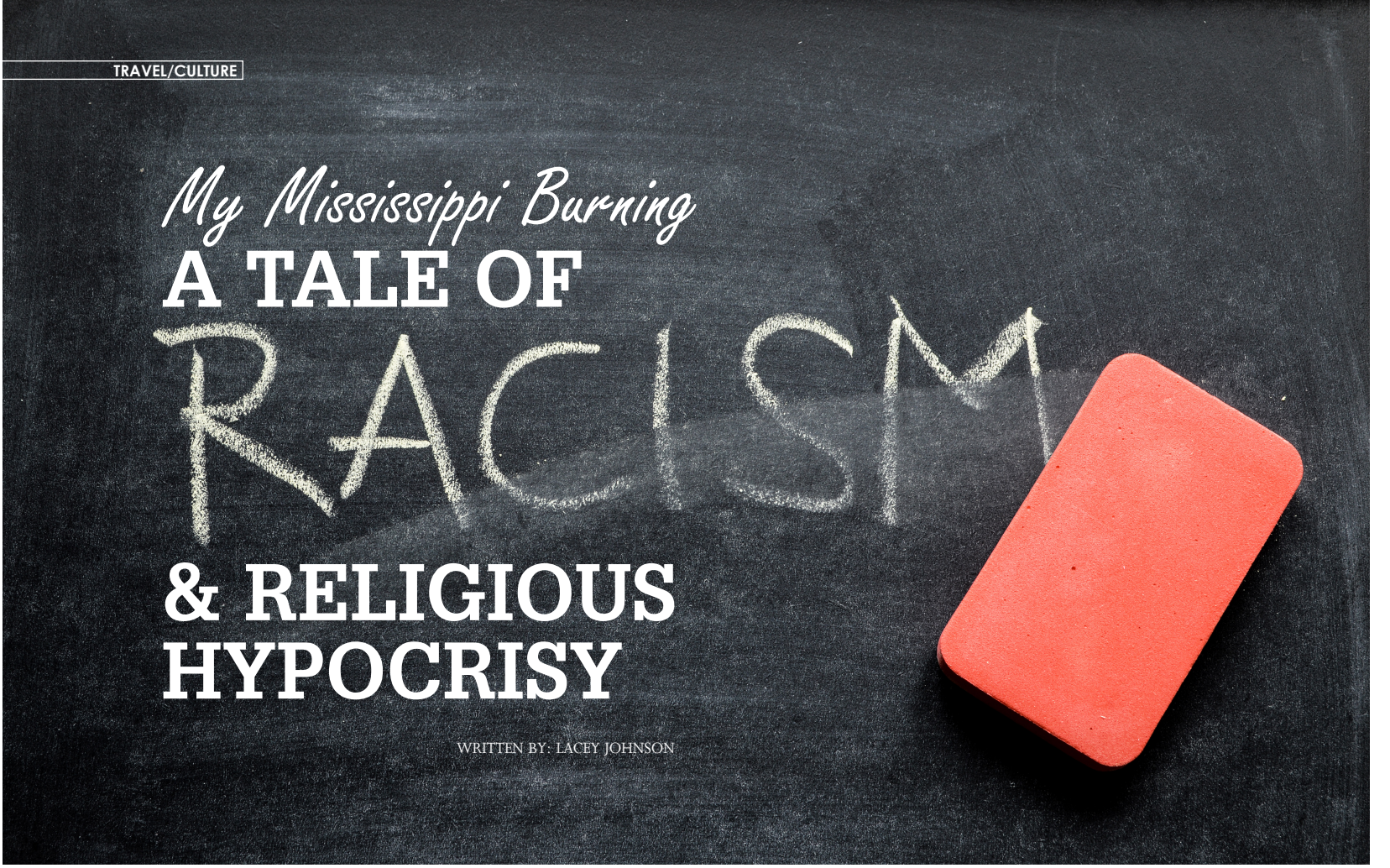

My Mississippi Burning
A TALE OF RACISM & RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY

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MY LIFE BEGAN in rural Mississippi, in a small town about 30 miles south of the state's capital. It was a place where I stomped on ant piles and made lightening bugs my captive every long and muggy summer, and said an unrequited prayer for a dusting of snowfall every winter.

