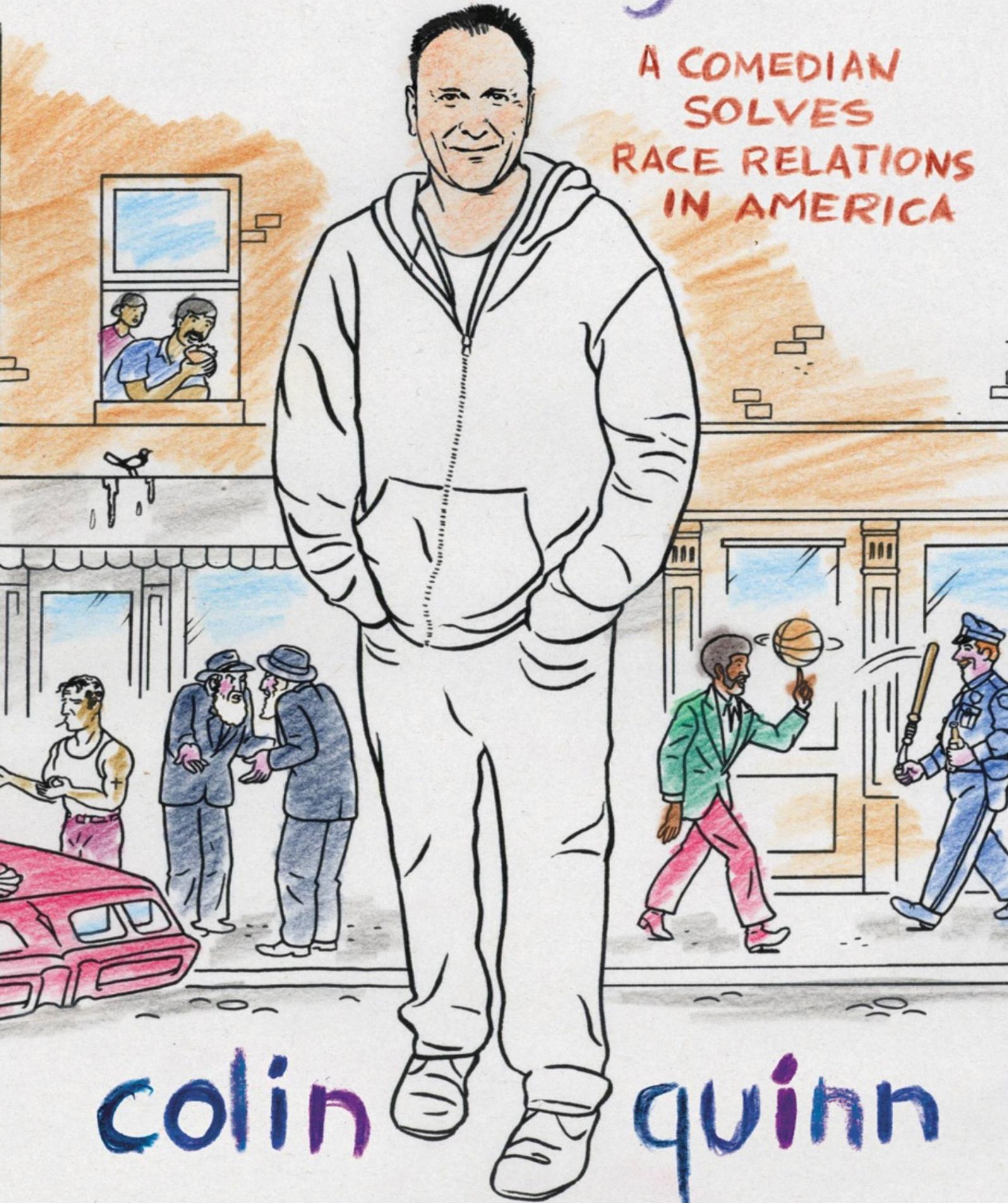


the coloring book

A COMEDIAN
SOLVES
RACE RELATIONS
IN AMERICA



colin

quinn

The Coloring Book

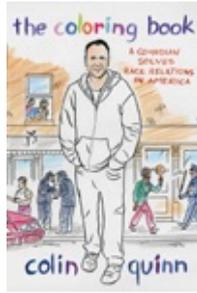
A COMEDIAN SOLVES
RACE RELATIONS IN AMERICA

Colin Quinn



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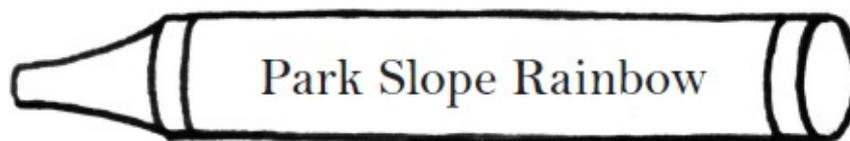
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This is dedicated to all the mixed-race, polyglot, mestizo, multiracial, biracial, triracial people out there. May there someday be wars based only on personality differences.

INTRODUCTION



TODAY IT MAY LOOK LIKE A SWISS VILLAGE, BUT PARK SLOPE, Brooklyn, in the 1970s was maybe the most mixed—integrated, they called it—neighborhood in the history of the world. Park Slope in the seventies was magical. It was a special place to grow up. Everyone felt it, except the murder victims.

I would walk home from Intermediate School 88, past Puerto Rican blocks, black blocks, Italian blocks, Irish blocks, the Arab deli, the Chinese takeout place, the first Dominican bodega, and the remnants of what was once a big Polish neighborhood.

