

# One of Them

by **Kirstin Nelson**

**Summer 1998**

Just last week, as I was walking through a shopping mall in suburban Baltimore, Maryland, I saw a sight that made me stop and think... and stare. Standing in the Disney Store window was a mother and her two children. The mother had long, blonde, curly hair and her skin was very fair. She had the look of a busy soccer mom who still had several more errands to run that day before rushing home to start dinner. She was trying her best to explain to her kids why they didn't have time to go into the store and look at the new Hercules merchandise. The children, a boy and a girl, were lively, cute and Black. As I walked by, I paused just beyond the store and watched. Not until that moment, as I caught the mother's eye, did I realize that she saw me as one of them.... a baffled, and perhaps disapproving stranger. I remember those looks. When I was very young I couldn't separate them from common, ordinary looks. But as I grew a bit older I learned to recognize a casual glance from a look that said "You're different," or "You're not like me," or "Your family is not a 'regular' family." Eventually I stopped noticing those looks completely. After you see a few hundred or thousand, you just don't see them anymore — unless you make the effort. There was definitely a time, probably in my grade-school years, that it bothered me a great deal. But today, looking at this mother and her children, my stare was not based on curiosity or disapproval, but on acknowledgment and understanding. Unfortunately, she did not seem to realize this just from glancing at me. I am sure that in her eyes, I was one of them.

As I looked in that mother's eyes, a thousand thoughts flooded my mind. I wanted to approach her and offer some words of wisdom (although I am not sure I have them) or to tell her of my experiences growing up as the Black daughter of white parents. But they began to walk away and the moment was lost. As they walked through the crowd of shoppers, I noticed a few stares and whispers from those around them. I wished that the mother could have known that my look was not critical, but one of kinship.

Later in the afternoon I thought about the girl, with her two tightly pulled braids and pink barrettes. I wondered if she was like me at that age. I wondered if she was old enough yet to notice the stares and comments or if she was still too young to realize that her family is different.

As I reflected my past experiences and feelings, I began to think about how they affected (and still affect) my view of myself. The one issue I seemed to keep coming back to is that as a child I didn't know any other children who had multiracial families like mine. Perhaps that is why I was so drawn to the family at the mall. I guess part of me still yearns for a bond with other children like myself. But the small communities in Nebraska where I grew up didn't have any families with transracially-adopted children, or at least any that I knew personally. And actually there were very few minorities at all in those communities. I feel quite strongly that had I had the opportunity to see, and more importantly to build relationships with, children like myself, I would have achieved a clearer, more accurate view of myself and my racial identity at a much earlier point in my life.

My understanding of who I am as a Black woman in our society had to come from, mostly, my adult relationships and experiences. Certainly, geography plays a role in parents' ability to expose their children to like cultures and people. I am sure that my own parents would be quick to point out that it was not due to a lack of desire or willingness to expose me to these relationships, but location. However, I know that exposure to other Black children and to other transracially-adopted children would have aided me greatly in formulating a healthy racial identity in my childhood, as opposed to in my adulthood. My childhood experiences have led me to believe strongly that neither overwhelming parental love, nor exposure to multicultural writings, art, music, etc., can take the place of relationships with children and adults of a similar background. While love and a sense of belonging are very important aspects of what parents offer their children, there is an essential underlying need for a personal link to the child's culture and for

relationships with those who know and understand exactly how and what they feel.

Today I feel very fortunate to have such a unique background and to have an intimate perspective on both white and Black cultures in our society. I have learned to live as a part of both, without having to choose one over the other. But it has been a long, often frustrating and painful journey. While it never too late to begin, the sooner children start down the path to a healthy and positive racial identity, the sooner they will reap its rewards.

### **Summer 2004**

I wrote this article in 1998 and it was a fair representation of how I was feeling at that time. However, in the last six years my perspective has changed quite a bit. I am now a 35-year-old professional woman and issues of identity and culture are still present in my life. In 1998 I commented that I had learned to live in both white and black cultures without having to choose one over the other. This is no longer the case. I've reached a point in my life where I have chosen one world over the other, at first unconsciously, and now with full acknowledgement. I have accepted the fact that because of my upbringing I am culturally white. I've never truly felt comfortable in the black community. That used to pain me greatly but I've realized that I am what I am and there is nothing wrong with it. Once I

stopped trying to be someone I was not, stopped trying to fit the image of what others thought I should be, I became truly and ultimately comfortable with myself. This is not to say that I do not have some black friends and acquaintances. I do and I value those friendships. However, the majority of the people in my life are white: my family, most of my co-workers, my best friends and the love of my life. For the longest time I thought there was something wrong with this. I felt that I had to, — that it was my duty to, — embrace my blackness. However, due to my upbringing in a nearly completely white environment I simply don't have any "blackness" to embrace.

In writing my story, I do not want it to appear that I am criticizing the way my parents raised me. They are wonderful people and I love them both very much. I simply want to tell my story so that parents of other transracial adoptees can see how my childhood environment shaped me and use my experiences in making decisions about how they wish to raise and mold their own children. I almost used the phrase cautionary tale near the end of this article. That is how I intend it. I certainly do think it is important for parents to address these issues with their kids so they don't end up like me. My parents did what they thought was right and best for me all throughout my life. I cannot change my past. What I can do is embrace and accept the person I am today. I am a transracial adoptee, I am culturally white and I celebrate my uniqueness. I hope you will give your own children more options.

*Kirstin Nelson, 35, is a law librarian and lives in Maryland. She grew up in a large, multiracial family, consisting of five brothers — three white, one Black, one Native American — and one foster sister, who is Vietnamese.*