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Corina Zappia

## Losing Whiteness When You Lose Your Father

To lose whiteness is to answer “here” when the cab driver asks where you’re from. “No, I mean, where are you *from*?” they ask again.

“My mother is from the Philippines.” You don’t tell them that your father’s side is Italian and Hungarian. You know this is not what they want to know. You’re curious where people are from, too, so you don’t always mind when they ask – but you minded that one guy in high school who said, “What the fuck are you, anyway?”

To lose whiteness is to realize how silly that sounds, as if you are missing the loss of fast food or a golden parachute. To lose whiteness is to understand that whiteness is a construct, but it sure can fill a room.

Sometimes you think you haven’t lost it and doubt that you look as Asian, as non-white, as you think. You perceive yourself as Asian because that’s how most people perceive you, but maybe you look more half-half. “Just mark the box that says ‘Other,’<sup>1</sup>” your mother used to tell you. “Keep those dummies guessing.”

Your father would always remind you of the white part. “Hey, you’re Italian too, you know.” He grew up in the kind of mid-century Italian American immigrant neighborhood that cinematographers strive to recapture: Italian ices on the corner, early-morning paper routes, big pots of marinara sauce on the stove.

Referring to yourself as Asian, just Asian, denies Christmases spent with your grandparents in Yonkers<sup>2</sup>, the city your grandfather moved to from Reggio di Calabria<sup>3</sup>. It ignores your aunt’s obsession with the perfect cannoli, the homemade ravioli your grandmother used to lay out on her bed over a big white sheet to dry. It pretends that your grandfather’s tomato garden never existed, the garden where your older sister used to frolic as a small child – just like that scene from *The Godfather*<sup>4</sup>. It renounces your grandfather’s traditional open-casket funeral, the meal after at the local Italian union, and his last name, which you and your sisters inherited and vowed never to change if you married: Zappia. It erases your father.

But whenever you lay claim to the Italian side and call marinara sauce “gravy,” you sense doubt from others. Do they nod just to placate you? Are you imagining their skepticism? And then you start to feel less Italian, which makes you feel even less Hungarian. (Speaking of which, why is the Hungarian part never discussed?)

You think of an article you once read about the black and Asian model Kimora Lee Simmons. “In negotiations for TV shows and movies,” the *New York Magazine* reporter wrote, “race remains an issue: Is Kimora Lee Simmons black enough?” In your case, you wonder: How real is real enough?

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To lose whiteness is to go out to dinner and watch your father be mistaken for a strange white man idling next to your brown, fatherless family. After an awkward pause, you and your sisters step in to reclaim him. “Oh no, he’s with us. Party of *five*. He’s our father.”

<sup>1</sup> *Just mark the box that says ‘Other’*: a reference to forms where you have to tick off your ethnicity

<sup>2</sup> a city in the state of New York

<sup>3</sup> *Reggio di Calabria*: an Italian city

<sup>4</sup> *The Godfather*: an American film from 1972 about the Italian-American mafia

Once, you made a joke about publicly disavowing him. “One of these days I’m going to do it,” you said. “Who is that creepy guy? No, I don’t know him. Please take him away, kind sir.”

“Do you want a punch in the nose?” your father asked.

35 Other times, to lose whiteness is to be mistaken for your white father’s much younger Asian girlfriend. This happened to your sisters in Boston. They were sitting at a bar with your father when a man walked by and complimented your dad on his double score: Not one, but *two* Asian girlfriends.

“Damn, dude, I gotta know... how’d you *do* it?”

40 To lose whiteness is to endure people’s guesses about how and where your father met your mother. “Did your father meet your mother in the army?” a date once asked. There it was, that *Miss Saigon*<sup>5</sup> question.

There is a name for them, the thousands of Filipinx<sup>6</sup> children fathered and abandoned by American military men: *iniwan ng barko* (“left by the ship”). You could have made up a story: Momma was a “pom pom girl,”<sup>7</sup> circling the US bases looking for young recruits. No, wait – better to make her a Filipina nurse. A Filipina nurse/prostitute/singer?

45 “Totally,” you said. “My mom was squatting next to her grass hut, picking away at that rice, when he up and rescued her.”

Your date was not amused. “It was just a guess.”

50 Your father met your mother at a party in Boston. They were medical residents, your mother from a much wealthier family than your blue-collar father, who paid his way through med school by giving accordion lessons.

You were less annoyed when a fellow biracial Asian asked if your mother was “the Asian one” in the relationship. “It’s always the mother, isn’t it?” Because he shared this experience, because his mother was Asian and his father was white, too, this seemed okay. But was it, really? Your shared dark humor, your exchange of smiles in acknowledgment of the Asian woman/white man pairing – of all Asian  
55 American/white marriages in 2010, more than 70 percent were Asian women and white men.

In dating so many white men, you know you fit the stereotype. Is it because you grew up in the South? Because your mom married a white man? Do white men think about what it means to date *you* as much as you think about what it means to date *them*? Are you even an Asian woman dating a white man, or are you a white woman dating a white man? Sometimes you check the races of your dates’ exes in old photos,  
60 thinking to yourself: *Two Asians is a coincidence; three’s a fetish.*

You wonder what it was like for your father to marry into your mother’s family, what it is like for all the white men who marry in. The white men in barongs, “Filipino tuxedos”: standing near the edge of the photos, arms draped around their brown wives, pale skin looking even fairer against those ghostly white, square-shaped button-down shirts of pineapple fibers. They’ve married in, but will they learn Tagalog<sup>8</sup>? Will  
65 their children?

