"[A] wonderfully realized and beautifully written memoir."
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Black Lotus

A MEMOIR

A WOMAN'S SEARCH FOR RACIAL IDENTITY

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For Amanda

All you are ever told in this country about being black is that it is a terrible, terrible thing to be. Now, in order to survive this, you have to really dig down into yourself and recreate yourself, really, according to no image which yet exists in America. You have to impose, in fact—this may sound very strange—you have to *decide* who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with its *idea* of you.

—JAMES BALDWIN

Prologue

After a couple of minutes of small talk, I knew. I knew it was going to happen, tonight. I was about to cross the threshold from just a girl to a girl with sexual appeal.

I was on the verge of my first French kiss and I had absolutely no idea how the hell to do it. Matt began to lean in toward me. Everything was moving in slow motion as our faces came together with expectant tension. My mind raced over how I was going to execute this foreign dance of tongues, when he suddenly pulled back to a comfortable distance and said:

"You aren't black, are you?"

"No!" I said in a loud stammer. "I'm not black!"

"Okay, cool."

He leaned back in and pressed his mouth against mine. Instinctively, I opened my mouth and allowed his tongue to slip between my lips. My mind was buzzing with fear that he would scratch up against my braces. Holding my breath, I did my best to follow his lead. His tongue entered my mouth, then mine his seven times, then capped off with a peck on the lips. I literally counted each stroke of his tongue, and with each touch wished that it would end. The uncertainty of my technique was kill-

ing me, and I didn't want him telling everyone that I was bad kisser.

As our bodies moved apart, I felt an instantaneous disconnect from the boy I had fantasized for months about kissing. With the sexual tension gone, we were once again two relative strangers facing each other in the shadows of the skating rink. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Matt said, "Well, I gotta go. I'll see you around."

"Yeah, see you" was my quiet reaction. I watched as he walked away and reconnected with his best friend and fellow skater boy Robbie, who had just emerged from the back of the rink with his latest sexual conquest. Rushing to the building entrance, I waited for my friends Marideth and Wendi to come outside so we could catch a ride home together.

I saw them smiling and waving as they exited the rink. Their faces were a relief. "Where did you go, Sil Lai?" Wendi asked. I hesitated for a moment, then told them both what had happened between Matt and me. Leaving out his question about my race, of course.

"Good for you! You finally had your first kiss! Did you like it? Was he a good kisser?"

I didn't know if Matt was a good kisser or not. After all, I had no frame of reference. But I laughed and said, "Yeah, he was good," as we watched my mom pull up in our family's eight-passenger van.

I didn't say much during the brief ten-minute ride home. Once we pulled up into our driveway, I hugged the girls goodbye and ran into my house. After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I went to my room and lay on my bed. Doing as I had done so many times before, I stared up at the ceiling in the dark.

My mood was disturbed. A first kiss is supposed to be a happy teenage moment, or at the very least, a triumphant one. Yet mine

was overshadowed by the fact that I had to lie about who I was in order to achieve it. Had Matt asked me the question about my race three weeks earlier, it would have been an honest answer. As far as I knew up until that point, I was Chinese, white, and Hawaiian. But I had just found out the truth about my racial identity and paternity, so what I had told him was a conscious lie. It sullied our already awkward interaction with shame. My takeaway from my first kiss wasn't sexual. It was social. I learned that if I ever expected any boy to touch me, I would have to lie about who I was.

"Passing" describes the choice to identify as a member of another racial group rather than face social prejudice. Passing has been practiced in other cultures, such as Jews seeking to avoid persecution from Nazis during World War II who passed as non-Jews in order to survive. But today the term is used almost exclusively to describe black people who consciously adopt a white identity.

