

Eighteen

by Bryana Turner

I have always been an enigma to most people; they can never figure me out. Once they think they have me down, I throw them another twist. According to Carl Gustav Jung, “The most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely.” I tend to disagree. Accepting yourself is the easy part; not knowing whether people will accept you or not is the terrifying part. I am half African American and half Lithuanian Russian, but I don’t look like a stereotype for either part. When people try to guess my ethnicity, they first presume that I am Latina, Pilipino, or Asian. Once I tell them that I am none of those ethnicities, they give up. When I tell them that I am half African American and half Russian they don’t believe me and say, “You don’t have black hair” or “You don’t act black.” I am a combination of hope, cultural history, dreams, tolerance, and acceptance.

My great grandfather on my mother’s side is of Lithuanian Russian heritage with Jewish culture thrown in. In 1916, being of ethnic minority in Russia and fearing reconignment into the Russian army, for which he had already served, he fled his homeland in the shadow of the night and arrived in the “land of the free,” America. He listened to the radio and read the newspaper daily to become fluent in his new language. After his first year in America, he was able to save and send for his wife and three children to come over seas. My great grandmother used that money to pay a “coyote” to sneak her and her three young children out of Russia. Diamonds were sewn into the lining of the children’s jackets to pay for survival during their journey. After my great grandmother and three children arrived in America, my great grandfather went into his own business selling thread and needles door to door from a cart. He was very industrious and saved enough money to move his shop from a cart to a storefront. As time went on, he purchased the three stores adjacent to his and opened the first department store in St. Paul, Minnesota. He eventually brought over eighteen other relatives, and the diamonds are still apart of our family. My mother is a reflection of the hopes and dreams that my great grandfather brought to America with him.

Since my father’s family is of African descent, their heritage was either never recorded or lost throughout the years. The oldest living relative on that side of my family is ninety-five years old—Bill, my grandfather. He lived on a farm in Arkansas until he was three, when his mother passed, and his father remarried to a woman my grandfather grew to love and call his mother. From Arkansas, they moved to Wisconsin. When my grandfather was a young man, the Great Depression hit, and he left to travel the rails to look for work. He remembers those days with fondness as his small world began to open up. He eventually returned to Wisconsin where he met and married my grandmother. Together they had three children who they showered with love and whose education they fiercely encouraged. My grandfather, who never was able to complete college, ensured that all three of his children would. To guarantee his children’s interest in furthering their educations, he encouraged eighteen of their neighborhood friends to further their educations as well. When two adults, such as my grandparents, can affect the lives of so many of their neighborhood youth, they should be and have been celebrated. Their wealth is not that of money, but rather of love and kindness. My father is a manifestation of my grandfather’s desire for education.

Now looking at both of my families’ roots, I wonder if it is a coincidence that both of my grandparents played such an imperative role in eighteen other lives and in my first eighteen years of life. I am a reflection of two cultures culturally combined. I represent everything that is good about California—diversity, acceptance, and tolerance—and this is my family’s California story.

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