



# Coming to the Table

*But now, the weary wooden table was witness to something new:  
a reunion of black and white, of kin.*

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Nonfiction

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*“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood.”*

—Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

I stood on the porch facing my newly discovered cousin for the first time. Six foot four. A shorn scalp. A black man whose skin was hardly darker than my own. He was a secret released, at last.

“Walter?” I asked, swinging the door wide to let the black family into my grandparents’ Georgia home. For more than eighty years my white family had denied they were kin. It was 2010. Six months earlier I had learned that my paternal grandfather had fathered a son with a young black girl in 1928.

At long last, relatives who had been divided by the legacy of slavery stood together for the first time. Walter, his wife, Kimberly, their three daughters, my husband, and I paused in the formal living room I had not disturbed since my father’s death. The quiet and troubled whispers of past generations roiled around us. Had there been a weather vane on the roof, it would have shifted.

Painful memories had propelled my determination to contact my cousins. I had been raised white, yet many times my father’s discipline included racial epithets. The first time, I was seven years old and had inscribed *Laura + Richard* in tiny ink letters along the spine of my small desk lampshade. For some unfathomable reason, the act ignited my father’s fury, and he called me a “nigger.” Though I had often heard him spit the hateful word, he had never lobbed it at me until then. I did not understand why he said that but my face burned crimson in shame.

My father had been raised in a small town in Georgia. Because

of his Air Force career, I had lived in Hawaii, California, New Jersey, Alabama and France by the time I was seven. My father was a patriot, a man defined by duty and unquestioned loyalty to American ideals. He was a charismatic man with a welcoming handshake, mischievous blue eyes, and disarming freckles, and I was considered his “spitting image.”

Whenever Dad disciplined me, he stood ramrod straight. His presence was as unyielding as the commanding officer he was. I blinked back tears, took the stiff, gray eraser, and scrubbed until the lampshade’s material frayed, but I could not take away the stain. Throughout his life, my father’s criticism of both my mother and me was often delivered in racialized terms. With each attack I felt further banished from his inner circle. Year after year, I buried my shame and anger.

But this year, my husband and I traveled to Georgia from our home in Seattle, contacted Walter, and invited him and his family to the home I had inherited from my dad—the home my grandfather had bought with my grandmother’s inheritance. Nestled among red clay hills, the house stood at the end of a long driveway. In the moonlight its white columns, draped in vines, loomed tall, like ghostly sentries.

We led our guests into the kitchen for dinner and gathered around the massive oak table where my white relatives had celebrated marriages and births, gossiped and quarreled, and grieved as generations gave way to illness and old age. But now, the weary wooden table was witness to something new: a reunion of black and white, of kin.

Kimberly offered the blessing. I sat next to Walter. We were both near fifty and, in our jawline, eyes and mouth, our faces reflected each other. Before long, it seemed as if everyone else at the table had vanished. We were in our own world, reveling in the reunion of long-lost family.

“Tell me about my uncle,” I asked Walter about his father, Ralph Heard, as I passed him the pork roast.

“Dad died of Parkinson’s a few years ago,” Walter began. “I wish you could have met him. He was the most intelligent man I’ve ever known. He went to both Savannah and Tennessee State and majored in math but didn’t get to finish. Back then, a black man in the south had a hard time.”

As I listened, I grieved for the uncle I would never know. Ralph Heard had served in the military, returned to Georgia, and worked the midnight shift at Dixie Yarn. Then, later in life, he had become the first black deputy sheriff for Hart County.

“Dad could calm all sorts of folks down.” Walter then added, “no matter how riled they got.” He shifted in his chair and straightened one shoulder. It was a mannerism I recognized. Most of the men in Dad’s family did the same. I smiled. Our bodies carry the truth.

*What if our fathers had known each other as brothers?* I wondered as I considered my dad’s short temper.

