborate was begun in living rooms and kitchens after dark.

At that time, after their father and I broke up, survival for my children and myself as their only caretaker was all that drove me. I learned how to bend the rules, to prevaricate, to be crooked, to

get something for as little as nothing, to take now and pay later, to fake facts in exchange for safety, to live by smoke alone, to feel grateful to cheap wine at night, to find the free clinics, the kind people, the food stamp outlet, and to exchange free childcare with other mothers. The potential for corruption that is in all of us is certainly triggered by the feeling of being absolutely alone in a desperate situation. I would do anything for my children. The emotion was not heroic or tough even. It was reactive. When this kind of situation lasts for a while, your adaptation to crookedness can alter your personality unless you watch out. There is a point when you realize you are spending more time covering the traces of your dishonesty than you spend plotting it. I know women now, I recognize them, who are powerful and lively spirits, who have nonetheless become permanently dishonest in response to several difficult years caring for their children alone. I know that they would lie to their own best friends to get an extra buck, years after the need for that was over.

(The problem with this kind of survival ethic when you are parenting is that the results of a well-intended action only show up years later. At the time, in the nearsightedness of desperate acts, you may be aspiring to goodness for all involved, you may have only unselfish motives in mind as you make decisions, but they can be wrong for one of the people. You can sacrifice a long-term good for a short-term result. Acts driven by worry unfold slowly and a long unhappiness can be the result.)

When I finally did have to strike close to the streets (we lost our house, we had no money and nowhere to go, and made daily vis-

its to dismal welfare and food stamp offices) it was a stretch that truly scared me, but there were several women who helped me out. One of these women was a young black psychiatrist, Daryl Utz, who worked at the neighborhood clinic. She was a brilliant and gentle counselor through this time—seated in a dismal office adjacent to the giant hospitals off the Riverway in Boston—wet snow falling outside. We shared champagne at New Year's, we became friends, she told me, "You married your mother!" I started commuting to New York to work two days a week, and on one of the days at home, she called me to say, "I am going to reverse roles and cancel our appointment for today." And then she committed suicide. It was this tragedy that gave me the impetus to leave Boston and settle in a shack in the woods in Connecticut. I saw Boston as a prison then, a race nightmare. Her isolated home in a white suburban tract where she had died seemed to be a metaphor for no-place-to-run-no-place-to-hide.

Nevertheless I, like her, chose the country, a wood by the sea, to recover in: a small town with a kind day care staff and sliding scale; a very good public school in a huge green field; my sister; and a train to New York, where I was then teaching at Columbia. The poet Maureen Owen was living in the same town and also working in New York, and we helped each other with child care when we had to spend nights away. She published two of my books of poems written at that time; we mimeoed and stapled them out in her barn. The smell of the sea and birdsongs in many ways worked as a tonic. But the race issue was a plague and a problem for the children, who had no friends of color to speak of in that small privileged town. And we were not used to living alone. We always lived with other people.

Not for the first or last time, we were asked to leave the shack after a year (too many children; I had lied and said I only had two) and we moved into a house near the village green called The Welfare House by the neighbors. There we lived over a single mother, a Korean woman named Kyong, with her son Michael, and we became an extended family happily. It was the mid-seventies. We were then a family of four living on \$6,000 a year, my income from adjunct teaching at Columbia. A small town is far preferable on a daily basis to a city when you are poor, but the catch-22 is that there are few opportunities for work, for changing your situation. You can comfortably squat in the same economic position there for many years. I felt stagnant and lacking in hope there.

With my return, then, to Boston, in search of more opportunity, I began to play the school system, along with many other single mothers, moving from one part of the city to the other following the zoning. Racialization of our children began immediately—they were coded by hair and skin tone to travel to one or another school, sometimes different ones. I remember fighting out this issue with an official over a table in some school in West Roxbury, until we found a school all three children could attend together. This perverse operation taught me to use race in my children's favor, calling them black in one district and white in another, in order to get the good school. I wrote an article for the *Boston Globe* at that time called "The Nouveau Pauvre" describing my own situation, as someone from the middle class who had fallen below the poverty line with droves of others, mostly women, and how we

coped with it. We formed food coops and community gardens in abandoned lots running along the tracks to downtown Boston. And we also learned how to entangle the issues of economics and race in ways that served our children's interests.