It was a cozy pocket of America - where family ties were made of a fireproof fabric, then threaded through the simplicities of day-to-day life. It was where strangers became instant acquaintances, worthy of a greeting and a smile. But, it was also a sanctuary of unspoken rules: the most important being that if you did not bow your head and raise your hands while suited in your Sunday best, you were branded an outcast.

Every Saturday venture to the nearest mall contained an offering of billboard sightings - many warning those who were unprepared for Jesus' rapturous return. And, every time a mighty storm rolled through and the trees began to sway, I held my Bible tightly to my chest. My flesh trembled in fear at the thought of my soul being left behind.

Fire and brimstone were occasionally served with dinner, but we all soothed the burn by washing it down with sentiments as sweet as our tea: "But, you know Jesus loves you despite that you were born evil; don't you?" By the age of seven, I had dined on so much fear, guilt and contradiction, I was burping it all back up in rebellion.

And, there were other unspoken rules I took notice of - rules of a far different breed. These were the rules every shred of innate decency within me wanted to reduce to ashes.

One summer afternoon when I was about seven or eight years old, I was nearly trampled upon as I stood on hot pavement, my body dripping wet and shivering - not because I was cold, but because I was an immobile and synergistic blend of shock and confusion.

I watched as several dozen children and their parents - most of whom were my classmates, neighbors and fellow church attendees - splashing and ejecting themselves from our community swimming pool. The expressions on their faces sort of resembled the masks the boys in my neighborhood wore on Halloween. I thought something filthy or horrendous lurked in those waters. *Is there a dead animal afloat? Is someone drowning?*

It was bordering on a frenzy - reminding me of the way the ants reacted anytime I dared to aggravate their pile: scattering and fleeing in terror.

I quickly learned, though, that their frantic movements had not been provoked by any danger in those waters. No. Rather, it was because three black children - newcomers to town - decided to join other children their age for an afternoon swim.

> "Race & Reality IN AMERICA"

You see, these newcomers were not acquainted with the unspoken rules. They were unaware they had crossed over into 'forbidden terrain' - for the pool they selected that day was the "white pool." How dare they not know they belonged at the "black pool" - the smaller, dirtier, 'lesser than' pool on the 'lesser than' side of town.

It was the end of the 1980s - early in the Bush administration, and more than two decades following the end of segregation. But, not long enough to dispel the culture of racism still alive and well within that town.

Everyone in the pool's vicinity continued to scramble. There were a collage of sun-drenched white bodies wrapped in brightly-colored beach towels, all huddled together in clusters along the fence railing. Some raced to the bathroom in hiding. Some tiptoed to the sidelines. Some fled to the parking lot. And, some abandoned their pool day entirely, seeking 'safety' in their cars - locking every door and driving away in haste.

But, not a single one of them remained in the pool. *Not one.*

My sister - seven years my senior - grabbed my arm and dragged me behind her in order to dodge the commotion. She rushed us to the payphone to call our father, who served as the town's mayor and was among the rarities in that mecca of Bible studies and southern hospitality: a young white man who was boldly unwilling to swallow the racist messages he was expected to digest. And, as a result, we were occasionally penned "n*gger lovers."

"Your dad helps n*ggers!" a boy had hissed at me on the playground one day.

I remember thinking he looked like a demon when he said it, and it provoked me to wonder why I was so worried about being penned as the weirdo.

I scanned the pool grounds for a moment before landing on his face. He was with the other classmates who were snickering about the black children's swim caps. Their folded arms conveyed that they were impatiently waiting for the 'lesser than' visitors to leave.

I thought about how ironic it was - how funny that they deemed themselves superior. They all looked like stumbling drunks - delusional, intoxicated, and toasting to their cocktail of white supremacy and vile religious hypocrisy.

Wait, I thought; If Jesus loves me, doesn't Jesus love them, too? Doesn't Jesus love "all the little children of the world? Red and yellow, black and white"? The color of skin and the texture of hair could not possibly make such a difference in regard to a person's value.