“When Dad became deputy sheriff,” Walter continued, “he found his calling. He loved that uniform.” He touched a napkin to his mouth and I saw something familiar in his quiet, pensive smile.

I imagined these two brothers side-by-side in uniform. Had they talked, could they have found common ground? Kinship?

Dad’s family wasn’t alone in denying kin. I decided to tell Walter about another family secret. My mother’s family was part Cherokee yet hadn’t admitted it even though they looked like they were at least half. With my blue eyes and fair skin, I was an anomaly among her relatives, so much so that whenever together, people doubted we were mother and daughter.

“Her family decided they had to pass as white.” My voice dropped to a whisper out of fear I might be overstepping. Then, my words spilled out as if some internal log jam had finally broken free. “Whites went after anyone they suspected was mixed-blood,” I blurted and then glanced up shyly. “I guess you know all about that.”

Walter frowned. And then I saw this man who seemed twice my size soften. In that moment, a lifetime of barriers seemed to fall away. We may have been strangers but we shared a deep personal history and we were hungry for the truth.

In a perfect world, perhaps we could have been youngsters flying across the creek on a tire swing, yet I was thankful we had not known each other as children in the 1960s South. I knew that, all too often, kids dutifully parrot their parents’ hateful language.

I looked at Walter. “Dad never told us about his brother. Did you know about us?”

Walter took a long sip of iced tea before speaking. “Dad never sat us down and gave us ‘the talk,’ but somehow we knew.”

Later that night, Walter’s older sister, Mahalia, joined us for dessert. Unlike her towering brother, she was my height. A woman with a serious face and a sincere smile, we sat side by side on the sofa. Walter’s daughters went to play on the porch swing and the adults gathered in the living room where Dad had often boasted about his great-grandfather, a Confederate general. At long last, the real legacy

of the Confederacy was being exposed.

“Chapman Bowers was a powerful man,” Mahalia began. “White folks respected him. Black folks knew better than to cross him.” Mahalia looked at me through glasses that sat squarely on her face. She was a woman of clear vision.

“Why was he so powerful?” I asked Mahalia. I knew my grandfather had lost his job at the bank during the Depression and never had held another job. He had said he worked as a *gentleman farmer*. I glanced up at a photograph of my grandfather, dressed in a suit, silk tie and pearl tie-pin.

“Your grandmother’s money,” she answered simply.

Plantation money. All my life I had been regaled with Southern white stories of the Civil War. In one, my young heroic great-great grandmother fled fires set by Sherman as he stormed through Atlanta. “Just like that scene in *Gone with the Wind*,” Dad had always added.

Dad did not tell me the South burned because Americans, both black and white, were fighting to end three hundred years of slavery. I looked at Mahalia and thought about her family’s side of the story. “What was it like for you?” I asked.

“When we were young,” Mahalia began, “both white and black kids teased us because our skin was lighter. They said Mister Chapman was our granddaddy.”

Those youngsters had spoken the truth, albeit painfully, while the adults cowered. Walter and Mahalia’s grandmother, Rosie, was only fourteen when my grandfather got her pregnant. He was 35, a family man, and my grandmother was pregnant with their third child. When Rosie got pregnant, her only choice was to live with her mother and raise a son who was never recognized by his father.

Walter and his siblings grew up unacknowledged in their grandfather’s shadow. They were among the first black students to attend the newly desegregated Georgia schools. Ironically, my dad’s first cousin, Ernest Vandiver, had become governor of Georgia in 1961. Once desegregation became the law of the land, Ernest, though a staunch segregationist, determined the integration of Georgia schools would be peaceful. He did not want a repeat of the barbarity that had occurred in Alabama and Mississippi. Later, I learned Ernest also knew about my grandfather’s “outside” son. I can only wonder how that impacted his policy decisions.

In high school, Walter and his six-foot-seven brother, Robert, towered as they led their basketball team to multiple state

championships. I asked Walter about being one of the first black students.

