

Michael Bourne

SPOOKS: A PERSONAL HISTORY



There's a shopping center there now, with an Outback Steakhouse and a Ross Dress for Less, but thirty years ago the bus stop in Marin City was a simple wooden hut next to an open lot that hosted a flea market on weekends. Across the dirt field a few hundred yards off was a freeway. In the other direction, past some more weed-strewn fields and up a slight hill, were the Projects, five hulking apartment towers that housed the only sizeable population of black people in other-wise lily-white Marin County, California. Once an hour, buses from across Southern Marin stopped in Marin City and everyone filed out and ran along the sidewalk looking at the numbers on the other buses until they found the one they needed and climbed aboard, feeling, if they were anything like me, the sheepish relief of a liberal, right-thinking white kid who understands that it is racist to be afraid of poor black people and yet nevertheless is.

That was what it was like in the daytime, sober. Now it was pitch dark, Halloween Night, October 31, 1981, and I was tripping so hard on magic mushrooms that I didn't realize the bus had stopped until the driver came back to tell me and my buddy Andrew that we had to leave. The driver was a jowly, heavy-set black man whose sour expression made me think of McGruff the Crime Dog. I think I may have even said this aloud: *Woof! Woof! Take a bite out of crime!* The bus driver glared at us, hard and unsmiling, as if he were counting up all the ways

it wasn't in his job description to take this kind of crap from a pair of stoned white kids, and we scurried out onto the street before he could call the cops.

It was Saturday night and the sidewalk was crowded with people, some in costume, most not, rushing from one bus to another looking up at the numbers in the windows, wanting to get the hell out of Marin City before all the buses left. Andrew and I should have been doing the same thing, but we had forgotten where we were going. Earlier we'd talked about going to the movies, but *which* movie? *Where*? We had no idea, a fact that seemed to the two of us, still riding that first brain-popping rush of psilocybin, hilariously funny. We ran from bus to bus, giggling as we stared up at the numbers in the bus windows, none of which were written in any alpha-numeric system we recognized, until all the buses had pulled away, leaving us stranded at the empty bus shelter in Marin City on a cold, dark Halloween Night, and suddenly it wasn't so funny anymore.

Before I go any further, I need to take a step back, examine this scene through the other end of the microscope, so to speak. This is a story of privilege and its opposite, so we can start with the privilege of being young and high. I'm sure Andrew and I weren't the only stoned teenagers in Marin City that night, but three decades later, what surprises me is how open we were about it, stumbling around in public laughing and barking like dogs. We weren't idiots, though. We understood the rules. The year before, I had been arrested for underage drinking and possession of marijuana. I had run from the siren and it took two police cars half an hour to find me. The police called my parents, and I was sent home with a stern warning. I was a college-bound high school student whose parents were mortified to be picking up their drunk fifteen-year-old at a police station. And I was white. Case dismissed.

Then there is the matter of the five apartment towers on the hill in Marin City that we called the Projects. I didn't know it then, but they had been erected during the Second World War to house six thousand dockworkers, many of them black tenant farmers who had come west from Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas to build Liberty ships at the Marinship docks in neighbor-

ing Sausalito. The shipyards shut down at the end of the war, stranding thousands of people without work, but the apartment towers still stood. In the late Forties and early Fifties, Marin City was held up as a model of successful integrated housing. Jack Kerouac, that eternal seeker of Black Authenticity, lived there briefly. (He calls it "Mill City" in *On the Road*, combining the names of Marin City and that of my hometown, Mill Valley, where he also stayed.) But as Marin County gradually became a wealthy commuter suburb of San Francisco, the white people abandoned Marin City, leaving behind the black former shipyard workers and their descendants.

By the time I came along, Marin City was a small-scale ghetto, an economic desert in the heart of one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, its central civic area a dusty field used by white people on weekends to sell homemade jewelry and reclaimed junk. Black kids from Marin City attended high school in Mill Valley, and I played sports with kids from "over the hill," as we called it, but we didn't mix much off the field. There was no formal segregation and we had some classes in common, but with few exceptions, we white kids were heading off to college while the black kids were — well, we didn't know what they were up to and didn't ask.

