

Lucinda Harrison Coffman / PERSPECTIVE

For miles the road runs parallel to the Ohio so that I catch up to and pass coal barges going downriver that seem not to be moving at all. The river here is wide, a commercial conduit, a lock, a bridge, concrete and barges. Further on, by Missy and the Captain's, there is no evidence of the Corps of Engineers at work, the river bends in a natural arc and the banks rise in ancient stands of sycamore and cottonwood. As Missy likes to say, it couldn't have looked much different two hundred years ago. It's the first thing my mother-in-law tells visitors. "From this perspective, you just squint your eyes and look across to the far bank and if you're real still you'll see" — she pops open falsely innocent cornflower blue eyes — "Indians."

Missy, like the Corps of Engineers she hates so much, lives in a world where there are answers to problems. This morning on the phone she said, "LaBrae would never have become impudent if you hadn't torn up your bedroom to paint it. Men are creatures of habit, and that includes you know what." Her telephone voice is clotted with charm.

"What are you saying, Missy, that LaBrae's problem is promiscuity or impotency?" Missy's quaint circumlocutions can be irritating. "In either case I don't think sexual preference has been linked to paint. Colors and fabrics might be considered symptomatic, but not causal."

"That isn't amusing, dear. My son has always been perfectly normal. At least until he met you." Normality is. The world can be set straight. Rivers can be dammed and bridged, and sexual currents changed.

From bank to bank the sun marks a wide gold track across the pale blue; there is a light breeze and the water is choppy with pink-crested waves. A speedboat towing water skiers roars close to the bank, cutting a white furrow. The boys in the boat wave. I wave back; when you're as rich as I am it's easy to get lost in other people's illusions.

If Missy were with me, she would make one of her coyly derogatory remarks, "It's the Porsche they're flirting with. And of course they think you've just got a good tan." Wrong, Missy; times have changed, no matter how hard you squint.

I couldn't have been more than five when I discovered that race is not always the genteel equation Missy would like to think it is. My mother and I were driving through a little town in the Bluegrass on the way to a horse show. I say a horse show because I don't remember my mother ever driving us anywhere else. It was one of those towns built around a court house square so that I saw the fight from three sides. A black man with a knife was astride a white man, and as I watched he carved out the white man's eye. There must have been horrible screams, of course, but I don't remember them, just the ragged, red hole staring out where the eye had been. "My god, would you look at that," Mother said. She rolled down her window. What had been the white man's eye lay on the hot concrete and the black man's knife was drawing a line beginning at the white man's left ear. "They're good with knives," she said; she spoke with the same dead level admiration she might have used to describe a gaited horse executing a rack. I had never seen a real fight, only television fake ones; but I knew this wasn't the way fights were supposed to happen. Fighting was like kissing, too intimate a thing for white and black people to be doing together. I tried to tell Mother, but she only laughed. "If you only knew, babydoll. Someday I am going to remind you of what you just said."

But of course my poor mother didn't live long enough for that conversation. It wasn't that she avoided discussing my paternity; it just wasn't the sort of thing that would interest her. In fact, she wasn't really interested in anything that didn't relate to horses. Mother had simplified her life in an enviable, if not always admirable, manner. She was *that* heiress of *that* automotive fortune, a name synonymous with the common man, granddaughter of an almost illiterate, but in the true sense of the word, *inventive* immigrant who made billions, whose only child, my mother's mother, in elevating herself, slid back into a pissmire of snobbery and exclusion more soul-stifling than the hole of ignorance and poverty from which my great-grandfather had clawed his way out fifty years previously. Insulated by money, my mother was raised in a society for which the breeding of horses was the paramount, no, the only consideration in life.

Ambitious mothers of gifted young horsewomen invariably fail to take into their social calculations that their daughters will marry horse trainers, or worse, have affairs with the swipes. It was the fifties, that soon to disintegrate fortress of conservatism and segregation, and my

mother was gifted. There was not a breed of horse that she did not own, race, or show. Then one summer abruptly during the show season she left for an extended European vacation, returning at eighteen with a baby girl, the richness of my café au lait skin and the ebony of my eyes already rampant, rearing against Bluegrass society, which could not quite bring itself to repudiate *his* great-granddaughter; with a frail, pale middle-aged husband called “the Count,” a title that was always spoken with a small hesitation by the servants, who were, as servants always are, the ultimate snobs. I have a memory so dim that I may have only imagined it: as a child I hold his bony hand and walk down to the lake on Grandmother’s estate. He hands me bread crumbs. “Trow dese to de ducks,” he says in an accent that I now associate with New Jersey. I am still unfathered, undefined.

