



Nora and the Black Man

NONA CASPERS

AT LUNCH, NORA'S FATHER told them there had been a black man at the Freeport Bank. "When?" her mother asked. "This morning," her father said. Her mother looked at him. "Who said this?" Her father said one of the farmers saw him standing in line.

"I bet he was Mexican," her mother said. "One of the new migrant workers staying in town."

"The farmer said black," her father said. "He's used to seeing Mexican workers."

"For god sakes," Nora said with a mouthful of egg salad. "The civil rights movement was thirty years ago."

"That's true," her father said, and they all went silent.

Before her father had made his announcement Nora had been reading *History of Western Civilization* at the table, which caused her mother to give her several irritated looks and slap a potholder on her head. On Nora's days off from slogging bags of peat moss at the garden store in town, she logged on to a summer community college class over the Internet—though she had just turned fifteen. She had also taken a biology course and earned a B; they studied the life cycle from birth to decay. She scooped up her last pile of corn and tossed it onto her father's plate.

"Oh please, we haven't come to throwing our food about, have we?" her mother said.

"Black, white, and brown, we're all going into the ground," Nora said.

“We all know that, Nora,” her mother said.

It wasn't death that seemed unfathomable to Nora; she had seen animals die; she had watched squirrels and mice and birds rot into the ground. It was the beginning of life that seemed impossible. Millions of humans prancing out from that double-celled pocked moon she'd seen in her biology book. Nothing more than a pebble or a piece of dried corn. And not only the body but also the brain, and not only the brain but also the soul—for Nora hadn't given up on the soul despite her disappointment in the human race, war upon war upon war. Civilizations. *Just people*, she thought.

Last week, she had read about slavery in the colonies that became the United States. The history book had only grazed the subject, but Nora researched more on her own out of sheer disbelief and astonishment. She was especially shocked when she hit the facts about the African women. The first slaves were kept in barns until they were forced to build their own quarters. The slave owners would pluck the women from the barn stalls, haul them into the plantation houses and rape them. But many of the women found ways to escape their physical existence; they filled their stomachs with hay and manure and rocks—anything they could get their hands on. Soon the slavery industry, *people*, invented equipment to stop the women from killing themselves. Nora told her parents about the metal masks and mouth guards.

“We all agree that's horrible, Nora,” her mother said.

“Do you think that white people are born mean?” her father asked.

Nora had to laugh. She knew her father meant the question seriously; the meanness of white people had a certain logic he could entertain.

“I've known a few nice white people,” Nora said.

“That could be,” her mother said, suddenly changing her tack and playing along because she was outnumbered. She hated to be left out.

“The black man could be the illegitimate child of someone in town,” Nora said. “Maybe someone died and he was picking up his inheritance. Or maybe he's doing an anthropological study and he's going to move in to write about the culture and mores of a typical Minnesota farming village.”

“We are pretty primitive,” her mother said.

“Maybe he was planning a robbery,” her father said.

Nora groaned.

Her father's shoulders went up. “I was just trying to give the guy some

credit,” he said, and he shoved a heap of green beans into his mouth.

“Maybe he was just stopping to use the restroom,” her mother said.

“African Americans don’t drive off the freeway into small towns in Minnesota to use the bathroom,” Nora said.

“Why not?” her mother asked, throwing a towel over her shoulder.

“Because they’re scared of us,” Nora said.

Her mother made a face that immediately communicated she was sick of Nora’s down-in-the-mouth attitude, and that she knew there was surely more to life than Nora imagined.

“Who’s afraid of a dairy farmer?” her father asked. He cut the stick of butter in half and grinned at Nora as he let the other half slide off the knife onto his potatoes. Nora cringed to think of all that fat swimming toward his unsuspecting arteries.

“Can we change the subject now we’ve concluded everyone’s scared of everyone,” her mother said. “It’s so depressing.”

Her father said the meat locker was having a sale on sausage. You could bring in your own meat—venison, goose, cow, whatever—and they’d cut it with pork and make the sausage at a discount. He had a freezer full of game downstairs. Her mother said the church bazaar needed more funds to get new canopies—the old ones were moldy.

Nora finished eating. She rinsed her dish in the sink and stacked it in the dishwasher. She sat in the living room ripping dead leaves off her hibiscus and piling them on the couch. She accidentally plucked a flower from its stem, the one with the yellow spots she had been admiring all week. She gave it a final sniff and buried it in her pile of dead leaves. After the biology class, which had a unit on ecology and the environment, she had rigged a recycling system for their household—compost now went into a worm bin. She had labeled buckets for paper, plastic and tin cans, and every week she dumped the buckets at the recycling center behind the high school. Sometimes she sat in the car listening to her iPod and staring out the window at the heaps of trash. Several times this ritual had made her late for logging into her biology class, which is why the professor had given her a B. B’s are okay, her father had said, but Nora had hoped for an A.

