

7-10 Split: My Journey As America's Whitest Black Kid

**7-10 SPLIT**

**My Journey as America's Whitest Black Kid**

**By**

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Sample Chapter

# ACT 1

## NAÏVE BEGINNINGS

### CHAPTER 1

#### LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL

##### *SUMMER 1963*

Powerful jet engines roared to life. In a sudden burst of power, we reached speeds in excess of one hundred sixty miles per hour in less than a minute. The captain pulled back on the yoke thrusting us skyward on a gradual ascent in an easterly direction. The plane teetered back and forth ever so slightly as the sound of landing gear retracting could be heard under the constant roar of the engines.

The bright lights dotting the New York and New Jersey shoreline quickly disappeared from view. Ten minutes later, it was pitch black over the Atlantic Ocean, as we continued our climb to a cruising altitude of thirty-two thousand feet.

My head was on a swivel---one moment staring at the beacon lights flashing from the plane's wing tips silhouetted against the dark sky; the next, watching flight attendants scurry about in a controlled frenzy serving our evening meal. Anyone who bothered to notice knew this was my first time on a plane.

My twenty-three-year-old mother, with a five-year-old and a three-year-old in tow, were headed for a land we knew nothing about. That realization terrified Mom. Her only comfort, the man she loved would be waiting at the other end of this journey.

Even at age five, I delighted in my ability to read Mom's facial expressions. So I did what I did best at that age---talked to damn much. The more she screamed at me to shut up, the more she relaxed.

After a few hours, a deep sleep ensued, many snoring loud enough to violate the space around them irritating other passengers. Mom and my sister Karen were fast asleep. I stayed awake for an hour after the lights were dimmed, looking out into the abyss for stars. Eventually, I too dosed off, only to be greeted by sunshine splashing through my window after a few hours. Madrid was six hours later, making it mid-morning when we arrived after a seven-hour trip.

Our Pan Am flight carried a combination of U.S. military personnel and their families, American civilians, and Spaniards. Guessing by our collective reactions, most had never been to Spain. My eyes remained fixated on the ground, as earth grew closer by the second. Passengers grew restless when the fasten seat belt sign illuminated announcing our final approach.

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My ears popped, followed by intense pressure and muffled sounds. I swallowed hard, yawned, and pretended to chew to clear the dulling sensation in my ears, nothing worked. The sensation of hearing loss persisted; it proved somewhat disorienting.

Suddenly the plane hit the ground with a thud slamming my head into the seatback. The wind fought violently with the aircraft wings before the pilot applied the breaks.

Next thing I know, we are standing in line at Spanish customs and immigration. With my ears still in recovery, I heard murmurs of a new language, one that seemed to elicit excitement and passion.

I spotted Dad standing just on the other side of a glass partition. It had been nearly a year since we last saw each other. He looked great, even out of uniform, just like I remembered in pictures.

Dad arrived in Spain a month earlier, having gone straight from Morocco, his previous duty assignment in 1962, to Torrejon Air Base, just outside Madrid.

We embraced for what seemed like an eternity among the throngs of people standing just outside baggage claim. We were exhausted, but that didn't seem to matter at the moment. Minutes later, we were whisked away on a bus headed to Torrejon, home for the next few weeks until our apartamento (Spanish for apartment) in Madrid was ready.

The breeze blowing through the bus windows provided a welcome relief from the stifling mid-August afternoon heat. Dad went into tour guide mode, providing running commentary on what appeared outside our windows. We stopped at the hospital where he worked as an administrator. I would have my tonsils removed in that very hospital the following year.

The next morning, Dad hired a driver who took us to view famous Madrid landmarks---The Alcala Gates (La Puerta Alcala), The Royal Palace (Palacio Real) and the Plaza Mayor. I was mesmerized by the architecture and beauty of the city, even though I didn't truly understand the significance of what lay before my eyes.

We made a quick stop at what would become our new home, located in a ten-story rectangular high rise across the street from a park.

We were greeted by the portero---Spanish for doorman, who doubled as the building superintendent. The portero escorted us to a spacious second-floor, two-bedroom unit with maid quarters. Expats, military families, and Madrileños all called this building home. Karen and I started running around like we owned the place. Our playfulness earned us a stern warning from Dad to behave in a voice only he could deliver.

