

On Being a Whiteskin

I am a whiteskin. I have always known this, yet until now, my own consciousness of this truth pooled only in shallow waters, rarely reaching a depth of profound recognition. I was a whiteskin, a part of the majority, one of many. Now I am a whiteskin, one of five in Mambisanda, one of two that does not bear the name, "Lutz."

I am a whiteskin. Minority to be sure, yet ever a privileged minority. When I exit a store, while all else are frisked by the guards, I am never touched. When I am stopped at the provincial lines, all that is required of me is a handshake and smile. When I enter one of the few well-financed hotels in the city, I instantly belong.

I am a whiteskin. I have been formally educated. While in this land I may only have the indigenous speaking abilities of a child, my skin tells another story. In a land of expensive school fees and differing social expectations, the ability to even sign one's name to paper is not the norm it has become in the whiteskin's world. Even if I had not sat in a single classroom, my skin would yet speak education and power. My voice is given the space to resonate. Even when I am clearly confused or ignorant, when I speak, others agree with me. Too often they give way to my words, concealing their own thoughts and insights behind a blank face or superficial smile. Therefore, my words always fall into the realm of hearing, though not always into the realm of listening. I am not always capable of discerning the difference.

I am a whiteskin. I am freely given positions of leadership, second only to the "big men" of the community. I am given a place of honor at most any gathering or event, thanked profusely for my attendance and fed in abundance. People often look to me for innovation, organization and action. Having spent many years under whiteskin colonial rule, many Papua New Guineans yet strain to find their voices. Without the whiteskin seal of approval, insecurity and inactivity too frequently prevail. I mourn at this dependence. I struggle and strive to keep myself a part of the collective whole rather than the willing or unwilling recipient of a whiteskin pedestal. And I rejoice when each new voice is heard.

I am a whiteskin. In the eyes of the populace, I have unlimited resources. This assumption, both correct and incorrect, will never be swayed by reason. It forces me to distinguish between sincere generosity that derives from friendship and the untold expectations that may ensue. Both facets may reside within the same person or family, and I continuously wade through the murky social dimensions. I have to say "no" more times than "yes," because every "yes" provides opportunity for ten more "no"s. The requests are not intentional abuse to one with unlimited resources. However, to one who knows her own emotional and financial limitations and does not take care to guard a sensitive heart, the assumptions and expectations can be taxing.

I am a whiteskin. My marital hand is most desirable. Many families pray that their sons will be my suitable match, and that my color will be brought into their line. My skin and resources can bestow new honor to a family. I do not, however, desire to be loved for my skin anymore than I wish to be hated for it. I can reject their notions and offers, but I cannot break their aspiration. I must therefore approach my friendships and associations with caution and care.

I am a whiteskin. I always have audience. I forever feel the prickle of eyes fixed on me. Most are kind and curious, though sometimes I am met with the solemn glares of suspicious or calloused souls. My skin gives a certain celebrity. My car is greeted by over-eager waves and enthusiastic shouts. Sometimes as we pass, the sound of my own name or the names of my other

white companions grace animated lips of those whom I have never met. The children especially stare wide-eyed. The more audacious may sneak an opportunity to touch my hair or skirt. In the city, I have even felt a playful tug on my hair as I passed a group of men, overgrown children. None would take credit with their eyes for the brazen act, yet I could sense the jest. I am a curiosity, and I try to bear it in good humor.

I am a whiteskin. I can be frightening... a new and sobering revelation. When infants and toddlers see me, they frequently shriek in panic. Even the most sedate child can be startled. They ache for the sight of their mother's familiar rich chocolate features and cry complaint at my own pale countenance. I laugh outwardly, covering my embarrassment. Yet, inside my own soul weeps in such moments, each tear praying the child's forgiveness for a visage that brings distress rather than consolation.

I am a whiteskin. I am gladly welcomed at the table of other whiteskins and individuals educated according to Western mores. My skin and cultural affinities often bring the solace of familiarity to their hearts and theirs to mine, making us instinctive friends. I no longer wonder at the worldwide predisposition to flock to those who appear similar to oneself. It is a natural phenomenon, though not one I readily espouse. Each day, I fight an inward battle, struggling to stretch beyond the inclination. Some days I succeed. Some days I do not.

I am a whiteskin. My color covers a multitude of minor indiscretions and oddities. A whim or moment of joyful foolishness can easily be blanketed by the summarization, "It's just that crazy American girl." I find great freedom in this persona. Likewise, my ignorance is often readily overlooked, because my skin serves as a constant reminder that I am not adept at the norms of this society. I am not the norm.

I am a whiteskin. I cannot change this. Therefore, each day I must live within my skin. I must view each new experience as an opportunity to discover additional attributes of myself. I must encourage others to see me through and beyond the effects of my skin, just as I strive to see others through and beyond theirs.