

The stories before.



Grandad Leonard Keith Saunders, June 1939 - November 2014.

My Grandad Keith

Grandad disliked most white people, especially those of his own generation. He came to the UK from Jamaica in the early 1960s, during the Windrush era. I will leave you to imagine what he had to put up with at the time and how that shaped his views.

I remember I was a little nervous when I invited my partner (who is not Black) to meet grandad for the first time at one of our family games nights of Dominoes and Ludo, with jerk chicken, rice and peas, steamed-fish, salads, plantains, and ice-cold Red Stripe beer, rum punch, and other Caribbean delights. It turned out I needn't have worried. Grandad loved Irish people on account of reading that same note way back when.

You know the one? Yes, that one.

Grandad was a baker. He also loved gardening. His front room was a tropical oasis of flowering plants running up walls and across the ceiling. He was both a firm and gentle man, with his bit of racist views, but I still love my grandad. He had his reasons. He died six years ago, and I still miss him.

Much debate has been had on whether it's ok to touch a Black person's hair. It's never ok without asking and being given the permission to do so.

I don't mind being asked about my hair, or having it touched, if I can also touch your hair back. I'm curious about all types of hair.

For instance, does blond, brown, or red hair feel different to the touch? My husband has dark brown (now mostly grey) hair, but I can't remember if I've ever touched blond hair before. Is it true blond hair can become even more white if you rub lemon juice on it and spend time in the sun?

What about Asian hair, what are the products you swear by?

I have 4C hair. But 3C, how do you keep yours from not drying out?

Everyone. What is good hair?

I'm often asked about my Afro. Here are some facts. To get this style I usually do the following after washing and drying my hair.

I use three combs to get it to a lovely puffball. I comb it out with a large-tooth comb to get out all the knots, followed by a smaller-tooth comb to get out the smaller ones trying to hide away. I then follow this up with an Afro-pic comb for about 15 minutes, spraying various oils and water-based spritz all over it, while combing and shaping it.

It takes about 30-45 minutes all-in. This is not to be confused with my other favourite style though - the get out of bed, spritz, ruffle it up a bit and finish with a front flick.

Now you know what I get up to in the mornings. What about you?

Let's discuss grandads and hair.

Best wishes,

Grandad gave me his photo, taken on the 28th of October 1961, several years before he passed away. At the time I wondered why, as I already had lots of photos of him, but he told me he wanted me to have this one. Since then, this pic has been in an exhibition and grandad has appeared in one of our film projects. At the after-party held at the Saatchi Gallery after the premier, where grandad was treated as the Hero of The Night, everyone called him grandad - he loved it! He was unapologetic about his views and everyone who met him loved him. He influences me every day. He was a gentleman.

Why the fuss?

I had a meeting planned with a new agency client and researched as much as I could about him online before the big day. I couldn't figure out how best to pronounce his name though. I assumed he was English, but I thought he looks Mediterranean, and his name is quite popular in Spanish-speaking countries. I thought I would use the Spanish-sounding version of his name. First impressions count right?

We met at reception, and I greeted him. Turns out he prefers the shortened English-sounding version of his name, not even spelt like his full name at all – whoops!

If a hole had opened before me at that point, I would have jumped in.

From that embarrassing first moment, which we both had a laugh about, he went on to tell me stories of how other people get his name wrong all the time. And because his background is so ambiguous, he often has clients speaking to him in different languages too. Like the time he was in a meeting in Italy, and everyone thought he was a local and so started speaking Italian at him. He couldn't understand a word of what they were saying. He's English and from Sarf London! I used to live in Sarf London back in the day, so we chatted about that for a bit, then secondary schools, his nice new shiny office, the view...

Next time we met I called him by the English version of his Spanish name. Said client has become one of my biggest supporters.

Why the fuss then over having one's name mangled? It could lead to learning something new and finding some common ground leading to, well, who knows.

This is true. This could happen and it does, but what if your name gets mangled on a daily? What if every time you run into 'you know who' they call you by their 'shortened-version' of your name?

How does someone who constantly has their name mangled feel?

Here is the other perspective: "If a person can't make an effort to learn my name, then they have no respect for me or my culture." Anon

And:

"Even with a middle name that's literally pronounced as it is spelt, people changed it to 'Abdi' - a popular Somali name. I am from Eritrea. When I had had enough, I started using my first name and it is almost hurtful to admit how much easier it made my life," say, Abraham Abbi Asefaw.

We are going to get people's names wrong of course, it's human to fuck-up. If you do don't be a shit about it. Ask your new friend to say their name for you until you get it. And if someone mangles your name, do give them a bly from time to time if it feels right.

It's at this point I would like to apologize to those whose names I have mangled in the past and will in the future. I will be following my own advice above. I also have no excuse, except that when we meet, I'm usually thinking on which one of my five accents or dialects I should speak to you in!

Over to you.

What's your view on name mangling?

How did mangling someone's name change your life?

Does having your name mangled annoy you no end?

