

Summer of Haint Blue:

From Cajun to Creole

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One

Small, Uncomplicated, and Innocent

In the summer of 1960, I was fifteen and a half, and my world was small, uncomplicated, and innocent. Under the spell of my family's shared history and Southern traditions, I was taught to think of Negroes in terms of racial stereotypes, like possessing an insatiable appetite for eating watermelons or having a broad, domesticated smile like Aunt Jemima's rag-topped face plastered on boxes of pancake mix. Those and other distorted negative racial views shaped my attitude about Negroes.

After befriending several Negroes that summer, I saw them as actual people and not caricatures of people. That revelation stunned me and required serious soul-searching. As a result, I was forced to ask myself an uncomfortable question: Should I, an ordinary Cajun teenager, continue to obey the segregation laws and racial doctrines drilled into me since birth? To understand how I addressed my moral dilemma, you need to know my story, and then you can judge me.

I was christened Justin Joseph Couvillion, the next in a long line of Cajuns who planted their roots in the rich delta soil like the beautiful magnolia trees that stood tall despite the threats of

hurricanes. I grew up on a small farm in South Louisiana where a dialect of French called *Cajun* was the mother tongue and crawfish was caught in drainage ditches on the side of roads. Farm life was hard. Generations before me plowed fields and harvested crops, battling the hot sun, rainstorms, droughts, and floods, and shivered in the cold to eke out a subsistence living. The farm and family were the centers of my universe in those days of my innocence. I didn't know much about the outside world, nor did I care to learn. My limit of perception, experience, or interest extended physically and imaginatively no more than a few miles from the farm.

Hanging on our farmhouse parlor wall next to my grandmother's needlepoint-stitched quotes were photos of my mom, uncles, aunts, grandpa, and several relatives who died before I was born. I liked looking at a grainy photo taken in 1861 of my great-great-grandpa Jean-Baptiste Couvillion wearing a Confederate uniform and holding a rifle across his chest. One of the photos was an embarrassing Kodak Kodachrome baby picture of me nude on a rug, bare ass up. I was fat, with round, chubby butt cheeks, chunky legs like a sumo wrestler, and flashing a wide, gummy grin. I hated that one. But those pictures gave me a sense of security, tradition, and a feeling that life would never change.

I lived with my mom, Ella Mae Couvillion, and grandpa, Osma Couvillion. I looked nothing like my mom. Mom's hair was sandy brown, just a half shade lighter than dark brown, and she had large hazel eyes. She looked like an older Annette Funicello in the movie *The Shaggy Dog*. In contrast, I was tall for my age and had straight coal-black hair, vivid green cat eyes, and a dark complexion. Mom said I was tall, dark, and handsome. But no real girl ever said that.

Since I had no dad, I loved and admired my grandpa. He was tough, intelligent, and an independent man of principles who

spoke English with a slight Cajun accent. When he got excited or angry, his accent thickened. He had been through a lot in his life, from his wife, my grandmother Alma Couvillion, dying while giving birth to their second child, my mother, to enduring the hard years of the Great Depression, when he barely held onto the family farm. Grandpa was respected by everyone and had a well-deserved reputation of being an honest and devoted Catholic.

When I was four, Grandpa brought me to the picture show to see *The Wizard of Oz*. I loved that movie and was mesmerized by the talking trees, witches, little people, and almighty wizard. Grandpa reminded me of the wizard—he was old; ruled the land, or in our case, the farm; and was incredibly wise. As a small kid, unable to pronounce *Grandpa Osmá*, I called him Grandpa Oz.

He could trace our family back to 1770. That was the same year Marie Antionette married Louis XVI, and when my Cajun ancestor, Adrian Amable Couvillion, carved a farm out of the wilderness in the then Louisiana Territory. I wanted to grow up and be a farmer fiercely devoted to the soil, just like Grandpa and the generations of Couvillions that preceded him.