The origin of this practice stems largely from slavery and Jim Crow: the systematic economic, educational, and social degradation forced on blacks in America by law. The system of Jim Crow, which legislated segregation, enabled the disenfranchisement of black people, and institutionalized white superiority led a significant number of light-skinned brothers and sisters to assimilate into white society. Civil rights activist and NAACP leader Walter White wrote in his *Saturday Evening Post* feature "Why I Remain a Negro" that approximately 12,000 blacks vanished into white society on an annual basis. This article was written in 1947, but the message of white supremacy and anti-blackness has been perpetuated for centuries. Fear, shame, and the desire to escape the burden of blackness continues to lead some black people to pass today.

In late 2010, I gave a lecture at Tuskegee University on the

subject of colorism, which is the discrimination between members of the same race based upon the color of one's skin. During the question and answer session following this discussion, many students shared views sadly showing how these ideas persist, even among young people who were among the descendants of those who actively participated in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

Some may wonder how people of all races would continue to buy into the soul-shattering, body-breaking, and life-taking message that black is inferior. The internalization of the belief that one's value increases in our dominant culture—white society—simply by changing the texture of your hair by wearing long, silky weaves, bleaching your skin, or having cosmetic surgery to "un-Africanize" your features. Sources of this message are numerous. It's disseminated on internet search engines and in the magazines we read. The advertising we consume. The media we watch, the music we listen to, the films and television programming we see. The myth of black inferiority is rife in popular entertainment stereotypes, which often depict black people as ignorant and savage. It's promoted by the way mainstream media covers our lives, or in most cases, erases our humanity. Four hundred years after Africans were enslaved and forcibly brought to the United States in order to provide free labor for white slave owners, many of us are still enslaved. Mentally enslaved, since our social hierarchy is based upon white supremacy. Anyone who is "other" than white has to intentionally create their own counter narrative to the repetitive message that black is dirty. Coarse. Violent. Hypersexual. Irresponsible. Ugly. There is also the counternarrative that black is beautiful and brilliant. However, this message is generally drowned out by the persistent message that to be black is to be inferior. But if many of us were honest with ourselves—people of all races—we would also realize that within

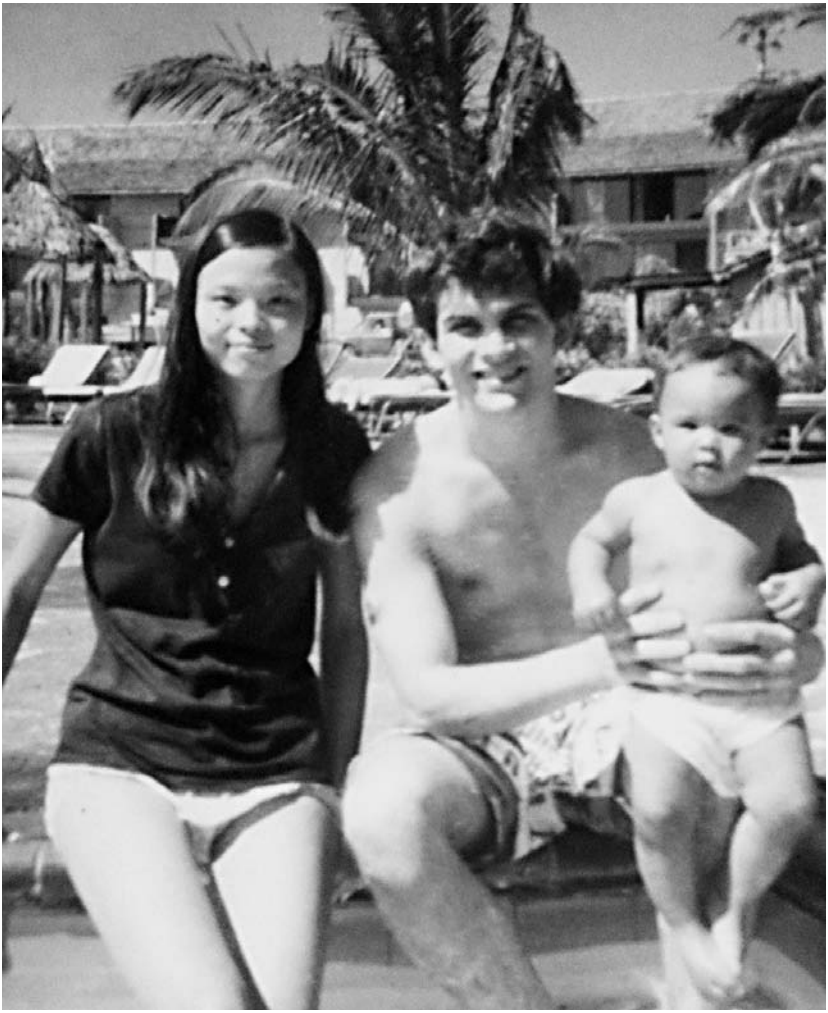
our own homes the effects of the "white is all right" mentality are still being passed down from generation to generation.