Let's have a conversation on it.

What is real privilege?

Where are you from, from? One of the most [triggering](#) questions ever asked. The reason why it's triggering is because when you say these words, you are instantly implying to the person who hears them that they are an 'other' and that as an 'other' they can't possibly be part of the fabric of the society you are part of. This is an assumption which is quite excluding.

Get it?

Best to just stick to saying where in [insert country / city / town / district you are in at the time] are you from? This, I think, will help stop a lot of triggering situations from happening and may start new friendships. It's also a lot more inclusive and a good way to use one's privilege.

As an immigrant from Jamaica, when I'm asked where I'm from this is where my mind often goes to...me walking up to an orange tree, picking the warm ripe fruit off the branch, peeling the skin back with my fingers and eating it. I was only about seven or eight at the time. I lived in a small blue house on the hill, in St. Ann, Jamaica, surrounded by countless fruit trees including grapefruit, tangerine, oranges, cherries, limes, coconuts, and avocados.

The view from our home was of tropical greenery for miles, dotted with a few similar houses with their own kitchen veg gardens. Larger fields were also carved out by local farmers who tended to their yams, bananas, sweet potatoes and [sensimilla](#)-filled plots looked on by cows, goats or donkeys.

Us kids were in paradise, although we didn't know it at the time. We would go foraging in the woods for hours, after finishing our daily home-life duties. This sometimes meant killing a chicken and prepping it for the night's dinner. We would follow the path set before by farmers, picking and eating fruit along the way. All we would take was a cooking pot and our slingshots.

We'd always end at the local river where we would spend hours jumping off mini waterfalls, into the deep below, surrounded by large bulging rocks! To this day, I still can't believe we didn't bust-up our heads on those rocks. I think the only health-and-safety advice given by our parents then was "don't go into the caves and watch out for sinkholes." Not sure there were any sinkholes nearby, but the thought of falling into one kept us on our toes, as did running into the odd snake!

After hours at the river, and once we were soaked to our bones, we would catch the last of the evening sun to dry our clothes as we walked home. This was a journey we made every evening, especially in the summer, and sometimes after school. The next day we did it all over again. It was glor-i-ous!

Yes, I do realize that I have just shared what I believe is a very privileged early-years-childhood. What is your real privilege?

Is Jamaica still glor-i-ous? Yes, it is.

Where in the world are you from? I'm curious to know.

Colour

I was about thirteen-and-a-half-years old when I found out I was also a colour too. Months before, at immigration, travelling to America, I had already learned I was an alien.

Family came to visit us in Jamaica and took one look at my river-drenched hair and persuaded my parents that going to foreign would be better for me. Woodland foraging, killing chickens for dinner, and being a pro with my slingshot were, surprisingly, not considered good for girls at the time, by those looking in.

I flew from Jamaica with my aunt, who I was going to live with, having only recently celebrated my thirteenth birthday. We missed our interconnecting flight en route to our destination, as immigration kept us waiting. I had to be fingerprinted and have the most horrid photo taken for my new Resident Alien Card.

We stayed in a motel at the airport to wait for our next flight and I tried pizza for the first time.

It tasted like I was eating a piece of road that had been shat on by a car engine! How old was that meat? It's called pepperoni you say? And the cheese, when was that cow milked?

I didn't touch another slice of my first pizza that night, as it was disgusting. Instead, to stave off hunger, I sucked on a couple of ketchup sachets I had collected as a treat from the flight over. I was used to these as relatives always brought us condiments when they came back home for a visit.

So, how did I find out I was also a colour too?

I'm in Junior High, Washington D.C. I'm leaning against my locker, which I could never open, when bully walks over. She started talking about me looking at her funny in class.

I couldn't for the life of me remember when that happened. All I kept thinking was should I go all Jamaican on her and give her a tracing (a piece of my mind / tell her about herself), but before I could do that, one of my new best friends walks over.

She is wearing Levi's blue jeans with a black t-shirt tucked in and a pair of fresh white high tops. Her hair is shaved at the back and straightened at the front into a half-bob haircut framing her face, semi-hiding her large circular gold earrings. She is carrying her purple Velcro-fastened writing folder and textbooks, with a pencil case on top. She was only about 14 or 15, but she was our senior, so...

She'd obviously clocked what was happening. Bully stops speaking and looks at her. My friend looks bully in the face and speaks: "You can't bully her. You are darker skin than her. She's browner skin." I looked at bully expecting a comeback, as that was a silly put-down I thought, but she walks off. I'm now looking at my best friend smiling at me and I'm thinking...I'm judged by my colour too? Like WTF!

Being Jamaican though, and in the early 90's, it was more like: "Mi a colour too? A wha' di bumbo-claaaaat!"

I often replay this scene over-and-over again in my mind. It was an important one now looking back.

I felt uneasy and intrigued at the same time about my new discovery. I spent a lot of my lunch break in the library learning more. I also watched a lot of films and chatted to the adults about it all - they had some interesting views. I started seeing people by their race.

