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Introduction

The distinct memory of Saturday mornings in our family home. The smell of Dad's Softsheen Magic shaving powder pinching the backs of our throats. The sound of bacon and eggs sizzling in the pan downstairs from Mum making breakfast. The vibrations from the record player belting out Bob Marley's 'Three Little Birds' so loud it woke us up and called us downstairs. 'Come here, your hair needs combing out!' Dad would say, looking at our thick, brown, dry mass of curls. We would look at each other and charge back upstairs, laughing. When Dad brushed out our hair, it hurt. 'Leave them alone!' Mum would say. She didn't see the problem with letting our hair run free, but Dad didn't like it. For us, growing up in a mixed-race family sometimes felt like occupying the space in between. Not always knowing which way to turn, which parent to listen to. Often trying to navigate who we were and who we wanted to be.

This is the book that we wish we had when we were growing up. The book we would have wanted our parents to read and the book we wish we could have given to our family and friends to help them better understand some of the experiences we would have, and issues that we would face. It's complex. No one's life episodes are identical. There is no singular, 'mixed-race experience', but one thing we've learned through writing this book is that – as with any community of people – there are distinct commonalities and threads that link us.

You may or may not identify as mixed race. We hope that those of you reading this who do not identify as mixed race will find something new

to reflect upon. Perhaps you are in an interracial relationship, or raising mixed-race children, or maybe you are simply intrigued to learn more about something unfamiliar to you. Whatever has brought this book to you, we hope you will read with an open heart and mind. Whenever you bring people together – whether it's discussing experiences of class, race, gender or sexuality – there must be room for listening to, and learning from, each other. We have written with reference to our own lives and have also interviewed a range of people, reflecting different facets of the mixed-race experience. We are immensely grateful to everyone who gave up their time and opened up to us, sharing their thoughts and reflections, so we could share people's stories and insights with you at this moment in our time.

This book will, inevitably, have its limitations. For one, the title itself implies there is one account to be told, which is, of course, not the case. We are from a small seaside town in England. The area we grew up in was white-majority, and it wasn't until we moved away that we realised just how problematic some situations in our childhood had been. We have one white and one Black parent. As mixed-race women racialised as Black, we face racism and sexism and, at the same time, hold other privileges such as being light-skinned, able-bodied and cisgender. We will never experience homophobia, transphobia or ableism.

Mixed-race people are not a homogenous group. We would never be able to write a neat little book about such a wealth of identities and nor would we want to. Being mixed race is often depicted as having at least one white parent and one Black parent, but this, too, is a misconception. We would not try to, and would never want to, write on behalf of others, which is why we interviewed a range of people and have included their quotes and stories to try to reflect the subjects that can arise within the mixed-race experience. We do not for one moment

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suggest that we have covered everything, but we have aimed to cover some of the main congruities within the experiences of a selection of people who identify as belonging to a mixed-race community – congruities such as colourism, racism and identity, to name a few.

This book doesn't hold all the answers, and it is certainly not the end of the conversation – it's a starting point. We present stories, guidance and support for those exploring their identities through the complexities of this world. Many of the themes and issues that arise can also apply to other aspects of our identity because, we believe, many of us are looking to understand ourselves better and find a place to belong. One of the most interesting things we discovered on the journey of writing was, while our focus was primarily on a particular group of people, many of the issues and parallels were concerned with how it feels to navigate life as a non-white person, and the impact of feeling like you don't belong. The sense that you are 'other', haven't found your community or feel rejected is incredibly destabilising, though we know that these feelings and experiences are not exclusive to those who identify as mixed race.

We hope our writing will provoke further learning and perhaps begin some conversations for you and your closer circles that may have never been had. Perhaps it will help you feel more confident in how you identify. We hope it will give you a better understanding of the beauty and complexities mixed-race people are sometimes not able to express openly. We hope you will read this and know the mixed-race identity – in all its facets – is valid. We hope that if you are mixed race, you finish this book knowing you are enough with no side to choose.

Naomi and Natalie xx

Why ‘Mixed Race’?

