from *Life on the Color Line*

Gregory Howard Williams
A bright winter morning dawned over western Ohio as I stared out the mud-splattered Greyhound window. My head throbbed from the sleepless eighteen-hour trip. Faded signs drooped alongside U.S. 40. DON’T TAKE THE CURVE—AT 60 PER—WE HATE TO LOSE—A CUSTOMER—BURMA SHAVE.¹ DAYTON 10 MILES announced a white-faced sign with large black letters. My throat ached for water. Mike opened his eyes and fidgeted in his seat to straighten his imitation army fatigue pants, which had twisted around his knees during the long night ride.

“Are we there yet, Billy?” he asked.

“No, Mike. It’s three more hours to Muncie.”

“As soon as we get to Grandma’s, I’m gonna go down to Nye’s for Colonial cupcakes and . . . ”

As he rambled, I drifted into my own Muncie fantasy. First, I would race up the broad wooden stairs to reclaim my summer bedroom. Then I would search the attic for my uncles’ comic books.

Crouching, I squeezed into the tiny attic door. As I pulled the cord, a dim light reflected off the shiny tarpaper ceiling. Focusing my eyes, I discovered two large boxes marked BOOKS. All four of my uncles loved comics, and I was grateful Grandma saved every one. The enticing covers of Captain America, Submariner, and The Phantom flashed in front of me as I dragged a box to the light.

¹ Burma Shave: a shaving cream made famous by a humorous ad campaign on highway billboards around the country
The smell of mildew enveloped me as I leaned inside it. I snatched a Dick Tracy mystery and helped him solve a crime with Sam Ketcham. Out of the corner of my eye I recognized the purple color panels of Buck Rogers and joined him. Perspiration beaded under my shirt. My knees ached from the rough-hewn attic floorboard. Still I hunched over the box. As the Submariner and I broke the ocean’s surface, from across the water I heard “Billy . . . Billy.”

“Billy!” Dad said sharply as he leaned across the aisle. I looked into his face. The Greyhound’s air brakes hissed as it slowed for the junction with State Highway 201. In a somber voice he continued. “Boys, I’ve got some bad news for you.” He paused. We leaned forward, anxiously. The wool of the seat made me itch. “We’re not going to stay with Grandpa and Grandma Cook when we get to Muncie.”

The gears clunked and the bus shuddered to a stop at an intersection.

“Why not?” I demanded.

“Your mother and I are getting a divorce. We can’t stay with them.”

Straightening my back, I turned toward him. He tightened his lips. My stomach rumbled with anger. I refused to believe we could not live with Grandpa and Grandma! They would end all worries about food, clothes, and lunch money. If Dad thought Grandpa and Grandma didn’t want us, he was wrong! Reassured, I leaned against the seat. As the bus bumped into gear, I felt a tinge of doubt. He leaned closer and spoke very softly. “There’s something else I want to tell you.”

“What?” I groaned.

“Remember Miss Sallie who used to work for us in the tavern?”

Dad’s lower lip quivered. He looked ill. Had he always looked this unhealthy, I wondered, or was it something that happened on the trip? I felt my face—skin like putty, lips chapped and cracked. Had I changed, too?

“It’s hard to tell you boys this.” He paused, then slowly added, “But she’s really my momma. That means she’s your grandmother.”

“But that can’t be, Dad! She’s colored!”2 I whispered, lest I be

2 colored: a term for Negro or African American that is no longer in general usage
overheard by the other white passengers on the bus.

“That’s right, Billy,” he continued. “She’s colored. That makes you part colored, too, and in Muncie you’re gonna live with my Aunt Bess . . . .”

I didn’t understand Dad. I knew I wasn’t colored, and neither was he. My skin was white. All of us are white, I said to myself. But for the first time, I had to admit Dad didn’t exactly look white. His deeply tanned skin puzzled me as I sat there trying to classify my own father. Goose bumps covered my arms as I realized that whatever he was, I was. I took a deep breath. I couldn’t make any mistakes. I looked closer. His heavy lips and dark brown eyes didn’t make him colored, I concluded. His black, wavy hair was different from Negroes’ hair, but it was different from most white folks’ hair, too. He was darker than most whites, but Mom said he was Italian. That was why my baby brother had such dark skin and curly hair. Mom told us to be proud of our Italian heritage! That’s it, I decided. He was Italian. I leaned back against the seat, satisfied. Yet the unsettling image of Miss Sallie flashed before me like a neon sign.

