

SHAME ON THE MOON

**Unleashing the Past
A Memoir**

Paul Dean Jackson

PAUL DEAN JACKSON

Shame on the Moon: Unleashing the Past, A Memoir

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Disclaimer

Although this memoir is a true story, some people's names have been changed to protect their privacy. In all other senses, this book is an honest look from my own perspective about my life.

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For my daughters, Katelyn and Kyra Skye.

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PROLOGUE

I was born at a unique intersection in history; there were those who knew and lived the life of segregation, and those who did not.

CHAPTER 1

STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON

It was a warm summer morning in Southern California. I was awakened at dawn by the familiar clatter of milk bottles outside our house. Wiping dried crust from the corners of my eyes, I jumped out of bed and raced to the window just in time to see the Carnation milkman rushing off with our empty milk bottles. Wasting no time, he trotted across the street, climbed into his shiny red and white truck, which was always left idling, and sped away. He left behind two icy-cold, half-gallon bottles of fresh whole milk, which he gently placed on our brightly painted red concrete porch.

I watched contently as he drove past the neighborhood's bungalow-style homes and conducted the early-morning ritual a few houses away. Every front lawn was lush, green, and neatly manicured. Hibiscus and bird of paradise flowers were in full bloom. As the sound of the milk truck faded, I quietly unlocked the front door, doing my best not to wake my family. I turned the squeaky doorknob slowly, trying not to make a sound, then gave the front door a gentle push. As the door cracked, the sound of songbirds flooded the room, and warm morning air pushed inside. Peering out, I reached down to pick up the milk a couple of feet from the doorway. I watched streams of water roll down the frosty sides of the bottles. I gripped them as tightly as I could with my tiny hands, carefully brought them inside, and tiptoed to the kitchen a few feet away.

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Still being as quiet as possible, I climbed onto the kitchen counter, opened the cupboard, and strained to reach a box of cereal just out of my grasp.

On this special morning, I would not have the usual lumpy oatmeal served by my mother, whose talent in the kitchen was limited to canned vegetables and liver and onions. Nor would I be enjoying the All-American family favorite, Corn Flakes, which stayed crunchy in milk for approximately fifty-nine seconds before turning to the consistency of snot.

This morning was like no other. I beckoned the cereal closer to me by stretching my index finger around the bottom edge of the box. Finally, I pulled an unopened box of Kellogg's Sugar Pops into view. The night before, while on the family's "big shopping trip," as we referred to our trip to the market, I'd coaxed my mother into buying them.

Once a month, after the bills were paid (I always begged for the privilege of licking the stamps and envelopes, which had a pleasant minty flavor), my mother went to Rosecrans Plaza, around the corner from our house, to Safeway for groceries. Since we had to make do with whatever food was in the house until she got her paycheck (my mother was a librarian), we called it the "big shopping trip" because when we got to the checkout line, our shopping basket was always full. My sisters and I loved to tag along because we could usually talk our mother into buying each of us one of our favorite food items.

I laid the groundwork weeks in advance by incessantly singing the theme to a television commercial implanted in my five-year-old brain. "Oh, the Pops are sweeter, and the taste is new. They're shot with sugar through and through. Sugar Pops are *tops!*"

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Once inside Safeway, I raised the volume as we neared the cereal aisle. Eventually, my mother got the “hint,” and to my great surprise, dropped the Pops into our shopping cart seconds before my singing turned to a full-blown convulsion of the begging and pleading song and dance performed by most five-year-olds.

Now, with my sisters still asleep, I was free to gorge myself with the wonderful morsels of toasted sugarcoated corn. This morning, I dispensed with my usual cereal bowl, and with no regard for anyone else, filled a large salad bowl to the rim. Removing the top from the freshly delivered milk proved to be more of an undertaking, but with a great deal of effort, I managed. My hands shook and my skinny arms were unsteady as I filled the bowl until the cereal floated to the top and cascaded onto the table. Scrambling for the overflowing morsels like a miner who had just discovered a gold nugget in the river, I shoved them into my mouth, savoring the sugary flavor. Uninterrupted, I devoured the entire bowl, and then slowly drank the sugar-flavored milk, savoring every drop as a connoisseur might sip a vintage wine. As the skin began to tighten around my slender tummy, I displayed a happy Buddha belly. “What a feast,” I thought. Little did I realize that it might be my last.

