

ABOUT NOT MAKING NICE

[NB: Check the byline – this is a personal essay by me, Rayne.]

Not long ago my mother told me about an incident she found puzzling. She has an odd habit of telling me certain uncomfortable stories in a casual manner, sandwiched between other day-to-day topics; it may take some mental stuttering before I realize what it was she *really* told me.

Like the time she was talking about her shift in the emergency room and dropped in a passing remark that humans burnt to a crisp smell like chicken. She simply continued on, “Last night was so busy, there must have been a full moon...”

And of course I realized then as I picked my jaw up from off the floor that she needed to unload or run mad with PTSD. We share the horror she dumped on me but at least she was validated and she’s not alone with her burden.

This summer over lunch at a quaint little cafe she told me the refrigerator and stove in my parents’ Florida home needed to be replaced. My father went to the local Big Box Hardware Behemoth to replace them using the store’s credit card.

The store called her and asked her if she knew someone had the store card and was buying appliances with it. “Yes, my husband has the card,” she told the cashier. “How odd was that?” she asked me, before taking a bite from her salad and telling me about the new appliances.

Wait. Back the fuck up. I know my eyes must have bugged out of my head at this point. I asked her to repeat everything she said. My dad had a Big Box store credit card he opened to buy building supplies and appliances when they built their home a dozen years ago. He’s used it without problem up north. But now, in Florida this summer, he was told to wait until the cashier

looked up his home's hardline phone number and called the house to make sure he's legit.

He had his fucking driver's license and other forms of ID on him, mind you. And the cashier still called the house.

The nice white lady with the northern Midwest accent at the home number vouched for him.

The nice brown-skinned guy sporting a darker-than-usual tan because he's been on the golf course a lot was cleared to buy appliances with his own goddamn credit card.

"Mom, that was discriminatory behavior. The cashier was racist. She just treated Dad like a second-class citizen," I told her.

"No. Why would they do that?" She was in denial, but deep down she knew better or she would never have brought it up and slipped into our lunch chat like a rotten wedge of tomato eased onto the top of a salad.

The other person joining us for lunch gave me a side-eye and a nod. We both know my mom was both uncomfortable with what happened and yet unable to grasp the ramifications that her Asian-Pacific Islander husband, who looks like he could be Filipino or Latinx, was just treated like dirt while she wasn't there with him to extend her invisible white privilege.

But that was just a single microaggression. There may be worse ahead.

After several reports that ICE has been randomly boarding public transportation and asking people for their identity papers, I've told my mother to make sure my dad carries his ID everywhere, all the time. I've told her to make sure her to make sure if he leaves the house he tells her where he's headed and for how long, in case he suddenly disappears.

I can't tell my father this. He's a conservative, brainwashed into thinking this stuff only happens to other undeserving people, not a military veteran like him. This credit

card thing was just a quirky one-off from his perspective. Never mind that the current occupant of the White House cast aspersions on the value of a birth certificate issued in Honolulu for more than a decade – which is the only kind of birth certificate my father has, born in what was then an American territory.

And never mind that ICE has picked up brown-skinned American citizens and detained them.

Mom struggled with my admonitions as much as she struggled with the idea of a racist cashier. She's college educated, has multiple degrees in STEM fields, but she can't see what's in front of her, blinded by a lifetime of white privilege. She has to buffer it to accept it just the way she drops ugly things in the middle of the most innocuous conversations.

This summer my mother also dropped another nugget mid-chat; my kid brother was worried about the political environment especially because of his wife and kids. My brother is adopted, of AAPI heritage, and his spouse is of Latinx descent. They live in the Midwest near a large city, so they aren't the only people of color in a sea of Caucasians. But they are still worried based on the little bit my mom wove into her download. Apparently my mom's worried, too, even if she struggles to articulate what's bothering her.

I've lived with the dull background noise of racism my whole life. I pass for white thanks to my mom's StayPuft marshmallow-like genetics. My sister doesn't pass, nor does my other brother by birth. My adopted brother definitely doesn't pass. By passing I hear and see stuff my siblings don't, the kind of racism white people have been reluctant to display openly but have no problem sharing when in a crowd they believe to be all white like them. This administration gave these closeted racists permission to come out and share their ugliness. They think they don't have to spare anybody else's feelings any more – literally, wearing t-shirts at Trump campaign rallies that read, "Fuck Your

Feelings.”

With their newfound openness, I don't need to take the time to make nice and get to know people who openly declare their belief I am not entitled to the same rights they have at best, and at worst lack the right to exist. I'm worried about family members, all Americans by birth, two of them military veterans, being detained and denied their rights simply because they are not white. I'm worried family members who are minors and in K-12 education are dealing with harassment which interferes with their learning.

Imagine how much worse this must be for African Americans. I have only just started to worry about my brother or father while their driving their car, only whether ICE will show up and nab one of them while they cut their grass, mistaking them for immigrants working as landscapers. African Americans have lived with this every day.

Making nice with racists to get inside their heads is a luxury some of us really can't afford. Exit your denial; don't mistake manners-as-survival-tactic for our acceptance of those who would rather see some of us dead.