

Liberty

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WOMEN WHO PASS AS WHITE

Thousands of Negroes are constantly crossing the line into the white world, but for many women the strain is so terrific that they break under it



"I thought it wiser to say nothing about my race."

By NANETTE KUTNER

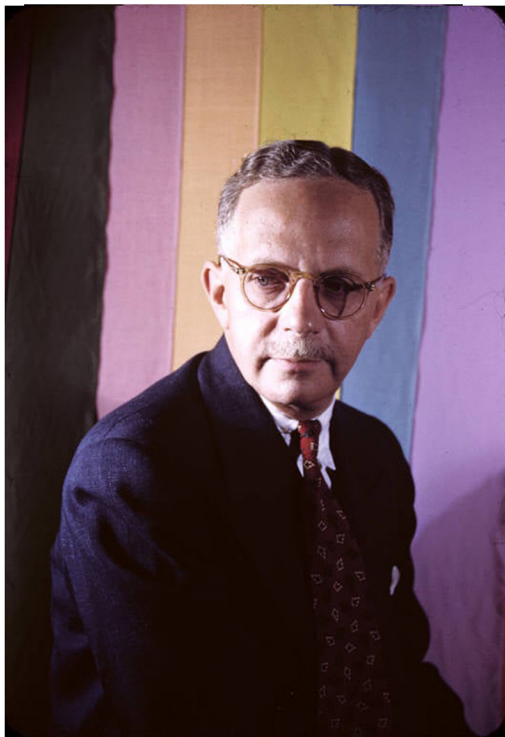
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In most of our large cities and many small towns there are thousands of Negroes who have successfully "gone over the line" and are now living as white. Among them, it is said, are several well-known athletes and members of Congress.

But you don't hear about the Negro women who "pass."

The roving male nature makes it easier for a man to pass completely, though it involves giving up his family as well as his friends. A woman finds passing harder to take.

Commencing this assignment, I contacted Walter White, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who could easily pass, himself. Like most members of his race, Mr. White doesn't fully approve of the practice of "passing," though he understands why people do so. He knew I wanted to meet a woman who was passing. He said, "I have just the girl for you. She attended an eastern woman's college as a Negro. In fact, she earned the highest marks bestowed by that college in twenty-four years. However, since graduation she works in New Jersey—and passes."



Walter White, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

Mr. White promised to have me meet the girl. Finally he admitted he hadn't been able to get in touch with her, which was not surprising. Negroes who actively pass have too much at stake to risk revealing their identity. This was further emphasized when an appointment was made for me to meet—at dinner—another “passing” girl, a reporter. She failed to show up.

My next attempt succeeded. I was to visit a Negress who passes in two ways, sometimes because she is in the mood; more often unwittingly, as she goes about her normal day. Her skin is as fair as that of the Hesperus skipper's daughter, her shoulder-length hair as straight and golden blonde as Lana Turner's.

Although she assured me “white people live here too,” her home is in one of the new and better New York City housing projects for Negroes, her modern, bookshelf-lined apartment a tribute to good taste and intelligence. Wearing well-cut slacks, she was the sophisticated hostess, a young woman who would be at home in any world. She has an excellent job with a government agency where she chooses to work as a Negro. On occasion she does pass. For example, she explained what happened when she took a cruise on a luxury liner.

“I had intended sharing my cabin with a friend who is very brown-skinned. At the last minute she couldn't go, so I sailed alone. Since I was the only Negro passenger, I thought it wiser to say nothing. I went around with the girl in the opposite cabin, and two men. When any race talk came up, I defended my people, but I never once let on I was colored. Before landing, the other three exchanged telephone numbers and addresses. I conveniently forgot.”

She told me about her family. “My brother and sister-in-law are as light as I am; so is their daughter. I feel sorry for my niece, who was reared in a small Pennsylvania town and went to school with white girls. In 1941 she enlisted in the WAC. Upon returning from overseas she found her erstwhile white friends married, and she was no longer accepted by them. She seems utterly lost, neither fish nor fowl. I think her solution will be to move away — and pass.”

◆ I still had to find the girl who was passing for the rest of her life. I located her in a city about 200 miles from New York. I felt like a character in a Hitchcock movie. For I had promised — should we meet

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again—never to recognize her.

She is tall as a show girl is tall and she carries herself beautifully. Her skin is tan smooth, as if she had but recently returned from vacation. The bridge of her patrician nose is freckled, her straight dark-brown hair worn New Look manner, bangs and a silky thinned bob. She was hatless, her tweed suit smartly tailored, her leather pouch bag swinging from one shoulder. She could have been any girl in any advertisement in any of the fashion magazines. I shall call her Gladys. And this is her story, told because she hopes that some day conditions will change so that people like herself will not feel driven to pass:

"I went to a progressive school in Ohio. I was the only Negro in a class of twenty. I also went to a summer camp and was the only Negro there. The day I left for camp, as the head counselor counted noses, she said, 'We all seem to be here but the little colored girl.' Then I raised my hand to tell her I was that girl. Years later the same thing occurred as I was about to receive my Phi Beta Kappa key. The man who gave them to us kept looking for 'that colored girl.'