So, why did it?

Wasn't this venomous hatred a slap in the face to the savior they bowed their heads, raised their hands and wore their Sunday best for? It didn't make sense.

I remember one of the black children in particular - a girl about my age. It was as though the sun had sought her out, as though ravished by her. And, though I was not brave enough to approach her, I badly wanted to.

In my mind's eye, I can vividly see her, still - her spine straight and long legs dangling in the pool. I can see the drops of water creating a collage across her frail, mahogany shoulders. I remember the way the sun shone like a spotlight over her, illuminating her profile softly - such beauty seeping through her veil of oppression and pain.

I never locked eyes with her, but empathy asked that I take a front row seat. And, a trajectory of grieving, vulnerability and expansion swirls around that memory. I wish that I could stretch back in time to that moment and - with mighty fists - grab ahold of her shoulders. I would announce what a powerhouse of courage she was.

I wonder how her recollection of that day differs from mine. I wonder what other stories she lived to tell.

I wonder these things not because of mere curiosity, but because she did something I have never forgotten in all of these years:

She stayed in the pool anyway.

She stayed - despite the snickers and side glances, despite the arrogantly-folded arms and tapping feet. Daringly, she stayed - as though her will were as strong as the cement.

An innumerable amount of times since that sweltering Mississippi day, I have been moved to tears reflecting upon it.

I sobbed into my pillow when Barack Obama was elected in 2008. I wondered if the girl from the pool was somewhere crying, too. I then sobbed even harder watching Oprah sob as he delivered his acceptance speech. And, I sobbed at Michelle Obama's words at the Clinton rally mere months ago - when she so eloquently defended every objectified woman - of every racial background - since the dawn of time.

I watched from my bedroom with my husband and dog on either side, wondering if the girl from the pool was also cheering and shouting at her television screen. I'll never know for sure.

This I do know: There has been astounding racial progress since that afternoon at the pool, but there remains a monumental divide we have yet to close. And, it's time we get honest with ourselves about it.

Recently, I read a field experiment conducted by The National Bureau of Economic Research in 2003. It determined that racism was still enormously rampant in the workplace - one of their findings being that college graduates with "black-sounding names" - in order to receive a "call back" - had to send out 50 percent more job applications than an equally capable individual with a "white sounding name."

And, although those findings are 14 years old, the Bureau of Labor Statistics determined in 2016 that the unemployment rate of black Americans was 8.8 percent - more than double that of white Americans.

Furthermore, it doesn't take much google-searching to be smacked with evidence that the residue of racism still reveals itself among our day-to-day interactions. A video of a passionate Trump supporter enraged and leaning into an automobile on a street in Memphis, Tennessee, shouting, "Black lives don't matter!" landed in my phone on the day of the 2016 presidential election. And, it is one of many of its kind I have stumbled upon since.

I will never know what it is like to be black in America. I may never realize all of the ways I, too, have mindlessly expressed racism in my public interactions and private thoughts. But, I do know this: It requires an impenetrable amount of bravery to be a black person in America - a kind of bravery I cannot fathom and do not believe I will ever grasp. But, I know it exists. I know it because I have seen evidence of it:

To know that your opportunities may be fewer than your fair-skinned neighbor, but to perfect your resume, steam your shirt and devote yourself to excellence anyway. To know that the security guard at the movie theater stared at you suspiciously and, perhaps, a little longer than he did the white gentleman three feet from you, but to buy the popcorn and enjoy the movie anyway. For the cells in your body to be alive and well with the memories of the generations before you who lived through oppression, slavery and violence, but to rise with your community in hope anyway.

To sit alone - surrounded by the echo of snickers and the dissonance of prejudice, but to stay in the pool anyway. That isn't freedom, but it is bravery. And, I suppose that is what black Americans have been doing for generations: They sit on the edge of this country's vast pool of opportunity - not deaf to the snickering, not blind to the side glances and not oblivious to the oppression.

But, they swim anyway.

"Conversations on **Race** a talk worth having"

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