

NINA REVOYR

## Foreigner in Marshfield

I moved to the United States from Japan when I was five years old, after my parents divorced. My arrival in my father's hometown of Marshfield, Wisconsin, was announced in the daily paper — Jack Revoyr, the prodigal son of Ronald and Mildred, had returned with a half-breed child. Most people in Marshfield already knew I existed — twice, when they were married, my father brought my mother home to visit, and for many of my grandparents' neighbors and friends, she was the first Asian that they'd ever laid eyes on. I'd come along on one of those two-week trips, when I was a baby, but in 1974 I was brought there to live. My father left me with my grandparents while he went to work in New York, making me the newest, most reluctant citizen of Marshfield. To my knowledge, I was the only person of color in the entire town of fourteen thousand people. Almost all the things I know about the workings of race I learned in the time that I spent there.

I lived in my grandparents' house for a little over two years. And I did live, mostly, *in* the house, looking out at the neighborhood from my father's old room, making up stories to pass the time. Marshfield scared me — a small, isolated town in the middle of Wisconsin, it seemed untouched by the social upheavals, the movements and debates around racial and sexual equality, that opened up the collective mind of the rest of the country in the 1960s and 1970s. The town itself was unspectacular, but it was surrounded by beautiful farmland and forest, which was dotted

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here and there with clean, clear lakes and small, slow-moving streams. The smells of beer and bratwurst seemed to linger in the air, always, mixing with the scent of fresh-cut grass. Most of the people who lived in Marshfield worked there too, for the meat-processing plant, or the cheese manufacturers, or the factories that made hunting clothes and shoes. For those who were born there, the town was both trap and protection. Almost all of my father's classmates got factory jobs right out of high school — or sometimes before — married, and had families by the time they were twenty. For a few, like my father, Marshfield was a place that needed to be escaped from, although he was warned by his teachers not to leave and go to college, because the outside world was sinful and corrupting. And for outsiders, like me, people who tried to make some kind of home there, Marshfield was excluding, impenetrable.

Moving to a small, white, midwestern town from the huge, bustling, international city of Tokyo was a tremendous shock to my system, and while my English was fluent — I'd gone to an American school in Tokyo — it still didn't come as naturally as Japanese. Marshfield, for its part, was no more ready for me, and the townspeople made it clear I wasn't welcome. They hadn't approved of my father's departure, and they'd been scandalized by his marriage; now, in their eyes, he was flaunting evidence of his bad behavior; he was inflicting on them the terrible fruit of his sins. But because they couldn't punish him directly, they focused their disapproval on his child. Both adults and children glared and sometimes swore at me if I passed them on the sidewalk. No one would sit next to us when my grandparents took me to church. Young boys used me for target practice when I rode around town on my bike, and I discovered that apples, if thrown accurately and hard, can hurt just as much as rocks. When the occasional child — out of sympathy or boredom or plain curiosity — made some preliminary gesture of friendship, her parents would soon put a stop to it. Because of the war, the children would tell me, and I didn't



understand until much later what they meant. Many of the town's fathers and grandfathers had served in World War II, and to them I wasn't just a foreigner: I was the Enemy.

When school started, things only got worse. I couldn't hide in my grandparents' house anymore, and school was a string of disasters. I got beaten up in the bathroom so many times that I developed a huge and resilient bladder, which could go an entire school day without needing to be relieved. Strange kids would call me "Jap" or "Nip" or "Yellow-bellied murderer." Groups of older students would corner me in the hallway, force me to count to ten in Japanese, and then mockingly try to imitate my words. Sometimes teachers, walking by, would put a stop to this. More often they just kept walking.