"I attended a state university in the Middle West. At the time only two other colored girls were registered. We were not allowed to live in the dormitories, but had to board with Negro families whose homes were at least forty-five minutes from the college. It was a long, wearisome, costly trip, back and forth to our classes. And there was no campus life for us. Going to a dance was a farce. I tried it once. To the tune of penetrating stares I danced with my brown-skinned escort over and over again."

So, after graduation, Gladys made up her mind to go to New York City, which she hoped would be cosmopolitan and more tolerant.

In New York, Gladys stayed with a colored family living on upper Riverside Drive. Mrs. K., the head of this household, was not so optimistic as Gladys. "Wait until you've been here awhile," said Mrs. K.

Gladys refused to let Mrs. K. discourage her. She went job hunting. Having majored in music and hearing that one of the better music stores was looking for a girl who could sell, play the music, and discuss it intelligently, she applied for the position. She was hired on the spot. She was never asked about her color. "Wait," warned Mrs. K.

Then one day, while having lunch with the other girls, one of them said, "Thank goodness, no niggers come into the store. I'd hate to wait on a nigger."

Gladys' stomach did a flip-flop. "But why?" she managed to ask.

"Oh, you're just a hick," the girls accused. "You wouldn't like niggers if you really knew them."

And Gladys found herself quietly answering, "I think I know Negroes very well. You see, I've been one all my life."

Shortly after lunch that day, the manager sent for her. He said, "I think you have an enemy here. One of the girls says you're colored."

"I am," answered Gladys.

She was promptly discharged with two weeks' pay and a reference stating she was "a capable colored girl."

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◆ She said to me, "I know that's an old story, but it's new if it happens to you. This, of course, all happened before the enactment of New York's Fair Employment Practices Act. Nowadays—in New York—if I wanted to make a fuss, I could bring my complaint to the State Commission Against Discrimination. This group would investigate, and if they found unlawful discrimination, they would issue an order requiring that it cease and that the violator reinstate me."

However, the incident stuck, striking deeply. On top of that, Gladys heard some sad family news. Her cousin had died in childbirth. The cousin might have died anyway. Gladys knows that. "But the hospital in Pennsylvania refused to allow her Negro doctor to officiate and she was obliged to have an interne. I shall always feel that, because of her color, everything medically possible wasn't done for her."

The cousin's death coming right after the job loss led to deep depression for Gladys. She would have continued to mope except for the fact that she received a note from her college beau, Jerry. He, too, was in New York and wanted to visit her. Gladys felt Jerry, who is as fair of skin as she, would understand her mixed feelings. She was right. His specialty is business administration, and as soon as he had admitted he was colored he had been fired, not from one job but from two. He had grown as despondent as Gladys.

"Jerry was tired of being mentally lynched," she said. "I told him, 'Everything's so cockeyed with us. I'm like a blouse dyed to match a skirt and coming out a few shades too dark, but enough to spoil the whole thing. Off color,' I said. And he said, 'It needn't be like the blouse. The whole thing needn't be spoiled.'"

From that day Jerry and Gladys talked of only two subjects—getting married and passing. They weighed the pros and cons of passing.

"When it came to having a nice home and decent medical care and happy children who would receive, without *question* or *legal fights*, the benefits of our country, we took the step," Gladys said.

Jerry went to the city where I had met Gladys and he secured a good job with a nationally known company. Then they each returned home and said good-bye to their parents. "That was the hardest," said Gladys.

They met again in New York City to be married at the Municipal Building. There they finally crossed the line, for on the marriage license, opposite "Color," Jerry for the first time wrote their lie. In unhesitating strokes, according to Gladys, he wrote the word that did it—"White."

They now own a small house in a group of nice houses on the outskirts of their new city. Jerry is a Rotarian; Gladys has her weekly bridge club and is an active member of her church. Their two children, a boy and a girl, will, when they are old enough, attend the best schools. When people ask about their backgrounds, Gladys and Jerry try to change the subject, though, in a pinch, Gladys says they come from the South and their parents are dead.

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◆ There is one hitch! Most of the local help is colored, and Gladys will not hire a Negro. "Maybe because I'm afraid of being found out."

This complex became a boomerang when the members of her bridge club criticized Gladys on the grounds that she is intolerant! These members must have been more than a little puzzled, since Gladys vouchsafed no answer to their accusation but stubbornly continued refusing to employ a Negro maid. ◆◆

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