Sandra Laing is a black South African who was born to two white parents during apartheid. Prior to her birth, they didn't realize there was African blood in their genealogy. Sandra lived as a white child, despite her darker skin and kinky hair inherited from her parents' recessive genes. But at the age of ten she was expelled from her all-white school after being reclassified as Coloured by the government. Fearful of the social impact this would have on Sandra, her apartheid-supporting parents fought to have her reclassified as white.

Her amazing story has been told in a documentary, feature film, and countless articles. But this practice of choosing a child's race based upon denial, fear, or convenience is not as uncommon as one might believe. Eight thousand miles away in America, "benevolent" racial reassignment by one's parents happened to me. Just like Sandra, I was born into a white family and raised in a white community, with great measures taken to eliminate my black heritage—before I had a choice.

As Sandra matured, she came to see their "well-meaning" racial reassignment as an alignment with the white supremacist power structure. It was also a negation of who she really was. This is a revelation I would eventually have as well.

This is my story of how I grew up believing I was ethnically white, Chinese, and Hawaiian while being raised in a racially and culturally white world. This book is my journey of a woman who as a child initially "passed" in complete innocence and then later intentionally—and my rocky transition to embracing my blackness, both ethnically and culturally, as an adult.



Me with Daisy and Dad in Maui, 1970.

CHAPTER ONE

In almost every family there is someone who for whatever reason just doesn't fit in. In the Baber family, I drew the short straw. My outsider status wasn't because I was moody and defiant. It wasn't because I was always failing at school, and a blackout drunk by the age of fourteen. Both my mother and father were runaways and high school dropouts who had long-term relationships with the bottle. Unlike in other clans, it wasn't juvenile delinquency, mental instability, or addiction that pushed me to the fringes. Unfortunately, in my family these issues were not an aberration. My dysfunction, if anything, was an expression of solidarity.

Like those omnipresent cobwebs hanging from the ceiling that you never see until you're ready to sweep them away, my differentness was based upon something that was hiding in plain sight. I was the black sheep, both figuratively and literally, for I am the only black person in my family.

Looking back on old family photographs today, I have to laugh at the brazenness of Dad's lie and my naïve acceptance of it. We look nothing alike. I had warm pecan skin and curly hair. While

swarthy, Dad was clearly white, with the type of thick, wavy black hair common to Mediterranean men. Despite the obvious physical differences between us, I believed him when he said he was my biological father. He's the only dad I've ever known, and he is white. But not "white white." He was Italian and English and his physical appearance heavily favored his Italian heritage. Dad spent a lot of time working outdoors, so most of the year he had a "farmer's tan." It was dark enough for the brown hair on his arms to seemingly blend into his ruddy, sun-weathered skin. The fact that he was capable of acquiring a deep tan made his lie somehow more plausible. Even though when our family was together in public spaces, people stopped and did a double take at me, the one brown body in our clan.

But I guess what was so obvious to the world wasn't to me because that's the way my dad wanted it. When I was born he "adopted" me as his own child the moment he signed his name on my birth certificate. Legally, George Baber is my "real" father. However, as I would come to learn after years of his lies, my biological father is really a black man whom I've never met and doesn't even know I exist.