Colored! Colored! Colored!

He continued. “Life is going to be different from now on. In Virginia you were white boys. In Indiana you’re going to be colored boys. I want you to remember that you’re the same today that you were yesterday. But people in Indiana will treat you differently.”

I refused to believe Dad. I looked at Mike. His skin, like mine, was a light, almost pallid, white. He had Dad’s deep brown eyes, too, but our hair was straight. Leaning toward Dad, I examined his hands for a sign, a black mark. There was nothing. I knew I was right, but I sensed something was wrong. Fear overcame me as I faced the Ohio countryside and pondered the discovery of my life.

“I don’t wanna be colored,” Mike whined. “I don’t wanna be colored. We can’t go swimmin’ or skatin’,” he said louder. Nearby passengers turned toward us.

“Shut up, Mike.” I punched him in the chest. He hit me in the nose. I lunged for him. We tumbled into the aisle. My knee
banged against a sharp aluminum edge. The fatigues ripped. I squeezed his neck. His eyes bulged. I squeezed harder. Whap! Pain surged from the back of my head. Dad grabbed my shirt collar and shoved me roughly into the seat. Mike clambered in beside me, still sniffing.

“Daddy, we ain’t really colored, are we?” he asked quietly.

No! I answered, still refusing to believe. I’m not colored, I’m white! I look white! I’ve always been white! I go to “whites only” schools, “whites only” movie theaters, and “whites only” swimming pools! I never had heard anything crazier in my life! How could Dad tell us such a mean lie? I glanced across the aisle to where he sat grim-faced and erect, staring straight ahead. I saw my father as I never had seen him before. The veil dropped from his face and features. Before my eyes he was transformed from a swarthy Italian to his true self—a high-yellow mulatto. My father was a Negro! We were colored! After ten years in Virginia on the white side of the color line, I knew what that meant.

Again Dad spoke in a whisper. “You boys are going to have to learn to live with it, and living with it in Muncie won’t be easy. But Indiana is only temporary. Once I settle up the business, we’ll head to California and start over. We can still be white, but not in Muncie. The town is full of the Ku Klux Klan. Once they know who you are and what you are, they’ll do everything humanly possible to keep you in your place.”

The mention of the Klan stirred up frightful memories. At the tavern I heard many stories about beatings, shootings, and murders of blacks, Catholics, and Jews by the Klan. In Virginia Dad was known as a protector of the Gypsies who plied their craft as painters, roofers, and septic tank men up and down U.S. 1. Much to the consternation of the local police and our white neighbors, the Gypsies often camped in our one-acre parking lot while working in the area. One summer we discovered the Klan was angry at us for

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3 **high-yellow mulatto**: description of a racially mixed black person whose skin can pass for white

4 **color line**: the imaginary line drawn between the worlds of whites and blacks in many racially segregated parts of the country

5 **Ku Klux Klan**: the white supremacist organization known for violent cross-burnings and lynching campaigns, especially in the segregated South

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Gregory Howard Williams
shielding the Gypsies, but Dad paid little attention until he noticed a group of white men parked across the highway from us several evenings in a row. Late one night, just before closing, a gunshot shattered our front plate glass window. Dad sat up the rest of the night clutching his German Luger pistol. Raymond borrowed a shotgun from a friend in Gum Springs, and Harvey joined the vigil with his trusty baseball bat. I stayed with them until I couldn’t hold my eyes open any longer.

Dad said he planned to return to Virginia to tie up loose ends. Soon, we’d all be together. He called us the “Three Musketeers.” In the meantime, we’d live with Aunt Bess.

Questions whirled through my mind, but I did not dare to ask them. I feared the answers. Who was Aunt Bess? Was she colored? Would Grandma and Grandpa Cook take us? Were they prejudiced? Suddenly, I recalled Grandma’s quip about the “little niggers” on East Jackson Street one afternoon the past summer as she drove Grandpa to work. But we were different from those kids playing on the street corner. We were her own flesh and blood!