One block would look as bombed-out as the South Bronx and the next would look as clean and affluent as... Park Slope today. My block was Puerto Rican on one corner, black on the other, and Irish, Italian, and Jewish in the middle. From kindergarten through high school, we had every kind of kid in my house all the time. So I should be the only person in the country allowed to talk about race.

And yet what I've seen more and more in the past thirty years are well-meaning people who rolled out of some annoying suburb and then moved to New York and immediately began trying to regulate everyone's language and thoughts. People are so very afraid of offending that they act like diversity doesn't even exist. As a result, there is this weird impulse in American culture today to say, "We're all exactly the same." To celebrate diversity as long as you don't point out anyone's differences.

If you ask people to describe somebody, they'll avoid saying their color. If pushed, their voice drops with shame and regret that they still think in those terms. You even hear cops going, even in the police blotter: "The suspect was 5'10" and 280 pounds—and that's not fat-shaming, we're just pointing it out."

I'm tired of humorless activist people decreeing that we only use these words and never those, and that we "check our privilege," in case we say the wrong thing and "trigger" someone. Supposedly nonjudgmental judgmentalism used to be what Southern California was for, but now it's encroaching even here in New York—where people are supposed to come *to* judge things. It's not the place to re-create the boring suburban landscape of your childhoods.

I don't like being bossed around—and that's not using the word "bossy" in a gender-specific manner—especially when it comes to humor, and especially not by the least funny people on earth. Across the country, the sexist office asshole has been replaced by the flat-affect, dead-eyed modern-day Puritan. Both groups—the old-school assholes and the neo-Puritans—share a common goal: to wipe the smile off of

everyone's face.

People who condemn other people for talking about race are usually members of what my friend Harry calls the “never-been-punched-in-the-face club”—smug, obnoxious people who feel very confident in their ability to say anything they want about what other people should and shouldn't do because they've never received a nice shot in the grill.

New Yorkers used to be straight shooters and loudmouths. They spoke their mind. The opinionated cabbie. The construction worker. The counterperson. The merchant. The old man at the bar. The guy selling pretzels. You can buy a better pretzel anywhere in the country, but what made the New York pretzel the best was the shitty, sarcastic attitude of the guy selling it. When I was growing up, tourists didn't come here for the Rockefeller Tree or “nice place to bring your kids.” They came to be told to fuck off by a real New Yorker.

Native New Yorkers have always had the abrupt, honest tone we need when talking about race. It's so much better than today's lethally fake one: “I'm sorry you feel that way.” “That's very interesting. I never thought about it like that.” “I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that terminology.” A strained smile of acceptance and a golf clap.

So all the nuances go unexplored. There are degrees of racism. Yes, unlike a little bit pregnant, you can be a little bit racist! There's a difference between a white supremacist and a little old white lady who slightly clutches her purse when a black guy gets in the elevator with her; between a white guy who doesn't hire black people and a white guy who flinches the tiniest bit when he sees a photo of his teenage daughter with her new “friend” at a Kendrick Lamar concert.

This is not an ethnic joke book: drunk Irish black guys with big dicks, bad Asian drivers. I don't want to deal with them because to do so would be to beat a dead horse, and I don't want to offend animal rights activists.

Different cultures are different. If you go to Queens, you can see restaurant signs with pictures of exotic fish with human faces, flamingos fighting over a burrito on Roosevelt Avenue, roasted guinea pigs hanging on a clothesline in Elmhurst, a mongoose spitting from a fire escape. That's what I want to talk about.

These days, the supposedly enlightened response to most questions is, “Who's to say?” My answer: *Everyone's* to say. That used to be New York's motto.

TRIGGER WARNING: *This book may be harmful to impressionable adults. It may raise distressing, troubling, problematic concerns. It may be “tone-deaf” in today's climate. Given the fact that it's coming from a place of white Eurocentric unconscious paternalistic fear of “the other,” it may add to divisiveness. It may contain stereotypes or generalizing. If offended, please alert Twitter or your favorite local blogger.*

I



NOTHING MAKES A ROOM TENSE UP FASTER THAN TALKING about black people when you're white. People will make jokes about Europeans all day long: *Germans are Nazis. Everyone hates the French.* But as soon as you start talking about people who aren't white and you are white, everyone gets anxious. Is this what we're striving for, avoidance of the topic at all costs? Frozen smiles and polite, strained looks?

To me, there are two routes to take when it comes to dealing with race: Stay separate and pretend we aren't different at all, or live together and acknowledge the ways in which race sometimes does actually matter. Of course, the compromise of living halfway together and pretending we are all the same is working out wonderfully.

* * *

Black people showed up in New York City in the early 1920s, in the white Manhattan suburb called Harlem. Before that, black people lived only down South. Until 1963, everyone wanted to be white. Wingtips, and whistling big band music on your way to the foundry, slaughterhouse, or brewery; you walked white, tipped your unironic fedora to the ladies, and shook hands with a hearty "How do'ya do?" Everyone acted white—even Malcom X straightened his hair. There was a dress code: No jeans. No sneakers for anyone over twelve. You had to wear a shirt and tie if you were a guy. Even on construction sites: shirt and tie. Health food was a can of mixed fruit with syrup and food coloring.