To Grandpa, the farm was the family's land, and it always would be. He saw himself as the temporary custodian of the farm and responsible for its well-being and for passing it down to his descendants. He joked, "I didn't inherit the land. I just borrowed it from future generations." Like him, I had a great emotional connection to the land.

Every Sunday after church, Mom called on friends while Grandpa and I went to Rabelais and Son's drugstore in nearby Cotton Landing, Louisiana. I would slide onto one of the bright-red, upholstered swivel stools at the white marble counter; sip my cherry-nectar Coke, savoring the intense, sweet taste; and, like the hit song, enjoy "watching all the girls go by."

After the soda, Grandpa and I visited his old pals and their wives in the town square. Grandpa and his buddies drank coffee, Pabst Blue Ribbon, or Dixie beer; smoked; and swapped stories in Cajun French about world events, crops, and sports.

Cajun French was the predominant language in South Louisiana until the 1921 Louisiana Constitution prohibited it from being taught or spoken in public schools. In school, students were punished or beaten for speaking this French dialect. White society considered the dark-skinned Cajuns to be poor, uneducated, and low-class whites. Due to that stigma, Cajun parents were reluctant to have their children learn the non-written language, even though it was part of their heritage and passed down for hundreds of years from family member to family member.

But no one could stop the old men from speaking the language they had grown up with. While the men yakked in Cajun about important things, the women knitted as they gossiped or talked about their kids and other frivolous matters. Only the old widow Johnson, a retired librarian in her fifties with thick glasses magnifying watery blue eyes, agreed with Grandpa's point of view. I grew up around Grandpa's friends and knew them all my life. They were white, hardworking, honest, God-fearing folks who mostly farmed. And like most white Southerners at that time, they clung to their beliefs in family, the Bible, states' rights, and segregation.

In the summer of 1960, they argued that the Greensboro, North Carolina, Negro sit-in attempting to integrate the Woolworth's lunch counter was a Communist plot. The recent Russian missile that had shot down an American spy plane was part of that treacherous conspiracy. Because of those unprovoked confrontations, it was agreed that Russia had launched a full-scale attack on America and our way of life. The Cold War had suddenly turned hot. Since the United States was the strongest military power

in the world, they believed we should drop the A-bomb on Russia and put the lawless picketers in jail.

In the square that muggy summer, it was rumored that schools in New Orleans, only 160 miles south of town, would be desegregated in the upcoming school year. Six years earlier, the US Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in Southern public schools was unconstitutional. As the years passed, no one believed that the schools would ever integrate. In fact, the prevailing view held by whites and constantly reinforced by pandering politicians was that the South would rise again, and nothing would ever change.

The consensus was that forcing “nigras” to go to school with whites was an attack on the “Southern way of life.” The men railed that “nigras” were only tolerable if they stayed in their places and argued that the court order was un-American, and that President Eisenhower was a Red. It all smacked of being part of the same Commie plot, and the dim-witted Yankees fell for it.

White Southern adults expected their children and their children’s children to accept and pass down those ideas. And the offspring usually parroted those views and did as their elders wanted. As for me, I couldn’t have cared less about world affairs. I was interested in girls; Jim Taylor, the former LSU Fighting Tiger running back who now played for the Green Bay Packers; Cotton Landing High; and LSU football.

At the time, the civil rights movement was far removed from my insulated world. So I rarely thought of Negroes or segregation. The only Negro I knew personally was Solomon, our foreman. Solomon had always been a fixture and friend in my life. Since neither Solomon nor any of our seasonal Negro field workers expressed their opposition to segregation, I thought they were happy. Like everyone, we all went along with the status quo, observing the rules, customs, and laws that governed Southern society.

Two

Ain't Looking for Trouble

One Sunday, as usual, I quickly tired of all the talk in the square and whispered to Grandpa, “You mind if I walk over to the Chevy dealership to look at new cars?”

Grandpa took a long drag on his hand-rolled cigarette. “Don’t wander far.”