“Dad,” I haltingly asked, “if you and Mom get a divorce, will we still be related to Grandpa and Grandma Cook?”

“Sure, Billy, they’re your grandparents. They love you too much to forget about you.”

The bus pulled into the Dayton terminal. We moved sluggishly to the front. There was a two-hour wait for the ABC Coach Line connection to Muncie. Dad, a step ahead of us, passed through double doors into the cavernous hall. A crackling loudspeaker filled the air. “Hamilton and Cincinnati now boarding at . . .” A crowd converged. A soldier lingered near the doors, kissing his girlfriend good-bye. Earlier, Mike and I would have gaped at them, but now we had too much to ponder. We passed the familiar green Traveler’s Aid cubicle. At the lunch counter at the far end of the building we stood quietly while the waitress reached into a glass case for a cold roast beef sandwich. She punched the register keys while Dad split the sandwich in two. It was our first food since Harvey bought us a candy bar at the bus station in Washington the day before. Dad led us to an isolated wooden bench and dropped
the small, tattered canvas bag holding all our belongings. “Wait here,” he ordered. “I’ll be right back.”

He strolled across the room as I hungrily ripped a bite from the sandwich. When Dad disappeared through the terminal doors, I panicked. I felt like I was standing alone at the center of the universe. With the bag in one hand and the sandwich in the other, I shouted for Mike. We raced across the concourse, pushing our way past soldiers and sailors. On the sidewalk I looked north, then south—Dad had vanished. I had no idea what to do. Finally, I saw his tall lanky figure enter a tavern a block away. Half dragging and half carrying our bag, I led Mike down the street. Comforted by the knowledge that Dad was inside, we huddled in the tavern doorway.

After devouring the sandwich, Mike and I began our vigil. Every few minutes I peered into the tavern window to check the time on the Schlitz Beer clock. An hour and a half dragged by. We grew cold and restless. Mike kicked beer bottle caps along the sidewalk. Empty bottles lined the bar in front of Dad. I recognized his familiar gestures punctuating a pronouncement on some public event. Drunk! Five minutes passed, then ten. I pressed my face to the cold plate glass window, hoping he would walk outside to scold me.

Just when I was certain we would miss the bus, a heavyset man in a denim jacket approached the doorway. Summoning all my courage, I begged, “Mister, will you tell the man in the brown derby we gotta catch the bus?”

Just five minutes before departure, Dad strode from the tavern and grabbed the bag.

“Come on boys, let’s double-time it!”

Mike and I raced behind him, struggling to keep up with his long legs. Though I feared what lay ahead of us, I knew it couldn’t be any worse than what we had left behind in Virginia.

The old, barnlike Muncie bus terminal was a familiar sight. To the north stood a four-story department store with sparkling
show windows and colorfully dressed mannequins. Trash and litter cluttered the street to the south. The gold-and-black sign of a pawnshop jutted over the sidewalk. Sadly, I recalled our countless visits to the Washington pawnshops in the past six months when Dad sold our possessions one by one. Televisions, watches, radios, and finally my beautiful Schwinn bike had been surrendered to keep us alive.

Dad pulled our small bag from the undercarriage and we headed south on Walnut Street. The odor of stale beer and the twang of country music rolled out to greet us as we passed the Tennessee Lounge. I caught a glimpse of unshaven white men in blue chambray shirts and jeans at the bar. We turned a corner and faced yet another sign, this one heralding the **Muncie Mission**. Stenciled below in small letters was the message, “Lodging for the homeless.” A short gray-haired man stared absently from the doorway. Next to the mission was a large white brick bakery. Trays of doughnuts filled the sidewalk display case. I gazed wistfully at them, but noticed they lacked the familiar shiny glaze. Then I saw a note scribbled in the corner: “Day-old bakery goods for sale.”

Five sets of railroad tracks ran alongside the bakery. Stretching east and west as far as we could see, they dissected the city. As we plodded eastward on the uneven rail bed, I ransacked my memory, trying to recognize or remember some sight from earlier train trips with Grandpa, yet it was all strange and foreign. Life was so different, so ordinary, down on the tracks. Abandoned warehouses. Windows covered with boards. Overgrown grass sprouted between spur lines. Dad crossed to the south side and passed a large brown Dague’s Coal Yard sign. An eight-foot barbed-wire fence guarded a mountain of shiny black coal. Beyond the coal yard we heard the sound of cars and leaned across a chest-high concrete wall to watch the traffic disappear into the bowels of the Madison Street underpass.