The phone rang and her mother answered. “Nobody knows who he is,” her mother said. It rang again ten minutes later. “Bells of freedom,” her father mumbled; then he shouted, “Tell them he’s our cousin,” and laughed.

But Nora didn't think it was funny.

Out the side door the little dog was killing ants, lazily and deliberately. He was lying on his belly in their driveway with his muzzle resting at the foot of an anthill. A line of ants paraded courageously down the hill straight for his nose, then they'd scurry apart in terror as he squashed them and licked them off his paw.

"Another insect civilization is being transformed by the dog out here," Nora yelled through the open side door.

"A bit much," her mother yelled back. Maybe it was an exaggeration, but still it was true. Hundreds of ants destroyed in a matter of minutes—families destroyed, communities displaced, all by the swipe of a dog's paw.

The garden Nora had planted with her father was plump with onions, beans and tomatoes. She plucked a half-ripe tomato off the vine. Surprisingly sour. "Here Pooch," she called, knowing she'd be feeding the dog's diarrhea to the worms later. She pulled out the hose and watered the garden. She wrapped the hose back up and went in the house and put on her shoes. Her book lay on her bed, open to the page about European missionaries hauling Christianity and small pox to the New World, which really was the old world, only new to them. The danger of adjectives, Nora thought.

She sat on the bed and tried to read, but was having a hard time digesting the facts and dates; instead she kept thinking about the incident this past winter. A group of grade-school kids had cornered the neighbor's dog, Ralphie, in the barn, and the dog bit off one boy's finger before vanishing into the woods. A week later Nora's father found the dog under a snow bank in their ditch. Someone had cut off Ralphie's head.

Why would somebody cut off the head? Nora had asked. Her father had shrugged and taken a deep breath, which Nora took to mean that he was exhausted by the question.

"Can I use the truck to run an errand?" She was allowed to drive on the back roads, even though she didn't have her license. She'd been driving since she was twelve.

Her mother had moved to the living room and was sewing numbers on school jerseys. "What errand?" she asked. "Don't you have a test tomorrow?"

"Whatever," she said under her breath, then louder. "Can I?"

Her mother put down the jersey and stared into Nora's face.
"Sorry," Nora said. "I don't have a test tomorrow."

The old road to Freeport someday would disintegrate completely, Nora thought, as the truck pitched over the potholes and uneven surfaces. Her grandfather had poured the concrete from Freeport to Melrose in 1901; her great uncle Leo poured the first tar line down the middle. The town itself might disappear—no, she thought, the town would survive. It was slowly evolving as people fled the cities and the new summer migrant families moved in. Tamales and corn tortillas and canned cactus meat had appeared on the shelves of the Red Owl in Melrose, to the dismay of several of her parents' friends. A flower shop had taken root, and there was a new café with mixed greens and pamphlets about domestic violence in the bathroom.

Nora tried to imagine how the black man had felt at the bank. She was embarrassed to admit—even to herself—that she had never seen an African American up close. One of the Niehoff girls for a year after high school had dated a Hmong from Saint Cloud. "Did he visit the house?" Nora had asked her mother. "Oh yes. He was a nice fellow, but just not right for Joanne." Her mother said everyone was nice, which in Nora's mind canceled every opinion she had about human beings. She was not a reliable source.

Before Nora was born her father had had a crush on Diana Ross. She married a Swede; he said he heard her talk about the Swede years ago on Johnny Carson. "She lives in Sweden," he said. Nora tried to imagine the woman on her father's old albums with a Swedish accent like the one Nora's grandmother had.

She tried to imagine the town differently, full of all different colors. She knew it was impossible—why would anyone voluntarily live in a one-street white town with people gawking at them. However, what if the black man was moving there, to their town? She imagined walking past him on the street and saying hello, or passing him in her truck on the old road and lifting her hand and giving him the peace sign. What kind of car would he drive? She tried to imagine the black man in a sleek city car, the car sailing up her family's gravel driveway. She could picture him sitting down to a dinner with them—venison, goose, mashed potatoes, carrots and tomatoes from her garden. Nora imagined herself as the one person in the town the black man would confide in—maybe

they could talk about history and she could demonstrate that not all rural white people were what you saw in movies or in the reruns of the Andy Griffith show. The thought made her feel hopeful, not just for their town, but also for the evolution of humanity.

