



A Black Amongst Whites

by Soma Swarup

SOMEHOW, the sight of a white person walking with a black has never ceased to surprise me. I remain a bit cynical yet I am glad that for some people, colour has not affected their choice of friends. My cynicism could stem from my own experience as a “black” living in a “white” community.

It is difficult, even after 15 years, to obliterate the hurt and utter desolation of those days. My family stayed in Davis, California, for a year, in 1971, when I was a child of six. In the beginning, I hated the place. I didn’t like the food, I missed my friends, I missed India. For about a month, we stayed in Green Apartments, of which all I remember is that it was dismal. I would sit in the apartment all day, looking out of the window, at the cold and unfriendly surroundings, and repeating over and over again: “Let’s go back, let’s go back.” Shifting to Anderson Apartments was a change for the better, for I found a friend there who has remained with me, even though now only in memory.

The second day after we moved, my mother took me to play in the park in the middle of the apartment complex. I sat on the swing there but didn’t know how to swing it. I was just asking my mother to

help me, when suddenly a girl came and stood behind me and asked: “Shall I push?” Although I understood a bit of English I didn’t know how to speak it well and, in any case, I was often tongue-tied in the presence of strangers. My mother kept prodding me to say “Yes” but I was too shy. Anyway, she, on her own, began pushing. From that day on, she never left my side.

Her name was Redercie. She was a year older than I, and lived with her mother and younger brother, Tom. Her father had left them when the children were small. Her mother was partially deaf and dumb. I used to be fascinated by the way Redercie communicated with her mother, using her hands and mouth so effectively.

Redercie and I somehow managed to communicate the way only children can, despite the language barrier. I picked up the language fast and within a short time, we were inseparable.

It was there that I first realised that I was “black” as if it was a crime. In India, I had never realised that I was at all different from other children.

But what American parents teach their children about people with a dark skin is both frightening and sad. With the

exception of Redercie, there was not a single boy or girl who did not look on me with distaste. I was forever wondering “Why? Why me?” As soon as Redercie became my friend, all her friends threatened her. I remember the incident so clearly that when I think of it, I can still feel the tension and hatred, and my thumping heart. They stood there, in front of Redercie and me, in a very aggressive formation. One of them, a Mexican girl called Martha, pointed at me as if I was something distasteful and contemptible, and said: “She’s not going to play with us. She’s black. If you want to play with us, you leave her.” I was bewildered. The issue of being black or white was one I had not confronted before, hence I did not comprehend it. Redercie immediately answered that if she was to play with them, I was to play too. She said to the Mexican girl: “You are black too.” The girl retorted: “I am brown, and besides I’m an American. She’s foreign.”

Despite their rejection of me, Redercie stayed glued to me. She’d say: “So what if the others don’t play with us. We two will play together.” I agreed with her heartily. We would often go walking and playing together. We would also go to a nice old lady who always had either cakes or

cookies to give us. Eventually, the others allowed us to join their group. But their learned distrust and contempt for me never went. They never let me forget I was a black.

The Mexican girl, Martha, was particularly nasty. Once, her mother bought her and her brother a Tinker Bell and Peter Pan costume. These two characters were favourites amongst us, and everyone was excited and eager to have a chance to wear Tinker Bell's dress. I was equally excited and, seeing that she was letting the others wear the dress, I too asked to wear it. Immediately, she turned on me and said: "No, you won't." I felt the tears prick my eyes and asked: "Why not?" She spat out: "You're black and you'll spoil my dress by wearing it." So I didn't get to wear it, although she very condescendingly let me hold Tinker Bell's wand and wave it around — that too, only because Redercie insisted. I was hurt, cried a lot, and pestered my mother with questions as to why I wasn't allowed to wear the costume and why I couldn't have one like it.

I often wonder what I would have done if Redercie hadn't been there like a mother hen, protecting her chicks from peril. She and I went to different schools. My experiences at school were much worse than in my neighbourhood. Not one of my classmates wanted to mix with me. I was like an unwanted thing thrust on them which they had to tolerate against their will.

However hard I try, I cannot remember my classroom as anything but dark. This may be because my class evokes in me only feelings of desolation and distress. I don't remember the face or name of any of my classmates, except for one girl, Trixie, who made it a point to push, pinch or hit me every day. She got some sort of sadistic pleasure from this, and her day was never complete unless she had hurt me at least once.

In the dance class, I remember how all the boys would rush around, pairing up with girls so as not to be forced to pair with me. But one of them had finally to be the "unlucky" one. Once, when one boy

found himself paired with me, he wrinkled his nose in disgust and went to the teacher to get himself excused from dancing, saying he was not well. When that didn't work, he said outright that he would dance with anyone but me. But the teacher would not give in. I stood there, fidgeting nervously, not really comprehending anything but the humiliation. The boy came back to me, closed his nose with his fingers and looked me up and down as if I was repulsive. While learning the basic

an aggressive child and an unwelcoming country was bound to have a further subduing effect. I kept quiet, holding back my tears. I hated dancing.

Valentine's day was another day I cannot forget. Small cloth bags were hung on the wall, with each child's name on a bag. The child who got the most beautiful and the largest number of cards was supposed to be the best liked child. I too waited for my cards. Valentine's Day came, and I took out my poor four or five cards.