Back then, Marin City and its complex history seemed to have nothing to do with me. Until high school, nearly all my classmates were white, and away from the sports field, I knew very few black people. Still, that doesn't explain the panic I felt standing in that empty bus shelter in Marin City. To make sense of that, I need to go back a generation to my parents, who grew up a few blocks apart in Danville, Virginia, a gritty mill town along the North Carolina border. Every year my brother, my sister, and I spent part of the summer there. Grandmand, we called it. Danville was an idyllic place for a kid, small and Mayberry-ish, with a sleepy downtown business district and neighborhoods of sprawling lawns and graceful red-brick homes. We spent our days swimming in neighbors' pools, playing Go Fish and Crazy Eights with our cousins and being waited on hand and foot by our grandparents' black servants, Rosa and Lin.

Lin, the elder of the two, had no teeth and no hair and spoke in a dialect out of an *Amos 'n' Andy* sketch, punctuated by a high, nervous cackle. No family gathering was complete without a few Lin jokes. There was, for instance, the one about why Lin never wore his dentures. Apparently, he had gone to a cut-rate dentist — the “toof doctor’s,” he called it — and when the set of dentures he picked out of a big barrel didn’t fit, he was too embarrassed to ask for another dip in the barrel. Then there was the one about how when my grandparents moved into their new home in the early Fifties, Lin had stood outside the front door in a starched white livery coat and crowed, “I’se Linwood Pinchback and I comes wid da house!”

Rosa was a quieter, more thoughtful person, stick-thin, with a round, withered-apple-like face and large hands that smelled of warm bread whenever she bent down to hug me. She also drank, which I didn’t know until many years later when my grandfather took me to visit her at her home on the black side of town after she retired. Rosa lay in bed, crippled by years of drunken falls, a dark gray skeleton of a woman, her hair and most of her teeth gone, her filmy eyes bright with rage. To me, Rosa was fried chicken and biscuits with gravy. She was the husky laughter that sailed out from behind the kitchen stove when my grandfather told one of his corny old jokes. This disfigured old woman in the bed, drunk and foul-mouthed, was a stranger to me. And yet I’d known her all my life.

What made Danville so confusing for me was that before I was born my grandparents had taken courageous stands against Jim Crow. In 1960, my grandmother, Virginia Bourne, went door-to-door in Danville collecting signatures for a petition to open the public library to black people. The local paper branded her “a known white integrationist,” and she received so many death threats that for a time she and my grandfather stopped using their phone. Three years later, she hosted a series of secret meetings between city leaders and a coalition of black ministers leading ten long days of marches and sit-ins protesting segregation in the downtown business district. Each night, while the events of the day played out on the evening news, the leaders met behind closed doors at my grandparents’ house, with my grandmother as chief mediator. My

grandfather made the drinks, mixing his mint juleps so strong that years later he swore he’d headed off two riots and a lynching, single-handed.

But that was just a story. In fact, the negotiations broke down, and on June 10, 1963 — now known in histories of the Civil Rights Movement as Bloody Monday — firefighters turned hoses on a group of black people holding vigil outside the city jail. The city had deputized its white garbage collectors, arming them with night sticks, and after the hoses washed the protesters down a blind alley, the trash men waded in, beating the demonstrators with their clubs, sending more than fifty people to Danville’s tiny black hospital.

So it was that on that Halloween night in 1981, I was a teenager caught in the swirl of contradictions of what it means to be white in America. In California, where I lived separated from my black schoolmates by a culture of soft and mostly unspoken segregation, my privilege seemed to arise from nowhere, at the cost of no one else’s freedom or dignity. Then for a few weeks a year, I went to Danville and I saw precisely how my privilege was constructed, and at whose expense. I saw how very personal oppression is. White Southerners mean it when they say their servants are like members of the family. Rosa and Lin had been working for my family longer than I had been alive, and by the standards of the day, my grandparents treated them well. Years later, at the gravesite during my grandfather’s funeral, I was stunned to see that Rosa was buried in the family plot along with her husband, their headstones a few respectful steps behind my grandparents’, as if, even in death, she was still loyally serving my family at table.

