

## What Color Are My Memories?

The music was low, barely whispered by some, only hummed by others.

“Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling...”

After the shouted sermon, the words of the song seemed to embrace you in a gentle comfort.

“...calling for you and for me...”

The verses were repeated while the preacher cajoled the congregation.

Gramma squeezed my hand tight, and to me her voice rose above all the others. I managed a quick peek with one eye and saw tears streaming down her cheeks. A few people were filing slowly to the front of the church, and Brother Pat would whisper something to each one of them.

The songs and the people march through the memories of my childhood. I can still smell the flowers and remember each of the stained glass windows, the vibrant colors blending and contrasting with the contradictions of growing up in rural Texas in the 1950's.

I was too young to know that I was living in “the quiet before the storm.” It would be another year before *Brown v. The Topeka Board of Education* would silence *Plessy and Ferguson*, 20 years before Watts would burn. But even then the hypocrisy of ‘separate but equal’ would become one of the deepest parts of me and foretold later decisions that would define my life. All I knew then was that Spanish children, (“Don’t say ‘Mexican’ it isn’t nice.”) were put in Miss Luton’s class, while everyone else was in Mrs. Borcher’s. The signs above the water fountains in all the stores, “White,” “Colored,” seemed strange to me. (“We say ‘colored,’ dear, the other words

aren't nice.") The Sunday school songs rang in my ears, "Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight..."

I was 6 years old and we had a maid. Her name was Marie and she had 5 children. She worked all week at our house, even Christmas and Thanksgiving. Once I asked her who made Christmas dinner for her kids while she was making ours. My mother heard and quickly marched me to another room to admonish me saying, "Christian little girls don't ask so many questions!" She said asking questions wasn't 'nice.'

One blistering Saturday I followed Marie around the house as she worked and listened as she described the swimming pool her husband had built. She said it was right there in their own backyard, and now they could all cool off anytime they wanted, and splash and holler and drink lemonade by the side. I was completely captured by the thought of how it would be to just run out into your own backyard and jump into your very own pool. All we ever got to do was go to the park and pay 25 cents to get into the city pool. Mama would sit on the benches with the other mothers, and we'd have to wave to her every now and then so she'd know we hadn't drowned.

Marie and I talked all morning about her swimming pool and by noon I wanted so badly to go home with her to try it out that I could already taste the lemonade. Mama walked into the kitchen about that time, and I don't know if Marie was just being polite, or testing out my mother's Christian conscience, or simply inviting an excited little girl to go swimming, but she told my mother it would be fine if I went home with her that afternoon to swim with her children.

I jumped up and down and begged, "Please let me, Mama, I won't drown. I won't even go in the deep end! Can I, Mama, please?" I didn't notice the

awkward silence before Mama said, “Oh, I suppose so. I’ll pick you up in an hour.”

We did just what Marie said we would. We splashed, and hollered, and even sat on the side drinking lemonade while we dangled our legs in the water. The pool was a lot smaller than the only swimming pool I’d ever seen. And it was an odd shape, covered with a kind of greenish plaster instead of tile. But it was her own pool in her own backyard, and I had a great time swimming with her children and pretending I lived there and it was mine, too.

I can still see the way my mother looked at me as I ran dripping wet and climbed into the car. Her face was tight and she hadn’t even turned the engine off. I must have been blabbing on about what a good time I’d had, because the shock of her hand slapping across my face, compounded by her screaming, “SHUT UP!” (“Always say ‘be quiet’ dear, not ‘shut up’, it isn’t nice.”) made me stop talking in mid-sentence.

I was quiet then while she told me how humiliated she felt that I had even asked to go swimming at Marie’s house. She threatened to ‘beat my butt blue’ if I ever jumped into a swimming pool with ‘niggers’ again.

I was stunned. “Red and yellow, black and white...” The song tinkled in my head. The deep crimson hues of the stained glass windows hung in my mind’s eye, and I could hear Gramma and the others singing about how Jesus was love.

I was sad then, sadder that I knew how to explain. I felt like suddenly I wasn’t a kid anymore. And Mama wasn’t a grown up anymore. I felt like all those words that Brother Pat had said were true, and that I really was going to live in Heaven. And I felt alone, and afraid, because I knew that Mama was surely going to Hell.

