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COMING OF AGE IN THE '60s

There's a natural mystic blowing through the air....
If you listen carefully now you will hear.
-BOB MARLEY, "NATURAL MYSTIC"

Richmond, Virginia

I grew up in Richmond, Virginia, the "Gateway to the Confederacy." Virginia was a slave-breeding state not known for the brutality associated with the cotton belt in places like Mississippi and Alabama. Richmond in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a clean city with broad boulevards like Monument Avenue, noted for its many statues of Civil War heroes. It had a genteel reputation for "good race relations."

But in reality, Richmond was no different than anywhere else in the South -- it just had a slicker image. As young black boys growing up in Richmond at that time, my brother Johnny and I didn't dare cross Brooklyn Park Boulevard for fear of being beaten by white boys our age or older. For the first seventeen years of our lives in Richmond, Johnny and I had no white social contacts, and our only white friends we met during summers in the North or in the Midwest. We did have one or two conversations with some of our white assailants who lived on the other side of "The Ravine," another boundary in the back of my parents' house, who used to shoot at us with BB guns. It was almost out of a movie script: the white boys had guns, which they could use

from long distances, and we had homemade bows and arrows and spears made out of bamboo poles and slate from rooftops for tips. We couldn't get close enough to use them! Stone Age versus modern technology; cowboys versus Indians.

But we more than got by, and those confrontations were not every day. We raised pigeons in the back yard, and my father had a vegetable garden. My parents were music teachers. My father, Maurice Lanxton Williams, was the first black instrumental music teacher in Richmond, and my mother, Bernyce White Williams, the first black supervisor of music in the Norfolk, Virginia, schools, near Suffolk, where she was raised by my grandparents.

I remember being happy growing up. As one might imagine, music was a constant in my house. My mother and father liked European anthems and church music. My mother played WRNL in the morning when she got us ready for breakfast and school, listening to the Top 25 popular artists, who were mostly white, like Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee; but some of them were black, like Nat King Cole and Johnny Mathis.

Both my parents were classically trained musicians. My mother studied at Howard University and the University of Pennsylvania, my father at West Virginia State College. "Pop Williams," as the kids in the high school band called him, was my music teacher on the clarinet and alto saxophone. When I became proficient enough, he shipped me off to Dr. Nathaniel Gatlin at Virginia State College in nearby Petersburg. When I decided to play drums, he sent me to a professional drummer at Boykin's Music store in Richmond. My mother taught Johnny (and me, until I quit) to play the piano. Daddy taught Johnny the trumpet, French horn, and piccolo. There wasn't a day in our collective educations that we didn't stay after school playing in the Armstrong High School band or orchestra, or engaged in plays, school projects, or tennis. My older half brother, Maurice Cameron, a career officer in the U.S. Army, introduced us to bebop and progressive

jazz. My older half sister Constance (Connie), who was a Los Angeles teacher before she died at an early age, taught us how to do Latin dances: cha-cha, mambo, and merengue. And because we were young, black, and living in Richmond, of course we loved rhythm and blues, later rock and roll. As children we joined Ebenezer Baptist Church, where we played our instruments on occasion and learned how to speak in public. Some of our teachers attended our church and otherwise socialized with my parents. I had a great childhood, insulated from "white people and their ways" by my parents and our middle class standing.

But despite the scarcity of confrontation with whites in our neighborhood, race and racism permeated every aspect of our lives. Our parents taught us that in order to succeed, we "had to be twice as good as white folks." We were constantly being prepared to enter a world dominated by whites. On Saturdays my mother or father sometimes took my brother and I to the movies at the Booker T, the Walker, or the Hippodrome, three run-down theaters designated for Colored Only, where we saw mostly B movies that had been hits months before in the white theaters. On those outings, we couldn't eat downtown at the restaurants reserved for Whites Only. When we went on vacation to Atlantic City each summer to be with my father's family, we left real early in the morning and carried bags of cold fried chicken to eat along the way. Between Virginia and Delaware, there was nowhere for us to stop on the highway, even to relieve ourselves.

Being black in those days was the suppressed anger at a sales-woman's callous whine when she finally got around to waiting on us: "Can I help y'all?" Sometimes we would laugh at the crackers, but never to their faces, so the bitterness was kept inside, the satisfaction only partial. All of us who managed to stay out of trouble in those days had to bite our tongues at some point. For some colored people, it became a habit. Being black was growing up with the knowledge that white is power, and uppidiness had its consequences.