But I saw how Rosa lived, and it was nothing like the way we lived. Each night after dinner, I tagged along as my grandfather drove Rosa home from work, sitting in the high-backed rear seat of my grandfather’s Cadillac, watching the rolling lawns and gracious homes of white Danville give way to the unpaved streets and tumbledown shacks of black Danville.

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I did not know then, but understood in a way more complicated than knowing, that Danville was a town built on slavery. In the years before the Civil War, Danville was a hub for the cleaning and drying of tobacco. Each year, after the tobacco harvest was brought in, white planters sent their field slaves on flat-boats laden with green tobacco downriver to Danville, where slaves from many different plantations worked together to process the tobacco for shipment. After the war, the emancipated slaves and their descendants, excluded by law and custom from most other work, continued to appear in Danville during tobacco season for another hundred and twenty years, well into my own lifetime.

The winding, narrow streets where Rosa and Lin lived were what remained of that slave-built world. At the bottom of the hill, nearest the river, stood a row of dirt-floored shacks where generations of migrant workers had lived during tobacco season. Up the hill, where Rosa lived, the houses were a little bigger, with floors and side yards and sometimes even a porch with chairs to sit in on hot summer nights. But two or three houses on every block were abandoned, the yards overgrown, the roofs caving in, the windows and doors boarded-over, with "No Trespassing" signs nailed to the plywood. The streets were dark when we drove Rosa home, but outside the windows of the car I saw shapes moving in the darkness, running, shouting, pointing at my grandfather's electric-blue Cadillac speeding through. I often had trouble sleeping in Danville. I lay awake imagining every creak, every oak branch brushing against the window, was a gang of angry black men come to kill us in our beds. As a child, it just seemed so logical to me. I knew how we lived and I knew how they lived, and if I was one of them I would have come at night and killed us all in our beds.

So that was the boy who found himself stranded, with a head full of psilocybin, in a dark, dusty field near the Marin City Projects on the last day of October, 1981. The bus shelter was

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enclosed on three sides and covered in graffiti, with a plank-wood bench along the back wall. It was pitch-black in there, like a womb. Andrew and I hung back out of sight hoping not to make ourselves visible to watchful eyes up in the Projects. My eyes and ears were still doing psychedelic backflips, but instead of riding that giddy wave the way I had when we first got off the bus, I was struggling to tamp down the high, checking each new piece of data that came in over the mental transom against known reference points of reality.

Which is what made the moaning so unnerving. It *sounded* like the real thing, an eerie ghost-song rising up from the open earth. Except that couldn't be. It was Halloween, for God's sake. I couldn't possibly be hearing the actual rising of the dead from the killing fields below the Marin City Projects. And what was I supposed to make of the laughter and the catcalls between the ghoulish moans? That had to be my brain fucking with me. Right?

"You hear that?" I asked Andrew.

But he just nodded and shrank another step back inside the bus shelter.

The first figure appeared a hundred yards off, a complete human skeleton running and dancing in the weedy lot across from the bus shelter. Then I saw another. And another, until there were a dozen skeletons dancing across the open field. They seemed to rise whole from the earth, their bones glistening white in the moonlight as they raced across the field, some moaning, others laughing and cracking jokes. I couldn't make out the words, but the voices were unmistakably young and male and black, and they were coming our way.

The first time I ever tried to write about race in any serious way, I began with a story about driving Rosa across town in my grandfather's Cadillac. I was twenty-two at the time, a bit at loose ends after college, and I had decided to spend a few weeks with my grandfather, writing. My grandmother had died the year before and my grandfather couldn't see well at night, so now I was the one driving Rosa home from work. She was in her seventies by then, much too old to be running that big house, but there she was in the kitchen eight, nine, ten hours

a day, cooking and cleaning and hauling bags of groceries up the back stairs. Every night after dinner, we would get in my grandfather's gleaming blue Caddy, and I would drive her through the manicured streets of white Danville across the tracks of the Southern Railway into black Danville with its clusters of tin-roofed shacks and whitewashed cinder-block churches. I hadn't made that drive in years, and it shook me, partly because a quarter century after the end of Jim Crow, the racial divide in Danville was still so stark, but mostly because I, who had grown up with it, had forgotten all about it.