Missy is waiting for me on the lawn. The afternoon wanes, the sun in the river dies from yellow gold to orange and the water greys in the failing light; the putrescent mudsmell of evening has set in. The old house, an austere and simple brick, built by the Captain’s progenitors when the Indians of Missy’s imagination were real and still asserting their rights to this land and river, reflects the orange sun opaquely in its mean twin window eyes.

Missy, with her appropriately quaint collies at her heels, walks over to my car. “You’re late, you know, and I hadn’t really counted on you for dinner,” she says, then covers her rudeness with a sigh of long suffering. “I haven’t defrosted anything. The Captain, poor dear, hasn’t felt up to coming down for a regular meal in days.” She gives me a cool peck on the cheek. The dogs, associating my presence with LaBrae, cower, not knowing whether they will be kicked or patted.

“But I must see the Captain,” I insist. “It would be just too disappointing to come to the River and not see the Captain.” From the first meeting I was intrigued by LaBrae’s parents. My previous marriage had been to a boy whose family was so average, so middle-class American that they might have been cast for a TV sitcom. They never mentioned my skin color, and only shyly, blushing, talked about cars. When I sat at their table and ate their roast beef and mashed potatoes I felt myself as blonde and freckled and average as they. They could not define me, make me into *me*. But with the Captain, Missy, LaBrae, and Sam, the black man who works for them, I sensed a relationship of such perversity and delicacy that the discovery of the

very essence of family life lay at my fingertips. In this miasma of despair and ambition I felt that I might discover what I had missed in my well-padded childhood.

"The Captain has been very bad lately. So many barges on the river." Missy looks at me, twitches her nose like a large white rabbit. "We musn't let on to him about LaBrae's" — she hangs on the word — "condition. I haven't told him about your separation yet." The rabbit look is pure appearance, not personality; since Missy has gone grey she has become colorless, as if her upper layer has been flayed, uncovering a sort of albino blankness beneath. Once a month she goes to a beauty shop in Lexington and has her eyelashes and brows dyed; it is time for a touch-up.

To be fair to LaBrae, all the signs were there when I married him. He looks like a Marine Corps poster, but his interest in the different, the eccentric, is boundless. LaBrae has, in our brief life together, never adhered to any occupation, belief, or sport for longer than three or four months. Before homosexuality he was a hot air balloonist, before that a disciple of a charismatic faith healer, bird watcher, horse trainer, publisher of a magazine for wine and cheese connoisseurs, stock car driver — so many personae has he lived that open his closet door and you will think you are backstage at a bizarre comedy.

As we walk across the lawn I catch a glimpse of an elongated shadow in an upstairs window, the Captain's room, from which, even when things are "going well," he rarely emerges. The Captain is "in drydock," an expression that allows the family to give full play to their sense of their own quaintness. The family had operated a ferry across the Ohio from 1809 until ten years ago when the new bridge was built five miles upriver. He was the last official Captain, but he had retired *de facto* several years before the new bridge, turning over the hourly voyage back and forth, back and forth, to his second-in-command, Sam.

Sam did not leave when the ferry closed. He lives in the farm's old tenant house, a shack on the edge of the deep ravine behind the big house. He gets government checks and does occasional odd jobs around the place, but since the ferry stopped there really isn't much for him to do. When there isn't any mowing or when he decides the job Missy has assigned him is not essential, he escapes to the shed on the dock that once served as the ferry office. He builds a fire on the bank,

his private ritual held over from the days when the ferry still ran, signaling the opposite bank that evening was fast approaching and the ferry was closed for the night, and ring as they might he wouldn't risk the snags and dangers of the darkened river.

Sam drinks and the court has taken away his driver's license. Missy has to buy Sam's booze from the liquor store in town. She says the man at the drive-in window gives her strange looks, but she has decided it's the lesser of two evils to be thought a lush than to be known as a rum runner for a "darkie." When she says this she gives me a sly, evil look, waiting for me to flinch, to acknowledge insult. I don't.

