

THE
MEANING
OF
MARIAH
CAREY

MARIAH CAREY

with MICHAELA ANGELA DAVIS

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*To my legacy, my children, Roc and Roe,
You are the physical embodiment of unconditional
love.*

*To my lineage, my ancestors, all of them ...
You may have come from two different worlds
that were often in struggle with each other,
yet the best of you lives on inside of me, finally,
harmoniously.*

*And to Pat, my mother, who, through it all,
I do believe actually did the best she could.
I will love you the best I can, always.*

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things yet unseen.*

Hebrews 11:1

PREFACE

I refuse to acknowledge time, famously so. I've made a lot of jokes and memes about it, but it's a very real belief for me. I cried on my eighteenth birthday. I thought I was a failure because I didn't have a record deal yet. That was my only goal. It was as if I was holding my breath until I could hold a physical thing, an album that had "Mariah Carey" printed on it. Once I got my deal I exhaled, and *my* life began. From that day on, I calculated my life through albums, creative experiences, professional accomplishments, and holidays. I live Christmas to Christmas, celebration to celebration, festive moment to festive moment, not counting my birthdays or ages. (Much to the chagrin of certain people.)

Life has made me find my own way to be in this world. Why ruin the journey by watching the clock and the ticking away of years? So much happened to me before anyone even knew my name, time seems like an inadequate way to measure or record it. Not living based on time also became a way to hold on to myself, to keep close and keep alive that inner child of mine. It's why I gravitate toward enduring characters like Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and Tinker Bell. They remind me we can be timeless.

It is a waste of time to be fixated on time. Often time can be bleak, *dahling*, so why choose to live in it? Life is about the moments we create and remember. My memory is a sacred place, one of the few things that belong entirely to me. This memoir is a collection of the moments that matter, the moments that most accurately tell the story of who I am,

according to *me*. It will move back and forth, up and down, moment to moment, adding up to the meaning of me now.

But then again, who's counting?

PART I

**WAYWARD
CHILD**

AN INTENTION

My intention was to keep her safe, but perhaps I have only succeeded in keeping her prisoner.

For many years, she's been locked away inside of me—always alone, hidden in plain sight before masses of people. There's significant evidence of her in my early work: often she can be found looking out of windows, dwarfed by a giant frame, barefoot, staring at an empty rope swing swaying from a lone tree against a purple dusk sky. Or else she's two stories up in a brownstone, watching the neighborhood children dancing on the sidewalk below. She's shown up in a school auditorium in OshKosh overalls, holding a ball on the sidelines, waiting and wanting to be chosen. Sometimes she is caught in a rare moment of joy, on a roller coaster or flying by on skates with her hands in the air. Always she lingers, though, as a dull longing just behind my eyes. She's been scared and alone for so long, and yet through all the darkness, she's never lost her light. She has made herself known through my songs—her yearning heard over the airwaves or seen on screens. Millions of people know of her, but have never known her.

She is little Mariah, and much of this will be her story, as she saw it.

Some of my earliest memories are of violent moments. Because of that, I have always carried a heavy blanket with which I cover up large pieces of my childhood. It has been a

burden. But I can no longer stand the weight of that blanket and the silence of the little girl smothering beneath it. I am a grown woman now, with a little girl and boy of my own. I have seen, I have been scared, I have been scarred, and I have survived. I have used my songs and voice to inspire others and to emancipate my adult self. I offer this book, in large part, to finally emancipate that scared little girl inside of me. It is time to give her a voice, to let her tell her story exactly as she experienced it.

Though you cannot dispute someone's lived experience, without a doubt, details in this book will differ from the accounts of my family, friends, and plenty of folks who think they know me. I've lived that conflict for far too long, and I'm weary of that too. I've held my hand over the mouth of that little girl in an attempt to protect others. Even "those others" who never tried to protect me. Despite my efforts to "be above it all," I still got dragged and sued and ripped off. In the end, I only hurt her more, and it almost killed me.

This book is a testimony to the resilience of silenced little girls and boys everywhere: To insist that we believe them. To honor their experiences and tell their stories.

To set them free.

EXISTENCE

*Early on, you face
The realization you don't
Have a space
Where you fit in
And recognize you
Were born to exist
Standing alone
—"Outside"*

There was a time in my early childhood when I didn't believe I was worthy of being alive. I was too young to contemplate ending my life but just old enough to know I hadn't begun living nor found where I belonged. Nowhere in my world did I see anyone who looked like me or reflected how I felt inside.