We lived in Compton, a small suburb roughly ten miles south of downtown Los Angeles. Compton was known as “The Hub City” because of its location between the L.A. Civic Center, the City of Long Beach, and L.A. Harbor.

In 1960, Compton was booming. Tract homes and new businesses replaced fertile farmlands as the area began to take on a new face...a black face. Whites were leaving Compton in droves, bound for points further south toward an imaginary line where minorities were not welcome—the white haven known as Orange County. Our neighbors and

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fellow church members at Saint Timothy Episcopal in Compton were creating a new phenomenon, which coincided with the arrival of the church's newest Negro congregants. It was a mass exodus, soon to be termed "white flight."

The city once known for its prize-winning produce and livestock fast became a haven for black middle-class homeowners by the 1960s. The election of the first black mayor of a major California municipality in 1969 brought Compton unwanted scrutiny from a sensation hungry media all too willing to work from stereotypes. Stigmatized as a high-crime combat zone in the 1970s and 1980s, homegrown gangster-rap artists solidified the myth of Compton as the home of the deprived and depraved.

— From *Images of America: Compton*
by Robert Lee Johnson

I am here to testify that "back in the day," Compton was a wonderful place to live. Downtown was neat, clean, and thriving. It was the dawn of the space age. We heard the startling sound of progress in the jarring double bang of a sonic boom followed by the rattle of window glass and frayed nerves. X-Planes regularly pushed the envelope of the outer limits of earth, reaching hypersonic speeds over Southern California's Mojave Desert. Cars with wings or elaborate tailfins cruised Compton Boulevard. Downtown bustled with activity as shoppers pressed shoulder to shoulder on the sidewalk with bags from J.J. Newberry, J.C. Penney, and other department stores that lined the street. Family trips to downtown Compton (the L.A. Civic Center was simply know as Downtown) usually meant a visit to Woolworth's, where we nestled up to the lunch counter and enjoyed a treat from the soda fountain. In those days, a dollar really meant something. It was ten cents for a king-size

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Coca-Cola, twenty-five cents for ice cream sundaes, and my favorite banana splits were just thirty-nine cents.

Back then, commuter rail was the preferred mode of transportation. Trains known as the Red Line connected Compton to downtown L.A. and points between.

I often rode with my dad to the train station to drop off my mother, whose library branch was in Los Angeles. I watched her board the Red Car. Pacific Electric, a privately-owned mass transit system, consisted of streetcars, light rail, and buses. My mother always took a window seat, then turned and gazed upon me with concern as the train, which was usually comprised of just two cars, slowly pulled away from the station.

When we returned home, my father would soon be off to his job. He was a physiotherapist at Las Campanas Hospital in Compton. The hospital and ancillary buildings spanned several acres. Few were aware of the secret hidden behind the huge white walls that all but enclosed the entire facility. Behind those walls, secluded from prying eyes, was a sanitarium. It was the place where some of Hollywood's greatest stars went to dry out. Screen legend Judy Garland, who was known for her recurrent mental breakdowns, was a frequent visitor.

While our parents were at work, we were left in the care of my older sister, Elizabeth. It wasn't uncommon back then for parents to leave children home alone. We were latchkey kids, meaning you had a shoestring with a house key tied around your neck, and you let yourself into the house after school. I thought it was an honor to wear the house key. I hadn't been bestowed with the privilege, so I wore a different key, a skate key.

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Looking back, it seems like virtually every kid in our neighborhood owned roller skates. Not so much because we wanted them, but because most of our parents couldn't afford to buy us bicycles.

Our skates were steel-wheeled monstrosities that were assembled with a hex key. The coarse wheels required frequent oiling to keep them spinning freely. The key was used to adjust the length and fit of the skate. You just squeezed your sneakers between what looked like two bullhorns in the front of the skate, then pushed or pulled it to fit the length of your foot. Roller skates may have coined the phrase "one size fits all," but not very well. Many a child took a tumble because your foot could easily pop out of the toe clips. With a little skill and a lot of luck, you could bunny-hop your way to a grassy landing on someone's front lawn, where you could grab your skate key, squeeze the toe clips, re-fasten them tightly, and be on your way. But mostly, the result was a Band-Aid over skinned knees.

