While growing up on the coast of Mississippi during the late 'sixties, I remember a few very distinct things that happened in my life. One was all the long hot summers we endured because we weren’t allowed indoors during the day hours while my mother cooked, cleaned, and did all the things that it took to run a large household; another thing was that my mother always kept us a little separate from the numerous other children residing on our block; she said bad habits would rub off on us. The last thing was that she brought me, my smaller brother, and baby sister in from the yard twice a day to vigorously scrub our faces and necks until they were raw, (I only remember this because it caused no little consternation to us for being treated so badly in front of our neighbors). One day I asked my mother why we had to be scrubbed so when the other kids stayed dirty all day until bath time. She replied that “dirt always showed up more on us.” This confused me but I did not ask any more questions at the time. No one ever mentioned that our faces were very pale or ever implied that there were different colors in our neighborhood. We were the same collective group of children that dwelled in every black neighborhood. If you would have asked me to draw a self portrait, I would have drawn a little brown face like all the faces surrounding me.

At the age of five, I was finally old enough to attend the neighborhood school. I was quite excited about all the people I would meet. My mother combed my hair into two pigtails with a bunch of plaits on the end, and I wore my best dress. I was dressed by 5:00 am and ready to be trusted to walk to school with all the other children from the neighborhood; big girl!, big dreams! I was very excited! Over the course of eight blocks and crossing the railroad, a lot of things took place. A lot of horse play, a lot of laughing, and a lot of planning took place on the route to school. The whole world was before you, and you were on your way to conquer it. The first day of school was very chaotic. In class, we were settled into our desk in a brightly lit room that was decorated sparingly; with the alphabet and numbers being the only two exceptions to the vanilla colored walls. We were assigned to old-fashioned wooden desks where our names were already taped on the right corner. My teacher was a tall thin black woman by the name of Mrs. Marks who wore her long black hair in a tight bun and wore dark red lipstick along with sensible heels. She had a way of looking you directly in the eyes, as if she could see direct into your brain and did not really need to hear your spoken words. We went over class rules before being shuffled off to lunch. The lunch room was down the hall and on the right. I can remember trailing my hand along the concrete wall as 29 other students walked in a tight line to the cafeteria. This building was the same building that housed my mother when she went to school 25 years earlier. Except for two new wings added on in 1972, it was the same halls that she walked when she went to school. After lunch we went back to our classroom to fill out our personal information on large white note cards, then it was time for P.E. This was the time I had been waiting for! I knew exactly what to expect. It was one of the most important times in childhood development. Just like in kindergarten, girls would separate from the boys for group activities led by the older kids, and also to form groups that would stay together for the rest of the year and possibly, the rest of your life. I was hoping to be chosen by the best and coolest group. My hair was well groomed, my shoes were only a couple months old, still retaining some shine, and I was dressed in a plaid and white short dress with long bobby socks. Looking out of the corner of my eyes, I casually observed the competition. Everyone had brought their best game for their first day. As in most colored neighborhoods, there were have and have-nots. It was no sign of shame that someone had holes in his pants or old shoes that were too big, or even if you wore the same clothes several times during the week. There was a sense of pride among black mothers that their children went nowhere looking dirty, even if their clothes were hand-
me-downs. Times were always tight everywhere you looked in my neck of the town. I wasn’t ranked in the best-dressed group of those that wore everything new, still; I thought my chances were great. To my horror, I was not immediately chosen. Groups of girls shrieked and played and pointed at everyone else and sometimes at me, but no one came over to invite me into their group. I was very lonely.

When the group with the smartest clothes walked over to me, I could not help feeling a measure of triumph. They asked me who I was and where did I come from. This would be easy! I knew I was in. Even as I answered their questions, I could see that some of the group was whispering in the back, and some had little frowns on their faces, as if a bad smell were in the air. Was I saying the wrong thing? Then, the leader of the group asked me a question I could not possibly understand. They all wanted to know why I talk so proper. I could only deny that I talked anything other than English. I didn’t want them to know that I had no clue what they were talking about; that I was too ignorant to know what proper meant. They all turned up their noses at me. They were accusing me of something and I just couldn’t figure out what it was. I did not get into anyone’s group that day. None of my siblings fared well that day. We waited after school for my father to come pick us up.

The next day was even worst. At P.E. the girls were relentless. I knew I had to defend myself or be harassed for the rest of the year. When the same group approached me again, I held my breath. The leader had a smirk on her face. She called me names that I could not have deserved, so I ignored her and walked away. I felt so much relief when a little hand grasped mine. It was a girl I knew from church. Sophie told me that, ‘I had to ignore people that were mean to me.’ I told Sophie that I was not worried because I was going to beat up the group leader after school. Bullies were no mystery to me. I felt better as soon as I made the decision. Sophie seemed to be contemplating for awhile. I asked her, “Why is everyone picking on me anyway?” She took a deep breath and broke my world apart.