There was my mother, Patricia, with paler skin and straighter hair, and my father, Alfred Roy, with deeper skin and kinkier hair, and neither had faces with features just like mine. I saw them both as riddled with regret, hostages of a sequence of cruel circumstances. My sister, Alison, and brother, Morgan, were both older and darker, and not just in terms of the hues of their skin, though they were slightly browner. The two of them had a similar energy that seemed to block light. They had an approach to the world that made little room for whimsy and fantasy, which was my natural tendency. We shared common blood, yet I felt like a stranger

among them all, an intruder in my own family.

I was always so scared as a little girl, and music was my escape. My house was heavy, weighed down with yelling and chaos. When I sang, in a whispery tone, it calmed me down. I discovered a quiet, soft, light place inside my voice—a vibration in me that brought me sweet relief. My whisper-singing was my secret lullaby to myself.

But in singing I also found a connection to my mother, a Juilliard-trained opera singer. As I listened to her doing vocal exercises at home, the repetition of the scales felt like a mantra, soothing my frightened little mind. Her voice went up and down and up and up and up—and something inside me rose along with it. (I would also sing along with the beautiful, angelic, soulful Minnie Riperton’s “Lovin’ You” and follow her voice up into the clouds.) I would sing little tunes around the house, to my mother’s delight. And she always encouraged me. One day, while practicing an aria from the opera *Rigoletto*, she kept stumbling on this one part. I sang it back to her, in perfect Italian. I might have been three years old. She looked at me, stunned, and at that moment I knew she saw me. I was more than a little girl to her. I was Mariah. A musician.

My father taught me to whistle before I could talk. I had a raspy speaking voice even then, and I liked that I sounded different from most other kids my age. My singing voice, on the other hand, was smooth and strong. One day, when I was around eight years old, I was walking down the street with my friend Maureen, who had porcelainlike skin with warm brown hair and a sweet face like Dorothy’s from *The Wizard of Oz*. She was one of the few little white girls in the neighborhood who was allowed to play with me. As we walked, I began to sing something. She stopped suddenly, frozen in place on the sidewalk. She listened for a moment in silence, standing very still. Finally, she turned to me and said, in a clear and steady voice, “When you sing it sounds like there are instruments with you. There’s music all around

your voice.” She said it like a proclamation, almost like a prayer.

They say God speaks through people, and I will always be grateful for my little girlfriend speaking into my heart that day. She saw something special in me and gave it words, and I believed her. I believed my voice was made of instruments—piano, strings, and flutes. I believed my voice could be music. All I needed was someone to see and hear me.

I saw how my voice could make other people feel something good inside, something magical and transformative. That meant not only was I not unworthy, valid as a person, but I was valuable. Here was something of value that I could bring to others—*the feeling*. It was *the feeling* I would pursue for a lifetime. It gave me a reason to exist.

CLOSE MY EYES

It took twelve cops to pull my brother and father apart. The big bodies of men, all entangled like a swirling hurricane, crashed loudly into the living room. Within an instant, familiar things were no longer in my sight—no windows, no floor, no furniture, and no light. All I could see was a chaotic mass of body parts in motion: dark pants and strong arms bursting out of dark sleeves, enormous hands grabbing, fists punching, limbs tangled together and tearing away, heavy, polished black shoes scuffling and stomping. There were quick flashes of shiny things: buttons, badges, and guns. At least a dozen pistol handles, stiff and sticking out of dull leather holsters, a few cradled in palms and thumbs, sat on wide black belts around broad hips. Chaos filled the air with the sounds of cursing, grunting, and howling. The entire house seemed to be shaking. And somewhere in the eye of this storm were the two most important male figures in my life, destroying each other.

I always thought of my brother's anger as weather—powerful, destructive, and unpredictable. I don't know if it was a singular act or an ongoing illness that made him so volatile, but it was all I had ever known.

I was a little girl with very few memories of a big brother who protected me. More often, I felt I had to protect myself from him, and sometimes I would find myself protecting my mother from him too.

This particular fight with our father had escalated more quickly than most, however. A shouting match became a tornado of fists in what seemed like a matter of seconds, banging through the room, knocking things over, and leaving havoc in its wake. In that moment, the rage between my father and brother was so forceful that no one person could have stopped it. No one would have dared.