That's why black people loved the blues. The blues spoke of love and lost love, money and no money, travel and arrival and leaving again: sometimes we were "Going to Chicago," and we were "Sorry but we can't take you." Then again, we might be "Movin' to the outskirts of town," because we didn't want "Nobody always hangin' 'round!" We loved the blues because it helped ease the pain of being slighted, ignored or slapped down by white folks. Blues singers (the slighted, ignored, or R&B singers of my day) would remind us of the joys and heartaches white folks couldn't share through dance, singing, or playing a horn. James Brown sang, "Down on my knees," but he got up with a smile on his face, his conked hair just right, and some money in his pocket. Even in our middle-classness, we could understand the blues, for ours was a fragile respite, our parents just one or two paychecks from being wiped out like our neighbors across the street. "The blues ain't nuthin' but the truth," and that truth was available for all of us, poor or not so poor.

Long years of suffering brought other kinds of resistance. I saw my father in resistance as the music teacher at Armstrong High School, along with Joe Kennedy, the black music teacher at our rival black school, Maggie Walker High School. They both stood up to Mr. Sanderson, the music supervisor in the Richmond School District, when he wanted all the high schools to march in the Tobacco Festival Parade but with the proviso that the black schools march in the back. My father and Mr. Kennedy refused. And when we did march in my senior year, on an integrated basis, we showed up cautiously at the gathering point thinking we were going to be outclassed. Because you see, the white folks had done a job on us where it hurt the most in our belief in self.

There were four corners, with the two white bands from Thomas Jefferson High School and John Marshall High School on two corners, and Armstrong and Maggie Walker High Schools on the other two. Each band took a turn warming up, showing off their prowess on the drums. Of course, the white folks ordained themselves to go first.

We listened, and began to titter and tee-hee at the stiffness of all that John Philip Sousa, West Point, Annapolis regimental drumming. We knew what Gregory Coleman and the drummers of Armstrong were capable of, and although we were rivals through the years, Walker's drummers came from the same source. So when it came our turn, each of the "colored bands" proceeded to blow them away with all that African syncopated fatback and cornbread, polyrhythmic, pre-Funkadelic, back-beatin' New Orleans Mardi Gras soul we had been waiting to reveal at this moment in history. In short, we rocked their world, shocked their falsely held belief that they were the best because they were white. White bands have precision, but black bands can strut-which requires precision and soul. It was on that corner that a mighty myth was shattered, before young eyes of both races. That day we marched so gloriously I could see it in my father's eyes how proud he was of us. And in the applause we got from blacks and whites alike along the parade route.

Another day of resistance came when my mother told us to break the law in a 5&10 cent store in Suffolk, Virginia. On one of our visits to see our grandparents, we went into the store to buy a few things. The Colored Only water fountain was rusty, and my brother couldn't get the water to rise. Not too far from it, the Whites Only water fountain, all shiny and new, was working just fine. Seeing our dilemma, mother told brother and I, "Go on and drink the water, boys," referring to the Whites Only fountain.

Just at that moment, a white saleslady came by and proceeded to berate Johnny and me, telling us, "Y'all not allowed to do that..." She was just carrying on, and Johnny and I were stunned by her verbal whiplash. But she didn't know she had crossed the line. Our Mama Lion was on her like white on rice: "I told them to drink from the fountain because the other one is broken! If you want to talk about it, deal with *me*, and not my children." My mother won the argument, because the messenger of white superiority was no match for her rage, her

facility with language, and her protective spirit. We were impressed, as we left the store laughing and with our heads held high.

On occasion, the outside world brought news of even greater perils and pitfalls for black people. The murder of Emmett Till and the picture of his bloated corpse after it had been thrown in a river in Mississippi brought anger, bitterness, and sorrow. And it brought an awareness of a lot of black people coming together, not just for a funeral but also to prove a point. I had no idea what fifty thousand black people passing by a casket looked like, but it sounded like a lot to me. Images of death, pain, sorrow, and protest rocked our world as young teens looking through Jet magazine, usually a source of entertainment and black culture.

And let us not forget Virginia's so-called "massive resistance" to desegregation in the early '60s, which among other things shut down certain public accommodations rather than desegregate them. Faced with an order to desegregate the public pools, Richmond shut down the black pool and the white pool. The black pool at Brookfield Gar- dens never reopened, and it, along with the tennis courts that had seen a young man named Arthur Ashe learn the game of tennis, are now the site of a massive post office complex. But in the days of my youth. the closing of that pool cost me a merit badge in swimming and life saving, and therefore my chance to become the first black Eagle Scout in Richmond. Did I say Richmond wasn't evil?

But it was the picture in Ebony magazine of Mrs. Tinsley, a a senior citizen of standing in the middle-class black community of which I was a part, being dragged across Broad Street in Richmond around 1960 or 1961 by two big redneck cops that sparked the ultimate outrage in me as a teenager. She was protesting segregated restaurants along with the students at Virginia Union University and was arrested and put in jail.