The term ‘mixed race’ certainly has its limitations and there will be those of you reading this book who will consciously choose not to use it. You may find the term problematic because race is a social construct¹ and to use the term ‘mixed race’ implies that race is based on biological attributes. Using it could be considered as reinforcing an idea of race as based on fact. We opted to use the term because it is how we have always identified and how we currently feel most comfortable. It was also important to us to dispel the idea that being mixed race includes only two ancestral groups, which is implied in the term ‘dual heritage’ (and which is so often considered a mix of Black and white). Some people will choose the term ‘biracial’ or ‘multiracial’. We also recognise that this may change. The term ‘mixed’ can also be dubious in that it can evoke negative connotations, such as being ‘confused’, ‘mixed up’ or ‘unbalanced’. This has often been peddled through the age-old literary trope of the ‘tragic mulatto’, which dates to the nineteenth century, and in which light-skinned, mixed-race characters are represented either as suicidal upon discovering their ancestry or as sexually seductive – essentially, born to be hurt and/or to cause harm. Then there will, of course, be some mixed-race people who will choose to identify monoracially. We encourage you to explore language and how you identify until you feel comfortable. This may also change over time. The bottom line is it is your choice as to how you identify, and not for anyone else to tell you how.

Chapter 1

Everyday Racism:

*On growing up in a
white-majority area*



Natalie: In October 2019 I stepped off the train at my home station of Margate, a small seaside town about an hour away from London. My hands were shaking, adrenalin was pumping and tears were rolling down my face. I took my phone out of my bag and called my sister, Naomi. I had no way of knowing at the time that the incident I had witnessed and filmed would change the trajectory of both our lives.

It was a cold Friday afternoon. I had finished a day of back-to-back meetings in London and was feeling sick from the endless cups of coffee I'd downed to sustain me through the many dull conversations I had endured that day. I'd missed the direct train home, so I had to change stations halfway. I stood on the platform, thinking about whether I should listen to a podcast or finish watching the programme I'd downloaded the night before. As I wrestled with this very important decision I watched my train arrive through the tunnel. Stepping into the carriage, I noticed it was full. Glancing around, I observed that all the passengers were white. I find you pick up on these things when you are used to being the minority in the room – something I find white people in this country can often take for granted. I remember once my mum rolling her eyes when one of my dad's friends returned from a holiday in Jamaica and commented to her on how he had gone to a football match and was one of the only white guys there. 'Yes, well,' she replied, flatly, 'imagine how it was for George growing up here.' Mum would often have to challenge ignorant comments like this.

I sat down on one of the few available seats, rested my bag on my lap, turned my podcast on, put my headphones in, leaned back and closed

my eyes. It swiftly hit me how tired I was at that moment. As the train pulled into the next stop, I heard the faint noise of doors beeping, and heard (what I assumed) to be two men getting on the train. They were being extremely loud. I opened my eyes as the men walked past and sat down on the seats in front of me. Looking through the gap in the seats, I could see they were each holding a can of beer. The two men were white, looked to be in their late twenties and sipped their beers, all the while talking loudly to each other, as though they were the only ones on the train. I observed passengers around me shuffling and looking around to see who was making so much noise.

I closed my eyes again, turned my podcast up and ignored them, hoping they would be getting off at the next stop. It was then that I heard another voice coming from behind me. This time, it was the train conductor. 'Tickets please,' he called out. I sat up, shuffled around for the small piece of card I had shoved into my wallet and held it in my hand, ready for when he approached. I paused my podcast and as I looked up, he gave me 'The Nod'. I nodded back. For those of you that don't know about 'The Nod', it's a common code in the Black community, especially when you're in white spaces. Musa Okwonga refers to it as 'a swift, yet intimate statement of ethnic solidarity . . . [a way of saying] "Wow, well, I really didn't expect to see another one of us out here, but you seem to be doing your thing just fine. More power to you, and all the very best."' ¹ Growing up, I would watch my dad give 'The Nod' to other Black men and women, thinking at the time he had a lot of friends!

I handed the conductor my ticket, and he thanked me and continued on his way. It was at that moment I looked over at the two loud, beer-drinking men and I knew in my gut not to turn my podcast back on. The train conductor approached them and said, 'Tickets please,' but there was no reply. 'Tickets please,' he repeated, as though unsure whether

or not they'd heard him. Again, there was complete silence. He asked a third time, his voice louder and more abrupt than before. One of the men turned to look up at the train conductor and, in full earshot of the other passengers, said, 'I ain't got a ticket, mate,' before turning away, smirking.

The train conductor replied, 'Well, you need a ticket before you get on the train.'

With a big sigh, as if the train conductor was a huge inconvenience, the white man turned again and said, 'I am getting off at the next stop, mate, so I don't need a ticket.'

'That's not true,' the train conductor responded, in a calm manner. 'Everyone needs a ticket before they get on the train, even if it's only one stop.'

My heart started beating faster. I had a gut feeling that this was going to turn ugly, and I was right. The white man shouted, 'Well, did you get a fucking passport to get into the fucking country?' I was immediately filled with rage, but, unsure how to help, I did the only thing I felt I could in that moment: I pulled my phone out and pressed 'record'.