Dad was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1939, to a fifteen-year-old mother. From the very beginning, his life took a series of twists and turns so completely unfair to any newborn; it's amazing he became such a warm and loving person. Dad's birth name was Richard Lee. On his birth certificate under "Fathers Name" it simply says "Baby Lee."

Dad's birth was an embarrassment to many in his family, and their treatment of him, except his grandfather and at times his mother, was harsh. The Lee family carried many secrets. One of those secrets would be the identity of Dad's biological father.

Dad passed away in 2012 of pancreatic cancer never knowing who fathered him. This glaring omission haunted him for life. He continually pressed his mother and other family members for the information, only to watch them stiffen in their resolve, often becoming

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downright hostile. It became even more difficult for Dad to accept the hole left in his genealogy, when his mother married, and had two more sons.

Not knowing his father was insult enough, but race reared its ugly head early, and often, in Richard Lee's young life. It wasn't because his skin color was too dark. Dad is what many in the black community call "high yellow," a pejorative meant to reflect a lack of dark pigmentation.

Dad endured years of verbal abuse, some opinions downright vicious, for having light features. Many blacks thought he was Caucasian. This ignorance transcended generations as my sisters' and me faced a series of contentious incidents from blacks and whites, all over the shade of a man's skin. Some whites couldn't understand how he married a black woman.

Dad was eventually shipped off to Philadelphia to live with Aunt Sue, who adopted him, and changed his last name to Bennett. While his life improved temporarily, Dad led somewhat of a nomadic lifestyle, going from one relative to the next, before landing back at Aunt Sue's. In addition to the mental abuse, Dad suffered beatings meant to enforce discipline with a strap used to sharpen razor blades.

Dad attended Catholic schools, where, as he put it, punishment was swift for the slightest of infractions. The beatings he described to me at the hands of the nuns would be deemed child abuse today.

Dad and Aunt Sue eventually made their way to the Atlantic City area, where he graduated from a Catholic high school in 1957, met and married into the only truly loving family he had ever known. The Hicks family loved Dad, and he loved them with every ounce of his being, even after my parents' divorced.

Dad was not one to suffer insolence or insubordination; quick to punish us kids for any acts he deemed inappropriate, which included spankings. As part of my punishment, I often went to bed without dinner, only to have Mom sneak into my room after he'd fallen asleep to feed me.

When Dad joined the Air Force, it provided the structure he so sorely lacked growing up. Dad loved the military, yet the demons of childhood persisted and manifested themselves in how he treated his family at times.

He loved us all, no doubt, and constantly tried to do the right thing. Dad just lacked a complete set of tools in his toolbox. He had no mentor or role model, forcing him to fly by the seat of his pants when it came to rearing children.

So when Dad said stop, I froze in my tracks, for justice Richard Bennett style was equally as swift and harsh as his upbringing, and in some cases came without explanation or cause.

The apartamento had an outdoor central courtyard. It was just wide enough to run clotheslines between buildings on a pulley system connected to a pole anchored in the center. I stuck my head out the window and looked up. Everyone had clothes hung out to dry, not something I'd seen in America.

Our apartamento was just off a busy thoroughfare dotted with tapas bars, mercados (markets), restaurants, and other small businesses. Street parking in our neighborhood proved especially chaotic at night when all the bars and restaurants were open.

Consuelo joined our family as a live-in maid within a week after we moved in. When we went on picnics or other family outings, she was there. On the mornings Mom couldn't walk

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me to the bus stop for school, Consuelo provided escort. If we needed things from the mercados, Consuelo usually took me along for the journey and taught me Spanish.

I'm not certain how old Consuelo was. If I had to guess, I would say her early twenties. She had a youthful look about her and very energetic. She needed all that energy to chase two toddlers around. Consuelo also provided discipline when needed, but like Mom, punishment was balanced with love and affection.

We settled quickly. I began kindergarten at Royal Oaks Elementary School two weeks after our arrival in Madrid. I don't remember much about the place, but it was the first time I'd been away from Mom for more than a few hours. The Royal Oaks area is where all the Americans attended school, K-12.

Life rolled along until November 22, 1963. That was the day the earth just stopped rotating on its axis. I'm not sure what time of day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, but Spaniards, known for late night meals and robust nightlife, were glued to small black and white television sets, and tiny radios for any news from the United States. The streets were eerily quiet that night. That quiet lasted for days.