Simply getting back and forth from the elementary school — which was about a mile away — was like picking my way through a minefield. Certain kids would chase me or try to make me late, and while there were several of them, both boys and girls, one girl remains distinct in my memory. Her name was Jean — I don't recall her last name — and she lived at the vertex of a V in the road about halfway to the school. Both sides of the V eventually crossed the street where the old brick building stood, flanking the school on either side with straight, separating arms, so it didn't matter which way I took. But every morning as I approached, I'd see Jean waiting. She was a couple of years older than me, and about twice as big, with dark, curly hair and an olive complexion. When she saw me coming, she'd brighten up and yell out some curse or warning. She'd tell me I wasn't going to make it past her that day, or she'd announce that I had to get off her road. Often she'd ask the question posed by kids all over town. "Hey, weirdo," she'd say, "What *are* you?" I wouldn't answer — perhaps because I was trying to figure that out myself — and besides, in that moment, simple survival was more important than reflection. I'd make some fancy foot move, fake and jab, and then cut to one side of the V. After a few forays in each direction, I realized that I naturally

seemed to go left — a characteristic that followed me all the way through my college basketball days. The road to the left was slightly longer, with cracked, uneven sidewalks, a dramatic jut uphill. But it was the road I preferred. Sometimes Jean managed to head me off completely, and I had to take a more roundabout way to school. But sometimes, despite the fact that she overplayed that side, I got past her and ran down the left side of the V, Jean yelling that she'd get me tomorrow.

While the rest of the kids in Marshfield acted like hassling me was a game, Jean's treatment was different, more personal. My grandparents told me she was Jewish, and it took me years to appreciate the significance of this detail — she too was unaccepted in the entirely Christian town, but with my arrival, she moved up one notch on the town's totem pole, and she wanted to make sure I knew where I belonged.



Things got easier in Marshfield my second year, which was when my grandfather taught me to fight. Ronnie Revoyr — known as Franchie because of his French Canadian parents — was a first-rate hunter and marksman who'd worked his whole life in a shoe factory and then a chicken-slaughtering plant. He was a bigoted man — he used racial epithets freely, and had refused to attend my parents' wedding — but it enraged him that the town did not embrace me. When a group of teenagers chased me home, my grandfather went out to the yard in his work pants and undershirt and challenged them all to a fight. When my grandmother's cousin told me I was going to hell because of my dirty yellow blood, my grandfather threw her out of the house. I've always wondered what it was like for him to see his only grandchild subjected to the racism that he himself perpetrated. Because my grandfather, for all of his faults, loved me. One day, while he was spraying Bacine on my knees after someone had knocked me off my bike, he bit his lip and his eyes filled with tears. He told me then, voice shaking



with anger, not to run away anymore — to stand up to the kids who were mean to me and fight. He taught me how to punch, how to defend myself against incoming blows, how to throw rocks back with accuracy and strength. They were lessons I made use of in the following year, and the irony strikes me only now: it was my grandfather, the uneducated, racist, small-town white man, who taught me how to survive as a person of color.



Just before I left Marshfield forever, something incredible happened — a young black couple, the Millers, moved into town, drawn by work at the growing regional clinic. They moved, in fact, right onto my grandparents' block, just a few houses up and across the street. The intense, swirling hatred that had surrounded me for two years was transferred at once to the Millers. This change was not remarkable to me, even when I was seven; I knew what the people of Marshfield thought of blacks. What *was* remarkable was that suddenly I was included in the discussion. The same kids who'd informed me that I was "the Enemy" now spoke of the dangers embodied by the Millers. The same parents who had crossed the street to get away from me now instructed *me* to cross the street to avoid the Millers. But my memories of my own experiences were far too fresh; unlike Jean, I couldn't replicate, onto someone else, the things I had endured. So I took what, for me, seemed like radical measures — I smiled at the Millers whenever I saw them, said hello when they passed me on the sidewalk. I learned, at seven, a lesson I've known ever since — that I had more in common with the Millers than with the people who were suddenly trying to include me, the people who'd tormented us both.



I carry scars from my two years in Marshfield, and the absence of things that are irrevocably lost. My first language was Japanese,

but through willful denial and disuse, I'd mostly forgotten it by the time I left Marshfield. Close to each of my parents in Japan, I felt disconnected from them both in America — my father because he was white, and my mother because she never experienced racism until she moved to the United States as an adult, and because when people *did* refer to her as Jap, or Chink, or Gook, she had the strength to tell them — as I couldn't as a child — to at least get the country right and to go to hell.