As a work of fiction, however, my story of driving Rosa across town went nowhere. I had no context, nothing to work with aside from the guilt I felt sitting behind the wheel of that big shiny car making small talk with a tired black woman in a blue-and-white maid's uniform who had known me since birth. I never finished the story, and soon quit writing fiction entirely and took up newspaper work. But when I returned to fiction some years later, it was the Rosa story that drew me back in. For a few fevered years in my twenties, nearly everything I wrote touched, directly or indirectly, on that nightly drive across town, on the five short minutes it took to pass between the world of broad avenues and stately trees I had grown up with to the squalid shacks and backyard chicken coops on Rosa's side of town.

Over time, that simple image metastasized into a full-blown novel, and not just any novel, but a big, fat multi-generational epic about race and violence in America. I moved to Richmond, Virginia, a few hours north of Danville, where I taught at a local university and drove to Danville on weekends to research my book. When asked, I told people I was studying the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement in Danville, and indeed I learned a great deal about the events of Bloody Monday and met many people, white and black, who had worked to preserve or destroy Jim Crow in Danville. But what I recall most vividly from those research trips are the moments that laid bare my own racial tripwires. Early on, I befriended a black city councilwoman who talked with me for hours about race and history and invited me to her home for dinner. Sitting with her and her family eating country ham with biscuits and collard greens, I felt, not without a flush of self-congratulatory pride, like a living

embodiment of the line from Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in which he envisions a day when the "sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

The next day she took me to a housing project where the kids she saw in her day job as a middle-school counselor lived. In particular, she wanted me to meet a former student of hers who had joined a gang, served time in a prison camp, and was now back in Danville, clean and sober and working as a counselor at a city-run after-school program.

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He was a towering, moon-faced young man in his early twenties, tattooed and muscular in the way you'd expect of a man just out of jail, but also friendly and happy to talk. It was late afternoon on a school day and we were on a grassy lawn surrounded by children riding bicycles and playing Double Dutch. I was, by any rational standard, perfectly safe. But racism is its own mind-altering substance. Standing on that sunny lawn, I couldn't see the actual man in front of me, a big, friendly kid a few years younger than me trying to move on from a rough patch in his life. What I saw was a Glock-wielding drug dealer from television. A mugger. A rapist. A thief. He was smiling and telling stories, trying to make some kind of connection, but all I saw was that angry black man of my childhood clambering up the drainpipe of my grandparents' house, coming to kill us in our beds. All I saw was a large black man with jailhouse tats and a criminal history, and I froze, unable to make simple conversation, until my friend the city councilwoman made some excuse and dragged me away to her car.

"What *happened* to you back there?" she asked as we drove off. That was twenty years ago and I've been trying to answer her question ever since.

At the bus shelter in Marin City, Andrew and I had a choice. We were about to be overrun by an army of dancing skeletons, and we could stay at the bus shelter, where there was at least some light and a chance of passing street traffic, or

we could run into the open field of the empty flea market. I, for one, was tempted to run for it. It was dark out there, with every chance of getting turned around or lost, but if we kept our heads, we could keep going all the way to Sausalito where there were lights and cars and — okay, where there were other white people. On the other hand, I was tripping on mushrooms and I had zero confidence in my ability to find my way through a dark, empty field at night.

So we stayed put, struck dumb by fear, as the skeletons danced across the weedy lot, until, one by one, they stopped, their skull-faces trained on us. I had seen enough zombie movies to know what was going to happen next. They would sweep across the road, a swarm of hungry zombies, and set upon us, slashing and gnawing at our flesh until we were nothing but skeletons like them. Instead, one of them stepped into the pool of light from a street lamp and transformed from a flesh-eating zombie into a skinny black kid, naked except for a pair of shorts, the bones of his skeleton painted on his skin in Day-Glo white. One after another, the skeletons stepped into the light and turned into teenagers dressed for Halloween.