Our portero hugged every American exiting the building, in a display of love and affection I'd never witnessed in a stranger. His swollen red eyes and moist shirt revealed the depth of pain he felt for all of us.

The typically noisy morning traffic of Madrid, even on a Saturday was replaced with stone cold silence. A cool breeze blew through the park across the street whipping up dirt and dust clouds, only to settle and start all over again. I sat, staring into the distance, unsure what the death of President Kennedy meant to me, or my family.

Consuelo and I walked to the mercados to buy food and supplies. Somber faces greeted us, followed by offers of free candy and soda from the storeowners. The merchants tried everything they could think of to cushion the devastating loss of our president, but at age five, I was simply too young to grasp the impact and importance of President Kennedy's assassination. It was a sad time in our little piece of paradise, brightened by a group of people whose compassion was truly genuine, and much appreciated by all Americans.

Dad came home from work long after I had gone to bed on the day we lost President Kennedy. I heard my bedroom door open ever so slightly. He peeked inside as I feigned sleep. Just as softly as the door opened, it closed again, submerging the room in total darkness. He and Mom chatted briefly, then as suddenly as he appeared, Dad left, not to be seen again for several days. Only later did I learn the military had been put on high alert.

Life at Royal Oaks was anything but normal for weeks. Teachers seemed nervous and scared. Even as a kindergarten student I took notice. Teachers tried their best to bring a semblance of stability to our young lives. It worked for those less observant than me. The upcoming Christmas/New Years recess couldn't come soon enough.

As spring 1964 acceded to the demands of summer, my many friends, Spanish and American, trolled the streets of our neighborhood looking for anything to keep our six-year-old minds occupied. We hit up merchants for free food and candy, or played amongst the piles of lumber from the construction site across the street when the workers left for siesta.

Siesta is a long-standing tradition in Spain. It started as a short nap of fifteen to thirty minutes, taken in early afternoon just after lunch. It's a great way to combat that post lunch

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drowsiness and hot midday sun. Through the years, siesta morphed into a three-hour sleep fest. Between the hours of 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., Spain, or at least Madrid, shut down. Shops and restaurants were closed; once bustling streets, deserted.

Bored with sitting around the apartamento, I used siesta time to explore the city, traveling as far as my feet would carry me. I wandered blocks in one direction, then another, ignoring Mom's admonition not to amble off too far. I have no doubt I was lost on occasion, but the one or two people I found on the streets, pointed me in the direction of home. I felt totally safe in Madrid.

Mom often sent Consuelo to find her wayward son, but to no avail. I mastered the fine art of getting lost. By the time I arrived home, both Mom and Consuelo took turns screaming, yelling, and administering some mild form of punishment. As long as they didn't say, "what till your father gets home," I was cool with whatever punishment they meted out.

Mom was a softy compared to Dad, yet, I feared disappointing her more than any corporal punishment Dad dispensed. Mom had a way of getting a point across, seldom raising her hand, or voice. For her to scream meant whatever transgression I committed was a serious violation. After a few weeks of trying to track and contain my movements, Mom and Consuelo gave up.

Anita Bennett – nee Hicks - was born December 1939, in Atlantic City, New Jersey. She is the second oldest of four siblings. Mom was a quiet child, a trait she still carries, now in her seventies. She could sit in a room for hours and not say five words, but when she spoke, it was usually something profound. To hear her tell it, she was just an average student with a love for reading. As an adult, I could always find Mom reading three books simultaneously, switching from one to the other, and back again, until she devoured them all. I loved our weekly trips to the bookstore.

Mom was born and raised in a predominantly African American neighborhood, in a city that still practiced segregation. Chicken Bone Beach, the euphemism for the black only beach, was located on a two-block stretch of oceanfront on Missouri Avenue at the famed Atlantic City Boardwalk, minutes by foot from her front door. It was the only beach where blacks were allowed during parts of Mom's childhood, yet, I never heard her say a word about segregation.

Ironically, prior to 1900, blacks and whites lived side-by-side. African Americans used the beaches without restriction. To appease the influx of southern tourists, hotel owners pushed local leaders to establish Chicken Bone Beach as the black only spot. The beach held its designation until the Civil Rights Act became law in 1964.

Hundreds of black leaders and celebrities hit Chicken Bone Beach to entertain, or be entertained. Sammy Davis, Jr., the Mills Brothers, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Sugar Ray Robinson, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan were among the many notables who spent time on Chicken Bone Beach.