When I wasn't on my roller skates, I was in our backyard playing on an old swing set. The swings were broken, and the chains that once held them were rusted and left to dangle. My favorite activity was to climb atop the crossbar and survey the goings on in the neighbors' backyards. Quietly perched there, I was able to look over a tall wooden fence and spy on the family next door.

Mrs. Sauers was a grumpy woman whom I always heard yelling at the top of her lungs at her children. I couldn't pronounce her name and called her Mrs. Sour. Oddly enough, no one ever corrected me. If her kids misbehaved (which was almost daily), she'd emerge from the house with a thick leather belt in one hand, and then herd them inside while whipping their butts along the way. I witnessed many a spanking from my perch.

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Our backyard was not big. Ivy covered a brick wall in the back. There was a small, detached garage on the side. Our play area was next to the garage, completely secluded behind the house on both sides by the fence.

As these were tract homes, the Sauers pretty much had the same layout in their yard, but they'd converted their garage into a family room.

On this day, the day of my Sugar Pops feast, "Mrs. Sour" happened to be in her backyard checking on a litter of newborn kittens the family cat had hidden behind their family room. I had no wish to talk to her, so before she could spot me, I grabbed the dangling chain to swing down to the ground and out of her sight. I had performed this vanishing act dozens of times before.

When I began my descent, my foot slipped off the cross bar, causing me to lose my grip on the chain, which popped high into the air, and then flipped over my head, forming a perfect noose. Suddenly, I found myself dangling precariously by my neck. My feet didn't reach the ground, and the rusty chain bit into my skin.

I clearly remember thinking, "How embarrassing. Now Mrs. Sour is gonna see me." I wiggled to regain my footing on the cross bar, which caused the chain to form a tighter noose. The bar was too high for me to gain a foothold. I tried to reach the teeter-totter on the edge of the swing set, in hopes of climbing up it to the cross bars, but it was just out of my reach.

Being only five years old, I had no idea of the dire predicament I was in. I had no thought of what appeared to be my impending death. As the chain cut into my neck, I continued calmly to look around the yard to see what other

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avenues of escape might be available to me. Dangling there, but now beginning to choke, I realized there were none.

I have no idea why Mrs. Sour decided to look over the fence into our backyard at that moment. Perhaps it was the rattle of the chain, or maybe she heard the faint sound of my quiet struggle. Perhaps it was intuition.

I remember the look of sheer panic on her face as she watched me dangling there, choking to death. Apparently, she knew there was no way in the world she could scale the fence, so she waddled out of sight. With my legs now twitching like a doomed man over the hangman's trap door, my breathing became labored. I was in peril. At that moment, the gate burst open. Mrs. Sour rounded the corner, rushed over, and gently lifted me up and out of my noose of death. My neck was scratched and bleeding from the rusty chain. Even as I was about to take what would have been my last breath...I knew I would not die.

I believe I was spared that day and put on this earth for a reason, a reason the universe would reveal to me later in life.

CHAPTER 2

FAMILY

By today's standards, I grew up in an abusive household. In the 1960s, corporal punishment was not the exception; it was the rule. "Spare the rod, spoil the child," went the saying, and so went my youth.

Television shaped my childhood. By watching TV, I learned the definition of feminine beauty, Lady Clairol; and blondes had more fun. I knew unequivocally that a man who used a little dab of Brylcreem could have any woman he desired. Television bent my view of the world, and at five years old, I soaked it all in as gospel.

Blacks were dumb; whites were smart. White was right. If you're black, get back. Indians were bloodthirsty savages. Mexicans were banditos. Asians were either "Chinamen" or "Dirty Japs."

Sitting on the living room couch in front of our black-and-white RCA Victor TV, my mind was an open book. Thankfully, my manual to American society allowed me to observe a "normal" family's life. I took solace from *Father Knows Best* and sought refuge with the Cleavers. Never once did I see Beaver get a spanking.

If I wanted to explore the wilderness, I could take an adventure with Timmy and Lassie. The pair communicated famously during their TV run, and I got it. I understood

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“Dog,” really. Long before the term “dog whisperer” existed, I was talking to dogs, cats, and, yes, even birds.