"If she could do it, so could I," I told myself, on the way to channeling anger to action. But my moment had not yet come, since my parents told me the college students who organized these actions

frowned on participation by high school students. "They don't think high school students can be nonviolent," my mother and father patiently explained. Decades later, I questioned Charles Sherrod, the Virginia Union student who led the 1960-1961 demonstrations in Richmond, who later became an icon in SNCC and a pillar in the Albany, Georgia, Movement in 1963. "Did you put out the word in 1960 that high school students weren't welcome?" I asked.
He looked at me and simply said, "No."

"Wow," I said to myself. "My mother and father at work again."

Protest against Jim Crow was a call to my generation, and my parents saw I was listening. So the next best thing was to get me out of town. Fortunately for them, I was a senior, and on my way north, pursuant to Bernyce's plan.

The Bernyce Williams Liberation Plan

Every family in the South had coping mechanisms for dealing with the aspects of Jim Crow in their lives. My parents decided to send us away from the South. Well, actually, it was my mother's plan, and my father supported it.

Bernyce White Williams, my mother, grew up as the only child of a well-to-do black businessman named Junius Cicero White and his outspoken former schoolteacher wife from Richmond, Annye Johnson White. My granddaddy White didn't go any farther than high school, and was one of nine brothers. He chose to stay in Suffolk to watch out for his parents, and there he sold insurance and built himself a little real estate empire. My grandmother Annye went to normal school, which was a kind of specialized teachers academy in America around the turn of the twentieth century. It was a way of getting women into the economy and a means by which to prepare the growing immigrant population for the new industrialism. Black people like my grandmother Annye were allowed in, but only to teach black children

rudimentary skills. She grew up in Richmond, but when she met and married my granddaddy White, she moved to Suffolk with him. There are family records showing that Granddaddy White and his brothers were involved in land deals in the Tidewater, Virginia, area with whites as well as blacks. He sold insurance, and at one time had his own retail general merchandise store. When I was a boy, I could stand at one end of the block on East Washington Street in Suffolk and count proudly the houses on that block that Granddaddy White owned.

So he had the money to send my mother to Hartshorne Academy, an all-girls private black boarding school in Richmond in the 1920s, then to Howard University for two years, and finally to the University of Pennsylvania, where she graduated with a degree in music education.

My late friend and famous NAACP Attorney Oliver Hill from Richmond -- who attended Howard University at the same time as my mother -- told me how he got arrested for a traffic violation coming through Nansemond County on his way to Norfolk to try one of the school desegregation cases that led up to *Brown v. Board of Education*. It was my grandfather White who went to court to vouch for Mr. Hill so that he could get out of jail. The white judge said, "No need to put up bail if Mr. White says you're okay." Of course, I don't know what that judge would have said if he had known what Mr. Hill was on his way to do. My father, Maurice Lanxton Williams, came up on the rough side of the mountain. He was the middle son of three boys born to John Baptist Williams and Minnie Ann Cobb in Danville, Virginia. My grandmother Minnie had six sisters, and her mother was born a slave somewhere in southwestern Virginia. One of my proudest possessions in the family archives is a picture of my great-grandmother seated surrounded by her seven daughters, one of which is my grandmother Minnie. It's hard to believe that my brothers and sisters and I are on the third generation in my family born "free," compared with the generations of enslaved Africans and African Americans before us.

To get a better life, Grandmother Minnie decided one day to move north. She told Granddaddy Williams, "You can stay in Danville if you want to, but I'm gone." She left with the boys, settling in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and he followed shortly thereafter. I remember my grand- mother Minnie in a big wooden house that my father eventually bought for her on Indiana Avenue, across from the Indiana Avenue School.

Before he retired, Granddaddy Williams worked as a janitor somewhere, and at home listened to baseball games on the radio in the sun parlor at the front of the house. I can remember him now, crouched in his chair, all alone, looking out the window and listening to the Dodgers or the Giants. Sometimes I would join him, cheering for Jackie Robinson or Willie Mays. I would become a Dodger fan, because of both Granddaddy and my father. I was taught to cheer for the black athletes, no matter what. They were the first two "race men" in my life. When my own little boys were eight and ten, they didn't understand why I'd root for the team with most black players, or a black coach, or a history of better race relations. I told them about daddy and Granddaddy, but they still didn't get it.

Atlantic City was a summer resort, and as a young man my father worked as a busboy and waiter in several of the big hotels. If you listen to some of the old-timers, gambling ruined the city. These were working- class people, my pop included, who enjoyed privileges but suffered the downside when things were bad. He was the second person in the family to go to college, on a scholarship and work basis, traveling to West Virginia State College in Dunbar, West Virginia-a traditionally black college. He was a musician, and his major instruments were the violin and his bass-baritone voice. He too graduated with a degree in music education, and went south in pursuit of his profession. In Sedalia, North Carolina, he taught music at the Palmer Memorial Institute, the creation of Charlotte Hawkins Brown, a contemporary of Dorothy Height and Mary McLeod Bethune. The story goes that he was supposed to marry the niece of Mrs. Brown until the day he came

to Suffolk, Virginia, to sing at a recital. Someone recommended mother as the piano accompanist, and the rest was romance.