Having determined that our children would get the kind of education that we had had, but having no money to support that determination, we not only taught them at home, we also tracked them for Boston Latin, the city's best public school, or Brookline High School, as soon as we had steered them through the maze of Boston's elementary-school system during the busing crisis. Whites were abandoning Boston for the suburbs, where the busing order was not enforced, in order to avoid sending their children to school with black children, and they left behind a trail of scrawled messages: *Nigger Go Home*. And some of those same whites worked in the city and often liberally encouraged poor whites and blacks to continue their struggle for integrated schools. It was the well-known American story: at all costs, don't mention economic injustice. Increasingly race was a red herring, a way to avoid seeing the ever-widening gap between rich and poor.

By the time my children were approaching sixth grade, one thing was clear: elementary school accomplishes eighty percent of the task of educating children for their entire lives. In the Boston public schools, between first and fifth grades, my children got all the basic learning they needed from excellent and committed teachers. Anything extra was my responsibility at home. From sixth grade on, the issues changed, and the school day was more of a social than an educational reality. The main lesson: learn your place in the pecking order through sports and clubs. The

kids got a little history and English, bad foreign language instruction, and small science. I could be of less and less actual help, because their attention was drawn elsewhere, towards the purely social. The truth is, from middle school to graduation, the public school system was cousin to the penal system, a way of keeping unruly kids off the streets so they wouldn't disturb the grownups.

I had returned to Boston with the hope of reconstructing my marriage, but our struggles continued after we returned to live in Jamaica Plain. We had moved when once again I was asked to leave an apartment, after Kyong and Michael moved in with us, putting six people in a two-bedroom space. It was then that my cousin Quincy gave me a down payment on a big old house, and we could rent out sections of the house and in this way pay the mortgage. I also began work on a project that would take eighteen months—*The White Slave*—a novel based on the true story of a white boy raised as a slave before, during, and after the Civil War. I was paid enough by Avon to live for those months, while I looked for another teaching job and rented out rooms in the house.

I think for that time my involvement in the domestic scene formed my position in the larger world. These household ideals—which are of course social ideals too—of an extended family that lives together, sharing and helping and not competing with each other—were incompatible with an individualist approach to the social and professional arena. Between my domestic socialism and the outside world's social realism I could only construct a narrow and weak psychological bridge, one that I was finally too suspicious to cross.

During these school-choice crises, people used false addresses, moved, and begged in order to get their kids into decent places. We kept three such students, friends of my children, listed under our address and several times had to rush to round them up before they were caught not living there. My daughters remained in Boston public schools until they went to college, and their education became the motive force behind where we could live. My son went to a private school that generously paid almost his entire fee; I sent him there so that he could have more attention than I could give him, now that I was working more hours and he had no father at home. And by the time he was six I had figured out that he was a school-hater (as I had been) and that I could place him in safe custody among generous liberals who were comfortable with his combination of familiar manners and color. The kindness of many now-despised liberals during this period was paramount in making it possible for numbers of school-age children to escape the public school system. During these years—between 1978 and 1987—there were 20,315 black males murdered in America; in 1995 alone, there were 7,913 deaths. Many of these were black-on-black murder-suicides. Most victims were children, most of them “mixed” through history.

It wasn't until five years after my divorce, when I joined those ranks of single white mothers, that I converted to Catholicism. I would have to say that my children led me to that place because I learned everything I ever hoped to learn about consequence from giving birth to them, from raising them, and from saying goodbye to them as they entered their generation's world.

THE WEDDING DRESS

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I want to run through the world
And live the life of a lost child
I have caught the mood of a wandering soul
After scattering all my goods.
It is one to me whether I live or die.
All I ask is for love to remain with me.

Joseph Surin, S.J.

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