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A few weeks ago we invited the family of our son's girlfriend to Sunday dinner. We'd resurrected this old-fashioned ritual when he moved back to town. His girlfriend had been raving about our meals to her parents, though it was pretty basic fare, usually including broccoli and cheese sauce because that's the only way I had ever gotten our son, now age twenty-three, to eat vegetables.

It was a classic setup for awkward conversation, of course, hosting total strangers who, like us, harbored the secret thought we might become family some day. But the parents and little sister were lively and fun, the lasagna was decidedly runny but tasty, and no one embarrassed the "kids." We only touched lightly on politics and religion and the interesting fact that our guests were Black, and Gerry and I were White. I went to bed that night feeling a little flushed with the social adventure but happy.

Yet at three-thirty in the morning, the usual hour when specters and bogeymen come out of hiding, as if they can read the clock, I was jolted awake. An urgent and horrifying truth pervaded my whole being. It was quite beyond embarrassment, even beyond

guilt. It wasn't emotional. It wasn't even totally mine. It was a visitation, and I found myself gazing right into its eyes, steadily, fascinated and repelled.

"White privilege," its voice whispered. I began replaying through a new lens the casual questions we had asked in the course of our conversation, the what-neighborhood-did-you-grow-up-in and the where-have-you-traveled inquiries. And gradually my vision expanded: I was seeing our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents and the immense gulf created by the troubling history of our two races. I was aghast at the false innocence permeating our interaction.

Here in my dining room had sat the Elephant that no one ever talks about, even if they get as far as our two families did, sitting down together for a meal. How often does it even happen? If it weren't for adopting a bi-racial baby boy twenty-three years ago, would Gerry and I actually go to our graves like so many White Americans barely having to confront personally this peculiar reality we live with day after day?

Even in my mixed-income, mixed-race city neighborhood, you can get by without noticing much. It's true I shuddered at our son's observation as a child, how all the professionals in our neighborhood were White, and how if you were Black you were poor. We tried eagerly to point out that in a couple of other city neighborhoods, there were plenty of Black professionals, but our cheerful reassurances never worked.

When our son was three, he met Marcus, the neighbor boy who has remained like a brother to him. And we grew close to his gutsy, devoted single mother with her infectious laugh. Our bond allowed her to confidently sign her son up for the soccer league because we had a car that worked. We learned to joke about our cultural differences: Tracy stubbornly insisted that kids should

wear jackets on brisk fall days and greet their elders respectfully. We learned where to find a good barber, and served each other turkey soup on winter evenings.

It became difficult, though, to turn a blind eye to the fact that we inhabited separate worlds. Gerry and I owned two cars, and except for a couple of trials of dented lemons, our friends took the bus. We signed our children up for chiropractic visits, while Marcus just put up with pain. When our son floundered academically, we scraped up the money and transported him into the suburbs every day to attend a special school. We asked family members to help pay for his summer camp.

Tracy was a devoted mother, adept at navigating the system, but her limited choices confounded me. She observed our privileged life without a hint of resentment. In her place I would have seethed. I had in recent years started noticing my rage whenever I was stereotyped or demeaned as a woman. Because my ancestors had come to this continent for opportunity, not in the hull of a slave ship, it was easy for my entitled soul to cry out at any sexist indignity, “How dare they?”

Indeed, how dared we?

The thing is, I have always seen the dynamic so well in other cultural contexts. Our parents’ friend from El Salvador, so many years ago, gushed about how she’d supplied a piñata for her maid’s child’s birthday party. “A child needs a piñata!” she exclaimed. And I remember wondering if she ever questioned not just the lack of a piñata, but the whole system of two sets of people living side by side, their expectations defined by the class they were born into.

But here in Cincinnati, my neighbors and I greet each other on the street, then go our separate ways. We return to homes that often starkly reflect the legacy of disparate histories we

never chose, yet these shape every aspect of our lives, and, most deplorably, those of our children.

During those early morning hours when I was visited by the truth, I calmed myself by sitting in the lamplight putting together a jigsaw puzzle. It was so lovely, the way the pieces fit together, just right, just so, and a beautiful new picture was shaping up before my eyes. It felt like a prayer.