Barbed wire sprouted again on the other side of the underpass. This time it guarded hollowed car bodies, rusted engines, and old oil drums, relics of a gas station storage lot. We came to a weathered brown clapboard house oddly facing the tracks rather

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*from *Life on the Color Line*
than a street. Two evergreen shrubs stood next to the skeletal vines of a grape arbor. Four railroad ties formed steps down the embankment. Dad turned toward the house. Certain this was Aunt Bess’s, I hopped onto the wooden plank porch. He grabbed my arm. “That’s Miss Lucy’s,” he said, leading us around the house.

Patches of brown winter grass dotted a muddy backyard. Two wooden barrels full of rainwater with a thin layer of ice on top stood under the rear eaves. Next to them concrete blocks supported a weathered gray plank bench. An ugly ten-by-fifteen-foot shed, completely covered from top to bottom with rough, green-speckled tar paper stood freakishly in the corner of the yard. It puzzled me that anyone would tar-paper a storage shed. Beyond it, a gate opened onto an alley. I skipped ahead. As I reached the gate, I heard, “This way, Billy.”

To my surprise Dad stood at the shed. Then I saw a screen door. The peeling green paint blended so well with the ugly tar paper, I hadn’t noticed it before. A sagging spring slowly drew the door shut after Mike. I followed him onto a small enclosed porch—four feet square, no windows, just a thin sheet of plywood to ward off the snow. Beer bottles, water-stained cardboard boxes, and trash littered the porch. An ancient icebox with the top door ajar stood in one corner. Outmoded women’s bloomers and faded stockings dangled on a rope stretched across the porch. Dad rapped on the door. No answer. I braced myself, praying this was not our new home. It was worse than our rental cabins in Gum Springs. I couldn’t bear to think of what it might be like inside.

“Mom must be at work,” Dad said.

Mom! I thought in panic. Was this where Miss Sallie lived? How could anyone stay here?

“Let’s see what she’s got to eat.”

Dad fished through the small icebox.

It was empty except for two beers and some gray hamburger patties. Mike and I winced as the sharp odor of spoiled meat

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6 **icebox**: the old-fashioned term for refrigerator. Before electricity, blocks of ice were used to cool the refrigerator unit.
wafted toward us. Dad opened a beer bottle and drained it with one long swallow. Then he guzzled a second, tossing the empties into a corner.

“Come on boys. Let’s go to Aunt Bess’s.”

We followed the alley to Monroe Street. As we trudged south, I realized I’d never seen so many black people in Muncie before. What bothered me most, however, was the tattered, down-at-the-heels feel of the neighborhood. The contrast with Grandpa and Grandma Cook’s sparkling white two-story home in the new Mayfield Addition was striking. Here, gloomy weather-beaten houses tottered on crumbling foundations. Exposed two-by-fours propped sagging porches. Jagged glass shards were all that remained in many windows. Graffiti-covered plywood sheets partially covered doorways. The yards were small, littered, and unkempt. Across First Street the run-down houses were replaced by a series of flat-roofed two-story concrete block buildings, all a sickly mustard color. There wasn’t a blade of grass in sight, just concrete, mud, and gravel.

“This is the Projects, boys,” Dad explained. “Colored families live on this side of Madison, and crackers on the other. Stay outta there. If the crackers learn you’re colored, they’ll beat the hell out of you. You gotta be careful here, too. Coloreds don’t like half-breeds either.”

An electrical charge surged through my body. Never before had I thought of myself as a “half-breed.” TV westerns taught me half-breeds were the meanest people alive. They led wild bands of Indians on rampages, killed defenseless settlers, and slaughtered innocent women and children. Nobody liked the half-breeds—not the whites, not the Indians. A half-breed! Turning it over and over in my mind, I forced my feet to follow Dad up a long hill, barely noticing a sand-and-gravel playground at the edge of the Projects. We skirted it quickly, and Dad opened the gate of a sooty one-story clapboard house. The ancient wooden porch swayed under our weight as the three of us stood expectantly at the door.