At the time, the pet of choice for boys in Compton was not dogs or cats, but pigeons. If you listened closely, you could hear the gentle cooing of the birds from backyard pigeon coops. My neighbor, Edward Hearld, owned more than a dozen, and from the moment I set my eyes on them, I wanted a bird.

As it happened, my grandmother was visiting us. My Grandma Dean was a big woman of Bahamian descent, who stood tall and straight. She was a woman of means who spoiled the child and spared the rod as only a grandmother could.

She took me to the pet store and allowed me to pick out any pigeons I wanted. It should not be at all surprising (because of my affinity to white families on TV) that I chose white birds. I chose a male, whom I named King, and his mate, Queen.

When I got them home, Edward took one look and scowled. “A couple of commies,” he said. “Commies” was the term used for domestic pigeons, with no redeeming pedigree characteristics (they were *common*).

At six years old, I knew nothing of the wide variety of breeds, from rollers to homing racers. King and Queen lived in a coop behind the house. I spent many days out there. King was the first of many animals I bonded with over the years. Any time I was outside, he flew to me and landed on my shoulder. It was fine with me, but not so much for my mother, who had to do the laundry.

We were the closest of friends. This bird actually followed me around the neighborhood. I’d spy him on a power line

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watching over me while I played with friends. “Go home, King,” I would demand. And he usually did.

It wasn't long before King and Queen had squabs. My mother joked about eating them, telling me how tasty squab was. She never got a taste, as I either traded or sold them. By the time I was nine, I owned twenty-one pigeons. Fan Tails, Muffs, homing racers, and even a coveted Birmingham roller, which wandered into the trap door of my coop when he was a squab. My collection of exotic birds was worth hundreds of dollars. But I didn't love money; I loved King, who remained my favorite. When Grandma Dean came to visit, I could tell watching King and me together brought her joy.

CHAPTER 3

FROM RAGS TO RICHES

In the '60s, conversations about race were a prerequisite within the African-American community. If it were a college course, it would have been called "Being Colored 101," with a special emphasis on the amount of Caucasian or Indian blood you carried, especially if it showed in the texture of your hair or the color of your skin.

My mother told me that in order to join a black sorority when she was in college, you had to pass the paper bag test. The test was simple; if your skin was lighter than a paper bag, you could pledge. If it was darker, you could not. I grew up in a system that taught young children that the more white blood you possessed, the more desirable you were. That was normal to us. Being black was not beautiful; it was a scourge.

Broken into a mathematical formula, my ethnicity was just acceptable to the black bourgeoisie. I am 69 percent black, 19 percent white, and 12 percent Native American. Thankfully, I have never thought of myself as anything other than black because I once believed that being multicultural in a world of black and white must have been a living hell.

When I mentioned my grandmother was a woman of means, it may have been a gross understatement. Her father pioneered a section of South Florida known as Coconut Grove. He and his wife lived the quintessential American

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success story, amassing enormous wealth through backbreaking labor. History remembers them as the most important family in the evolution of the black Bahamian Grove in South Florida, but our family version is a bit more intriguing.

Ebenezer Woodberry Franklin Stirrup was the illegitimate son of a slave. But not just any slave. His mother was a Bahamian servant, and her employer (I say “employer” because slavery ended five years before his birth) was a wealthy white landowner on Harbour Island in the Bahamas.

According to family lore, Ebenezer’s white father was proud of his son, not only accepting him as blood, but also handing over the keys to the kingdom by offering his progeny a place by his side.

“He was his own man,” recalled my grandmother. “He rejected slavery and his father,” she said, with a tone both proud and determined.

At the tender age of fifteen, Ebenezer left his island home in a tiny boat and set sail for the mainland to live with his uncle and seek his fortune in America.

“He was deeply in love and promised his childhood sweetheart he would return for her one day,” recalls my mother.

Young Stirrup’s skiff landed in the Florida Keys, where, under the tutelage of his uncle, a carpenter, he learned the skills of woodworking and construction. They were skills that would prove useful in the years to come. Driven by the power of love, he remained in Key West for nearly a decade, until he saved enough money to return to the Bahamas for his childhood sweetheart, Charlotte Sawyer, whom he married.