Then one day in May of 1964, two soul brothers (as they were known back then) ran into each other on the street. Instead of the usual "Hiya, pal, how's tricks?" and a firm grasp of each other's hands, one guy put out his palm and said "Gimme some skin, Jack" and the other guy slapped his palm and that was that. They changed the greeting! That's kind of a major thing if you think about it. People are greeting each other all over the country, maybe one out of every three people every day. That's 191.9 million people in the U.S. back then. That's about sixty-four million greetings a day. And black people changed probably half of those. Black culture then ruled New York City. Before, there had been watch repair, TV repair, shoe repair, and clothing repair, even though everybody owned a sewing machine. Suddenly, even my father was wearing a hip, open shirt and growing a beard. People were smoking joints, the Knicks were the stars of New York, and people listened to Gamble and Huff music while

wearing giant shoes.

* * *

I moved to Park Slope when I was seven. Before that I was in Bay Ridge, then Flatbush, but Park Slope was crazy. Wild white kids, wild Puerto Ricans, but nobody was wilder than the black kids. When us white kids or Puerto Rican kids would steal candy or jump on the back of buses, we were still scared to get caught and have our mothers find out. But the black kids were not scared of any store owner or bus driver. They'd start yelling back at adults. "Get off me! Tell my mother!" and the store owners wouldn't tell, because they knew if they did, sure, they *could* get a sympathetic woman who thanked them and shook her head and said "I don't know what to do with him," BUT they *might* get the Ghetto Avenger mother who came running in with a string of curses, knocking over the display case and threatening the owner for putting his hands on her kid.

Our store owners were all characters. They all had growths or warts or scars and Coke-bottle glasses. They were usually either morbidly obese or tubercular. They were prejudiced but not racist.

Danny, the Jewish candy store owner: "Hey, you kid, don't jump the line. The colored lady was next. You respect your elders. Now you go to the back. It's the colored lady, the Spanish girl and the Chinaman, and then you. You learn how to behave!"

He was a nice guy and if you asked him what race he hated the most, I bet he would say Germans first, because he was a Jew that grew up in the thirties. People can be prejudiced against groups based on their experience (not just ignorance), but that doesn't mean they don't like the individuals. Most black people hate "white people" as a concept but they like a lot... well, some... okay a few, white people.

* * *

My first day at I.S. 88, I was walking down the hall and a group of black kids were coming from the other direction chanting, "Ungawa, Black Power. Destroy, white boy." I thought, *I hope that's not the school song*. Often during fights, the black kids would chant, "Fight, fight, nigger and a white! The white turned red, and the nigger dropped dead!"

A lot of white kids in the old neighborhood would use the word "nigger," and that didn't make them racist. They even sometimes used the word in anger—even in anger toward a black person they knew—and that didn't make them racist either.

Ohhhh, you heard me. Using that word wasn't the entirety of people's feelings toward or relationship to the black race. Someone might have an unpleasant interaction with a black person and use the word, and yet at the same time have tons of close black friends who they would die for. Those black friends might hate "white people," but they would have white friends who they would die for, too.

These are contradictions, but most of life is contradictory. There are no absolutes, unless you're an idiot with a naïve belief that life is only one way, always and forever.

When you're just theorizing about it, absolutes make sense, but when you're living a real life and having actual hot-and-cold relationships with real people, shit gets complicated.

* * *

“Yo, shut up, you black parakeet!”

“Who you calling a parakeet, you black bitch?”

“Who you calling bitch, bitch? My brother gonna come up to this school and bust your ass.”

“Shut up, your head look like a snail shell.”

“So what, you got slave hair!”

“You got old-lady ears.”

“Shut up, you live in back of the hardware store, come to school smelling like cut keys!”

They were funny those kids. They'd come rolling into class like they just bought the place, making fun of each other's financial status—who's on welfare, food stamps, AFDC, SSI: They knew the system backward and forward. They'd sing songs about each other's mothers on the 67 bus home. “Me and Mrs., Mrs. Richardson” to the tune of “Me and Mrs. Jones.” Or the song “I'll Always Love My Mama” was almost asking for it. Some kid would look sincerely at another and sing, “I'll always love your mama, she's my favorite girl.” And “It's a sha-a-a-ame... the way I mess around with your mom.”

They were never boring. One time, the teacher was yelling, it was really tense, and this kid Ralph opened the door and looked directly at a kid named Trent like he was delivering the most important message in the world. He said, “Trent, your father wanted me to tell you to leave the shoes on the back steps of the school—he's got to go to work.” Then he closed the door and left us all there for that stunned pause until everyone, even the teacher who'd been furious with us, couldn't help laughing.

Since I was little, black people have been at war with the system. Most people came into I.S. 88 with varying degrees of resigned acceptance. The Jews and Asians were listening to the teacher. The Italians were killing time till the union job. The Puerto Ricans were using it as a singles mixer. The black girls came in with Sugar Babies, Fruit Stripe gum, and Pixy Stix. They'd walk around the class, figuring out where to sit. “Who sittin' here? Can you change seats so I could sit next to my friend?” The teacher would say, “Josephine, sit down.” Josephine would arch her back and announce to the room in outrage, “Lincoln freed the slaves!” then sit down and start eating squares off her candy necklace.

Five minutes later the black guys would float in. Somewhere between a John Wayne swagger and a Renaissance prince, they'd enter like Medici popes coming by to check up on Michelangelo. They'd put a number 2 pencil in their Afro as a way of acknowledging they were in a classroom. They'd sit splay-legged halfway out in the aisle, digging the scene with a gangster lean (as the song went). If a black kid gave an answer to a question, it was fine, but only if it was a laconic throwaway. Like he was so cool the answer just slid out. He would take the toothpick out of his mouth... “The, um... Magna Carta”—and then immediately back to the toothpick. You could get

away with it if you had the style, but if there was any lapdog or enthusiasm or wish for the teacher's approval showing, there would be a loud tsssss, like letting the air out of a basketball.