A heavy, big-boned woman, almost six feet tall, with light
coffee-colored skin, angular features, and long black braids came to the door. She looked more like an Indian than a colored lady. A calf-length dress hung loosely over her thick body and sagging breasts. The aroma of cooking grease wafted from the house. Peeking from behind her was a thin, dark-brown-skinned girl about my age.

“Boys, this is Aunt Bess,” said Dad.

“How you boys doin’?” she said in a slow drawl. Both Mike and I uttered a weak “Fine.”

“This is Mary Lou,” she said, pulling the girl to her side. She popped quickly back behind her. “Say hi to your cousins, Mary Lou.”

Cousins! I winced as a muffled “Hi” floated from behind the large flowered dress.

“Ain’t no need to be standin’ in the cold. Come on inside and rest your bones,” she said, throwing open the door.

Raising my eyes, I stole another glance at Aunt Bess and Mary Lou. Colored! But that didn’t make me colored, I decided. I didn’t look anything like them. I didn’t know them, and didn’t want to know them.

Secretly, I examined the shabby room. A tattered couch nudged against a wall. Cotton stuffing spilled from the armrest of a faded green brocade chair. There was no television, just an old-fashioned Philco radio almost four feet tall. I turned to the window looking for an escape. Next to it hung a large collage of snapshots almost two feet square. My eyes scanned the dark faces, recognizing no one. Suddenly a photo leaped at me from the corner. White faces. I wondered why they were there. My mouth dropped open as my eyes fastened onto images resembling Mom and Dad. Certain my mind was playing tricks on me, I leaned forward. It was Mom and Dad! And Mike and I were right between them! Stepping closer, I recognized the concrete bench in front of the Open Air Theatre. Then I remembered when the picture was taken. Dad made me and Mike walk across U.S. Route 1 barefoot and in our underwear because he was in such a hurry to take that picture. I sank into the faded green chair. Was I really colored?
Aunt Bess’s booming voice interrupted my lament. “You boys hungry?” Looking into her brown jowly face, I realized hours had passed since Mike and I shared the roast beef sandwich in Dayton. We nodded eagerly.

“Come on, then,” she said. We followed her through a sitting room and into the kitchen. The crisp smell of burning wood filled the air. In front of an old soot-stained stove, she picked up tongs, inserted them into a large circular piece of iron, and expertly slid it across the stove. Flames leaped from the gaping hole. She dropped wood inside, and then with a clank shoved the covering back into place. She motioned us to a window while she sliced corn bread at the kitchen sink.

I stared at the playground we had passed. It was a full block square, mostly taken up by a gritty sand-and-gravel baseball diamond. A ten-foot wire baseball backstop stood in the corner nearest the house. An empty swimming pool with cracked walls and peeling paint sat in the far corner of the block. Brown weeds sprouted in its crevices.

Aunt Bess placed steaming bowls of navy beans in front of us. When Mom cooked beans I refused to eat them, but in the last six months I had learned to eat anything that was offered. The beans disappeared in minutes. For dessert we devoured strawberry Jell-O mixed with bananas.

When finished, I timidly asked to use the bathroom. “The slop jar’s on the back porch, and the toilet’s outside. Take the broom, if you go out.”

Puzzled, I stared at the corner sink in the dimly lit kitchen. I noticed black holes in the white porcelain where faucets should have been. Some of the houses in Gum Springs didn’t have indoor plumbing, but that was different. This was Indiana. Muncie was a big city. It was 1954. I stared again. Paper bags were stacked in the double sinks. I had not misunderstood. She was talking about an outhouse. Heading for the back room, I pondered, “Slop jar?” As I stepped into a cold, enclosed porch, I was engulfed by the pungent odor of stale urine. I snatched the broom and stumbled out the back door, transported instantaneously to an urban barnyard. A six-foot mesh fence surrounded the entire area.

from Life on the Color Line
Chickens ran in and out of a henhouse. Rabbits scampered behind the wire screen of a hutch. Hay, grain, and farm tools were visible inside a shed. An early morning drizzle had turned the bare earth into a giant mud puddle. Wood plank walkways slick with water, mud, and chicken droppings snaked through the yard. My eyes searched for the toilet, but I couldn’t find it. All the buildings blended into a gloomy barnyard gray. Again I wondered: Why the broom?