By the time I was a toddler, I had developed the instincts to sense when violence was coming. As though I was smelling rain, I could tell when adult screaming had reached a certain pitch and velocity that meant I should take cover. When my brother was around, it was not uncommon for holes to be punched in walls or for other objects to go flying. I never really knew how or why the fights would begin, but I did know when tension was turning into an argument and when an argument was destined to become a physical fight. And I knew this particular one was going to be epic.

My Nana Reese was there, which was a bit odd because it was rare that she or anyone from my father's family, who lived in Harlem, was at our house. We were in Melville, a predominately white, affluent-adjacent town in Suffolk County on Long Island, New York, though I would eventually move thirteen times growing up. Thirteen times to pack up and go, to try to find another place—a better place, a safer place. Thirteen new starts, thirteen new streets with new houses full of people to judge you and wonder where or who your father is. Thirteen occasions to be labeled unworthy and discarded, to be placed on the outside.

Pastor Nana Reese, the Good Reverend Roscoe Reese, and their African Methodist Pentecostal Church were where my father came from. Roy was the only son of Addie, Nana Reese's sister. My father never lived with his father, and there was always a potent distance between them, a mystery that inevitably held a misery. These people, living in the village of Harlem, were his people. They had come up from Alabama and parts of North Carolina and other regions of the

South, bringing with them traditions, traumas, and gifts—some of which were ancient, African, and mystical in origin.

Nana Reese and I found each other right before all hell really broke loose. The thunder of profanity, fists, and feet drowned out all other sounds, so I didn't hear when the cops burst in.

I didn't know if they had come to save us or kill us. It was Long Island in the 1970s, and two Black males were being violent—the appearance of the police almost never meant that help had arrived. On the contrary, their presence often complicated and elevated the existing terror and escalated violence. That hasn't changed, but this was my first encounter with the fact. I had no benefit of experience; I had no benefit of any kind. My cousin LaVinia, Nana Reese's daughter, always said, "You kids had all the burdens of being Black but none of the benefits." It took me a long time to understand the reality of her observation.

This, of course, was not the first vicious fight between my father and brother—for as long as I could remember, their relationship had been a war zone. But it was the first time the troops had been called in. It was also the first time I witnessed the possibility that a member of my family could brutally die in front of my eyes. Or that I could die too. I wasn't yet four years old.

★ ★ ★

Before my mother and father found their marriage unbearable, they lived together in Brooklyn Heights. Though the neighborhood had seen a stream of bohemians arrive as early as 1910, and the 1950s brought in a wave of urban activists—liberal folks with money who loathed the suburbs—in the 1970s it was still a pretty eclectic mix of mostly working- and middle-class families. It was pre-yuppie and ungentrified. If there was a tolerant place for a young mixed-race family in that era, Brooklyn Heights was probably the closest you could come to it.

Throughout my childhood, I would live in many obscure places, mostly on Long Island, and feel very much like a castaway on this island-off-the-island of Manhattan. Both my parents worked very hard so we could live in neighborhoods where we could glimpse that elusive “better life” and feel “safe.” Conventional wisdom, however, suggests that “better” and “safe” are synonymous with white.

We were not a conventional family. Was it better to live in a place where my white mother would often walk alone through the front door first, ahead of my Black father with her mixed kids—for their safety? What does that do to the psyche of a man who is supposed to be the head of the household? How can such a man keep his family safe, and what does such an indignity signal to his Black son?



After the squad of policemen managed to separate my father and brother, though there was still a considerable amount of yelling, everyone was alive. The truly dangerous part of the storm was over; the thunder had stopped. The next thing I knew I was cradled in Nana Reese’s arms, crying and trembling. She had scooped me up like a sack of laundry and set me close beside her on what the kids used to call “the rocking couch,” a cheap, flimsy structure the color of dirt, rust, and olive, dotted with flecks of mustard. Sometimes I think it was that couch that planted the seed of my eventual preference for Chanel. We kids called it the “rocking couch” because it was missing a leg, and if you shifted your weight back and forth it would, well, rock. This was a noble attempt to find humor amid broken things, a talent I shared with my brother and sister. In the midst of the violence and trauma, a great comfort came to me on that sad sofa.