“Truth is, we didn’t get to go to school much,” Walter began. “If it wasn’t raining, we were picking cotton to put food on the table. My mother out-picked any man—500 pounds a day—but, that wasn’t enough to feed four children. When I was a kid, she’d hold my hands and say, ‘Earn your money using your mind, not your hands.’”

Mahalia then explained their Aunt Lois had worked for my grandparents. She and her family lived in a little house behind my grandparents’ “big house.”

“Family always gathered at Aunt Lois’ house,” Mahalia explained. “As kids, we used to come over and play. Your grandfather would stop by and sit a spell. Sometimes, old Aunt Janie came for a visit. She was just an itty-bitty woman but the only one brave enough to take on your grandfather. She’d look at him and say, ‘Oh Mister Chapman, you know’d what you done was wrong.’”

Mahalia turned to look at me. “And your grandfather would just sit there. Rocking back and forth. He’d say to her, ‘Hush up Janie. You don’t know what you’re talking about.’”

I cringed. Too often I had heard my grandfather utter those same words to my grandmother as dementia carved away the synapses of her brain. I looked into the faces of my kinfolk: Walter and Mahalia.

The time had come for me to speak the truth. I took a deep breath. “My grandfather’s actions were wrong. He was the adult; he controlled the money and the power. Your grandmother was a young girl and what he did is called *rape*.”

The word hung in the air. For a long moment we sat in silence.

Then Mahalia nodded. “Amen,” she said quietly.

I looked at each of them. “I’m very sorry ... for everything my grandfather did to your family.”

Together, my cousins and I had dragged this terrible history out of the shadows where it had festered for years. As the truth settled, I could hear Walter’s oldest daughter playing with her sisters out on the porch. She, too, was fourteen—the same age Rosie had been when she was forced to carry the burden of my grandfather’s child.

I could not know that night that my work had only just begun. This would be the first of many gatherings around the table where I would eventually meet many members of Walter’s family. But, neither Barack Obama’s election nor meeting my black cousins could heal the demons that still lurked within. I had not yet told my white cousins about our

grandfather's black son. Until I faced them, I would be complicit in fostering the legacy of racism and would continue to carry my family's shame until I spoke the truth.

During this struggle, my long friendship with Ann Holmes Redding, a woman of African heritage, would help me navigate through these troubled waters. We were both the daughters of powerful patriarchs. Her father had been the first black attorney in Delaware and was part of the legal team that fought desegregation through *Brown v. Board of Education*. My dad, a colonel in the Air Force, had commanded squadrons of men during both the Cold War and Vietnam. They knew they must follow his every order.

Ann invited me to join *Coming to the Table*, an organization dedicated to healing the wounds from the legacy of slavery. Only through deep friendships with women of color, would I find the support and courage I needed to write to my white cousins. This would be yet another part of the healing I had sought for fifty years, but there would be more. The hateful legacy of slavery and Jim Crow had been foisted upon both Dad and me and, in our separate ways we had both boiled with anger. Ultimately, to heal fully, I would have to forgive both my father's anger—and my own.

But that night with Walter and his family, I did not know what challenges still lay ahead. The mosquitoes had chased the girls back indoors. Before they left, I had an idea.

“Will you come upstairs with me?”

The seven of us climbed up the narrow staircase that led to the third story, my favorite part of the house. The walls are covered with plain pine wainscoting and each corner is stacked with dusty relics. The attic had always been the kids' territory, a place where our imaginations could run wild. Across the walls, our names had been scrawled in chalk and punctuated with hearts, stars, and tiny airplanes. We had understood that, by signing our name on the wall, we belonged. I poked around the clutter until I found some chalk and handed out various blue and white pieces.

My cousins grinned and wandered around the large room till they each found the right spot. Then, one by one, Walter, Kimberly, Mahalia, and the girls—Amber, Danielle, and Dominique—wrote their names on the wall of our family home.