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!” pierced the air. I whirled to my left. A rooster stood directly between me and what I now recognized as the outhouse. Turning to retreat to the slop jar, I hesitated as I recalled the stench of urine. The rooster scurried toward me, his neck feathers bristled. I tried to wave him off. He came faster, his yellow talons almost a blur. Now only five feet away, I shook the broom at him, but he didn’t stop. I poked again. He screeched, beak open, feathers on end. Now he was within striking distance. Dad said we had to fight the whites and the coloreds. He didn’t say anything about roosters. I jabbed.

He fell on his side. His fluttering wings showered me with mud and water. I relaxed and whisked him into the mud once more. He screeched, “Nawk! Nawk!” I waved him off, but he kept after me. I grabbed the broom with both hands and waited. When he was three feet away, I swung it like a baseball bat and sent him flying sideways. He began another charge. I turned the hard wood handle toward him. I swung and missed his head, but grazed a yellow talon, spinning him head over heels into the mud once more. I stepped off the wooden walk, sinking into the muck. He frantically sought a grip in the dark water of the yard, trying to flee. I gritted my teeth and raised the broom handle over my head, watching him draw his last breath.

The back door swung open.

“Whoa, boy! Don’t ya be killin’ my chickens! I’m the only one ’round here that does that!” Shamefully, I looked at Aunt Bess and lowered the broom to my side.

“Just a little tap gets ’em out of the way.” She paused. “Look at you. Don’t be tracking mud back into the house either. Leave
them shoes on the porch. Now go an’ do your business.”

The rooster and I hobbled away from one another.

An elderly black man sat at the head of the table when I returned to the kitchen. Dad introduced Uncle Osco Pharris. Osco’s face beamed as Dad recounted how he had been one of the strongest hands at Broderick’s Foundry for thirty years. Dad bragged about him, now pushing sixty, still peerless among the younger men before the flaming open-hearth furnace. Dad raved about Osco’s physical prowess for almost half an hour, then asked for a beer.

“Buster, I don’t drink no more.”

“Don’t drink no more?” Dad challenged. “I remember when you used to put away Speck Johnson’s corn likker like it was goin’ out of style. Hell, you got so drunk I saw you staggering up Monroe Street with a smile on your face . . . .”

“Whoa, Buster. Hold up. Don’t you be talking like that in my house.”

“Sorry, Osco,” said Dad soothingly, “I guess I’m just feeling the need for a little dram myself. Don’t suppose you got any in the house for colds, do you?”

Osco shook his head.

“Anyway,” Dad continued, unable to conceal his disappointment, “tell me how Wayne and Louise are doing in Cincinnati.”

Soon I was tired of the stories, walked into the sitting room, and dragged an old rocking chair across the sagging linoleum floor to the warmth of the coal stove.

That night, Mike and I crowded together on the sitting room bed while Dad slept on the living room couch. Mike kicked and squirmed, and I was unable to sleep. As I pushed his leg off me, I realized that we had shared a bed only once, on a vacation to Atlantic City when the hotel had only one room with two double beds.

Lying there in the darkness of the night, I remembered Harvey and Raymond standing behind the Greyhound bus as we waved good-bye. I was almost certain Harvey cried. Maybe it was my own tears. Harvey was too big to cry. As I lay in the strange bed
in a strange house, trying to adjust to all the different sounds and smells, I wondered if I would ever see them again. Our lives were changing already. Here in Muncie, Aunt Bess and Uncle Osco called Dad “Buster.” In Virginia he had been Tony. I wondered if Mike and I would have different names, too. Would I be Billy, Greg, or “Rooster”? 

As I lay there, I was startled by the shuffle of slippers across the creaky linoleum. Rising up on my elbows, I saw Uncle Osco heading toward the back porch. Soon the buzz of urine rang out against the side of the steel slop jar. A minute later I heard a plop. Within seconds the nauseating odor swept over me. I prayed Grandma and Grandpa Cook would come for us as I pulled the covers over my head and tried to will myself to sleep. When it finally came, I was plagued by nightmares. Roosters attacked from all sides and I had no broom.

**Literary Lens**

*What are some of the ways you think the narrator’s life will change?*