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With his new bride in tow, Stirrup returned to the U.S. and moved north to Perrine, a small community between Miami and Homestead. There, he found opportunity knocking. Hearty newcomers were flocking to the region located along Biscayne Bay by the lure of land and opportunity.

Now a skilled carpenter, Ebenezer went to work for William Cutler, a medical doctor from Massachusetts. Dr. Cutler first visited the area in the 1870s and fell in love with the region. He returned years later and purchased a 600-acre tract of land for \$1.25 per acre. With my great-grandfather's help, Cutler set out to establish a fruit and vegetable plantation. In lieu of cash, Cutler often paid my great-grandfather in land, the source of what would become a vast accumulation of valuable real estate.

The way my grandmother tells it, Ebenezer and "Old Man Cutler," as she called him, were fast friends. My grandmother was the first of ten children (six of whom survived into adulthood). After toiling all day on Old Man Cutler's estate, Ebenezer hiked more than four miles through the thicket and mangroves to Coconut Grove, the spot he chose to build his home. There was little time for rest as Stirrup burned the midnight oil, working through the night until he was able to complete construction on a home of his own.

My great-grandfather's good fortune continued. He befriended, and traded with, Seminole Indians. After enduring three wars with the United States, they called themselves the "Unconquered People." The man my grandfather traded with was likely one of just 200 to 300 Indians who were able to elude capture and forced relocation by the U.S. Army. My mother loved to tell the story of a Seminole who came to visit Grandpa Stirrup at his homestead in Coconut Grove.

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“Grandmother Dean was just a little girl. She took one look at the approaching brave and screamed bloody murder,” my mother said, laughing. “Well, he was just wearing a loincloth. Grandpa rushed outside and saw the man and was mad as hell,” she said, still laughing. My mother explained the Indian was one of my grandfather’s friends, and he was deeply embarrassed by his daughter’s fearful behavior. “Go inside you silly girl,” he demanded.

In my grandmother’s defense, aside from horror stories from whites about past Indian wars, little was seen of the Florida Seminole until they began to venture out and trade in the late nineteenth century.

Stirrup continued his life of labors with Charlotte Jane by his side. Together, they amassed a small empire, purchasing land and constructing more than 100 homes. Despite his lack of a formal education, Stirrup became a formidable businessman and owned a grocery store, bicycle repair shop, tailor shop, meat market, private horse and buggy transportation, two cemeteries, and a dry goods store. Through his years of hard work and business acumen, Stirrup eventually became Florida’s first black millionaire, owning a variety of properties in Coconut Grove, Cutler, and Overtown.

Since my grandmother was the oldest family member, it fell upon her to oversee the vast empire when her father died. Up until that time, she was the dean of an all-girls’ school in Miami. She took the job after the death of her husband, a Florida businessman by the name of Fredrick Dean.

“They called her Dean Dean,” my mother joyfully recalls.

In a 1976 interview, my grandmother recalled, “Father believed in every family having a house, a yard, and a garden, so you would feel like you had a home. He felt that

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people became better citizens when they owned their own homes.”

With little business experience, she was ill prepared to be the overseer of this vast estate. She sold many of her family’s properties in order to pay taxes.

The part of my family’s story that intrigues me is the fact that Old Man Cutler not only paid my great-grandfather in cash, but also in land. And though we can’t confirm it, it is believed Ebenezer Woodberry Franklin Stirrup owned upwards of 100 acres of land on Cutler’s estate.

My grandmother claims she was swindled out of that land by folks she referred to as “unscrupulous Jewish lawyers.”

Poring over historic text in an attempt to sort out the truth, I learned that Dr. Cutler tried, unsuccessfully, to convince many of his friends to settle in the area. Only one, William Fuzzard, took him up on the offer. History credits Fuzzard as being the area’s founding father. He later named the area “Cutler” to honor his friend.

Fuzzard eventually moved to North Miami, along with fifty or so other residents, when the railroad bypassed the area.

For the next fifty years, Cutler Ridge mostly belonged to deer, panthers, waterfowl, and snakes. And somewhere in the middle of those mangroves, open glades, and creeping vines...was Great-Grandpa’s land.

In the early ’50s, David Bloomberg began developing the land on Cutler Ridge. The first housing development went up in 1954; six years later, a mall opened. The timeframe seems to jibe precisely with Grandma’s story.