Nana Reese held me tight until my little frame stopped shaking and my breathing became normal. From disorientation I returned to the room, I returned to my body. She turned my face up toward the light and made sure my

eyes were focused and locked on to hers. She placed her delicate hand firmly on my thigh. Her touch immediately steadied any aftershocks still pulsing through me. Her gaze was unusual—not that of a great-auntie, a mother, or a doctor. It was instead as if she looked directly into the essence of me. In that instant we were not a frightened little girl and a consoling elder but two souls, ageless and equal.

She told me, “Don’t be scared of all the trouble you see. All your dreams and visions are going to happen for you. Always remember that.”

As she spoke, a warm and loving current spread out from her hand to my leg, gently coursing through my body in waves and rising up and out the top of my head. Through the devastation a path had been washed clear; I knew there was light. And somehow I knew that light was mine and everlasting. Before that moment I hadn’t had any dreams I could remember. I had very few memories either. I certainly had yet to hear a song in my head or have a vision.

From around when I was four years old, after my parents’ divorce, I didn’t see my Nana Reese much. My mother and my father’s families remained locked in conflict, and since I lived with my mother, I was largely cut off from Nana’s life of healing and holy rolling in Harlem. I did later learn that people called Nana Reese a “prophetess.” I also learned that she was not the only healer in my lineage. Beyond all that, I believe a deep faith was awakened in me that day.

I understood on a soul level that no matter what happened to me, or around me, something lived *inside* me that I could always call on. I had something that would guide me through any storm.

*And when the wind blows, and shadows grow close
Don’t be afraid, there’s nothing you can’t face
And should they tell you you’ll never pull through
Don’t hesitate, stand tall and say
I can make it through the rain*

—“Through the Rain”

THERE CAN BE MIRACLES

When I was six years old, my mother moved my brother and me into a tiny, nondescript house in Northport, Long Island. It sat sadly atop a stack of long, winding concrete steps.

The dull little structure had a few tiny rooms running along either side of a steep, creaky staircase, which led up to even smaller rooms. My mother was often working or out at night, so Morgan was left to babysit me. He had no skills to look after a little girl. He would leave me alone and go run wild with his teenage friends. One night, while left alone, I was watching a special on *20/20* about children being kidnapped—totally inappropriate for a six-year-old. And it so happened that at that moment, some kids in the neighborhood decided to throw rocks at the window. Their voices broke through the dark night, chanting, “Mariah, we’re gonna get you!” I was terrified by the news, by the kids, by the night, by the house, by my absolute aloneness.

I wanted my brother to love me. I was impressed by his strong energy, but it also scared me. This little house couldn’t possibly bear the weight of all of our pain and fear—especially my brother’s. It was such a raw time. I was a scared little girl, my mother was profoundly heartbroken, and my brother—well, let’s just say he was more than simply an angry teen, especially in high school. He’d outgrown anger by middle school and had graduated to full-on rage. As a young teen, my brother was bursting with creative and

athletic promise. But earlier in his life he had been bullied and beat up for having a disability and being a mixed-race kid. The visible difference he wore on his skin always distanced him from the white boys in Long Island and made him a target. Children can be mean, but when ordinary meanness is combined with racism, it takes on a peculiar brutality, one very often sanctioned by (and learned from) adults. My brother most likely caught some hell from the Black kids too. I'm sure his distance from their kind of detectable Blackness, the kind that gets you roughed up by the cops for nothing, stirred up a resentment in them that came out in the form of physical blows and name-calling.

My brother was broken early on, and the only tool he had to defend himself was destruction. He would fight everything, his demons and everybody else, especially our father. The relationship he had with our father was not one that helped him rebuild—instead, it ground him down even further into his inner outrage. A broken man cannot fix his broken boy. My brother was shattered into pieces, scattered to the wind, and our father's outdated tools of militaristic discipline were inadequate to help him collect himself and prepare him for manhood. The misunderstanding and emotional distance with our father was my brother's perpetual and crushing agony, and it resulted in his absolute rage.

For most of my childhood I was caught between my brother's fury and my mother's sad searching. Rage and despondence are both highly damaging, but, I think, one turns inward and the other turns outward. When they collide, it can be catastrophic. By the time I was in kindergarten, catastrophe was already routine to me. When we lived in Northport, mini explosions erupted between my mother and brother daily. I conditioned myself to be still and wait for the outbursts to pass over. Most of the time I tuned out the words and reasons behind their fights—the “why” was big-people territory. To me, their arguments were just a

blur of intense voices at high volume, punctuated by ruthless cursing.