As the racist altercation continued, I looked around the carriage to see how others had responded. There was a woman pretending to scroll through her phone; a couple who promptly rose to move seats; a man shaking his head, but saying nothing and two young boys watching like this was a wrestling match. I knew one thing for sure: not one person was going to say anything. I continued to record. The longer it went on, the more infuriated I became, watching the conductor trying to negotiate with the men. 'Why would you ask if I have a passport?' the conductor continued. 'Are you asking me because I am Black?'

One of the men responded, 'I've got two mixed-race kids and [the conductor] thinks I'm racist . . . it's always the Black card, innit?' The train conductor sighed, turned and walked away in the same direction he came from back through the carriage. As he walked past me I could see a defeated look on his face. It was then that I stood up, and the rest is a bit of a blur.

I've since watched the footage of me confronting the men, but it always feels like it was someone else speaking. The recording also serves as my only memory of the incident, because my mind remains completely blank. 'Are you joking?' I said.

'What?' said the white guy.

I continued, 'What you said is racist. And your children . . . poor them, if their dad is going to speak like that!' I knew what I had said didn't exactly make sense, but it was all I could muster together.

'Yeah but . . .' he scrambled.

'No,' I interrupted. 'What you said was racist.' My voice was still shaking, but firm. 'Would you have said that if he was white? What does having a passport got to do with your train ticket?' My phone was still recording.

'Well, when I went to Ireland . . .' the guy started, while the other man sat there, mute.

I cut in. 'That's not what I am asking you. What has a passport got to do with your train ticket? You need a ticket like everyone else,' I repeated. The man had no answer; he had nothing. He sprang out of his seat. *Here we go, I thought, he is going to attack me now.* I'd called

him out for being racist, and as a woman, I am also all too familiar with toxic masculinity. In the past, I've noted that when a man's ego is bruised, he can become aggressive. To my surprise, he walked past me and shouted after the conductor, 'Mate, I am sorry. I am sorry.' The conductor turned round, shook his head, and walked away.

I couldn't quite believe what I'd said had had an effect. I didn't handle it perfectly, and said some things that didn't make sense, but it still seemed to have made a difference. I decided to move carriages because I didn't want to be near the men anymore, and I spent the rest of the journey feeling physically sick. As I made my way through the carriage, I could see people staring at me. Some gave me a smile, as if to say, 'Well done.' Others looked at me as if I was the one making trouble and had disturbed their peaceful train journey home. I was sure they were thinking, *She should have kept out of it.*

As I sat down, the train stopped and I saw the two men get off, still holding their cans of beer. Relief ran through my body, but I wanted to see the train conductor and check he was OK. I have experienced racism so much in my own life and I know what the feeling is like when it's done so publicly and there is nowhere to go. Fortunately, he walked by again. We chatted; he was visibly upset. I forwarded the video footage to the conductor – never to see each other again.*

The rest of the journey felt like forever. When the train finally pulled into my station, I stepped onto the platform and called Naomi straight

*I did see the conductor again at the end of 2021. I was on the train heading to London from Margate and when I looked up, he was walking towards me asking to see train tickets. When I asked him if his name was [...] he looked concerned, he didn't understand how I knew him. Then when I explained he smiled. We chatted. I asked to take a picture and he politely asked me not to put it on social media. He told me how he also got a lot of attention from that video. It was lovely to see him again as I think about him often.

away. I needed to speak to someone who would understand. I told her everything, and we both asked each other the same question we have asked ourselves our whole lives:

'Why did nobody else say anything?'

There began the desire to speak our truth and start sharing publicly how racism shows up for people every day. After much deliberation, six months later, I shared the video on social media, and it went viral. The outpouring – both of solidarity and ignorance – led to the idea that people should have the space to share their truth and give practical advice. It was then that our Instagram account @everydayracism_ was born.

Challenging racism is nothing new to us. We grew up in a white-majority town, with a white mum, white teachers, white postman, white church leaders, white gym instructors, white doctors and white friends. We were often the only mixed-race women in our spaces and there were only a handful of non-white students in the schools we attended. We were never taught by any Black teachers. We went to parties where people thought it was acceptable to do blackface. Our hair was openly fondled. We were often in positions where we had to challenge racism and were rarely backed up. It was a town where the British National Party (BNP) would come and march, and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage felt confident he could be elected as a member of parliament. When we wrote to our local MP, Roger Gale, about our concerns with racism in the area, he confidently informed us that our fears were unfounded – he had an excellent working relationship with all of the 'ethnic and faith groups' in east Kent.