Soma with her mother at Disneyland

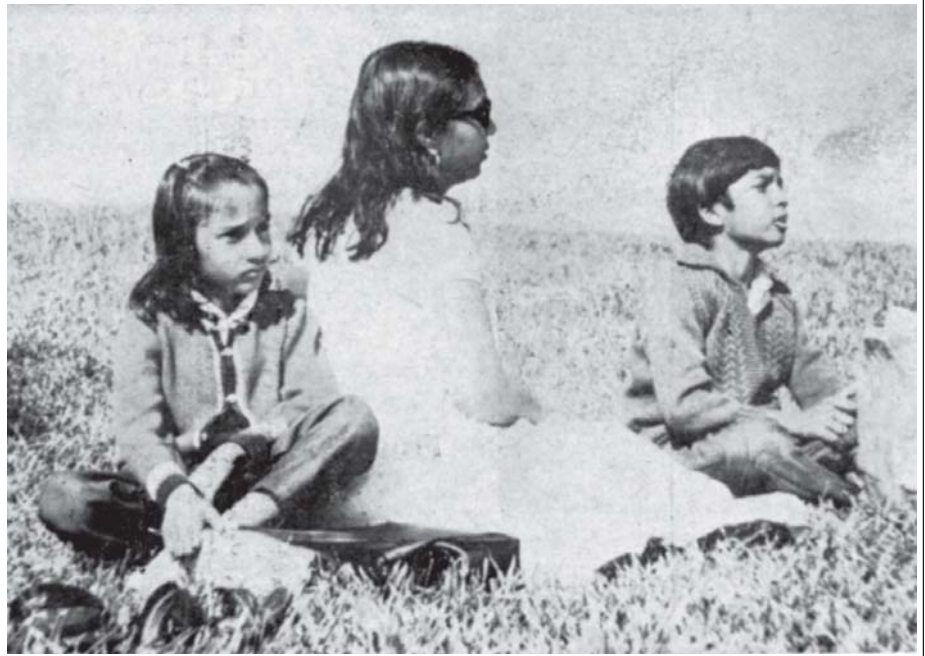
steps of ball dancing, he held me as far away from himself as possible, occasionally deliberately stepping on my toes. All the other children sniggered at him, saying he was now dirty and had begun to stink. He retorted: "I'll have a bath as soon as I get home." I was never

The others laughed and said: "Nobody likes you." How could I argue when they were waving their numerous beautiful cards under my nose? Still, I said that at least a few did like me since they had sent me cards. I was not allowed even that consolation for they said that those few

had sent me cards only out of pity because they didn't want my bag to be empty on Valentine's Day. So they had bought me plain cards which were the cheapest. I was hurt and bitter and asked myself again and again why nobody liked me.

In school, hardly anybody would play with me. On one occasion, I was standing in the corridor, watching two boys from my class play catch with a basketball. I watched longingly, wanting to be included, but not daring to ask. One of them saw me, and asked if I wanted the ball. Diffidently, I said: "Yes." He winked at the other boy, aimed the ball right at my stomach, and threw it with all his strength. It hit me hard and I doubled up with pain, clutching my stomach, with tears streaming down my face. I stood there, crying, and they stood there, laughing. My teacher saw me and hurried over. I told her what the boys had done, but if I was hoping they would be punished, I was wrong, for they were let off after a mild scolding.

Once, I was invited to a pool party by a girl in my class. This was the first party I was invited to by a classmate, and the last I attended. I don't remember it very well. It's very dark with no colours in it, maybe because I have tried to repress it, but have been unable to do so completely. All I remember clearly are the moments of complete fear. When I reached there, the girl took me and two or three others to the backyard to show us her dogs which were big and ferocious. I don't remember how—but suddenly I found myself locked out with those barking dogs. I screamed for somebody to open the door and let me in. My screaming got the dogs more excited. I trembled with fear, screaming still. The girl came back and with an innocent smile said: "Oh, I didn't know I had locked you out." I went in, trembling like a leaf, and was taken to the pool where everybody seemed to be enjoying themselves. I hung around, wondering what to do. Somebody came up and said: "Why don't you swim?" I said timidly: "I don't know how to swim." That didn't seem to matter to the person for suddenly I was pushed into the pool and came up, gasping for breath and



With her mother and brother

flailing my arms. I don't remember whether it was a girl or a boy who pushed me in. All I remember is the laughter of many children. One boy who was in the pool was not very pleased for he said: "You shouldn't have done that. She doesn't know how to swim." So someone helped me out. Soon, every one of them went back to enjoying themselves. I couldn't stop crying. I stood in a corner, in my wet dress, crying and wanting to go home, but, unfortunately, I had to wait for my parents who were to come and pick me up. I don't recall how I managed to stay through the party.

How can I forgive these kids? Harder still to forgive those who raise their children to perpetuate prejudice and hatred. I have often wondered what kind of adults those small children have become. Are they the ones instigating and condoning racist attacks on Africans and Asians? Or are they the ones now mouthing slogans in support of human rights?

When I got upset about the way I was shunned in school, Redercie, who was one year ahead of me, would say that she would join my school, and if she didn't study hard, she could fail and be in my class.

Then, she would make sure nobody bothered me. She would often say how much more fun it would be if we were together in the same class. We would go to school together and be together all day. How I wished it would come true!

My greatest regret is that I lost contact with her right after I left the US, and, worst of all, I don't even have a photograph of her. She has become a faceless person yet no girl has till date touched me as she did. I have not found such a friendship again. In that friendless country, she was the only one who reached out to me across the barriers of race and colour. I wish that some day, somewhere, I could come across her, just to know that she is well, happy and unchanged. I hope my faceless friend is as fine a person now as she was as a child of seven. □