To someone tripping on mushrooms, this was brain-meltingly cool. And also not. From the start, the not-high part of me had known that I probably wasn't seeing actual zombie skeletons come to eat my flesh. In a way, though, that would have been easier to take because it would have meant Andrew and I were just having some sort of mutual bad trip. Bad trips were scary, but they existed only in your imagination. The kids drifting across the street toward us, on the other hand, were very real. There were a dozen of them, taller, older black kids from Marin City, who pooled around us in a ragged half-circle at the bus shelter, wanting to know who we were and why we were hanging around the bus shelter when it was obvious that no bus was coming.

We told them our names and tried to explain the forgotten movie and the missed transfer. It was a surreal conversation, partly because we were tripping our brains out, but also because, drugs or no drugs, it is a little surreal to be standing at a bus stop in the middle of nowhere talking to a bunch of half-naked kids painted up to look like skeletons. Mostly, though, I

was just scared. Because I knew what was coming. I saw it in the way a few of the guys toward the back were watching us, sizing us up and whispering to each other.

"Nice jacket, man," one of them said finally, stepping out of the crowd.

I thanked him, trying to inject a note of cool into my voice, as though I thought he was merely complimenting me on my jacket.

"No, I'm serious," he said, edging closer. "That there's a cool jacket. Adidas, right?"

It was, in fact, the top half of a yellow Adidas track suit I had recently bought and now wore everywhere. I looked around, but all I saw was a circle of floating Day-Glo skulls watching me.

"Always wanted me an Adidas jacket," the kid said, fingering the zippered collar.

There is a code among teenage boys of every race and class that when another guy touches a thing that belongs to you, whether it's your girlfriend, your lunch money, or your new Adidas warm-up jacket, you have to fight him or let him take it. It's primal, this code. No one has to explain it to you. Everyone in that circle of guys saw what was happening, and Andrew and I saw it, too, that I was too small and frightened to risk getting my ass kicked over a yellow warm-up jacket. Maybe another night this would have been the cause of laughter and cat-calling. Instead, things got very quiet. I was being shamed, and it was shameful to watch. The floating skulls bent downward, watching out of the corners of their painted eye sockets.

"Aw, let him be," a voice piped up from the back. "That's Bourne. He's all right. I played football with him."

When I turned to look at the kid who had spoken up, I saw that under the layers of Day-Glo, his prominent brow and tiny curled ears looked blessedly familiar.

"A.D.?" I said.

"Yeah — Bourne, right?" A.D. said. "From Pop Warner. I remember you, man. You was our left tackle."

This was true. I didn't know A.D.'s last name, or his first name for that matter, because everyone called him A.D., but I did know him. We had played on the same Pop Warner football team when we were thirteen — me as our left tackle, A.D.

as our tight end. I said the name of our coach, not because I cared about the coach, but because it established that I was the Bourne A.D. remembered from Pop Warner. It was the right call, though, because another kid in the crowd had played for the same coach a year or two earlier, and before I knew it, the three of us were talking about wind sprints and two-a-day practices and how come that team never won any football games.

I have always wondered why A.D. stood up for me that night. It is possible I said something nice to him in the locker room once, or simply did him the courtesy of acknowledging his existence on our informally segregated high school campus. Or maybe it had nothing to do with me. Maybe the kid who wanted my jacket was a bully, always picking on smaller kids, and A.D. just wanted him to back off. I'll never know.

But perhaps that's the wrong question to ask about this story. A better question might be why I was so terrified when I

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realized Andrew and I had missed our bus and were stuck in Marin City after dark. And what about all those other kids there that night, the ones I hadn't played Pop Warner football with? We were roughly the same age, went to the same school,

and lived a few miles from each other, so why is it that, except for A.D. and me, we were all perfect strangers?

That, it seems to me now, is what this story is about, what I see when I examine it long enough through the other end of the microscope: I grew up around black people, immersed in a culture profoundly influenced by black life, and yet almost without exception, the black people I knew were strangers to me. I could not begin to explain to you what was going through Lin's mind when he stood at the door of my grandparents' home and said, "I comes wid da house." It shocked me that Rosa, the warm maternal presence of my childhood, was a bitter alcoholic who resented my grandmother's high-handedness. It never occurred to me to imagine what went on behind the doors of

the big beige towers we called the Projects. Black life was, to me, one great blank slate.

