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American Anomaly

Nicole Smith

Western Michigan University

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AMERICAN ANOMALY NICOLE SMITH

No one ever believed me when I said I had an albino cousin. He was my third cousin really, but an albino nonetheless. I suppose I wouldn't have believed it myself, if it weren't for a Fourth of July family reunion. I was eight, and Mom had warned my brother and me that this younger cousin of ours would be there. "Just so you know," she said, "your little cousin Buck is an albino." Mom used the same tone of voice as if she were explaining that we would be eating fried chicken for dinner.

"What's an al—al—?" I said.

"Al-By-No," my eleven-year-old brother Patrick sounded out. "It means he has no color. His hair and skin are white, and he has pink eyes." I immediately thought back to the time I had contracted pinkeye. When I woke up in the morning, Mom had to wipe my eyelids with a warm towel just to get them from sticking together.

"Not 'pinkeye,'" Dad explained, somehow knowing what I was thinking. "Pink eyes. Buck has pink eyes."

"I don't think so, Walt," Mom said matter-of-factly. "I think Buck's eyes were blue when he was a baby."

"Well then how in God's name do they know he's an albino? I mean, dye Patrick's hair with some peroxide and he'd look albino too," said dad, as Patrick's eyes lifted in sadness. "No offense son; you're Irish."

Dad pulled the car into the driveway of one of the great-aunts. "That's enough," Mom whispered before letting us out of car. "Remember, Buck is just a normal kid like you, so don't stare." Patrick and I looked at each other with equally devious smiles. We both knew that when adults said "don't stare" it just made staring more inevitable.

Walking out to the backyard, Patrick and I stayed shoulder to shoulder—making a fortress against the army of pinching uncles and red-lipped aunts in search of fresh young cheeks. Even together, we were no match for the adults. I managed to escape with no fewer than three lip stamps on my face, and Patrick's red hair was ruffled from all the head patting.

Once all the greetings had settled down, Mom proudly handed her patented American flag whipped cream cake to an old woman she called Aunt Betty. "Lilly helped me wash the strawberries," Mom boasted, giving me a wink. Really, I had only watched Mom as she had carefully wiped each berry with a damp cloth. She was always quick to give my brother and me credit for things she had done.

As Mom and Aunt Betty continued to disclose family baking secrets, I noticed Patrick making his way into the garage with Dad. After quickly losing interest in the many uses of baking soda, I went to the garage and peeked inside. I saw Patrick standing amid a circle

of grown men with beer guts and VFW shirts. They had already begun quizzing poor Patrick about World War II weaponry. “Look in that gun cabinet, son,” one of them said. “Can you tell me which one of those firearms is circa 1942?” Patrick stared blankly, and though I felt sorry for him, I quickly decided it was better him than me.

Already bored, my mind retreated to the last interesting topic—my cousin Buck. In search of my first encounter with an albino, I scanned the circle of lawn chairs for any extremely pale children. However, it being an Irish family, pale skin didn’t quite narrow down my search. Just then, I heard a car door slam, and a woman’s voice speaking in some form of high-pitched baby talk. “Now Buck, be a good little firecracker and Mummy will give you lots of sparklers tonight . . .”

Buck, the al-, albino! I ran toward the garage, sure Patrick would want to see Buck too. In the mass of veteran war heroes, Patrick stood in a stupor. “This gun here could take out a rabbit from ‘bout forty yards,” a fat bald man explained, holding a long gun with one eye closed, as if he had the rabbit in his sights. “But this one,” he said, taking a much longer one from the cabinet, “this beauty will take out damn-near anything.”

“Patrick . . .” I whispered, “Buck’s here.”

“Did someone say ‘buck?’” the man shouted. “Yeah, it’ll take out a buck . . .”

My brother and I ran to the front yard where all the cars were parked, but disappointment set in when there was no sign of Buck. “This way,” said Patrick, leading me along the side of the house. We peered around the corner, but all I could see of Buck were his shoes as he was swept into a huddle of the kissing aunts and grandmothers. We waited, knowing they would have to let him go eventually. And then they did. My first encounter with a real albino; I could hardly wait. But just as quickly as the old woman let go of Buck, we were again filled with frustration. Buck was dressed in pants, a long-sleeved T-shirt, a baseball cap, and tiny sunglasses. From what I could tell, Buck looked like any other Irish kid.

“I can’t see him,” I whispered. “Why’s he all covered up?”

“Because albinos burn in the sun real bad,” answered Patrick. “They have to stay in the shade and wear lots of sunscreen.” I thought back to a camping trip we had taken last summer. Dad had fallen asleep on the beach, and his back had turned dark pink in just an hour. He spent the rest of the weekend groaning in pain as Mom liberally applied aloe to try to prevent any blisters. I figured if Dad could fry in an hour, Buck could probably burn up in a matter of minutes.

“We’ll have to get a closer look,” said Patrick, and I followed his lead. Keeping Buck in our sights, we headed over to where Dad was playing Bocce ball with some of the men from the garage. The playing field was about ten yards close to Buck, so we figured we would wait there while planning our next move.

“Bu-uck,” the baby-talking woman called to her son. “Buck-Baby, do you have to tinkle in the loo-loo?” Patrick cut me a look as if to say, “Loo-loo?” and I just shrugged. Taking Buck’s creamy hand, she led him across the yard and into the house. “That’s my good little apple dumplin’ . . .”

I gave Patrick a look, and we both knew that getting a decent look at Buck meant following him into the house. Keeping a safe distance behind them, we casually made our way into the house behind Buck and his mother. By the time we got into the cool shade of the family room, Buck had been taken to the bathroom. We realized it was important for us to look unsuspecting. I darted into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and pulled out Mom’s American flag whipped cream cake. I figured if I had a dish in my hand, I’d look somewhat busy and have some excuse to be in the house. Just as I carefully pulled it from the shelf, Buck ran up behind me screaming, “Cake! Cake!” Before I knew it, a heap of whipped cream and strawberries lay on the yellow linoleum, and visions of child abandonment passed in my mind.

“Ooh,” said Buck, and before his mother could stop him, he was face down in the whipped cream, laughing hysterically. Just then, Mom walked in the kitchen and saw what was going on.

She immediately knew who to blame, and quickly began spewing forth questions. “What did you guys do? Do you know how long it took me to make that cake? What were you thinking . . . ?”

“Get outside,” was her final comment, and Patrick and I knew better than to stick around and offer our assistance. With our heads lowered, my brother and I made our way to the back porch. Sitting on the steps, we considered our punishments in silence. I imagined Mom and Dad dropping Patrick off at some boarding school, just before taking me to the nearest orphanage.

Just then, Buck and his mother came out of the house. His face was still covered in a layer of whipped cream. Holding a kitchen towel, his mother slowly wiped Mom’s confection off Buck’s cheeks. She removed his cap, revealing Buck’s white hair.

Forgetting our inevitable retribution, Patrick and I stared at our cousin, the anomaly. His hair was as white as the old man playing Bocce ball with Dad. Buck’s mother, then slipped off the tiny sunglasses from her son’s head, and my brother and I finally caught a glimpse of what we’d been waiting for. Once the icing had been wiped from his eyelids, Buck’s eyes popped open, and we realized it hadn’t really been worth all the trouble. Mom was right; Buck’s eyes were blue.