Yet, as much as he tried to erase the truth, the question of my paternity was always there. Lingering. Like a persistent, unpleasant odor, the source of which you can never quite discern. My nagging suspicion is what led us to have an annual paternity Q&A that went something like this:

"Dad, are you sure you're *really*, *really* my dad?"

Chuckling, he would smile with his mouth and not his eyes, and say: "Of course I am."

"But why am I brown, and May Lai and Dan are your color?"

"Sil Lai, your skin is brown because you were born in Hawaii, and Hawaiians have brown skin."

"Dad, are you really, really, *really* sure? May Lai and Dan

were born in California, but that doesn't make them Californians, right?"

"Stop asking so many questions!"

And for a time his answers placated me.

I'd seen photos of Hawaiians in the National Geographic magazines that Dad's mother, my Grandma Lou, kept stacked like kindling on the low bookshelf near her front door. While my hips were narrower and hair was much wavier, I thought a hula skirt *could* look quite natural on me once I hit puberty.

As I grew older, something about his explanation didn't sit quite right, but I knew better than to debate him. My capacity for argument at the age of seven was still relatively unformed, and he had twenty-six years of living on me. Even though I desperately wanted to press the issue, I'd leave it alone until the next time he was in a receptive state of mind, which wasn't very often.

I always thought I favored Dad, but as I grew older I was told on more than one occasion that I was a larger-framed version of my mother, Daisy Lui. She was a waifishly built Chinese woman with a five-foot-eight build reminiscent of an Upper East Side Manhattan society wife, and although it might sound like a stereotype, her facial features truly were as delicate as bone china. Her eyes were large, wide-set almonds framed with short, dense eyelashes, accented with salmon-pink rosebud lips. Daisy's jet black hair fell halfway down her back like a cape, which she often wore pulled behind her ears, showing off her elegant collarbone and swanlike neck. My mother's movements were refined, betraying her upper-middle class upbringing in the Kowloon district of Hong Kong. Like many Chinese, she kept her emotions hidden under a façade of agreeability, until you pissed her off.

Then you'd better duck, for she was known to throw the closest thing to her.

Daisy and Dad were roughly the same height, but that's where their similarities ended. His olive skin contrasted sharply with her paleness and their personalities clashed as much as their features. Dad was brutish and loud; Daisy was reserved and wary. Looking back at photos of the three of us together when I was a baby, I strain to see how I could have been so misguided as to believe that I was Dad's biological child. But my sun-kissed, caramel skin and wispy, wavy dark hair appeared to be a fusion of the two adults in the photographs. In the mind of a three-year-old, I believed I was George Baber's blood-related daughter.

Dad's features were inherited from his mother Lucy (Lou) Nicastro, an industrious and fiery-tempered Italian-by-way-of-Hammonton, New Jersey, a town known as "The Blueberry Capital of the World." In her prime, Grandma Lou resembled a more ethnic version of the legendary 1940s American movie star Rita Hayworth. She was noted for her independent spirit, grueling work ethic (a result of a childhood spent laboring in the blueberry fields), her indisputable culinary skills, and the ability to stretch a dollar. She was really something.

Equally renowned were her sharp-tongued criticisms of her two children—my dad and his younger sister, Doni—as well as their father, her ex-husband Ralph Baber. Although I didn't realize it at the time, Grandma was the first woman with quasi-feminist leanings I ever encountered. Her beliefs shaped much of my early, personal philosophies around gender.

Despite her feminist tendencies, Grandma still favored Dad over Doni. My aunt attributed it to the Italian culture's rever-

ence for their sons and the fact that out of her two children, Dad was the one most like her. He was the physical embodiment of Grandma Lou's bloodline—a true Nicastro man. To her dismay, his sister took after their father, both physically and temperamentally. Both had patrician features and a taciturn personality that was as subtle as their gray eyes.