I swung my hand in a sweeping motion, indicating the square of buildings. “Downtown isn’t bigger than a postage stamp. I can’t get lost.”

To Grandpa, Cotton Landing, located in Belle Terre Parish, was about as big as a city should be. He never traveled more than forty miles from the town. It never occurred to him that only in the segregated South was it an average American town.

For me, the farm, Cotton Landing, and Belle Terre Parish were my entire world, and nothing important existed beyond its boundaries. Frequently, the outside world attempted to invade mine by bombarding me with TV, radio, and newspaper stories. I was an expert at ignoring all that serious, grown-up static called *news*. Listening to rock ’n’ roll or football games on the radio

was the only connection to the outside world that interested me.

Grandpa frowned. “You and your mom got strange ideas about the town and life.”

I furrowed my brow. “What are Mom’s ideas?”

“Never mind, just go.”

I started to walk around the square. Cotton Landing was the parish seat of Belle Terre Parish. In the middle of the square, the courthouse stood encircled by a wide cement sidewalk. It was a three-story, all-brick building, and the tallest structure in town. The American, Confederate, and state flags proudly flew in the square. Adjacent to the courthouse were several park benches, trees, and monuments dedicated to the citizens of the parish who had died in the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War.

Facing the square and across the street were the Bon Marche mercantile store, Coco Chevy dealership, Belle Terre Bank, several bars, Rabelais and Son’s drugstore, Fox movie theater, a grocery, a sweet shop, a radio station, and several other small businesses.

I cupped my eyes from the bright sunlight to peek inside the Chevy dealership showroom window. There, like a shiny Lincoln penny, was a brand-spanking-new 1960 Chevrolet Impala Sport Coupe. The air-conditioned, two-tone copper Impala with its wraparound windshield and jet-age, dual tail fins was my dream car. At that time, most people didn’t have the modern marvels of air-conditioned cars or homes. In our farmhouse, we had a humongous window fan that sucked in bugs and blew in a promise of cool air. During summer, we rolled down our truck windows and had a rolling sauna. Some people paid good money to take a steam bath. We had the privilege to sweat for free.

Mr. Coco walked outside and smiled. “Want to buy the Impala?”

Mr. Coco’s Italian great-great-grandpa once sold fruits and vegetables off a cart in town, specializing in the sale of coconuts. Since no one could pronounce his foreign name, Giorgio Genovese, people called him “the Coconut Man.” Years later, the family changed their last name to Coco to better fit in.

I put my hands in my pockets and pulled the linings inside out, then shrugged. “Sorry, can’t today, no dough.”

Handing me a peppermint hard candy, he joked, “Oh well. I’ll save it for you.”

I laughed as I walked off, sucking on the candy and dreaming of that car.

About a block away, I heard screaming and laughter. Curious, I moved toward the sound. In a secluded alley, I saw two Negroes. Without thinking, I stopped to see what they were doing.

A blubbery Negro with glassy, buggy, bloodshot eyes wearing a filthy torn shirt that didn’t cover his enormous belly, stared back. In a threatening voice, he growled, “Boogalee. What are you staring at?”

I stood, frozen and puzzled. In almost sixteen years of living, this was the first time I had been called an insulting name by a Negro. The ones I knew were courteous and respectful.

The second Negro was over six feet tall and all muscle, with chiseled arms the size of an oak tree. He held a bottle of muscat wine sticking out of a brown paper bag. He moved toward me and huffed, “You think y’all better than me?”

Intimidated, I sniveled, “Mister, I’m not looking for trouble.” He hunched his shoulders, ready to attack. With a

raw, angry face, he warned me, "Get set to get ya white trashy ass whupped."

I could smell the putrid combination of cheap wine, body odor, and bad breath. I felt like gagging. He rushed toward me, swinging his fist, and I ducked. He lost his balance and, in slow motion, teetered back and forth, finally crashing to the ground. I saw a large, strong, black hand on my shoulder pulling me and almost screamed. But then, Solomon's calm voice said in my ear, "Come on, Justin, let's find your grandpa." We turned to face the men, and they were gone, almost as if they'd never been there.