Sam does his drinking by the fire on the river bank. He curses the Corps of Engineers, the federal government, the civil rights movement, and when he gets drunk enough he forgets that the ferry is no longer in operation and curses the Captain for leaving him alone and for giving him the job and not the title. Then he curses the authorities for not demanding that he be licensed, for preferring to ignore the fact that he was running the ferry so that they would not be forced to issue a license to a black man.

Sam makes no secret that he thinks I have "passed" and that LaBrae has married beneath himself. Sam is a bitter man: in the old days he saw himself as exemplary among his race; now he has no job, not even an unofficial status, and he is not prepared for the new order and the possibility of equality. He has built a fire and his hunched figure is silhouetted against the smoke and the greying river.

"Soused again," Missy snorts in the direction of the river as we enter the house. "But you know how *they* are." Is this another dig at my uncertain paternity or a nudge to my white heiress half? It isn't always easy to know if Missy is being indirectly nasty or naturally a little addled. To make ends meet she runs, in the old summer kitchen behind the house, a primary school for retarded children, although some of her pupils are larger than herself. She calls her school a Christian Academy for the Learning Disabled. God, or perhaps modern medicine, has worked to Missy's benefit; her school overflows with children whose kumquat shaped heads and slanting eyes make them both appealing and pathetic. The bricks of the summer kitchen are crumbling and in the winter the windows rattle in their sills, but it is, in a way, reassuring to hear a babbled version of "Jesus Loves Me"

coming from that disintegrating kitchen where once slaves cooked over open fires, where now eighteen blighted souls are being toilet trained, led to Jesus, and given a niche of sorts in an alien normal world.

The school has taken its toll on Missy's logical processes. She rambles on in the sing-song baby talk voice she uses with her idiots, leading me through the dusky dog-trot hall, pronouncing in what may not be a non-sequitur, "It has never been a suitable marriage. Because of your background, who you are."

"Everyone adjusts to money sooner or later." I bring her up short, intentionally ignoring a possible slur, reminding her that in any bargain, because of wealth I automatically have the upper hand.

"What my son needs is a new start. As if none of this had ever happened. He needs to find himself." Overhead we can hear the Captain pacing back and forth on the wide old ash boards, fretting as he does when the barge traffic has been heavy.

Missy has recently redecorated the parlor, throwing out the ugly horsehair settee and the threadbare velvet drapes, replacing them with calicoes and the primitive rat-holed cupboards that for generations had been banished to the tobacco barn and meathouse. The room is as artfully cozy as a woman's magazine layout, but I prefer the parlor the way it was before, with its palpable gloom, as I am sure the Captain does.

She serves me tea from the silver service and offers me a cookie. "Fresh out of the oven. I baked them especially for you, dear." I recognize them from her last idiot school commencement, which I graced as a favor to impress the parents. They are hard and tasteless except for a bitter sprinkle of the Captain's bourbon, a failed attempt at revival. In spite of the stale cookies the point of all this formality has been made: my visit is to be a summit conference; we will decide the conditions of my divorce from LaBrae.

It hasn't dawned on Missy yet that I hold the trump card for she says, "Our name is one of the oldest in the state. It automatically bestows respectability on the bearer. You'll want to keep it, of course."

I weigh my response carefully, seeking the appearance of candor, "Frankly, Missy, LaBrae's name is of no value to me. I will take back my maiden name, or maybe my great-grandfather's, the inventor, you know, the white one. In the world at large, I believe, automobiles have more cachet than a defunct ferry."

It is a blow to her pride that Missy hadn't expected; she sits up so straight in her plain little Shaker rocker that its slatted back is perpendicular to the floor. "Then why in God's name did you marry my son? None of you even pretend love anymore, much less honor." Her voice rises in an anger which she cannot afford to show. "Why, when LaBrae first brought you home like a stray mongrel puppy, the Captain said it just proved —" But she stops herself.

Should I explain to her the true nature of my love, my pursuit of that most abnormal state of normality, the family? I think not; the subject of any study will behave truer if observed from a blind. And anyway, how can I explain what I myself do not clearly understand. I say comfortingly, "LaBrae and I have both benefited from our marriage. We have grown, all-be-it in our separate ways, but we have grown. We have discovered ourselves by reaching a kind of death."

"This is a temporary thing. LaBrae has always been imaginative. He just needs to find something to believe in."

"He may have found himself this time."

