

my first racist joke

by Lance Manion

I heard my first racist joke when I was about eleven. I went to an all-white school and lived in an all-white world. At the time I didn't think anything of it. I didn't think I was a racist. I didn't think about race at all.

"There's a guy and he's standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon."

I saw plenty of non-whites on television and they all seemed the same as my friends. I would later be part of a track meet where we went into the city and ran against an all-black team. Afterwards, on the bus ride back to my school, I would think to myself that blacks seemed the same as my friends except they run much faster.

"A Mexican family walks up to look at the Grand Canyon. They look over the edge and marvel at how far down it is."

Maybe it was the innocence of youth but when I heard this joke I laughed and laughed. What did I know? I knew nothing of what went on before me in the world.

"The guy standing there asks the family if they want to see something cool. Of course they all say yes. He climbs over the railing and then hurls himself over the edge."

Looking back now I wonder if the joke would have worked without the racist bit. Probably not.

"The Mexican family is in awe as the man seems to just float there, smiling away. The man explains that there are thermals that blow up from the canyon depths that keeps him from falling."

I do remember wondering, on that same bus ride home from the city track meet, if Asians or American Indians ran slower or faster than I did.

"The man asks the Mexican dad if he wants to try it. He says yes and climbs over the railing and jumps. He plummets to his death."

I wonder now if racism isn't just another way to laugh at people. Something to make jokes funnier. To make barbs crueler. I'm sure there are people that have good reasons to dislike other people but I

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can't help but think that if the other person is a different color that it might make it easier.

"A man standing next to the grieving family turns to his friends and says "Man, Superman sure hates those spics."

Obviously you could switch out the races of the superhero and the victim but that's not the point. The point is that someone told that joke, using Superman no less, to an eleven year old. Even if I could at the time rationalize Superman's behavior, perhaps he was upset about the amount of illegal immigration, it seemed a very inefficient way to get rid of Mexicans. And also a bit ironic given that despite his patriotic appearance (red cape, white skin and blue tights) he was not only not from this country but he wasn't even from this planet and I'm fairly certain he failed to fill out any paperwork before crash landing here. But the joke itself is funny, you can't deny that. I laughed because it seemed dangerous and edgy to talk about another race.

Maybe.

I'm still not 100% sure. What I do know is that was no way to hear the word 'spic' for the first time. Having never heard the word before I could only assume it had negative connotations because of the way it was said. I heard it from the same kid that always had a cripple joke or a Helen Keller joke handy. He was very popular. I don't so much blame him as wonder whatever happened to him.

I'm guessing that kids these days don't get to eleven before they hear the word 'spic'. I doubt they'll even remember it the way I do. Like a scar inside my head.

A few years later, after I was getting accustomed to hearing racist words, I had the thought that perhaps racism is just a way for sensitive people to deal with reality. I thought maybe that if people didn't dislike people of color for some reason they'd go crazy with all the hunger, poverty and war going on in other countries. I wondered if it was just a defense mechanism to stay sane in a cruel world. Distancing themselves from the horrors going on around them.

Then I learned maybe that wasn't the case.

Learned is a bad word for processing such stuff.

Whatever the reasons, I never looked at Superman the same way.