I am Black.

Several months before, I was jumping off [mini waterfalls](#) into the deep below.

I thought of Jamaica and now saw all my old classmates and friends in a different light. Most were Black, but suddenly I was differentiating everyone. I thought of Kirk in our class, I saw him as mixed-race.

Andrea, she is white-Jamaican, or is she maybe mixed-race? We lived near each other, along with my other best friend, Solomie, who is Black. When we played 'hair salon' together, we didn't know what to do with Andrea's hair as the braids wouldn't stay in unless we elasticated the ends. She is different.

It was all too much rethinking people. I felt like an alien.

I was in a bubble before finding out I was also a colour too. It was goooooood. I often go back to this feeling in my mind. Blissful.

Yes, colourism exists, but luckily growing-up in the countryside in Jamaica I'm grateful my parents shielded me from it. And racism. A privilege my young children sadly don't have.

Before colour, I knew my neighbours and friends by their names. Now I notice their differences as well!

This is a big question I know, so have a think on it and leave this one for a conversation in our forum.

PS. Looking through my old passports to double check on dates for this article (I'm usually not good with dates), it has really come as a shock to me that I didn't see other people in terms of their race or colour until I was around thirteen and a half years old - I always thought I was younger. In terms of years, it's the equivalent of all-of primary school and the early part of secondary. It makes sense to me now how those years of not knowing helped shaped my views of people and the world today, which are often seen as different. I don't think I'm alone in this though. PPS. I stayed a little while longer in America and then I made the decision to leave, aged fourteen. I concluded that America was not my friend, and I was moving to England. My grandparents lived there.

Or sit down

I'm in England now, living in South London. I am fifteen years old. In my first week of secondary school, on the Tuesday, I beat up the school bully.

It went like this. It was the end of the day and I popped into the loo, when bully and her friend walked in. I was drying my hands when she came over and started saying something about me looking at her funny.

Bish! Bosh! Wallop! Wallop! is how I floored that bully.

It was a combination of things that made me lose my rag that day. Now reflecting on it, the "looking at..." may have triggered me as well, sending my mind back to America when I learned I was also a colour too.

I left school and went home. I had things to do. Like having to write a letter so my Nan could pray over it before it was sent off to the Immigration Office. I had to help put forward my case on why they should allow me to stay in the UK, since I was actually at that moment an Illegal Immigrant, Citizen of Jamaica and an Alien of America.

I found out the next day, that bully was the school bully. Some of the teachers and students came up to congratulate me and told me about her. She had been terrorizing them or their little brothers and sisters for years. I kept saying whenever anyone chatted to me about it all: "Not sure what came over me. I don't really fight girls - only boys - as I have brothers. I've also taken up writing now."

I didn't really say that last bit, but I had just written a very important letter to immigration. Also, it was my written account of the bullying incident, for the school, that had bully suspended and me exonerated. So yes, I had taken up writing now.

Standing up to the school bully meant I was welcomed by almost all the different tribes and cliques – made up of pupils from around the world - for the rest of secondary school, which helped set my future career path. What a privilege to have met and hung out with them all.

My Ghanaian best friend Stella, parents strict AF, taught me how to budget for life. I spent a couple of months with the hair-and-beauty-girls. There was too much preening and looking into mirrors, but they did improve my eyebrows for a time.

I would spend a few days here or there with the Japanese crew, when they would have me (I wasn't quite cool enough). I was taught a few words and phrases but can only remember "Konnichiwa."

I chilled at least one day a week with my South Asian posse, Saima, Fatuma and Suparna. They usually brought in their own school lunch. Food delicious. We ate while we chatted about this and that.

Then there were also the girls who liked to pop to the shops to buy fags and crisps during school lunchtime. I could only meet with them every few months, as it meant lots of hiding from the teachers – which was all too exhausting.

I tried grunge after hanging with the cool kids but had to drop my new style after [grandad](#) moaned that I was shaming the family every time I stepped out of the house looking like my clothes hadn't been washed!

My Chinese friend Lan (who styled her uniform so much better than mine), was a brilliant artist. She spent most of lunchtime drawing or snogging the face off her boyfriend, DJ.

Hanging with the Columbo fans meant I could dress up. I love a trench coat me.

The grown-up-kids taking care of the family, doing the weekly shop and looking after their siblings, plus the cat, dog and other assorted pets, were pretty good to hang with as well. They always filled me in on what was what.

And I always found time to chill with the mixed bunch of nerds in the library and the geeks in Maths Club, I love reading but needed help with my algebra and trigonometry.

Flexing with the Caribbean girls was where I got the chance to speak patios, even though everyone insisted on calling me “the American girl,” because of my new accent. I dropped that within a few months and became a Sarf Londoner innit.

Yes, secondary school was a lot of fun, so many cultures, so many stories.

It would be great to hear yours.

Best wishes,

Kenisha (her)

Sherry-Ann Collins

Sherry (her / us)

Sherry Collins

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