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Taking today's property values into account, that undocumented 100 acres of prime real estate on the Intercoastal could be valued in the billions, as it is now some of the most expensive real estate on the planet.

The Stirrup family still owns a number of properties in Coconut Grove and surrounding areas under the Stirrup Properties brand, which remains family owned and operated.

My mother's life story has never been clear, at least to me. It was as if she suffered from selective amnesia. I concluded something dark must have happened to her in Florida. She was named Charlotte, after her grandmother. She claims to have had a happy life surrounded by people who loved her. But the moment she graduated from college, she turned her back on her family's wealth and headed west, never to return.

She knows little of her father. "He was a businessman from Miami who died when I was very young." Getting information about Frederick Dean from my mother was like extracting teeth without anesthesia. I eventually learned that he was a widower who had two daughters before he married my grandmother and they became a blended family. I found it odd that she did not care to know who this man was. When I inquired, she would become troubled, saying, "I didn't know my father. He died when we were very young, but we had a happy life. We just didn't think about him."

After her husband passed, Grandma Dean moved in with Grandpa (EWF Stirrup, as our family lovingly referred to him), leaving her stepdaughters to live with her husband's relatives. The half-sisters never spoke or interacted as a family again.

"Grandpa" and his wife Charlotte helped raised my mother and her little sister Dazelle. It is strange not to know what to

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call Charlotte Jane. I've never had to articulate the word "Great-Grandmother," as both of my great-grandmothers passed away long before I could speak.

Aunt Dazelle married a New York "city slicker" named George Simpson. My great-grandfather, who did not have a high school diploma, made sure all his children received a higher education. Stirrup financed the couple's college educations, and they went on to become physicians. Aunt Dazelle became the first black pediatrician in the state. And Uncle George went on to become the first black surgeon in Florida. They eventually built and operated a hospital together to fill the gap in the underserved needs of South Florida's black residents.

My mother, meanwhile, attended Fisk University and obtained a Master's degree in library science. She says she left Florida to escape racism. But in 1940, there were few safe havens. Fresh out of college, she moved west to Los Angeles, where she married. My mother admits she knew very little about my father before they were married. They met at a sorority dance, and my mother said she really wasn't that interested in him. She had another suitor at the dance, but my father was persistent, and as for the other gent, apparently not so.

My father, Paul Moore Jackson, was a dashing young physical therapist. But, as my mother would learn, he had a hidden past. My dad hated being black, and he constantly reminded us he was part Indian. Unlike my mother, he spun amazing tales of his family. The story of his grandfather never changed and always absorbed me.

Josiah Jackson, according to my father, was an Oregon lumberjack. Not any lumberjack, but very possibly the predecessor to the great Paul Bunyan. Honestly, who's to

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say? Paul Bunyan's exploits evolved from the tall tales of North American loggers. Could it be possible that the legend of Paul Bunyan evolved from the exploits of my great-grandfather?

According to my dad, his grandfather was 6'10." He was a giant. "He could carry a barrel in one arm and a grown man in the other," explained my father.

Hmm, a giant lumberjack with superhuman strength in the woods of Oregon. Sure sounds like Paul Bunyan to me. In none of his stories, however, did my father mention a blue ox named Babe.

The story fascinated me so much that I traveled to Oregon and spent a week in the heat of summer poring over archives at the natural history museum in Portland. I combed through historical text, hoping to find a story about the giant in the woods. Unfortunately, I could not find a single word about this mysterious black giant.

I did learn that it was a crime to be black in Oregon. Blacks and mulattos were not permitted to live in the state during the time that my great-grandfather would have lived here. In fact, there were laws on the books that free black people would be subject to flogging if found in the territory.

I can only assume my great-grandfather stayed as far away from whites and civilization as possible. Exactly how a black man got to Oregon in the time of slavery was a mystery. Was he a runaway slave? Where was he from?

Then I began to have a recurring dream. Deep in REM sleep, I saw a tall, bearded black man wearing buckskin clothing running across the early-American landscape. Native Americans pursued him, but they couldn't catch him. Tribe after tribe tried, but always failed. He was simply too strong,

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too fast, and too determined in his stride as he made his way Northwest. These pursuits were agonizing. In my dreams, he ran for days on end until his pursuers, who were also on foot, finally realized he was impossible prey. My dream of his odyssey played out countless times, and always ended the same. Bewildered braves gave up the chase, then gave him their version of “the finger” before heading back to their villages.