Grandma's obvious favoritism of her firstborn created a complicated relationship between her and her children. Doni resented being marginalized by her mother, and spent much of her life trying to gain approval that never came. Dad and his sister had a combative way of interacting with each other due to the rivalry that naturally developed as a result of Grandma Lou's behavior. But it wasn't Doni who lashed out at Dad as would be expected. Instead, he would assert his dominance in ways that could be outrageous. For example, when I was around nine years old, we took a family trip to pick oranges at a local California grove. It was a lighthearted, family-oriented day that ended in tears when Dad decided to "play" rough with his sister on our front lawn. We were all tossing oranges at each other when Dad hauled off and threw one at his sister with such force that it made her cry out with pain. "George! What are you doing?!" Doni asked, tears running down her face. I could see the large red mark on her pale thigh that would turn into a dark purple bruise by day's end.

"Oh for Christ's sake, Doni, stop being such a baby!" He laughed, oblivious to her pain.

"You know how easily I bruise! Why would you do this?" she demanded.

"You know what, fuck you, Doni. You're always so goddamned sensitive. Suck it up!" he shouted as he stalked away into the house.

Dad's resentment of his mother and sister was perplexing given his golden child status. However, in retrospect, I could see

why he could be angry—at least at his mother. Grandma Lou was highly opinionated and rarely hesitated to share her views and unsolicited advice with Dad. More than likely, her decades-old resentment of Grandpa provided additional fuel for his emotional rejection of her. Instead of completely removing himself from her life, he accepted his mother's occasional financial support, while limiting her access to him and his family. It wasn't until I was an adult that I could perceive the complex facets of this woman who could simultaneously attract and repel not only her own children, but also her extended family and friends.

When I was a teen, I learned the root of her hatred from one of my paternal great-aunts. Aunt Thelma was married to Grandpa's brother, Glen, another quiet, unassuming man. Thelma—whom Dad wasn't very fond of—("she's got Glen's balls in her pocket")—had shared their sordid story with me during one of her visits. Grandma Lou and Grandpa's miserable marriage ended in a disastrous divorce during the 1950s, around the time Dad was twelve or thirteen. The issue wasn't just that they had divorced, but also that my grandmother had lost custody of her children in the process. In the 1950s Grandpa had done what was unthinkable—been granted sole physical custody of their children. This was during a time when paternal custody decisions in divorce cases were about as rare as four-leaf clovers.

Grandma Lou lost custody of her children because she was deemed mentally unfit by the judge presiding over the case. The reason for his decision was pretty basic and rock solid: in what would be one of their last arguments, she had grabbed a long knife in the kitchen and attacked Grandpa. No one knows if she had intended to murder or simply maim him; however, in the fray she managed to slice through the tendons in his hand, nearly severing his thumb. This part of the story Aunt Thelma had left out,

but Grandpa shared it with me during one of my many inquisitions about our family history.

As far as he saw it, losing custody was a beneficent act on the judge's part: "She was lucky she wasn't sent to prison. Instead, she went away [meaning "was sent away"] to a mental hospital." Grandpa would show me his hand. There, ever so faintly, I could see the thin, silvery scar on the webbing between his thumb and forefinger.

The idea that Grandma Lou, a woman I knew as an incredibly loving, affectionate, and generous woman, could be a violent, potentially murderous harpy was unresolvable. As much as I didn't want to acknowledge it, I knew the story was true. Grandpa wasn't a dishonest man and the story had later been corroborated by Uncle Glen and Aunt Doni. Still, it was incredible to comprehend. The grandma we knew was devoted and caring, albeit a little smothering at times, and completely and unequivocally dedicated to her grandchildren. When we spent weekends at her tiny efficiency apartment in Long Beach, California, she would cook huge Italian feasts in a kitchen so small you could barely turn around. She sent us cards for birthdays, money when we would lose a tooth, Christmas gifts, Easter cards, valentines, and even St. Patrick's Day cards.