One particular night, however, I distinctly knew the source of the argument: my brother wanted to use my mother's car, and she wouldn't let him. Certainly they'd had hundreds of fights over the car, but for some reason this night felt different. I was paying attention. Typically, their fights would start off the way I imagined normal fights between most teenagers and parents did, but this one wasn't like that. It began at blow-up level and rapidly escalated into violent obscenities being hurled across the room. Hurtful words flew back and forth like bullets ricocheting off the walls, gaining strength with each new round. There was no escaping the crossfire; the screaming shot room to room, up and down the stairs, and the entire house became a battlefield. There was no safe place. I felt the air tighten as my mother and brother came face-to-face, mere inches of electrified anger between them. I was terrified. My whole body stiffened. Eyes opened wide, I fixed on the space between them and cried out, "Stop it! Stop it!" over and over again, through my tears. I was hoping maybe my cry could slip into that space and disarm them for a moment.

Suddenly there was a loud, sharp noise, like an actual gunshot. My brother had pushed my mother with such force that her body slammed into the wall, making a loud cracking sound. I saw her frame go rigid; for a moment she appeared frozen against the wall, pinned up like a painting, her feet lifted several inches off the ground. Next thing I knew she was totally limp, as if her bones had melted, folding onto the floor. It was a split second. It was an eternity. My eyes were still fixed in place, only now I was looking at my mother collapsed in a crumpled pile on the floor. My brother stomped out and slammed the door, shaking the house one last time, and sped off in her car.

I stood there for a moment in the eerie silence. I could hear myself breathing, but I couldn't tell if my mother still

was. A chilling clarity came to me, just as a soft part of my childhood left. Without taking my eyes from my motionless mother, I pulled myself together. Picking up the receiver of our one telephone, I felt it heavy and cold, pressed against my small ear. My little fingers pushed down the square buttons in a familiar sequence. It was the number of one of my mother's friends, whose house she would sometimes visit to hang out. Since I was only six years old, hers was one of the few numbers I had memorized.

Clearing my voice so I could be heard over the telephone's static hum, choking on tears, I did my best to calmly tell her, "My brother really hurt my mother, and I'm home alone. Please come help." I don't remember what she said. I hung up still feeling focused, my eyes still fixed on my mother's body. I went into a sort of trance.

I don't know how long I stood there, just that I snapped out of it at the sound of a loud banging on the door. I scurried to open it for my mother's friend, and several policemen rushed in. I couldn't understand what anyone was saying, but I watched as they hurried over to where my mother was lying. Next thing I knew, she was moving. The moment I realized she was alive, the spell of shock broke, and a gush of fear and panic rushed over me—the dawning realization of what had actually happened, what had almost happened, and what unknown future was waiting. I tucked my small body into a ball, held on to myself tightly, and quietly began to cry. I could hear the faint sound of my mother's voice as she stirred back to consciousness. Then I heard a crystal-clear voice, ringing out just above my head. It was a man's voice, a voice that I will never forget.

One of the cops, looking down at me but speaking to another cop beside him, said, "If this kid makes it, it'll be a miracle." And that night, I became less of a kid and more of a miracle.

WHEN CHRISTMAS COMES

*I don't want a lot for Christmas
There is just one thing I need
I don't care about the presents
Underneath the Christmas tree*
—“All I Want for Christmas Is You”

My mother added a leaf to her tiny wooden table, making it almost family-sized for the day. With a few simple decorations, the table became the festive centerpiece, along with a Charlie Brown-ish tree, of an otherwise makeshift furnished living room in the run-down house where the two of us lived. Despite our circumstances, my mother wanted us to have a “wonderful life.”

The days leading up to Christmas were an event. My mother always kept an Advent calendar. We would open a new flap each day. I'd read the portion of a story or a poem printed there, and she would give me the chocolates hidden inside. The mulled wine she made camouflaged the dankness of the house with a warm spicy aroma. I was well aware we didn't have much money, so while I never really anticipated getting any extravagant presents or popular toys, I loved that we'd make an effort to get into the spirit and do what we could to create an ambiance of joy and jubilation. We'd clean up, we'd decorate, and of course we would sing. Christmas carols sung in my mother's operatic voice brought a feeling

*image
not
available*

sashayed around the house in spectacular multicolored silk caftans. Burt would bring me out in their yard to take photos of me (I just adored showing off in front of a camera), and he totally encouraged my exaggerated poses. He fully supported and understood my propensity for extraneousness.