One night, my dream changed. I’d never paid attention to the surroundings, which were always a vague, dry, western landscape, with barrel cactus amidst the rugged terrain. This night, the pursuit took place in a forest. At full gait, he bounded over downed trees and splashed through a small stream until he reached a clearing. Directly ahead were a sheer rock face and waterfall. Hearing the distant footsteps of the pursuers, he pressed on until he reached an impassable river.

An Indian woman with a papoose strapped to her back stood on the riverbank. He stopped and gazed at her. By then, braves had reached the riverbank. They approached cautiously, then froze. They seemed mesmerized by his stature, and it was clear that none had ever seen a black man.

In this dream, I realized Jackson had an axe in his hand. The war party slowly fanned out and surrounded him. Hopelessly outnumbered, he gripped his axe tightly. Suddenly, the sound of cracking twigs broke the silence. The Indian woman he had seen earlier came out of hiding from behind a fallen tree. He looked at her contently, and then walked slowly toward the war party. It was the only time he ever spoke in my dreams. It was a single word.

“No.”

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He looked at the child strapped to the woman's back, and then, ever so gently, tossed his axe aside.

The braves studied him closely; all stood in silence. I sensed they were in awe of his height, his strength, and now, his humanity. One of the braves gave him a knowing nod, and then they turned, one by one, and left him in peace.

Since I have been robbed of my history, I like to believe the story in my dream is true. Perhaps it's a "knowing," a vision of the past. Against all odds, my great-grandfather escaped slavery and made his way across the United States until he arrived at the banks of the Columbia River in Oregon and could run no further.

Though my great-grandfather was an enigma, I easily located my grandfather in the historical archives. Lewis Edward Jackson attended the Hill Military School in Portland, Oregon. He left the Pacific Northwest at some point in his young life and moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where he met his wife-to-be, a Mohawk half-breed (as society referred to biracial Native Americans at the time) named Elizabeth. Ironically, her last name was also Jackson.

"Scotch Irish. He was a Scotch Irish trader," my dad would say, referring to his white grandfather. It mattered not that he'd married outside his race. When his daughter fell in love with a black man, he became enraged. My father says that he did everything in his power to keep the young lovers apart. When that failed, he sent his daughter east to live with relatives. But their love for one another was strong, so she saved her money and returned west. The Jacksons married and began a family.

Lewis Jackson was a brilliant man. He found work as a chemist in the wine industry, a job that required constant

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travel. The Jacksons settled in Oakland, where they had three children: Eloise, her younger sister, Margaret, and my father.

Anguish filled my father's face when he spoke of Margaret. His features hardened as tears began to fill his eyes. "She was kicked in the head by a mule and died."

It was the first time I saw my father cry.

My dad was a tall, thin, athletic man who stood 6'5". His complexion was "red-boned," showing his mixed heritage. The native Californian grew up with a love of nature. He was a boxing enthusiast, tennis player, and an impressive distance runner, specializing in the 3,200-meter event in track.

But this native son had a dark side. He failed to inform my mother he had a history. My mother was his third wife. To compound matters, soon after they were married, he became abusive.

Despite his hang-ups (and he had many), my father was a proud man. He did not allow my mother to accept any money from her family. His directive fell on deaf ears when it came to her little sister Dazelle. Did I mention that Dazelle was a force?

"One day she called me," my mother recalled with delight. "She said, 'Go pick up your new car.'"

"What?" replied my mother.

Aunt Dazelle said, "Go pick up your new car at Bill Barnett Chevrolet in Compton." She had paid cash for our family's first new vehicle because she did not want her big sister to use public transportation.

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Aside from that extravagant surprise, and the story my beloved mother enjoyed telling, we lived quite a different existence from our rich relatives in Florida. My cousins had a live-in maid, who cooked, cleaned, and served as their surrogate mother. They never had to lift a finger, as far as sharing in household chores.

My family, on the other hand, lived a very different life. I had no idea my mother came from money. While our first cousins grew up with the proverbial “silver spoon,” I was happy with our “stainless-steel” lifestyle in Compton.