"Then LaBrae will have to have therapy," she says hotly. "People can be rehabilitated from that. But it's going to be expensive." Missy is under the very wrong impression that to get money from the very rich you have to prove injury. She doesn't realize that we are like the government or God in that respect: we expect to pay for life for services we require only temporarily.

"But that would suggest to LaBrae that there is something wrong with his newfound sexuality. I was thinking more in terms of a new start. In a place where his new lifestyle will be, well, more acceptable." Missy is, if nothing else, one who adjusts to the curve balls, the slings and arrows, the frequent and execrable exigencies. She rocks in her antique chair, her rabbit face deep in thought: she will trade her son's geographic proximity to her and her hope that he can regain heterosexuality for his living a lifetime of luxury and ease. But what choice does she have; what mother wouldn't? I love it. Missy doesn't realize that the bargaining is not yet over. I go on, "I've been thinking, with all my money I should do something for the less fortunate. Some eleemosynary act. Have you any need for, say, computers for the learning disabled? Or some improvement to the facilities?"

Missy brightens: the cornucopia holds far more than she has expected. I rise, glance at the ceiling. "I'll just pop up and have a word

with the Captain."

Panic flashes in Missy's white-rimmed eyes. "You won't let on to the Captain about LaBrae?"

Here, I am fair, resolute, as certain as any TV pedant of popular psychology. "Acceptance will be the key for both of them. Adjustment is essential. We musn't treat LaBrae's homosexuality as shameful. Besides, it will give the Captain something more concrete than barges and the Russians to worry about." She follows me to the stairs, cowering like one of her collies. I stop her with a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I know you hadn't planned, but I am simply famished. Why don't you rustle us up something to eat while I visit with the Captain."

Upstairs, the hall is cramped and musty with the smell of old wallpaper and disintegrating plaster. The door to the Captain's room is closed. I knock and enter. The Captain is sitting by his window of little wavy panes. The river beyond is dark except for Sam's fire on the bank and the running lights of a tow going upriver. Behind him, over the mantel, is the portrait of an ancestor, the original LaBrae, supposedly painted by Jouett and worth thousands, a stern big-jawed face emerging from a gloomy nebula, a hideous and valuable painting that the Captain, even at his lowest financial ebb, would never bring himself to sell.

The Captain is in his nightshirt (he believes pajamas to be decadent and once threw LaBrae out of the house for wearing shorts). He hasn't turned on a lamp, probably so that he can better watch the river from the dark. When I enter the room he orders, "Smile, so I can see where you are."

"Ha, ha," I say, "Very funny. Have you seen the newspapers today?"

"Missy canceled our subscription," he says gruffly. "She thinks the news won't reach me. But I've got Sam and you. A good darkie will always tell you the truth."

I love it. I wonder if my own father, wherever, whoever he may be, would denigrate my white blood. Would he abuse me as cruelly: I am defined by cruelty. "You know, Captain, the Russians have announced the development of a new ICBM."

There is a look of instant justification on his face. "I knew it. I knew something was going on. More coal barges on the river today than

ever.”

The Captain believes that the military-industrial complex and the Russians are in collusion, upping the ante to keep employment and production high, hardly as original an idea as he believes it to be, and considering our nuclear brinkmanship world, a rather comforting one; at least we’re all pulling together for the economy. The family is embarrassed by his counting the barges and babbling about the Russians. What they don’t realize is that the modern world has no reality for him. His reality is here: the river, the crumbling walls, the gloomy ancestral portrait at his back. The Russians, the barges, the threat of nuclear war are all a game.

No, the real craziness, and they don’t know it, is theirs: he is oppressed by the weighty grandeur of their past. He sits by the window with its old wavy green glass that turns the water to the color of pea soup and watches the empty trackless path his family’s ferry followed for almost two hundred years, thirty-five of which were his own life, every hour on the hour, daylight to dark, until his nerves got the better of him. At the time of his retirement they were down to selling their last hundred acres. Once the family owned five thousand acres along the river and a hundred slaves. Now the Captain’s holdings go no further than the ravine below the garden into which Sam throws his dead soldiers; and Sam and me, his two darkies.

“I have something to tell you. LaBrae has decided that he is gay and we’re getting a divorce.”

The Captain says nothing. Although my wealth has always been an affront to him, a symbol of the military-industrial complex that destroyed his pastoral heritage, he doesn’t despise the money itself. His pride would never let him admit it, but in his imaginings he has surely envisioned LaBrae restoring the old house, buying back the land.