The street outside the bank was fairly empty: a blue Ford Truck, a white Chevrolet. A month ago they had bolted in a bicycle rack, which had made Nora laugh—who did they think would bike to the bank? The farmers with all their extra energy? She parked outside the bank and stared at the flat orange brick. The orange building up against the blue sky—it was scenic. The front of the bank had been re-sided with fake smooth brick. The new paved walkway clashed with the old crummy concrete of the sidewalk. Even concrete had begun to look different in her lifetime, denser and smoother; the new cement didn't crack or get porous or pocked. The species was moving toward smoothness.

She saw through the glass door the familiar dark shaggy hair of Lola Munson, the teller, and she saw red-faced stout Mr. Stalnerger, the bank manager. There was no black man. Of course there wasn't.

Nora drove slowly down Main Street past the Rexall Drug and Joyce's Flower Shop, Joyce cleaning the windows in her embarrassingly peach jumpsuit. She trolled up two blocks toward the city limits, then turned east on a gravel road. The Eckers had sold their farm two years ago to Minneapolis investors and now their paint-chipped white house was empty. Their barn had been expanded to milk 1600 dairy cows; a few other farmers were joining forces and milking herds up to 2500. Nora and her father had driven by at feed time and been startled to see the green hills transformed into a solid sea of black and white mooring.

On the back end of the investors' land, stretched out for what seemed to Nora like miles, the new migrant family was cleaning the alfalfa fields—it was still an odd sight. Three Mexican men wearing Munson Feed baseball caps, a father and two sons it seemed, shorter than most of the men Nora grew up with, walked behind a flatbed, tossing rocks. On the tractor pulling the flat bed sat a young woman, perhaps Nora's age—she also was wearing a baseball cap but had turned it sideways and tucked her long black hair into it. Several summers before high school Nora had helped pick rocks on her uncle's farm, and hated it. Spoiled, her father would say. As she passed, she waved, and the men looked up, puzzled, and then waved back.

Instead of taking the old road home, Nora decided to break the rules and she veered onto the Interstate. The Interstate had become one of her pastimes. She loved watching the pageant of vehicles from east and west slice through these towns, passing within miles of her parents' house. Today every person in every car was white.

Several times that summer she had taken the car on the Interstate and driven for miles in either direction, tooling the odometer back—easy to do on an old truck—so her parents wouldn't notice. Last week she had driven fifty miles east, almost to Alexandria, the windows wide open and the warm air billowing around the cab until her ears and then her skull filled with air; the sensation of being pulled out of time, as if she and the other travelers floated in their own separate stream of history. She put her hand out the window when the truck hit 60, reveling in the pressure on her palm, and imagining that she could absorb knowledge, everything she would need to know, through the air. That's how she felt sometimes when she stared at the trash heaps at the recycling place: broken dishes, a doll's body, an office chair, a cupboard top painted half purple, a backpack, a computer screen—what did it all add up to?

About a mile down the Interstate there was a car on the shoulder, broken down. Nora passed the car, a European kind she didn't recognize, and then she slowed, stopped, and backed up to where the man was standing.

The man wore a shiny black suit and shirt, like a movie star, and he wore dark sunglasses and had freckles on either side of his nose, which surprised her. "Fan belt broke," he said, as he leaned into Nora's open passenger window. His bleached hair was curly on top and cut close on the sides. He wore braided leather around his neck. "Could you give me a ride to the nearest gas station?"

As Nora drove, the man sat tapping out something on his cell phone and looking through his side window, which Nora now felt embarrassed was so dirty. She hadn't noticed before, though her father had asked her to wash the truck a week ago.

"Are you from the twin cities, then?" she got up the nerve to ask him after a mile.

He continued to look out the window. "Now, yes. Originally, New York." Then he started tapping on his phone again.

"Oh," Nora said. "New York." She didn't know why exactly, but she found herself wanting to impress the man. "Are you here visiting relatives?" she asked.

“Real estate,” he said. He didn’t turn his head when he spoke; he just kept tapping on his phone and looking out the window.

They drove another mile in silence. She noticed that he wore a small headset clipped to his ear, with a mouthpiece, and she could see that a section of his ear lobe was missing, as if someone had taken a bite out of it.

“A lot of people move here from the Minneapolis area, or around the cities,” she said. She waited for the man to answer; maybe he was developing houses on one of the lakes—he looked like a developer type, or a high-powered businessman or something. “The place is really changing fast. There’s a new café, and in Saint Cloud there’s a community college that’s got online classes.” Nora felt immediately foolish.

“Progress,” the man said, turning further toward the window.