Mom is stunning in her beauty. Had she been five feet eight inches tall or taller, instead of five feet three, she could have easily been America's first black supermodel (no disrespect to Beverly Johnson). According to my aunt, most of the high school students in AC were envious of my parents'. They were the "it" couple, with all the good looks to match. While

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Mom defined introvert, Dad was the life of any party---the ultimate alpha male extrovert. If opposites attract, their relationship was truly magnetic.

Unlike Dad, Mom was born into a great family. Hard working and determined to provide for their family, my grandparents' Harry and Helen Hicks were married for seventy-three years until they both passed away at age ninety-five, forty days apart---the love affair of all love affairs.

When Mom and Dad were "courting" as Dad liked to call it, he spent more time at Mom's home than his own. The Hicks family embraced Dad as if they had given birth to him. My aunts' and uncle adored Dad.

My parents' courtship led to my birth two weeks after Mom's eighteenth birthday. With a family to support, Dad joined the Air Force in March 1958. When he returned from basic training and technical school, Mom and Dad married. For some reason, it remained a big secret for years that I was born seven months before their marriage. I confronted Dad in my thirties about the secrecy. He asked me how long I had known, I replied, since age ten. He simply laughed and went on about his business. I guess that old habit of maximum secrecy instilled by his family proved hard to shake. Dad's family would have made great CIA operatives.

My parents' entertained a great deal in Madrid. Karen and I would awaken early the morning after one of those famous Bennett parties, and treat ourselves to leftover potato chips, peanuts, finger sandwiches, soda, and whatever non-alcoholic beverage we could find. It was the ultimate breakfast of champions. Poor Consuelo had the unenviable task of cleaning up the mess---a tough job when you have two brats running around.

Never one to shy away from a good time, Dad relished the nightlife of Madrid. During the summer between kindergarten and first grade, Dad often took me with him on one of his many early evening excursions along the cobblestone streets of Madrid's bar life.

Dad set me up at a table outside with a bowl of hot Spanish peanuts, and all the soda and candy I could consume without getting sick. It served as a distraction while he went inside to party, occasionally peeking his head outside to make sure I hadn't wandered off. That repeated itself many times during the summer of 64.

The señoritas that frequented these bars would spend hours sitting with me drinking and baiting men to sit and buy round after round. The ladies often bought my dinner, or made the men pay for it. Those ladies smelled good, were always nicely dressed, and pampered me like I was their child.

The señoritas hugged my narrow frame so tight at times I could lick the lotion off their partially exposed breasts. I looked forward to these excursions, constantly harassing Dad to take me along.

Dance and music is a way of life in Spain. Restaurants and bars often treated their guests to Flamenco dancers, and other forms of Spanish dance. Some performed on the street right in front of where I sat. The colorful dress and toe-tapping music drew huge crowds. The dancers often noticed me sitting alone, grabbing my hand to participate and teach.

Flamenco originated in the Andalusia region of southern Spain. Over time, it migrated north into Madrid, before spreading globally. Flamenco is a blend of Spanish folk music and dance, performed with amazing grace and power.

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The clacking of castanets interspersed with powerful tap dance movements against the cobblestone streets, told stories I didn't understand. The well-choreographed lively movements left open to interpretation a particular dance, and its true meaning. Those who really knew the art formed discussed it for hours afterwards.

The señoritas usually walked me home because Dad simply forgot, too caught up in his own revelry. I lied to Mom about how I got home so Dad wouldn't get into trouble.

First grade came much too quickly for me, but provided Mom a semblance of comfort, knowing I couldn't hangout with Dad any longer.

Like Mom, I read everything I could get my hands on. I had an insatiable appetite for knowledge. During my preschool years, Mom often sat me down in the kitchen while she cooked dinner, or baked a cake, teaching me the alphabet. Once I mastered letters, she put basic words together until I could read cooking instructions. The cakes were always the fun part. Mom rewarded me with batter when I met or exceeded her expectations.

When I entered Royal Oaks, I was light years ahead of most of my classmates. The last hour of each day was devoted to Spanish lessons, but because I'd been in Madrid for over a year, the lessons came easy. The combination of Mom's teaching and Spanish exposure had me so well prepared; I grew bored with the pace of instruction. Instead of seeking a more useful outlet for my energies, I became a class clown of the highest order. My shenanigans ended when my butt had an encounter with the wrong side of Dad's belt.