Growing up in our small seaside town, the only other groups of Black people we would see were day-trippers who would visit by coach from London. As we walked along the seafront, our eyes would literally light up when we saw people who looked like us. The longing to be noticed and to have a group of people who would understand, rather than mock our heritage, was something we craved. It was only when we were much older that we realised how deeply damaging that void had been. However, as we grew up and gravitated towards what we characterised as our 'Blackness', we began to realise that what we craved couldn't be found there either. Understanding more about our Jamaican culture and heritage was, of course, essential, but it still left the unanswered question: 'What is *my* identity?'

Spending time with our Black family – whether it was travelling to London or Nottingham to see cousins and aunties or flying over to Jamaica to stay with our dad – never satisfied that sense of needing to belong. Even though it taught us so many positive things and we were lucky enough to be able to travel, we also didn't feel fully at ease in those spaces either. We would feel we weren't Black enough, but we also knew we weren't white, so this pain of not feeling enough of anything grew progressively stronger and stronger. It was like carrying around this sense of guilt and shame for only being half of what the world named us as. This wasn't anyone's fault; we generally had a good relationship with both sides of our family and our mum tried her hardest to ensure that we were connected to our identity. She tried to help us understand our heritage. She took us to Jamaica once a year and our dad – who by this time had moved back to his hometown of Montego Bay – would also come and visit us in the UK. She made friends with other Black families who lived in the area and sought out hairdressers and hair products. She tried to cook Jamaican food for us. One Christmas, she dressed up a Black Barbie doll and put it on top of the Christmas tree because there were no Black or brown angels in the

shops at the time. She tried, but no matter how hard you try, growing up as a non-white person in a white-majority town is always going to be hard. Whiteness is the default. When it comes to trust, success, and beauty standards, it is whiteness. When we became teenagers, there was generally only one thing that was important to us and that was to be liked, accepted and to fit in. With our 'unruly' curly Afro hair and brown skin, it seemed impossible to not stand out.

Our mum, Penelope (she/her), is white British and in her mid-sixties. She shared what it was like raising us in a white-majority town:

Mum: It was a big learning curve for me. When I first had Naomi, it was 1983. I remember a nurse coming into my room at the hospital and saying, 'Oh, she's very dark; is her father dark?' and I said, 'Yes he is.' When he walked in, there was like this [strange] look on her face, and I got that a few times with the nurses. I think the first time it really hit me was when Naomi was a very new baby in the pram, and I was taking her for a walk. An older lady came up and said, 'Oh, can I look at your baby?' She looked in the pram, turned to me with this look on her face and said, 'Never mind; she will probably get lighter as she gets older.' I was stunned. I never said anything to her. I couldn't believe what I'd heard. Then after that I would have people say things like, 'Oh, brown babies are always really attractive,' and I noticed people fetishising mixed-race babies, and it was so uncomfortable.

Naomi and Natalie: How were the school years for you, and watching us grow up in a white-majority town?

Mum: It was tricky. There were times when I did make a fuss and I had no qualms about it whatsoever, and other times where I'd think, should I just keep quiet? I didn't want to make it worse for you. Naomi was born in 1983, Natalie in 1989 and Rachel in 1997 and there were quite a

lot of years' difference and changes over that time. When Naomi started school, it was very different and basically, if you were non-white, you were grouped all into one. I remember a few racist incidents that happened to all of you in school, including incidents to do with your hair. Even now, people feel they can touch a Black person's hair. I even have it with the grandchildren when I take them out.

You each had your own hair journeys. Naomi went through a lot to try and feel comfortable with her hair. I was not experienced with Black hair and I had a lot to learn. It was helpful that your father's aunt and cousins helped; we would travel to Nottingham and London because you couldn't get Black hair products where we lived. I sometimes got them sent from America, along with Black Barbie dolls. I really did try and source things that were relevant for you, including magazines, if I could, because there was nothing – there were no Black references for you growing up.

Naomi and Natalie: Did you ever feel that you needed to have a conversation about race with us all?

Mum: No, I don't think I did. Oh, that feels terrible now. I think I was always open to acknowledging it with you and supporting you and, if necessary, saying something at school or to people. I didn't ignore it. I certainly like to feel that you could say anything to me. I can remember when you [Natalie] started going on the bus on your own and you came back [one day], and you were so upset. When I asked why you said this woman at the bus stop kept asking, 'Where do you come from?' and you said 'Margate.' She said 'No, where do you *really* come from?' and you got upset because she kept asking you. I remember explaining to you that she was referring to your heritage and she shouldn't have been questioning you like that. I remember one day after you started primary school, you said, 'Mum, tie my hair up as