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To lose whiteness is to be jealous of siblings who scored a bigger piece of the white pie. When you were younger, you envied your older sister’s Roman nose: a reliable nose, there for the long haul. Not a bridgeless nose like yours – which, you always imagined, threw in the towel halfway down your face.

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<sup>5</sup> *Miss Saigon*: a musical from 1989 about the Vietnam War in which a Vietnamese woman and an American soldier fall in love

<sup>6</sup> of Philippine origin

<sup>7</sup> *pom pom girl*: a prostitute

<sup>8</sup> a language spoken in the Philippines

70 One day you found an article on “nose contouring” in a women’s magazine, describing how to use makeup to create the illusion of a nose bridge. To create the element of shadow, you smeared both sides of your nose with a few drops of the muddiest brown foundation you could find. You didn’t have a foundation two shades lighter to highlight the bridge, so you streaked a shimmery white eyeshadow down the center of your face instead. You looked like nothing so much as a confused young girl wearing eyeshadow on her nose.

75 “What is it like to be white?” you once asked your older sister, and your older sister’s nose. You imagined she thought of herself as half-half. She looked half-half.

“I don’t know,” your sister said. “People don’t assume I’m just white.”

“You’re whiter than the rest of us,” you said. “I bet they think you’re white. So what’s it like?”

Your sister shrugged.

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80 “I’m half Filipino... and like, half Italian/Hungarian descent... like half Caucasian... I’m half white...”

To lose whiteness is to compress the white half, to describe it awkwardly, to never know how to address it as you try and then trail off.

85 The Filipino half is so easy to explain: a full 50 percent, a mother straight from the motherland, and *look at me, can’t you tell?* The white half gets muddled. Your father is not from Italy; it’s your father’s father. Your father’s mother isn’t from Italy; she’s Hungarian. But it’s her parents who are from Hungary, not her. At what point does someone stop claiming their European heritage? At what point does the flick of the hand and the trailing-off, the “I don’t know, we have some Scottish and German and French in there” happen? Is there some point when the color of one’s skin becomes a sign of identity that outranks former nationalities?

90 Compared with your father’s side, your mother’s half of the family is huge: rooms of second cousins introducing themselves for the first time, your legacy bound to theirs in blood and Microsoft Excel (“I keep a spreadsheet of all of us,” one of them says; “I’ll share it with you”). Your mother’s side is tables of older aunties and uncles who grew up together, remembering stories and talking chismis, the gossip, over dishes of adobo<sup>9</sup> – this one chased that one with a knife when they were kids, that one hung her kids up in a rice bag – until you can see the child-versions of all of them, time reversed, your mother at the kids’ table and your Aunt Jeng pinching all the others, because that was what Aunt Jeng liked to do.

100 Though you still talk to two or three cousins on your father’s side, the rest are confined to memories. They are photos in boxes your mother keeps under the coffee table; old scribbled recipes for lasagna, stained with tomato juice. They are Facebook posts you never respond to, written by relatives from a former life. Funerals and weddings are when family connects, but what happens when everyone stops attending?

105 When your father was alive and well, he kept that side together as best he could: hour-long calls to his brother and sister, checks he sent to cousins to help out. You would walk with him down Woodland Avenue, as his father had before him, to visit his father’s two sisters – who lived side by side but refused to speak to each other – eating Italian cookies with one of them, and bringing a pan of baked ziti<sup>10</sup> to another. There were summer childhood visits to your grandparents’ house in Yonkers, eating watermelon with your cousins in the garden, listening to your grandfather sing opera until the glass in the cabinets shook, and watching your cousin Charlie on TV after he landed his first Kids R Us<sup>11</sup> commercial. There were trips to San

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<sup>9</sup> a Filipino dish

<sup>10</sup> a type of pasta

<sup>11</sup> Kids R Us: American brand of children’s clothing

Francisco to see your grandfather's brother and his family, your Uncle Joe wincing as you drank orange juice with your spaghetti and meatballs (a true Italian American crime).

110 Now that your father has passed, you fear that your connection to this family and this world is gone.

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To lose whiteness is to fear not so much a dilution of identity so much as a slipping-away, because you have relied on another to give and create for you a certain truth. It is to fear that you can only be defined through the presence of that person. It is to pick up the pieces after that person is gone, and build a new person.

115 You bear your father's last name, Zappia, if not the Zappia nose. Though you are starting to look more like your mom in recent family photos, more and more like a Filipina woman, you look like your father, too. See it there, and there: The photos tell a story, but you don't need them for proof; you have his wavy hair, his down-turned eyebrows, his short legs. One day, without realizing it, one of your sisters will roll her eyes and say something to you, and you will think of your father at his most exasperated and droll – though he convinced himself otherwise, he was the funniest in those moments when he didn't try to be. This was your father, these are your sisters. And this is you.

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