Grandma Lou did for us the things my parents were either unable or unwilling to do, such as taking us for outings to the San Diego Zoo, Sea World, the Pike in Long Beach, and the *Queen Mary*, which was docked at the Long Beach pier. Grandma was my idol, a woman who worked for years as a clerk in the Long Beach family court building and was able to modestly retire with a small pension, savings, and social security benefits. She was fiercely independent, emotionally tender, and endlessly encouraging. In her presence, I never felt anything but loved. I'd never seen

her lose her temper. It was unfathomable that she'd be capable of violently attacking anyone, let alone her husband, with a knife.

Years later as a young adult I would ask Grandma Lou if the story Grandpa had told me was true. She admitted it was, saying, "It was a horrible marriage, Sil Lai. Grandpa wasn't abusive, but he was completely unavailable. He was like a ghost. A man completely shut down, who simply lived in our house and went to work. There was no communication. No money. Nothing. It was like we didn't exist." She added, "I was just happy to have found someone who would love me and help me with the burden of caring for my younger sister. When my dad died, I was fourteen years old and had to help raise my younger siblings. I couldn't go to college because my family needed me. When Ralph came along, I thought my prayers were answered." She snorted. "What a joke! I was so much younger than he was and didn't know it. Grandpa lied to me about how old he was when we got together. When I asked him his age, he said, 'How old do you think I am?' I answered something along the lines of him being in his early thirties and he let me think that. I only found out his real age when World War II started and he wasn't drafted. When George was born, I was twenty-six and Grandpa was forty-eight!"

When I pressed her to tell me her version of what happened after their divorce, Grandma Lou's eyes welled up. "After I got out of the hospital, I still couldn't see my children. The judge had given Grandpa the right to decide when and if I was ever going to see them again. Back then, women didn't have the same rights as their husbands, unlike today. But I wouldn't let him or a judge stop me from seeing George and Doni. I would go and stand down the street and watch them play in the front yard from a distance. For almost a year I watched but couldn't speak to them or let them know that I was there. Finally, Grandpa agreed to let me start visiting them. Not long afterward George started running

away from home. My relationship with your dad and Aunt Doni would never be the same."

Both of my grandparents were not what they seemed, or at least, hadn't been. The simple, honest man who I knew as my grandpa had in his younger years been a drifter, a ne'er-do-well who had hoodwinked a much younger woman into marrying him with the promise of a stable life after a youth spent chasing women. As is so often the case, people are much more complex than what they present. What happens between a couple is rarely what is seen by the world.

Perhaps it was Grandma Lou's controlling behavior and unintended emasculation of my father that planted the seeds of seething resentment and abandonment in future generations. "Repetition compulsion" is a psychological phenomenon in which a person re-creates past trauma as a way to try to rewrite their past. It's a defense mechanism that leads some to constantly choose the same type of partners, often those who share personality traits with their opposite sex parent. Like many survivors of childhood neglect who grow up in chaos, Dad had an unacknowledged need to bring a sense of order to his life. But youth and circumstances (like the Vietnam War) led him to select a partner with whom he would end up creating an even more volatile home environment than the one in which he was raised. A mate who, despite the differences in appearance, mirrored the emotional instability of his mother.

"In her honest account of her tumultuous, loveless childhood, lost girl years, and her painful search for identity, Sil Lai Abrams opens her heart and bravely owns her story."
—WENDY LAWLESS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Chanel Bonfire*

"Compelling . . . Resonant. I felt her story represented a broader narrative of the black experience that deserved an audience."
—AMY DuBOIS BARNETT, former editor in chief of *EBONY* magazine and author of *Get Yours! How to Have Everything You Ever Dreamed Of and More*

"Her ability to own her identity as a biracial woman with a troubled past is the greatest strength of this compelling narrative. A searingly honest coming-of-age memoir."
—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*

"Like a slow, steady bass line, Sil Lai viscerally draws you into her aching journey to find her place in the world."
—NILE RODGERS, Grammy award–winning composer, producer, cofounding member of CHIC, and author of *Le Freak: An Upside Down Story of Family, Disco, and Destiny*

"[*Black Lotus*] resonates powerfully with generations of people growing up in our multicultural society."
—WALTER M. KIMBROUGH, PhD, president of Dillard University

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