* * *

Fights were always happening. It seemed like there was a fight every day. Either somebody was threatening to fight you, or you were hearing that your friend was getting into a fight, or your little brother was fighting, or there was a fight happening right now and you'd better hurry if you were gonna catch the end of it. Then people would say "I heard so-and-so had a fight," and you could say "Yeah, I saw it."

I remember having to fight. Some kid was next to me in line and said, "You wanna fight?" and I couldn't say, "Well, that's coming out of left field." I had to gulp and say "Okay!" The next thing I know, I'm rolling around in the hallway with a bunch of kids cheering like they're watching pay-per-view.

My first or second day of class in Park Slope, I'm walking in the halls and this little black kid came by and blocked my path and said, "Hey, white boy, gimme a quarter." I said no, laughed, and pushed him. Suddenly, I heard, "You push my cousin, you freckle-faced strawberry?" (As a child I had a lovely face full of freckles, like a young Julianne Moore.) It was the old bait and switch! This big kid was there. Then he pushed me. The security guard broke it up, and the kid said to me, "I'll see you at three o'clock."

So we go back to class and now I know I'm fighting at three o'clock. All the kids in class are excited, because everyone loves to see a fight. And my stomach hurt because this kid looks like a real fighter. He had a mini Afro, which was usually a bad sign. A big Afro meant a fun playboy. But a mini Afro parted on the side was only for the hardest of hard rocks.

As all boys know, there's no experience like waiting until three o'clock for a fight with a kid that you know is probably going to beat you severely. A teacher is bullshitting on about long division and I'm just trying to figure out if there's a way I can maneuver this fight to the curb, so I can get a passing truck to do my dirty work for me.

People now say you're supposed to report bullying. In those days the teachers were trying to survive for themselves. They were trying to hurry home, get on the train before it got dark. I saw a teacher get beat up by a parent in grammar school. The parent stormed into the classroom and beat his own kid around the room, then turned and punched the teacher in the chest when he tried to intervene. Then the parent stared at the class silently, like, "Anyone have a problem with what just happened?" And we all sat there quietly, hoping we weren't next.

One time, this kid Jasper's mom was coming up to school with her brother or boyfriend, definitely there to complain about how the school was treating Jasper. A kid was looking out the window. "Oh shit," he said, "here comes Jasper's mom." We all ran over to the window and when we turned around, the door was open and the teacher was gone.

My uncle Eddie was a teacher at Franklin K. Lane. The students lit one of his coworkers on fire. So when the teachers would see a fight they'd pretend it wasn't

happening. For half a shithead like me, they would say, “Aren’t you the kid that makes jokes about my sideburns in the back of the room? Good luck, big mouth.”

But back to that day: All the kids are crowded around like Roman soldiers at the Crucifixion, and they’re all chanting like little demons. I’m surprised some kid wasn’t selling programs and pretzels. This kid and I begin to fight, and I can tell almost immediately that any chance I have is going to come from wrestling, because this kid is just a little too advanced with the way he’s holding his hands. I grab him and he flips me into a group of kids and jumps on me.

In those days, people really believed in the concept of a fair fight, and there were no group stompings. You had to fight it out man-to-man. If somebody tried to jump in, the whole world would beat their ass for trying to upset the forces of nature and society. But you would get in a fight after school and it was a big event. People love to see violence. And they loved you for being in the fight. Now kids just jump in and stomp kids half to death while chanting “Worldstar.” In those days there was no YouTube, so after a few months of telling the story, you kept slightly changing it until you eventually won the fight.

The worst part of getting your ass kicked after school is retrieving your books and pencils that got scattered all over the place—all your little papers with stupid numbers from math on them that seemed meaningless now—and taking the Charlie Brown walk home.

But the thing about a fight is, even if you lose you’re still a little bit of a celebrity for a few days. I didn’t like that I got my ass kicked and that everybody watched me get my ass kicked, but I did like that I was not anonymous. It was similar to bombing in comedy, really. When it first happens you think that nothing could be more humiliating. Everybody is looking at you; some are horrified and pitying, some sadists are enjoying it. But either way, even if it’s just for one day, everybody respects you for trying. And you realize you didn’t die from it.

In those days, you had to fight for your train pass. The school would give you a pass that would enable you to travel for free on public transportation for a year. And every other kid in school knew that. Why didn’t they just make them out of gold and stick them around your neck? In 1970s New York, the subway was violent and crime-ridden. And so you had to get beat up to defend your right to keep the pass so that you could get mugged on the subway on the way home.

I won some fights, too, but even when I won I still lost. There was this skinny black kid named Walter who was messing with me one day. We fought in front of the school and I emerged victorious. I got the better of him, as people used to say. I gave no further thought to that fool until the next fall, when he came in after summer vacation and must’ve put on six inches in height and forty pounds of steel. There’s nothing more intimidating than when you can see muscles under a dashiki. This kid had turned into a monster. And I had the physique of Avril Lavigne. The first time I saw him in the hallway at school I didn’t recognize him. We passed each other, and at the last second my eyes widened like I had just seen a ghost. (I probably did—my own.) Every time after that, we just nodded professionally. I know he didn’t want to kick my ass because it would bring up a lot of questions as to what happened originally, and that could shame him in his new identity as Black Caesar of I.S. 88. It was what they call a *détente*. He had power, I had information.