I don't think this sets me apart from the great majority of white people of my era, but unlike most white people of my era, I grew up to be a writer determined to write a big, fat novel about racial injustice, and there America's color line, and my own failure to cross it, cost me. To write about people you have to inhabit them, see what they see, feel what they feel, and when it came to the black people I wanted to write about, I had no meaningful access to their inner lives.

The novel I wrote — or, rather, tried to write — about Danville was set in 1946, and focuses on a strike at the city's cotton mill. In the book, a group of black war veterans just back from the battlefield cross the picket line to take jobs held by striking members of an all-white textile workers' union. In retaliation, the white mill workers kidnap a black scab and take him out into the woods, where they tie him to a tree and paint him white, the color he so clearly wishes to be. They only mean to scare him, but they're drunk and full of rage and they shoot him, setting the plot in motion. All this was easy enough to write. It took no great leap of imagination to see why black soldiers returning from combat would be willing to break a strike by an all-white union, and once the black strikebreaker is shot, it wasn't hard to understand how and why the black community would do everything it could to fight back.

But then the black characters had to *talk*.

Part of my problem was that while I grew up hearing black Southern accents, I never spoke that way myself and knew no one in my adult life who did. But good dialogue is more than just sound. Dialogue feels fresh and true when it opens a window on a character's view of the world, and when it came to my black characters, I couldn't get it to sound right. I spent years tinkering with the dialogue of my black characters, fussing over verb tenses, taking out the g's at the end of gerunds and putting them back in, and the dialogue never got any better because I knew just enough to know it sounded wrong, but not enough to get it right. This is part of the reason I made all those research trips to Danville. The facts about the segregated South I could learn from a book. What I wanted to know was

how people who lived in that world thought and felt — and what I learned was that, faced with a latter-day version of the young black men I was writing about, I was so paralyzed by fear I couldn't speak.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois describes the "double-consciousness" felt by black people in the presence of whites. It is, he says,

a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

This passage is famous for how well it nails the peculiar madness of forever being seen as both human and not — both a person and a stereotypical black man. The passage, however, leaves unexplored the peculiar madness of the white observer, forever unable to see the human being before him under the layers of myth and stereotype. That was the madness — the hallucinogen of America's color line, if you will — that afflicted me that day in Danville when I saw the smiling moon-faced kid in front of me trying to make a connection, but reacted only to the constellation of fears and prejudices my upbringing taught me to see when looking at a young black man.

In the end, I gave up on my big, fat novel about race in America, which now resides in a lonely file on my hard drive, where I sometimes peek at it with the same mix of fondness and embarrassment I feel when I see pictures of my teenaged self with feathered blond hair and a broad stoner's grin. But I don't regret the years I spent researching and writing that book. I set out to expose racism in others, and found instead how deeply my fears had worked their way into my own imagination. I learned the hard way that there is no way to understand, much less write about, racism without first experiencing it in yourself, not because doing so magically cures you of racism, but because it permits you to see the distortion field in your

own vision. I am still me, a product of a world that taught me black people were either grinning servants or hardened criminals. Every time I'm in a social situation with a person of color that strays beyond the superficial, I feel that distortion field rise again in my vision, that ancient hallucinogen kicking in. What is different today is that I know it's there, and when I am being mindful, I can see past the layers of myth and stereotype to the fellow human being sitting across from me.

That, finally, is what is so remarkable about what A.D. did for me that long-ago night in Marin City. Yes, he saved me from humiliation and possibly an ass-kicking, but he did it by seeing me not as a frightened white boy who had wandered where he didn't belong, but as a real and particularized human being: a kid he played football with. I had to fly across the country and spend years of my life researching a book I would never finish to master that species of creative imagination. A.D. just did it. He saved me, at no small risk to his own reputation, by swatting away the stereotypes Marin City kids no doubt had about white kids from "over the hill" and treating me as an equal.