But there were positive elements to my experience in Marshfield, too. The hours I spent locked inside, reading or making up stories or listening to my grandfather's tales, were training time, apprenticeship, for my eventually becoming a writer. And the town made clear, in no uncertain terms, the workings and significance of race. It let me know exactly where I stood, and when my father moved us, thankfully, out of Wisconsin, there was never any question — as there might have been if I'd lived in a more accepting environment — that I was a child of color. I learned to take pride in what made me different, to define that difference rather than letting someone else define it for me. And so Los Angeles, when I moved here, was nothing less than heaven — I heard Japanese again, and ate Japanese food for the first time since I'd come to America. But it wasn't just being around Japanese Americans that pleased me. Los Angeles is a smorgasbord of color and culture — and if L.A. is a city of racial division and strict boundaries, it's also a place where those boundaries are constantly being blurred, where accepted terms are redefined daily. In my high school in Culver City, over forty different languages were spoken. Asian kids listened to hip-hop and jazz. African American kids were fluent in Spanish. I took my black and Chicano basketball teammates to Japanese dances in the Japanese American town of Gardena. In L.A. I also met a number of mixed-race children, and it was the first place where I experienced the simple comfort of finding others who looked like me. Here, people still made racial assumptions about me, but they were somehow less insidious,



sometimes charming. An old woman on my block regularly addressed me in Spanish, refusing to believe I didn't have Mexican blood. Someone would ask me at least once a week if I was Native American. Occasionally, when I had a tan in the summer, and especially when I went through my regrettable pseudo-Jheri Curl stage, people even thought I was a light-skinned black girl. And there were also those who assumed I was white, and who couldn't understand why I didn't take that as a compliment. But here, in Los Angeles, it was clear I belonged, even if no one knew quite where to place me. In L.A. I never felt like what I always was in Marshfield — the only Asian kid, the enemy, the freak.



I would never want to relive the years I spent in central Wisconsin, or wish them on anyone else. But I'm grateful for the time I spent there. One's piecing together of one's own identity is a lifetime proposition in any case, but for me the project was both complicated and simplified by the two years I lived with my grandparents. When I came to this country, with my white father, and into a white community, my identity could have developed in one of many directions. But because of those punishing experiences in Marshfield, I learned firsthand that this country's thoughts and fears about immigration are inextricably linked to race; I know that there are clear demarcations between whites and everyone else; and I know which side of the fence I belong on. I remember Jean, who waited for me at the vertex of the Y, making me choose to go one direction or the other. I chose the side that was more difficult, but it was the one I leaned toward naturally. And I've also come to realize that there really *was* no choice — no matter which way I decided to go, the two roads ended at the same destination.

FAITH RINGGOLD

 The Boy Nobody Knew

It was one of those hot summer nights in Harlem in 1937. Mother, Daddy, and Uncle Hilliard were talking about their childhood growing up in Jacksonville, Florida. When Uncle Hilliard came to visit we never missed a chance to laugh at his stories. Everything he said was funny. We kids would just cover our mouths and laugh into our hands. As long as we were quiet, Mother would forget it was late and we were still up.

Uncle Hilliard was at the door now saying goodbye. Each of us kids could give him a hug and he'd give us a silver dollar to spend on our vacation.

Soon school would be closed and in a few weeks we'd be going to stay with the Pattersons and their kids in Atlantic City. Barbara and Andrew would spend their silver dollars long before then, but I saved mine in my piggy bank. When Mother needed some cash she'd borrow from me, replacing the coins with buttons and washers, though it would be years before I found that out.

"You sure are crazy, Hilliard," Mother yelled down the stairs at Uncle Hilliard; he'd told my father, "Now don't you get no uglier till I get back. You need a license now to walk the street." Daddy just laughed and laughed.

And then the house was quiet. We were getting ready for bed when we heard the superintendent running up the stairs and knocking on every door. "Fire! Fire! Everybody outside!"

Everyone's doors opened and all the tenants poured into the