* * *

People say kids are spoiled now. Good. It was the parents who were spoiled back then. Now, parents have to spend all this money on their kids' uniforms, Xboxes, PlayStations. Our parents bought one shitty ball and made up these "street games" they supposedly played in the Depression era that were, coincidentally, free. The games always took place on the stoop (free) or the curb (free), and the lamppost with the exposed electrical wiring could be home base (free). The balls would get caught in dirty gutters filled with oven grease, stale cigars, and refrigerator coolant. We'd breathe in the sewage from the sewer grates for two hours. "Go outside and play! It's healthier."

It was never parents watching the games. You'd get the amateur sportswriter on the stoop. It was: "You got no arm" or "He's fast but he's gonna be a fat teenager, you can tell by his calves."

There were two kinds of street games: violent games and games that would turn violent. We'd play skellies with bottle caps. To make a skelly board or to make bases, you'd have to cut up the street with a knife. In Hot Peas and Butter, you'd hide a belt and then whoever found it would whip the other kids until they got to home base. I once played with just one big kid, and he ended up trying to hang me with the belt. His father came home and yelled at him to put his belt back on, which really wasn't the root cause of the problem. I should've said, "Sir, your son's a psychotic. It's not a wardrobe malfunction."

Then there was Knuckles. This was a game where you'd have a deck of cards and the other person would pick from the deck, and if they picked a black 10, for example, they'd get ten soft smacks on the knuckles. But if they picked a red 10 they'd get ten hard smacks. And I forget what would cause the penalty, but for something you would have to suffer a "sandwich," which involved putting your hand on the ground, with half the deck of cards on either side of your hand, and a kid would stomp on your hand.

* * *

My comedy career peaked at thirteen, when I was the class clown. I was part of a class clown interracial comedy team—me and Charlie J. He was as funny as I was, but when he moved to Virginia, we disbanded the act. I was considered funny because I'd come over and start busting people's balls, which in my neighborhood was the ticket to the big time. Black people don't like veiled comments or irony. Their idea of funny is to say something to your face.

When I snuck out of class, I would *sneak* out. But the black kids would get up and walk out like they were above it all. If a naïve teacher asked where they were going, they'd look at him with irritation, like, "You really want to play this game?" If they condescended to answer, it would be matter-of-fact: "The nurse." Or "My mother need me to go downtown to Tillary" (or Adams or Schermerhorn or Livingston—any of the Brooklyn streets where you'd find the offices of city bureaucracy).

And if some substitute teacher from the suburbs said, "But you can't leave!" the

kid would chuckle sadly and walk out after looking around the room to the rest of us like, “Please explain the dynamics here.”

I was loud and attention-seeking and lazy. Today they would diagnose me with Attention Deficit Disorder and I’d be getting some nice meds, but in those days, instead of ADD they just diagnosed you as a loudmouth future asshole. When he saw me coming, a friend’s father who hated me used to say, “Here he is: the ham.” There are always those friends’ fathers who hate you.

Big kids, on the other hand, were my mortal enemies. I still hate people two years older than me. They should have separate schools for each grade. It was always the left-back kids who caused the biggest problems in class. Yeah, that’s a good idea: Tell this kid, “You are not good at school, so we are going to keep you for an extra year. And we’re going to place you in a room with a bunch of younger, smaller kids to further shame you.” Gee, I wonder where that psychological powder keg is going to focus his rage.

Some people say about kids who enjoy watching their peers get hurt, “Oh, kids can be so cruel.” Really? You ever see the celebrities at a boxing match? These are the richest and most successful people in the world. They are role models. And they pay thousands of dollars to get a seat up front to watch bloodshed and brain damage. They could be spending that Saturday night at a cancer ward. People either say bullying is the worst thing ever or they try to put a positive spin on it—it builds character. I suppose if by “character” you mean that you cover your teeth when you laugh because people called you Snaggletooth or you have a twitch because kids made fun of your limp, then I guess it builds character. I guess you could argue that PTSD prepares you for the real world. Sure. But talk to the fat kid, the short kid, and the short, fat kid before you tell me that. I don’t want to hear about how bullying is good for your character from someone hot. Adversity builds character? Yes, if by “character” you mean homelessness, depression, suicidal ideation, and school shootings.

I was guilty of it, too. I made fun of kids. I pushed around a couple. One time, I got beat up after I beat up a kid—because this other kid didn’t like my unsportsmanlike conduct. I won the fight, and then I kneed the kid in his leg as I got up. So this other kid goes, “You didn’t have to knee him,” and *he* kicked my ass, and what do you think his last move was as I was lying there?

* * *

Park Slope’s Seventh Avenue used to have its own fish market, meat market, candy store, luncheonette, bakery, and deli. All the luncheonettes, fish markets, and meat markets were Italian. Bakeries were German. Delis were Jewish. Bodegas were Spanish. If you were in a bodega and under the age of ten, they knew you were there to rob. From ten to fifteen, you were there to buy stuff that you weren’t supposed to buy.

When I was growing up, there was no law. No “You must be eighteen to buy cigarettes.”

When an adult said, “Son, you’re too young to be smoking,” you would respond, between puffs, “I got permission.”

“These are for your mother, right?” the guy at the typical bodega might ask as you

bought a pack.

“Uh, yeah,” you would say, unconvincingly.

“You know, smoking is very bad. It’s no good. Little boy, you should not smoke. That’s for adults.” But he’d still sell them to you. As long as you told him it was for your mother, that was legally binding. It would hold up in court.

To save time, you’d hope to get the guy’s wife. She was always so mad at him about his girlfriend that she actually sort of wanted his business to go under, so she’d sell you whatever you wanted, coldly tossing it across the counter. You got that sort of personal touch everywhere you went in Brooklyn in those days.