“However, as I have come to feel about you and Missy as I would my own parents I would like to continue being your daughter. We both have much to share.” The Captain considers my proposal stoically. He leans back in his chair, away from the faint light from the window. His face is as dim and stern as the original LaBrae’s over the mantel. “Don’t tell Missy,” he finally says, “but bring the newspapers when you come.”

Downstairs Missy has fixed supper. We eat in uneasy silence in the kitchen with its cozy woodburning range, in which Missy has built a

fire as the evening has turned cool. Baskets hang from exposed rafters overhead and the old fireplace with its trammels and iron pots looks as it must have a century ago. When we finish, Missy lights a cigarette; she is not a smoker and she maneuvers her cigarette in unintentional camp. She doesn't like the taste and she's afraid of cancer, but it's her one vice, she maintains, something she can do that the Captain doesn't approve of but can't stop her from doing. And when her idiots are around they watch and ape her every move, so lighting up gives her a sense of unharnessing from one more burden in her life. Missy takes a couple of puffs, rises, then lifts the lid on the stove and destroys the evidence.

"You've probably noticed the summer kitchen needs a new roof," she says, breaking the silence.

"I'll send a contractor over."

"It's up to us to protect them, LaBrae and the Captain. To take care of things," she says nobly. Under the light her white-rooted lashes make her appear to have dusted her face in bath powder. "Men are so much weaker than us."

"Check out the kind of computer you want." In leaving I bend to kiss her head. Her roots are grey beneath the blonde and she smells of old tobacco and the classroom. I remember my own mother smelled of horses. She was an expert horsewoman, but even expertise has its limits. Her gaited gelding tripped in the show ring, fell on her, crushing something internal. Her dying words to me in the ambulance were, "Damn, I think I had the class won, don't you."

I say, "Goodnight, Mother." I have never called Missy that before, although when we were first married she insisted. Now she flinches.

As I start to get in my car, Sam's fire catches my eye. A sharp breeze off the river fans it into a blaze. My approach startles him. He looks up from the flames, and when he realizes that it's me, he nods in a surly, formal way, then thinks better of it. Perhaps he has weighed my racial heritage; the wealthy white half has tipped the scales. He stands, suddenly in instant transformation the house nigger. "How do, Miss. How you this evening?"

To the parents of her students, Missy refers to Sam as "our house boy," even though no amount of money would induce him to put on a white cotton jacket and answer her front door. But he can put on a good show, although even he must sense that the audience who

appreciates this sort of thing is rapidly diminishing. "You got your Derby horse picked, Miss? Cause I got mine. Hee-hee-hee. And I ain't telling. No sir."

An open bottle of whiskey sits at his feet, only a swig down, his second bottle, for he is steady on his feet. Sam has reached the point of alcoholism where consumption has an inverse relationship with steadiness. Sobriety makes him shake violently.

A string of barges slides down the river, making the water slap the bank. "The river seems busy tonight."

"Sure do, Miss, sure do." He laughs with high good nature, not sure if I am taking a pot shot at the Captain's mania or just making conversation. I can play his game, too.

"Some things a government doesn't know everything about," I say, leading him out.

"Sure don't, Miss. They sure don't." He shakes his head and pokes at the fire; no phoenix will arise from his flames. Occasionally I wonder if my father, wherever, whoever he is, got caught in the eddies and backwaters of our time like Sam; I wonder if he, too, is a bitter man.

"For instance, a bridge may get you across the river, but it isn't like a ferry. A ferry takes a man to run it. It takes a human touch."

"You right about that. A ferry don't run itself."

"And you know what else it takes to run a ferry, Sam?"

He sizes me up with a rheumy, serious eye. "Smarts; it take a brain. You got to know the river. You got to know people." There is bitterness in his voice.

"More than that. It takes money."

He takes my bait warily; am I playing him, will I reel him in at will like the Captain, history, the government? Is the tan of my skin to be trusted? "Hee-hee-hee," he bluffs. "It do, it do, and we ain't got none of that around here."

"Sometimes, Sam, when you're sitting here watching the far bank, do you ever see Missy's Indians?"

He takes the joke — if that's what it is; it's a matter of perspective. "Depends. Depends on how good I'm feeling."

"Change is always hard, Sam, but we'll be all right," I say with more confidence than I feel.

Like one of Missy's idiots, he nods complacently and repeats, "We be all right."