Earlier that year (February 1964), the British rock group sensation The Beatles made their way to America for the first time. It certainly didn't go unnoticed in Madrid. The Beatles film, *A Hard Day's Night* was released that summer. Dad treated us to the movies, the first time I'd ever been in a theater. The simplicity of a big screen showing a projected image in a darkened room captivated my imagination. The crowd became energized as Beatle mania swept the theater, many standing, clapping, or snapping their fingers to the beat.

Dad, the ultimate movie buff missed the opportunity to attend more films while we lived in Spain. He could recite word for word, lines from movies such as *Casablanca*, and the film's star, Humphrey Bogart.

"Here's looking at you, kid," and "Where were you last night?" *That's so long ago, I don't remember,*" were among Dad's favorite lines. He used the last one on Mom when he stayed out too late.

Dad captured Bogart's voice, intonation, and mannerisms in exquisite detail. He had a special affinity for that particular film since he'd been stationed in Morocco, although the movie wasn't shot there.

Dad also had an infatuation with Latin music. He loved the drama, rhythms, and style the music evoked. It would be a toss up between Latin music and R&B for Dad. He brought back music from Spain often regaling us with his excellent vocals. He could have easily been a professional singer had his life taken a different direction.

I didn't know any of the Latin artists Dad followed in Spain, but later in life he shared with me his love of José Feliciano, the early music of Carlos Santana, and the Spanish language albums of Linda Ronstadt. Some time in the 1980s, I bought Dad Ronstadt's *Canciones De Mi Padre, Mas Canciones*, and the *Frenesi* album for a Christmas present. He memorized them all in Spanish and sang loudly and proudly over the phone.

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Madrid represented everything one would want in life---freedom, love, excitement, and adventure. The food was great and the people were even better. Dad took to Spain like fire to dry brush; we all did. It fed his partying lifestyle, but just as important, it helped him relax. Spanish culture meant life was to be enjoyed and Dad submersed himself in it like no other.

One early afternoon, Dad made the trip to Pamplona to run with the bulls after having a little too much Spanish fun. For his exuberance and heightened state of inebriation, he was gored in the left leg leaving an ugly gash that took minor surgery to close. As much pain as he endured, his bruised ego suffered more. Dad was the only one in his group of drunken airmen who came away with a scratch.

With first grade now over, another summer of fun was upon us as Dad once again took his personal escort to the latest Madrid hotspots. Nightlife had returned to normal in my world, the señoritas rubbing their perfumes and sweaty bodies all over me.

Just before the start of second grade, Dad delivered disturbing news to our family. Orders had come; we were headed home. Dad's new assignment would deliver us to one of the coldest places in America; Loring Air Force Base, just minutes from the Canadian border, in Maine's northeast corner.

Dad's disappointment at our imminent departure nearly destroyed him psychologically. Our love affair with Spain had come to an unceremonious conclusion. It never occurred to me that life in Madrid could end, but end it did in November 1965, but not before the Gods of Madrid sent a few subliminal messages that suggested we should remain in Spain.

Mom was seven months pregnant with my little sister Amanda, the month we were set to travel. Against her obstetrician's rather stern advice, Mom decided she was going to travel with her family, ignoring pregnancy complications. Dad tried to convince her otherwise, looking for an excuse to either stay in Madrid, or come back. Mom wasn't swayed in the slightest.

On our last day, Dad gave Consuelo a rather substantial sum of money, which he had me deliver. At first she refused. Dad insisted, like a true salesman, that she take the money. With heavy tears flowing down her face, Consuelo accepted, hugging him for several minutes. I don't know what became of her, but she would be sorely missed.

As if we needed one more reason not to leave Madrid, our plane was at full throttle set to liftoff, when the pilot slammed on the breaks, bringing us to a screeching halt. Passengers were tossed about like rag dolls despite being strapped into our seats. Mom almost gave birth on the spot.

Armed security boarded our aircraft, grabbed a man by the collar and escorted him off the plane. His crime, he smuggled a small dog onboard.

Decades later, Mom admitted she was hesitant to come home. She knew just enough about the Civil Rights Movement to feel trouble loomed on the horizon, especially for me. At the time she couldn't predict how truly isolated living in northern Maine would become, shielding all of us from events in the South.