In each store, regardless of ethnicity, everyone was rude. Shopkeepers all yelled, in various accents, “What do you want?” At the luncheonette, they would smoke cigars in the face of little kids eating grilled cheese sandwiches. The customers were rude, too: “Give me a liverwurst without too much mustard!” “Give me a half a pound of chuck chop!” “Go easy on the relish!” The customers came out of the womb dissatisfied, believing they were being cheated: “Ma, don’t be stingy with the breast milk.” That’s how everybody ordered. At the pizza parlor it was “Gimme a slice,” and you had the picky bastards who thought they were special—“Not from that pie, from the one under it.” There was always a better pie that was being hidden from them.

The candy store on Garfield and Seventh was Jewish. The owner, Danny, the one who was prejudiced but not racist, had a tragic story: A guy named Chickie jumped him. Chickie lived on our block and we used to tease him—“Chicken Chickie!” and then we’d make chicken noises—but that was when we were seven, so he would only chase us. Danny was in the hospital for months. He came out with a giant scar, and for the rest of his life he went to work every morning at 5:30 a.m. carrying a lead pipe in his hand.

Danny hired this old lady named Mary to watch the store when he wasn’t there, and whenever that happened, word would spread through the neighborhood like wildfire: “Mary’s on by herself.” Down the street, one kid to another would whisper: “Mary’s there.” Mary was not particularly good at watching the store, so it was essentially the same thing as his leaving the place unattended.

If you weren’t in school when you heard that Mary was on duty by herself, you were there at the candy store in minutes, shoving fistfuls of Tootsie Rolls in your pockets. It was understood throughout Park Slope that if you couldn’t steal a week’s worth of Twizzlers and Wax Lips when Mary was on by herself, you didn’t deserve to live in Brooklyn. Candy was everything. Mary Janes. Buttons. Sugar Babies. Bubble gum cigars. Wax with flavored water. Bit-O-Honeys. Dumb Teaberry gum. Horrible. Tea-flavored gum. Stupid. Good & Plentys, which were awful. Sugar Daddys. Turkish Taffy annoyed me, I’m not sure why. Smarties. You would buy candy and stand outside and chew it. A good piece of candy to a kid was like a glass of wine after work for an adult. You’d just feel that relaxation all over your body. *Aaaah*. It was word of mouth. You’d tell another kid. You’ve got to try Fruit Stripe gum. It’s got a full-bodied taste that you don’t find with Bazooka.

The store owners were all different, but they always treated you like an adult: “Come on, come on. Whaddya want?”

They all lived behind the store. In the back or upstairs. People would go to watch these guys get mad. They all had various degrees of anger and irritability. And when

you're little, nothing's funnier than an adult losing it. I'll never forget when the guy from Pergola's meat market or the fish market got into a fight with some teenager and the kid knocked over a display or something and so he came running out with a baseball bat. And it changed the way I saw him. Before that, I thought "He's an old bald bastard," but now I was like, "Hey, this guy's ready to kill over a display! I better be nice when I come in."

That was by us. The candy stores on Fifth Avenue were a little shadier.

There were a couple of candy stores I went into where you realized, "Oh, this is a candy store with no candy." It was either a mob place or a drug place. When I was a teenager I bought drugs in a couple of those bulletproof-glass, five-year-old-items candy stores.

That's why it's sad today, when everything is a chain store. People say "name recognition" is key now. We had real name recognition: Danny, Greasy Jack, Cheap Andy. Or ethnicity: The Greek's. The Polish deli. The German bakery for cake. Not the Italian bakery—"Only go there for bread."

But even by the time I was growing up in Park Slope, many members of these white groups had fled to the suburbs, and black families had taken their place. One was the Shanks family. That was their real name. They had the one gay brother, and the other two guys were always coming back from jail ripped—and this was before jails had weight rooms, so you knew they came by those muscles using human beings as exercise equipment.

The other family—we'll call them the Smiths so we don't get sued—probably had eleven kids, a couple of cousins, and a random uncle or stepbrother, all packed into about seven rooms of a railroad flat with dirt floors. Actual dirt floors. In Park Slope. In 1974. In my neighborhood. And, of course, we were nice kids, so during fights we would tell them to go home and "water their floors" or "rake the rug."

They had a cousin who was very dark and who they called Burnt Toast. Burnt Toast, who was my age, came back from his grandma's one summer and I told him how boring that must have been. "What'd you do all day?" I asked. That was a mistake. He replied: "Every day we'd go down to the creek and one guy would get behind another guy and start fucking him in the ass and he'd get behind another and start fucking him in the ass and he'd get behind the last guy and start fucking him in the ass."

I sat there in shock, as you are doing now. I don't know if he was telling the truth or not, but I let the image wash over me, much as the waters of whatever creek they were in washed these little satyrs as they indulged in the unholy trinity of incest, buggery, and ecstasy. I pictured a Dantesque waterway adorned with the indigenous fauna and flora of the mid-Atlantic. The late summer illumination. I pictured a choreographed Jackson 5 configuration in the sickening late summer illumination, pornography by a literal light in August.

* * *

I was the only white kid on the basketball team. So I gave myself street cred and a ghetto pass. I was one of the first wiggers. Now, I know today some (all) people find that term offensive, but if you saw me in my African nationalist red, black, and green

sweatbands and floppy socks, you wouldn't know what else to call it.