My parents had four children, but not by my mother’s design. Their firstborn was Elizabeth, named after my father’s mother. Soon after, Margaret arrived. Two girls were enough for my mother. She was done having babies, and went to the family doctor for an IUD. Unfortunately, the technology of the day was new, and so along came my sister Paula.

Until Paula, there’d been no indication that my parents were both part white. Paula emerged from the womb a white baby. My father was elated because she looked like his mother. And so, for a time, they were a happy family of three.

My mother had no qualms in telling me about her second IUD failure. “I was mad as hell at the doctor,” she told me later in her life. Nothing like knowing you weren’t a wanted child. Thank God I was a boy. Otherwise, I might’ve been flushed. My father, on the other hand, was pleased to have a son.

All families have problems. So I won’t trouble you with the gory specifics within mine. I will say that as the years passed, my father became physically abusive, lashing out at his oldest child, Elizabeth. I was too young to know why he beat her. Margaret always went to her rescue, only to be

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attacked herself. This pattern went on for years. Paula and I were somewhat shielded because she looked like his mother, and I learned to lie low and stay out of sight.

My mother says she stayed with my father for our sake, believing it was the right thing to do. But as time went on, Elizabeth became more defiant. She seemed to be deliberately trying to pull my father's strings, knowing the results would be more beatings. My mother looked on helplessly, never once intervening to stop him.

My parents stayed together almost seventeen years. Sadly, by the time their divorce was final, the cycle of abuse had evolved. Elizabeth became the abuser. Because of her emotional pain, she deliberately set out to destroy Paula's and my sense of self-worth through the same verbal and physical abuse she received.

Our cries for help fell on deaf ears. Now a single mother and the family's sole breadwinner, my mother immersed herself in her career. She rose to the top of her profession, ultimately turning down the number two position in the Los Angeles Public Library System. She chose instead to remain head of the southern region. I think it had something to do with her office in San Pedro. The San Pedro branch was a new facility, the crown jewel of the L.A. Library system.

Ultimately, my mother's absence from family life elevated Elizabeth to the position of primary caregiver, and her cruelty escalated. She seemed to hate Paula more with each passing day. It took years of psychological counseling before Paula and I finally realized that Elizabeth despised that my father could not hide the fact that Paula was his favorite. Very simply put, my dad loved Paula more because her skin was white.

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Paula began to have trouble on two fronts. First, there was Elizabeth's constant verbal and physical abuse. And then, there were the girls in our neighborhood who didn't like her because she was "high yellow," which was the term for light-skinned blacks.

My mother allowed Elizabeth's abusive behavior because of the immense sense of guilt she felt from never stopping my father's abuse.

The rift between my oldest sister and me grew far beyond childhood and took an unexpected twist when Elizabeth did the unfathomable. It was something so deceitful and sinister that my life changed forever. More about that later.

"To understand is to forgive, even oneself."

— Alexander Chase

Two stories about my father empowered me to forgive his past transgressions.

"We knew our grandfather," he told me. "When he saw us walking down the street with our mother, he crossed to the other side." The bitter old man never met his grandchildren, nor did he ever speak to his daughter again. It was clear to me that my father loved his mother and big sister more than anything in the world.

"Every day after school, we waited for our mother at the public bus stop," he told me. "She sat in the front of the bus (she was thought to be white). We sat in the back. We had to pretend we didn't know her. We couldn't say hello or even acknowledge her as our mother until we got off the bus, were off the main street, and around the corner in our neighborhood."

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I felt the anguish of his story deep in my soul. I tried to imagine what it was like to wait all day to see your mother, your everything, and then not be able to touch her, hug her, kiss her, or tell her you loved her.

Shame on the moon! It's enough to make anyone crazy.

That simple story of our racist society not only allowed me to forgive my father, but also gave me an insight into why he was the way he was.

I will always remember the warm summer days in Compton, standing on the corner waiting for my mother to walk home from the bus stop. "There she is! Mama," we would shout at the top of our lungs as we ran toward her as fast as our legs would carry us. Seeing her round the corner of our street is one of my happiest childhood memories. I would rush up to give her what I called a jawbreaker kiss, which was not perfect unless she said, "Ouch" ...in a good way.