As we walked away, I had a flash of fear. What if my Guardian Angel wouldn't have appeared out of thin air to save me? I'd probably be lying face down, dead, in that alley. Still shaking and breathing hard, I said to Solomon, "Thanks for rescuing me."

"Good thing I happened along on my way to visit my mom."

"Again, thanks for your help, but I can get back to Grandpa on my own." I pointed across the square. "See, he's just over there."

Solomon looked at Grandpa's friends and I saw something in his eyes. It looked like fear, but why would he be scared of a bunch of old Cajuns?

"Okay, then," he said. "I'll see you later."

Running as fast as I could, I finally reached my grandpa. Noticing I was trembling, he asked, "What's the matter? You see a ghost?"

Winded and gasping for air, I couldn't talk. Finally, I stopped panting like an overworked mule. "Two drunken Negroes tried to jump me, but Solomon stopped them."

"Are you hurt?" the widow Johnson asked.

“I’m OK,” I answered. “Just a little shook up.” Charlie, my barber, bared his teeth. “I knew that Commie court order would rile up niggers!”

An old-timer with a day’s growth of beard and a military buzz cut whose name I’d forgotten shouted, “Those coons from around here once stayed in their place. Now they’re stirred up by uppity ‘nigras’ not from around here. Ain’t nothin’ ever be the same?”

Always coolheaded, Grandpa stared them down. “I don’t like that kind of talk around women or my grandson. Since my colored foreman backed the boy and he wasn’t hurt, it’s best we let things be.”

His words pacified the men and prevented the formation of an angry mob. Grumbling, they resumed smoking, drinking, and rambling on and on in Cajun.

“Osma, you’re a peacemaker and sweet,” old lady Johnson said, and then quoted the Bible. “Matthew 5:3–9: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be children of God.’”

Grandpa suddenly had a paralyzing attack of blushing embarrassment.

Hearing the widow fawn over Grandpa was weird. It was the first time I sensed that the widow Johnson might have romantic feelings for Grandpa. But I pushed that out of my mind. Instead, I took a deep breath, collecting my thoughts. Those Negroes wanting to bash in my head made me feel unsafe and unwanted in the place where I was born and raised. They threatened me not because of what I had done but because I was white. That was a very frightening and unfamiliar feeling. Thank God, Solomon happened to come along.

Three

I'm a Couvillion

On the ride home, I asked Grandpa, “Why don’t Negroes and whites get along?”

“In farm country, we have good relations with our colored neighbors, and for the most part, we do,” he answered.

I thought for a moment. “In segregated Louisiana, the different races seem to be always fighting. Since Northern cities like New York are integrated, do Negroes and whites always fight?”

“New York is just as segregated as here. The city is separated into Chinatown, Little Italy, and Harlem for the coloreds, the Irish channel, rich whites in Manhattan, and who knows what else.”

“Then why are Washington politicians passing laws forcing people to mix, when people don’t want to, and they’re naturally separating themselves?”

“In the South, we have commonsense laws that separate the races. But up North, the liberals think they know better and pass laws that aren’t followed. So Northerners naturally separate themselves. It’s human nature to want to be with your own kind. It doesn’t matter if you’re white, colored, yellow, or brown. Birds

of a feather flock together.”

Knowing it was a sore subject with Grandpa, I braced myself. “Mom believes that the segregation laws are racist and disrespectful to Negroes. Do you think they are?”

“Absolutely not. God intended people of different colors to live separate and not mix, creating a mongrel race. If I support the law of Louisiana that guarantees and mandates equal public facilities for whites and coloreds, backing segregation doesn’t mean I’m racist. It makes me a law-abiding citizen of the great state of Louisiana. Coloreds have the same legal rights that you and I do.”

I was puzzled. “Why do you think Mom doesn’t support segregation?”