I distinctly remember one Christmas photo session we staged. I was dressed up in a green dress with flowers, and, as a special Christmas miracle, I had decent-looking bangs. I pretended to be placing an ornament on the tree as I coyly looked back over my shoulder and Burt snapped the picture: fashion-feature festive.

I enjoyed Burt and Myron's lovely, cozy little home year-round, but especially at Christmastime. They put so much care and personality into preparing for the season. The house would be perfectly clean, and there would be pretty decorations, precisely placed, and a fire roaring in the fireplace. The house smelled like a new oven with something roasting inside; they always had little savory morsels to nibble and served fancy drinks like brandy Alexanders. I remember being stuck at their house one holiday during an ice storm, which I hoped would never end. Burt and Myron gave me my first taste of what a homey Christmas really felt like. They provided an example of a homey lifestyle in general.

My guncles supported the showgirl in me. Whenever I wanted to put on my own little production (which was frequently), they would pay full attention to me. They never tried to tame my over-the-top imagination. It was from my little girl's spirit and those early fantasies of family, and friendship, that I wrote "All I Want for Christmas Is You." Think of how it begins: ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding ... the delicate chimes are reminiscent of those little wooden toy pianos, like the one Schroeder had on *Peanuts*.

I actually did bang out most of the song on a cheap little Casio keyboard. But it's the feeling I wanted the song to

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available*

of their wax sleeves, was intoxicating. He would pull out one tall column of crackers, undo the meticulously folded sleeve top, slip a single cracker from the stack, and hand it to me delicately, as if it were a precious gem. Then he would carefully refold the paper, slide the stack back into the box, and return it to its place on the shelf, where it would stay.

I'd hold the buttery, salty, crunchy goodness up to my nose, close my eyes, and breathe in one long, luxurious sniff. With precision, I would take one teeny-weeny bite along the scalloped edge. I'd chew ever so slowly, letting the savory sensation linger on my tongue. Turning the golden treasure ever so slightly, I would nibble off another little piece of the edge, relishing every grain of salt and crumb, making my one cracker last as long as I could. (Ironically, the slogan on the box was "there's only *one* Ritz"—and for me, there really was!)

By today's standards my father would have been considered a hipster. After the military, he moved to Brooklyn Heights, drove a classic Porsche Speedster, and prepared authentic Italian dishes in his kitchen. Oh, how I lived for my father's cooking! He made a mean sausage and peppers, and delicious parsley meatballs, but his linguine with white clam sauce was *sublime*. The scent of garlic in hot olive oil, boiling pasta, and the salty sea are what the best Sundays smell like to me. I loved Sundays. Those were the days I spent with my father—and our meals together were what I looked forward to the most.

One Sunday, my father's mother, Addie, was there—a rare occasion. I don't think I was more than five years old. It began as a typical Sunday, my father spending the entire day meticulously preparing his signature dish. He shucked and cleaned every clam, sliced the garlic, and chopped the aromatic flat Italian parsley. It was such a process—a ritual, rather. As per usual I hadn't eaten all day, save maybe a Ritz cracker (and I probably hadn't had a full meal the day before; Saturday night at my mother's house could be a bit

in the hole in the bottom of the sea

He also liked to sing “John Henry,” a folk song about a Black man who worked as a “steel-driving man.”

John Henry was a little baby, sitting on his Daddy’s knee

When he would sing “knee,” he’d hit an impossibly low note that would always make me laugh. I liked singing those songs because they would help the time and the miles go by. Back then I thought just driving was such a bore. But now, oh, what wouldn’t I do to sit next to him, one more time, in those leather seats, on the open road, with just the hum of the engine and the swishing of the wind as our accompaniment. My mother, the opera singer, taught me scales, but my father taught me songs that made me laugh.

*Thank you for the mountains
The Lake of the Clouds
I’m picturing you and me there right now
As the crystal cascades showered down
—“Sunflowers for Alfred Roy”*

Occasionally we would go to Lime Rock Park, a racetrack in Connecticut. It was a slightly more glamorous experience than a typical NASCAR venue. Paul Newman had a team there, and world-class drivers like Mario Andretti were regulars. I found the racetrack pretty boring, but going to the races was a favorite activity for Alfred Roy, and he made all of his kids join him. This was one rare thing we kids all could agree on: cars going around and around in a circle wasn’t high entertainment.