And so my parents came from different class perspectives. But combined they had the earning power to allow us to live comfortably, and the skills and forethought to do some planning for their children's future. My mother's plan was dominant, and executed in stages. She groomed us from our elementary school days to think about leaving Richmond and the South as soon as we graduated from high school. Segregation and Jim Crow were poisonous, and we had to get away to the North. Although she had gone to a predominantly and historically black university, as had my father, the "good" schools were white, she instilled in our minds from as far back as I can remember.

My father was silent on the subject of which college to attend, so long as we didn't become musicians or schoolteachers. There was no money and lots of heartaches in both. It troubled him that I was inclined toward music. He knew I loved it and was good at playing the clarinet, saxophone, and drums before I was seventeen. He planted the seed, then tried to dig it up when he saw where I was headed. He wouldn't let me play in any of the pickup bands formed by my friends from school for fear of the bad habits I might bring home. I'm sorry about that part, because I missed out on some valuable experiences and some pocket money as well.

He didn't share my mother's preference for things white. Even so, he didn't interfere with her plan, but did later express to her his regret that he was perhaps too discouraging about the music.

Pop was about as down-to-earth as a person could get. He spoke to everybody who passed by the house, and liked to plant and tend to his garden in our huge back yard, which descended into woods right in the middle of the city. He didn't like the fancy bourgeoisie parties my mother longed to attend, but from which she was ostracized by the high-society black women in Richmond. He was the best music teacher I ever had, and could make a band or orchestra sing like it was one

instrument. I wish I had gotten to know him better. He died of cancer at the age of sixty-seven in 1971 when I was twenty-eight years old. And I don't know why the society ladies didn't like my mom; probably because she was outspoken, and didn't mind telling them how smart and talented she thought she was. But she really was all that. Before she died in 2004 at the age of ninety, she got some of the recognition she deserved from her church, Ebenezer Baptist, where she had created and directed four choirs.

Stage two of her plan was to get us into as many summer programs with white kids as she could. This meant somewhere in the North or Midwest, because it wasn't possible at home. She wanted to reinforce the belief in our heads that there was no difference between ourselves and white kids our own age, except skin color and hair texture. One summer we went to camp in New Jersey. Another one, Johnny went to Perdue University in Indiana for a science institute, and I went to Michigan State, in Lansing, Michigan, each in our respective junior years of high school. We both worked in some summer camp later in those same summers. The experiment worked: neither one of us came back in awe of white people.

For stage three, she prepared us at home by pushing academics. Music preparation and practice were my father's department, and academics was hers, although they both agreed on the importance of both. She took us to the library in Richmond, which for some reason was not segregated. I remember when we first went to the "white" library on Franklin Street. Johnny and I had each selected books and were standing at the front desk to be checked out. We were excited and ready to use our brand-new library cards. Said the white librarian, hard eyes looking down at us over her made-to-order librarian eyeglasses, speaking in a Southern drawl: "What y'all gonna do with all those books?"

By now you know my mother was not one to back down, and so with perfect diction and without missing a beat, she replied, "Read

them. What do you think they're going to do with the books?" Her unspoken message was, "You will not burden my children with your judgment about them." Johnny and I are today both voracious readers, and in time, that librarian became one of our biggest fans. Johnny and I were the "exceptions" to her rule about colored people.

And finally, stage four of the plan was to guide and protect us in our search for college, which by then was internalized by both of us, and she wasn't going let anybody or anything deter us. My high school counselor, a black man, was on staff with my father at Armstrong High School, and a member of our church. He called me in one day, and asked me where was I was planning to apply to college. I told him I was planning to apply to UCLA and a few other white-majority schools, my top choices at the time. He told me, "You'd better apply somewhere where you can get in." This was like a kick in the groin, which momentarily rocked the confidence my parents had painstakingly built within me. That night at dinner, I casually told my mother what happened, and Bernyce went ballistic. She picked up the phone and called him that night. She told him he had no business telling "my boy that he might not get in, even suggesting it was wrong for him to try. Is that what you're doing over there at that school? Is it your job to help, or hinder these kids?" He realized he had made a mistake. He was the only teacher who ever apologized to me for his behavior, and he did it the next day.

There was a saying in the black community that went like this:

If you white, you all right
If you brown, stick around
But if you black, get back. Get back, get back.

As pernicious and invasive as racism was in all its forms and fashions, my parents were determined not to let it damage us psychologically. So we got ready to go away to college -- and that meant we had to go North.