

Our Boy, Powhatan

by Jocelyn Johnson

We named our boy William Powhatan Hunt IV—"Will" for short—but sometimes I call him "Powhatan." The name "Powhatan" speaks of the Americans indigenous to the wild, swampy part of Virginia where my husband grew up. At two months old Will *looks* like he could be Native American, or Asian, or Latino, with his luminescent tan skin and slick black hair.

Will's ethnicity is not obvious when you look at him, but I am his mother: an African American woman with dark skin and coarse hair. Will's father, Billy, is white with sharp blue eyes. While I was pregnant, we would lay in bed discussing the genetic possibilities between us. Would our boy inherit my dense curly hair, or Billy's blonde wisps of childhood, or some strange combination of our most contrasting features—Billy's length of nose, for instance, combined with my width?

At birth, Will was presented to us naked and wailing, red as a lobster. We watched wide-eyed as the nurses prodded him, counted his fingers and toes. Dried off and calmer, Will was the color of sand. I hadn't expected my baby to be so much *lighter* than me; he seemed even more so when they laid him, to nurse, across my bare chest.

"Tell me straight, doc, is an afro still a possible?" Billy asked, considering Will's glossy loose waves. A brown-skinned nurse smiled as she answered: Yes, actually, an afro might still be in the cards, she said. Baby hair falls out sometimes and grows back in differently; skin darkens; birthmarks fade; bright blue eyes change to hazel or brown.

The nurse also shared that she had birthed three bi-racial children. Each of her kids looked dramatically different from one another, but together they created a continuum between her husband's appearance and her own. Days later, leaving the hospital, the same nurse handed us Will's birth documents. Under the category of 'Race' someone had typed 'Human.'

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My family is from South Carolina but my parents migrated north to the suburbs of the nation's capital years before they had me. I grew up in a progressive, multi-racial community, where my teachers promoted some vague idea of America as a melting pot. But for all the talk of black and white mixing, I remember, in high school, being berated by a group of black girls for how I wore my hair—punky and wild to their smooth, relaxed ponytails. You wanna be white, their sneers seemed to say.

I had wanted only to be arty and original; I tried to answer the girls, but never found the right words to defend myself. I was only 15, and could not get my mind around the complexities of race and ethnicity. I did not understand why there were such broad implications because of how I wore my hair. I was bright enough to realize that when white girls wore ponytails they weren't accused of trying to be black. I coveted the expansive identity afforded the dominant race.

After I met Billy in college, we would sometimes visit his tiny hometown in southeast Virginia. Driving past 1950's style ranchers and the super Kmart, Billy would recount racially charged stories from his youth. He had grown up in a town where the "N" word was used early and often; where a senior was sent home one Halloween for wearing a clansman costume to school; where the single black street in town was annexed to the county. Occasionally his peers would jump or be jumped by black kids from neighboring communities. And there was always the shining legacy of the times of their fathers when black folks could not even drive through the town after dark.

Years later, after we were married and started considering children, I thought a lot about the superficial truth of color, and its very real potential to impact identity. During this time, true life stories found my ears as if they were meant for me. In these tales a black mother with a white baby is mistaken for the nanny; a white father with a black baby is stopped as a kidnapper on the street; a bi-racial child is outcast and set apart.

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But now Will is here, lighter than me, darker than Billy. In our Virginia community, our African American neighbors fawn over our light-skinned black boy with "good hair" and grey-blue eyes. Downtown, under awnings of shops and restaurants, white friends compliment his dark locks and naturally tanned skin. Old ladies at a lunch counter tickle his toes to wake him; he opens his eyes to the world and they say he is beautiful. When I tell them his full name they say Powhatan is a good, strong southern name.

Both of our families, black and white and southern throughout, love Will unconditionally. They claim his features—those they recognize as like their own and those they find exotic. They adore him for his sweetness, and the composed way he holds his hands together, and because he is theirs.

As for Billy and I, we still look so starkly different from one another that sometimes, even after a decade together, I catch a glimpse of us reflected in a store window and I am surprised by the contrast. Before Will was born we would sometimes marvel at the one place of sameness on our bodies: the pale pink of our palms. Unexpectedly, with Will splayed out in the stroller between us, we make visual sense in a way we didn't before.

Still there have been moments and there will be moments for us, for Will. There are the questioning looks of strangers wondering how this Indian, Asian, Latino looking boy belongs to either of us. Billy and I giggle when someone asks "What's the boy's *origin*?" The stork, the universe, baby Jesus, we want to answer wryly. Instead we say: He is from us. Look. He is dark and light, familiar and unique, human and divine. Our boy, Powhatan—too expansive for words.