When we were on our drives or at the racetrack, I was often just *around* while he did regular adult things. While he listened to or watched football (which he loved, and which I found extremely boring) I would be close by, quietly reading or drawing—observing the ways of an adult.

Alice” sounded close to her name. When I was brought out to the living room to perform, all of the lights were out, and I was surrounded by burning candles and a circle of teenagers (as well as my mother). Watching Alison’s face for approval, I let out the first verse:

*One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small
And the ones that Mother gives you, don't do anything at
all
Go ask Alice, when she's ten feet tall*

A song about taking drugs and tripping is not typical (or appropriate) lyrical content for a little girl. But I sang it because my big sister taught it to me. I loved nothing more than learning and singing songs, but this one was full of scary images (“the White Knight is talking backward /and the Red Queen’s off with her head”) and what seemed to me like creepy nonsense (“the hookah-smoking caterpillar”—what?).

Of course, I wondered what this song was about and why I was singing it in the dark. It was past midnight, and while all the other kids my age were nestled in their beds, I was belting out, “Feed your head!” for a candlelit gathering of wannabe-hippie teens conducting a pseudo-séance. Tell me that’s not weird.

★ ★ ★

“See you next Sunday!” That was our thing. My father and I gave that little promise to each other with a wave each week as I left him to return to life with my mother. But as I grew a little older, my seriousness as a singer-songwriter began to swiftly envelop my whole world. I was in the profession by the time I was twelve. My father did not see it or support it, largely because he did not understand it.

Music, as a career, was not logical to him. When I talked about writing poetry and singing, he would shift the conversation to grades and homework. He didn’t see the

COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINES

*It's hard to explain
Inherently it's just always been strange
Neither here nor there
Always somewhat out of place everywhere
Ambiguous without a sense of belonging to touch
—"Outside"*

My first encounters with racism were like a first kiss in reverse: each time, a piece of purity was ripped from my being. Left behind was a spreading stain, which seeped so deeply inside of me that to this day, I've never been able to completely scrub it out. Not with time, not with fame or wealth, not even with love. The earliest of these encounters happened when I was about four years old and in preschool. The activity for the day was to draw a portrait of our families. Laid out on the table was a stack of heavy-stock construction paper the color of eggshells and small groups of crayons for us to pick from. While I much preferred sing-along and story time to coloring, I was excited about the project and determined to do my very best. I thought if I did a good job maybe the teacher would decorate my drawing with a gold-foil star sticker.

I chose my supplies carefully, found a quiet corner, and got busy with the assignment. At that point, our family of five had not yet fractured. For a short time, I had a father, a

exploded into tears. Confused, I looked to my father for help, but I could see that he was frozen too, and breathless, a mortified look twisting his strong features. In a state of shock, my mind scrambled as I tried to process the abrupt and painful turn of events. Becky in hysterics, my father in silent agony: how had we gotten here in a single instant?

I didn't know what to do. I was stuck there, unmoving, for what felt like hours but was likely merely moments. Finally, my mother came up behind us on the stairs, to Becky's rescue. Without even a glance in my direction, she gently placed her arm around the distraught little girl and wordlessly guided her down the stairs and into the backseat of her car. My mother sped off with the strawberry blonde, without ever making any attempt to clarify what had happened. There was no consolation, no mediation, no acknowledgment of the devastation to me or my father. In the wake of Becky's storm, my father and I stood quietly together on the stoop and waited for the ache to pass. Nobody ever mentioned it after that, but we never played together again, and the moment remained with me forever. And, believe it or not, her name really *was* Becky.

No one ever outwardly questioned my ethnic background when I was alone with my mother. They didn't dare ask about, or else could not detect, the differences in our hues and textures. Becky, and most likely her mother too, had probably just assumed my father was also white, or maybe something exotic—but certainly not *Black*. That day on the stoop I learned, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that I was not like the people I went to school with or who lived in my neighborhood. My father was totally different from them, and they were afraid of him. But he was my people; I came from him. That day, I saw firsthand how their fear hurt him. And his hurt deeply hurt me too. But what was perhaps most painful, that afternoon, was that he saw that *I* saw their fear of him. He knew it would impact me forever. He knew I could never return to the innocence all children deserve.