“I’m not sure where she got those funny ideas. But since this is a free country, I respect her opinion. I’d ask that you do the same. Because she’s right about some things. Like, there are a lot of good, hardworking colored men and women who earn respect. Race has nothin’ to do with the worth of a man. But it’s just better that we live separate. If it was good enough for God, then it’s good enough for me.”

Monday to Saturday, Mom worked as a maid in town. While she worked, I did my farming chores with Grandpa; listened to the radio; played with friends; or rode my bike along narrow, serpentine, dusty dirt roads lined with deep, open ditches. During the hot summer months, clouds of dust stirred by the occasional car and wind painted the houses, animals, and people a light-brownish color.

I looked forward to the daily afternoon summer showers that washed off the dirt, formed puddles of water in the roadways,

and lowered the temperature. After the storm passed and rumbled on to drench the next farm, I had an overpowering urge to ride my bike at breakneck speed and zigzag through those dirty puddles, splashing water everywhere, ignoring Mom's warning that I would catch some incurable disease. If I had a dad, I was sure he would tell Mom to lighten up—boys will be boys.

I never met my dad. He was killed in World War II, before I was born. When I asked Mom about him or why I had the same last name as she and Grandpa, Mom was vague. When I asked Grandpa, he claimed my father died before they met. All I knew was that my dad and his family were not from around here, and he got a Purple Heart medal. The medal was awarded to soldiers who were either wounded or killed in war. I treasured that medal and carried it with me everywhere, all the time. Sadly, that was the only tangible thing that showed me he was real.

Mom met Dad at a US Army hospital in the city of Alexandria, Louisiana, during the war. When I was about six, I found a snapshot on Mom's dresser of a soldier in a fancy dress uniform. His handsome face seemed happy and showed potential. When I asked Mom if the mystery soldier was my dad, she answered no; he was just a friend. I never saw that picture again. With the passing years, the face of that soldier faded from memory. But I often fantasized that the attractive soldier was my real dad.

Although I never met my dad, I didn't miss him. But I am pretty sure Mom did. When I asked about him, she got sad and stared into space. When she was like that, I stop bothering her. I hardly ever got sad about not having a dad. I had Grandpa. He was sweet, smart, and kind. I loved him like a dad. Better yet, I knew he loved me back. Mom loved me, too, but in a mushy, motherly way. Since I was her only child, she was always worried that I would get sick,

hurt, or killed. Grandpa tried to keep her straight, but she never listened. I loved her back but not in a gooey way.

As I sat on the back kitchen porch of our old farmhouse, built up on cement blocks, the half-light of dawn announced the arrival of the sun, and the farm stretched and yawned awake. Generations of my family had sat on that porch watching the light of the sun rise over our old barn and fields. The porch was the heart of our farm. Since the house was built hundreds of years ago, Grandpa said that the porch ceiling had always been painted haint blue to scare off ghosts and family worries. The color tricked spirits into thinking they were approaching water, over which they couldn't cross. When I was sad or worried, I would lie on the floor, gazing up at the blue ceiling, thinking of all my relatives who had done the same.

In the distance, there were plowed fields cut deep with round furrows in the soft, rich delta soil. I loved the feel of loose, fresh, mangled earth in my hands. During the summer, cornstalks stood at attention like tall, thin soldiers marching into battle. The scent of tilled earth and sweet corn ready to burst out of its husk gave me optimism and the expectation of an abundant future and a good life.

Like an alarm clock, the sunrise woke the animals. Chickens squawked, cows mooed, and pigs squealed to be fed. Sitting on the porch and looking out at our farm, I felt a timeless connection to the earth, my family's past, and God. I imagined my ancestors looking out at the same fields, seeing the same sun rising, bellies filled with homemade biscuits slathered with grape jam and ears attuned to the sounds of farm life and Cajun music. I smiled in the comfort of knowing that I would never live any other place. Even as a confused teen, I realized how lucky I was to live on a farm that one day would be passed down to the next generation. It was Couvillion land, and I was a Couvillion.