But as we grew older, suddenly blacks started to hang out in all-black groups and whites in all-white groups. I'm thinking of my basketball teammate Trevor, who had a no-look pass that I would try to imitate. We were close. Then one day, all of a sudden, he was wearing a dashiki and we were barely nodding acquaintances. I thought, *You used to sleep over my house*. "Ain't this a bitch," I said to myself, in a black dialect.

There is a spectrum of black comfort in white society.

1. **Likes white people better.** It's the only black guy at the Bruce Springsteen concert now that Clarence Clemons is dead. They've made their decision and they don't care.

2. **Goes both ways.** It's like how Obama can be Barry and Barack. He can like both Jay Z and Kelly Clarkson, basketball and golf.

3. **#TeamBreezy.** They have very little to do with white people. They don't care that Chris Brown battered Rihanna. They say, "Good as he look, he can hit me anytime," horrifying the white community and terrifying half the black community as well.

White people are desperate for black people's approval. The people you hate the most are the ones who love you the most, like your parents. Black people hate white people more than any other group, and yet we are your biggest fans!

The races are like America's children. White people are the firstborn, so they were Dad's favorite. Black people are the second kids, the abused ones, so they still hate Dad. Latinos are the third, caught in the middle and always trying to make peace between the other siblings. Asians are the youngest and get good marks in school but basically are just trying to keep their heads down and not get involved. And Native Americans are the old uncle who owned a house and everyone else in the family was like, "He's not using that! Let's move in!"

* * *

It seemed superfluous when we were at I.S. 88. We were called into a black-appreciation assembly for Black History Month, a tradition that debuted when I was in junior high. We filed into the auditorium, trying to see some side-tit, which was blessedly plentiful thanks to early-seventies fashion. The dean of our grade got up and yelled that there would be consequences for any fighting, cursing, candy eating, or littering. Then the program started.

First, the one black nerd in school would get up and angrily read a Langston Hughes poem. Then we witnessed an empty stage made dramatic by the sound of offstage drums. Three black girls—two hotties and a big girl who was the terror of the girls' bathroom, forever clutching a menthol cigarette in one hand and a fistful of some blonde girl's hair in the other—entered, gyrating to "Soul Makossa" or another drum-heavy seventies African song. When their dance was over, out came the most popular black dude in school. He opened by saying, "This next song is about me." He danced by himself to Curtis Mayfield's "Superfly."

The audience screamed, fought, littered, and cursed.

*Yo, that's your ego. That's your ego, yo.
Yo, I don't even fuck with the C train.
That hat-wearing motherfucker.
He don't know me, but he need to.*

* * *

Black people have a problem with the System. That's why, like Eskimos for snow, they had fifty names for it, including "the Man," "Whitey," "these crackers," "Mr. Charlie," and "they" (as in, "You know how they do").

"Is the train on time?" I'll ask a black guy at the station.

"Supposed to be," he'll say with a shrug, as if he'll believe it when he sees it.

Black people don't like the fact that we're a nation of laws they didn't have a hand in writing. And so they'll make a statement with something like jaywalking. Fastest people on the planet, takes them a half hour to cross the street.

All the black people I know have conspiracy on their minds. They don't trust us. They think we photoshop everything. If you show somebody a picture of some liquid on Mars, they go "C'mon man, you don't believe that's real do you? That looks like Stone Mountain, Georgia. I was stationed near there back when I was in the service. Shit. That's Stone Mountain, Georgia. They cropped that picture."

White cops, black kids—the age-old conflict. They've been at each other for so long they've started to assume each other's traits. White cops talk like inner-city black people: "Yo, my man! What you doin'? You chillin'? Where's your homeboy?" "I ain't sweatin' you, I need to know where your hustlas at, where your ballers at, playa? Where the squad at tonight?" And black kids talk like cops: "That's a 511! That's a Class D misdemeanor! He gonna release him on recog. He ain't gonna run the plate. He lookin' at the VIN number. He from Emergency Response. That's the citywide task force. He got him on a violation. Condition unfounded. He don't need a warrant because it's in plain sight. He gotta call to Command. 10-22. That's criminal mischief. He gonna write it up as 'refused medical attention.' He checking for priors right now. He got a outstanding bench warrant. He absconded. They gonna remand him. That's 527.6 in the penal code. Section 249. Nah, he ain't get out. That's the lieutenant. Yo, LT! The lieutenant's making the sergeant get out of the car first! He gonna request investigator. 'Cause he can't transport him to the hospital without a supervisor signing off on it."

* * *

A lot of the black girls were cute, and I liked this one girl in my class, but we were never able to get past the fact that I was funny and she wasn't shy about calling out the fact that I liked her. The black girls weren't shy. They couldn't afford to be. They had to stand up to the brothers. They had to hold their own against these black dudes that would be analyzing their every move. Not just sexually, psychologically. Black guys

like to lean back and assess people. They have something to say about everything. “He short, so he has a little-man complex.” “He pretty, so he act hard.” “He can’t dance, so he carries a gun and shoots up the club as soon as the music starts so no one can ever find out.”

And women. Men in every ethnic group have their own relationship with women. The Italians and Puerto Ricans are trying to bang half and make the other half mommy them, the Jews are trying to stand up to them, but the black guys have a whole psychological thing that they’re just always trying to provoke them. They’re trying to annoy and charm at the same time. They like to argue with women. I’d go to any city agency and there’s a lady behind the counter arguing with a black guy in line and they’re not even looking at each other.

THE GUY: “Some people get a little power and they want to abuse people but that’s alright.”

THE LADY: “And some people think they can come in like they deserve special treatment but they don’t. They got to wait like everybody else.”