“Everyone saw your daddy picking you up yesterday” she finally told me, “they say he is a white man.” I was so shocked that my mouth stayed open for a full ten seconds. Of course I denied it immediately. They were lying on me for no reason. My dad was just as black as anyone. I was so shocked at such an outright lie that I was speechless. I went back to class thinking about why they would think so outrageous a thing. On the way back to class, my father rose before my eyes. I thought about what his face looked like for the first time in my life. Before, he had always been just daddy; the same face that looked back at me every day of my life. What if he was a white man? That would have been the worst thing I could think of for all time.

But, what exactly made white people so bad? I could not answer that. The librarian at our school was white, and I thought she was very nice. They only thing I could think of was the time my mother and I rode the bus downtown to the biggest store in town; Woolworth’s. Mom was distracted looking at fingernail polish while I strolled up and down the aisles. I was quite happy with my new-found freedom when I saw the ice cream counter in the right-hand corner of the store. I climbed onto one of the shiny red stools and waited for the clerk to give me something good. The clerk began to walk towards me when something awful happened to my arm. My mother pinched me and hauled me outside the store onto the sidewalk before I could breathe. She looked angry enough to kill. “We’re not allowed to sit at the bar!” she told me. "If you touch anything, then they won’t let us come back!” I didn’t know what I did wrong but my oldest sister finally explained it to me when I got home. White people did not want to put up with us, and we had to stay out of their way. I didn’t know how to stay out of their way, so I silently began to fear the day when I would do something to get us all in trouble.
The next day, I had a heavy heart as I waited for my father to pick us up from school. I snuck a look at the side of his face while he drove and my heart dropped. His face was a funny shade of pale vanilla that had turned red from sun exposure, especially around his neck. His eyes were crinkly in the corner and I could see straight through his iris into his eye. Grey was a funny shade for eyes. All of the sudden, I knew I could never go back to school again.

That evening I could not eat. How could I tell my mother that I was not going back to school? She had combed my hair exactly how I liked it. When she took me on her lap, I knew I wanted no more silence. I blurted out, “Mom, is dad a white?” before I lost my nerve. She looked at me and began to laugh. She hugged me tight as I buried my face in her ample buxom. “No hunny, your daddy is not a white man,” she said. “He is a black man; just ask him to take off his hat.” I thought about that. I never saw daddy without one. He had one on when he left for work in the mornings, and even when he carried us to bed at night. “What’s under his hat?” I asked her. “Nothing but the pride of us all” she said. I wanted to ask more questions but my father had come to carry us all off to bed. While he carried me to bed; which he did individually for us all, I made a grab for his hat. “What you doing gal?” he asked. “Mom said to look up under your hat” I sheepishly replied. I didn’t want to tell him of the heinous crime he was being accused of. He bowed his head and let me take the prize. From under his hat sprang an assortment of tight black curls that matched the head of my brothers. Mother always complained about how long it took to comb such think curls the same as all the other neighborhood mothers. They would often sit outside on one or another’s porch in the evening time to comb heads for the next day. I could not be sure, but I thought it meant that we were the same as the rest of the neighborhood kids if we shared the same hair.

Later that night, mother came to me and assured me that I was the same person that I have always been. She told me things about the family that I had not known. The most important thing she wanted me to know was that I should always be proud of being a person of color even if it did not always suit to be so.

All during the year I had to defend everything I was. I got into many skirmishes and arguments defending my rights to be treated like everyone else. I tried many things to help them see me as I was; including changing my speech to fit the strange way the others dropped verbs from sentences at will, and attempting to learn slang. None of my attempts got past the others, and my mother was always cross with us when we came home speaking badly. I had given up hope of ever having friends of my own. I was an outcast in my own neighborhood.

My siblings and I were granted a reprieve two years later when our school was finally integrated. It was one of the last schools on the Gulf Coast to do so. Finally there were faces in the crowd that were lighter than mine. I was finally included into that which had excluded me. I was a black girl.

When I think about those times I am saddened and infuriated. What were we all afraid of? Were white people as afraid of us as we were of them? How did they see us? I can’t answer those questions to this day. I am ashamed that even now, white people still seem a mystery to me and even strike a little fear in my subconscious when in close proximity. The things we are taught as children tend to stay with us. Over the years, I can’t say that my situation has improved. I am told that I speak white and do not possess the mannerisms of a sister. That may be so, but I am what ‘I am.’ I never give up the hope that there is a friend out there for me. Over the years I have been asked many times about my race. I can only look at them and smile. Don’t they see the little brown girl staring back at them?