Nora could hear in his voice a condescending grin. Her face went hot, even the lobes of her ears burned. She could see herself from his view, a backward girl who thought she knew something, all of it inconsequential and ridiculous. She was glad the man couldn’t see her flame up—what did her mother call it?—her rose rage. A strange new anger burned up her throat—humiliation?—but then it caught on something that turned the feeling oddly satisfying. Nora kept her eyes on the white line and stepped down, just slightly, on the gas pedal.

The man was looking down at his phone.

She had never taken the old truck past 60; the chassis wasn’t built for high speeds, her father had warned her. Nora pressed further down on the gas pedal, and the needle lurched past 70. She could feel the metal tremble. The glove compartment and dashboard began to vibrate, the plastic clacking like teeth. The man looked up, his face slack for a moment. Then he glared at her. Nora pushed the pedal down, her heart slapping hard against her chest. The needle hit 75. 80. 85. Gripping the dashboard with both hands the man sat upright; Nora caught a glimpse of the ridges of his neck shooting up to his jaw, his eyes glassy with fear. At 90 the front end of the truck shuddered, the seat shook, the steering wheel nearly hopped out of her hand as the engine whined and began to convulse, and then the whole front end bucked as if the metal would fly apart from the internal pressure and the man’s head lurched forward and smashed into the dashboard.

“You stupid kid!” he screamed at her and then Nora could feel his hand grip her upper arm, she could feel something sharp dig into her flesh—a new sensation. “Slow this fucking heap down!” he said slowly, his fingers pushing deeper and deeper into Nora’s arm.

The Texaco station off the Sauk exit had been around forever, as far back as her grandfather, though it hadn't been Texaco then, she was sure. And the truck stop next to it where her mother had worked when she was young and where Nora had thought she might work to make money for college, but the family had agreed, Nora was not service oriented.

She pulled the truck up to the store, her face hot, her hands shaking—Nora felt for the first time as if her body were not one piece, as if the top half of her body were floating away. Her arm burned. The man had continued to grip Nora's arm hard even when she had slowed down and exited the freeway. They drove the half-mile to the station in silence, and the man popped open the door before she could even come to a complete stop. He had a slight cut on his forehead. He hopped out without a word. Nora watched the hem of his suit jacket sway as he jumped up onto the concrete step and into the building's restroom.

Would he call the police? What would the station owner think, a man who knew her father.

Nora eased the truck into the Red Owl parking lot across the street, sliding behind a semi truck on the side of the building, and cut the engine.

There was some damage—she knew there would be: the stem of the mirror had cracked and it dangled awkwardly over the driver's door; one wheel cover was missing; her parents would be furious. She found an old towel in the cubby behind the truck seat and wiped the dash where the man's head had hit, then threw the towel in the Red Owl dumpster. She would have to make up a story. As she circled the truck a second time, she pictured the man's frightened face, and even though her breath was shaking and she was beginning to feel as if she would faint, Nora also felt a new queasy exhilaration, an oily veneer spreading over something murky and more dangerous.

The ride home on the Interstate was quiet and cloudy; there was a graininess in the air and a shadowy stillness she'd never seen before in summer, as if she were in the negative of a photo, or in an old movie; even her hands on the steering wheel looked gray and bony. Red brake lights on the car ahead surprised her. In the right lane near the exit was a fender bender pile up and people standing around. Nora slowed and saw further down from the accident a deer had been hit, its hind end smashed into the asphalt. It must have been hit and run over.

Nora felt tired. Life was creepy.

When Nora pulled into the driveway her mother and father were next to the garage, bickering over the irises. They walked over to Nora and looked at the dangling mirror, and the Red Owl sacks in the back seat.

“You’re grounded,” her mother said, and handed her a dead iris leaf.

That night, as they ate their first dinner of the tamales and beans Nora had bought them, along with chunks of her father’s venison, Nora told her parents that a deer had run into the road, a baby deer trying to cross the four-lane highway, where she knew she should not be, and she had swerved and missed hitting it but landed in the ditch.

“What was a fawn doing on its own way out there,” her mother said, and looked at her.

“Yet another mystery,” her father said, and shrugged. “How’d you get the truck out anyway?”

Nora took a few bites of her tamale but couldn’t eat; her arm ached but she wouldn’t touch it. She looked at her parents. Her father stuck a chunk of venison into his mouth. Her mother said she’d heard there’d been a five-car pile up on the Interstate near town and another outbreak of chicken pox at the Freeport pre-school.

Suddenly, Nora had the urge to get up from their kitchen table. She wanted to stand up, and take her parents by the hand, and pull them out the front door. She wanted them all to run up their driveway and over the roads into the fields. Their lungs and muscles would burn, but they would keep running past every town and farm, past where the fields stopped, past everything, she thought, until they could recognize no one and nothing.

“Nora, are you all right?” her parents asked.

Nora sat as still as she had ever sat.