Black guys think they’re experts on women. “She wear too much mascara. That means she likes light-skinned brothers.” Or “Her fingernails are cracked. That means she has more than two kids.” Or “She got too many toe rings. That means she only goes with Colombians.”

Black guys are always analyzing women’s genetic makeup. They’re like walking DNA test kits: “Damn, look at that ass! She about 40 percent Brazilian... She Honduran on her father side... Ooh, Indian and part Chinese!”

They like exotic flavor combinations in their food, too. When a train I’m on stops near a black high school, three hundred kids get on, each with a flavor of soda I have never heard of. There are choruses of, “Yo, kid, run me a taste of that birchberry kiwi!” “What the fuck is that, yesterday’s sour hawberry tea?” “Don’t steal my White Fungus Bird’s Nest soda, man!”

Black guys are also the only people who seem to genuinely not mind being cheated on. They have that sexual confidence. They will say, “Shit, *tssss*, she trynna make me jealous.” They never cockblock. They always want to know that somebody’s “hitting that,” except people didn’t used to say “hitting that” or “tapping that.” I think it was “getting some.” If a black guy saw you with a girl and he asked, “Are you in there?” and you said no, you’d ruin his whole day. “Awww. Why not, man?” “Well, she’s got a boyfriend who lives in Queens.” They would stop whatever they were doing and stare in disbelief. “In Queens? He’s in Queens? And she’s in Brooklyn and you’re in Brooklyn! What is your problem, man?”

* * *

Different races have different ideas about what’s rude and what’s polite. Black people will never break a date or argue about the restaurant choice. Instead, they show up

three hours late, having already eaten what they wanted to.

Black customers and Arab counterpeople are like the oil and water of the deli interaction. Arabs never turn on the charm and they never blink. The black customer will say, “Yo, what kind of ham is that?”

Arab guy: “It’s ham.”

“But is it like that Boar’s Head shit, or—”

“It’s ham!”

“Okay, man. Let me get a ham on rye with...”

“Hurry up!”

“Mustard. Yo, I see you slicing that ham thin. Make sure you give me enough.”

“I give you the right amount!”

But the reason there’s racial tension is that groups’ quirks and preferences all come out in these little social exchanges. White people back down in public but black people have no problem creating drama in public. They’re not afraid to cause a scene. They don’t get embarrassed. Meanwhile, you see white people so well intentioned that they wind up being racist. They hold black people to a totally different standard.

When a black girl is getting crazy in a store, white people will freeze and start backing quietly away. It’s a muscle memory, this sense that, “Oh well, this is justifiable anger, even if she seems in this situation to be unreasonable.” Other races don’t have this same anxiety level. The Asian shopkeeper won’t second-guess. He will just shout back, “Get the fuck out of my store! You go smoke crack!”

White people do exciting shit boring, and black people do boring shit exciting. We will skateboard volcanoes and base jump off a canyon but cause someone to fall asleep when we explain it to them. Black guys can do nothing all day, but when you hear them explain their day, it sounds like they’ve been skateboarding volcanoes.

Black people have a secret society of black artists about whom most white people are totally oblivious. You’re walking down the street looking at a long line outside a theater and it’s like, “Wait, who’s Janelle Monáe?” Black people know everything there is to know about the one black person on a white show who you don’t even think about—some black guy from a show like *CSI* who wins six Image Awards, and we go, “What’s an Image Award?”

We also have a society they don’t know about. Like, they’ve never heard of *The National* or *Parks and Recreation*. Sometimes we try to bridge this gap, and when we do, look what happens. The best example is Stevie Wonder and Paul McCartney, two musical masters of the twentieth century. In the mid-eighties, they decided to help the racial dialogue by getting together and composing a song. They came up with “Ebony and Ivory,” one of the worst songs ever written. It makes you think maybe Mark David Chapman did John Lennon a favor, so he didn’t have to live through that abomination.

* * *

We could teach a course in how not to have a conversation. Every conversation about race consists of saying we need to have a conversation about race and everyone nodding their head solemnly. “Yes, race is a complicated issue,” someone will say sagely. “Yes, race is tricky,” another will say, followed by a few more generalizations. We hate generalizations in our society unless they are about generalizing. Why? Well,

one reason is because people get used to saying the same things and it's comfortable. Here's how it goes:

A SHOOTING OF A BLACK KID BY A WHITE COP...

The black people start screaming...

The white people start stammering...

Some behind-the-scenes activities with the Sharptons of the world and the attorney general or the mayor or whoever...

People make pronouncements about retraining police, changing systemic ingrained attitudes...

The cops are the proxy for the system...

Finally things calm down on their own and everybody breathes a sigh of relief...

Until the next time...

Black people—you showed us the shadow side of the American Dream. We appreciate that. You made us look at the parts of our personality we didn't want to see. Thanks. We get it. Now quit acting like just because we did you evil you are saints.

A lot of my black friends have said, "White people are responsible for all the evil in the world." That's considered a sophisticated narrative and viewpoint. A lot of white people feel the same way. I'm not going to say we don't have a big responsibility for the bad, as we have been in charge of a large part of the world for a long time. But there are percentages. There's no way 100 percent of the evil is on us.

How about we take 80 percent? Are you telling me that all white society is evil and all black society is good? How about 20 percent of your problems you take for yourselves? You committed heinous atrocities in America and Africa, too. You broke Detroit. You can't completely blame the school system for your kids failing when you're bringing them to a midnight showing of *Saw 7*. Quit saying that you will handle your community problems yourselves. You're taking too long. Either we're in this together or we're not. If you have any questions or complaints, come to me and me only. I will handle it for you.