



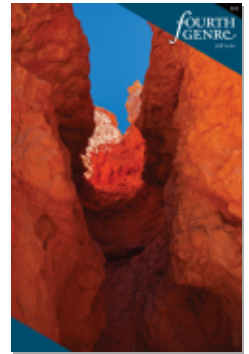
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A Bind

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A Bind

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If you travel with a fear of flying, mental health experts recommend that you hold fast to the facts. Remind yourself of statistics that show that the most dangerous part of your travel day is the car ride to or from the airport. Remember that the chances of you being involved in a plane crash are one in three million. Don't let the media's recent focus on airline disasters condition you to believe that you're next. Take a deep breath. Fasten your seatbelt. Clear skies ahead.

If you're a mixed couple living with a fear of racial violence, Joe and I recommend holding fast to the facts as well, but don't get your hopes up. While you might interpret someone's microaggression accurately, or your injustice radar might turn your insides up to a boil, it's crucial that you stick to The Plan, the one you and your partner devised the second you realized it was too risky to keep loving each other without one. Here's Our Plan for reference:

Should a situation arise in which Joe is in danger, I will record everything on my phone, following suit of so many, too many Black mothers, sisters, wives, aunties, and friends. I will swipe up from the bottom of my locked screen the way Joe taught me so I don't lose time entering my six-digit security code. With my phone in hand, I will place my white body in front of Joe's Black body like a shield. I will let my white tears hit the ground like bombs. Joe will shapeshift. He will get small. He will make his six feet and three inches as close to invisible, impenetrable as possible. Joe won't say a word. Joe will keep breathing. He will keep breathing. Keep breathing. We won't let an endless video stream of authority figures murdering Black men condition either of us to believe that Joe is next because he's not he's not he is not next.

Take a deep breath. Fasten your seatbelts. Clear skies ahead.
So far.

Joe and I hold hands during every takeoff, every landing. This ritual was born on our first flight together. We lived in Chicago, had been dating for a little over a year, and I'd been accepted to graduate school for creative writing in New Orleans. He told me he wasn't going to do long distance, and I said I wasn't staying, so we were left with two choices: lay down roots in the South or call it quits.

Joe took what I've come to understand are the 48–72 hours he requires in order to negotiate change. (We recently moved the dirty clothes hamper from the bathroom to our bedroom, and he insisted it was “weird” seven times before deciding it “sort of made sense.” We moved it back a week later.) Then he took to Google and found a job fair for experienced high school teachers like him scheduled to take place the following weekend. We loaded our online cart with two last-minute tickets from ORD→MSY. He winced, I squealed, and we clicked “Purchase.”

When we boarded the plane, Joe still hadn't said yes to New Orleans, but he also hadn't turned it down. Joe had lived in or around Chicago his entire life, with the exception of four years in Iowa City for undergrad. I was grateful for the risk he was thinking about taking for me, for us, even if I didn't fully understand what that choice to love me involved. Now I'm grateful for Joe's patience as I unwrap, unwrap, unwrap what it means for a Black man to choose a white woman until death does them part. Most of the time it means love. Sometimes it means danger. I'm still learning the rest.

We both agree that our love requires more communication than other relationships we've had with same-race partners. We don't always intuit what the other is thinking as smoothly as our ease with one another might suggest. This does not make us unique. Communication is key in any relationship and is often the difference between connection and isolation. But in our relationship, as it steps into the shadows of Unite the Right rallies and the 136 Black men killed by police so far this year as I write this sentence on September 17, 2019, our communication can also be the difference between life and death.

Race isn't all we talk about, or rather it is; we just don't always acknowledge it out loud together. If we did, I suspect our marriage would start to feel more

like some twisted social experiment than a romantic relationship wrapped in the promise of forever. I should be clear that when we do acknowledge race, it's almost always about Joe being Black. Perhaps in the future these conversations will achieve more balance as I come to define what my whiteness means. But for now, he shares. I listen. Sometimes I ask questions. I've nearly untrained my very white impulse to shove my own personal story into the container of his to prove we're not so different after all and that it's perceivable that we could love each other, right?

At times when Joe shares, it feels like we're sitting on either side of a pane of glass. Joe's voice is audible, his body language observable, but he is also protected by a barrier. This is not how it feels for Joe. He tells me there are no barriers and that he feels comfortable describing all the ins and outs of his experience. This barrier thrives only in my head. I want to protect him. Even from me.

I worry sometimes that what Joe will want from a marriage is never feeling the need to explain himself to his partner. I worry that someone of his own race could love him better. I wonder if he's risking big love, no-need-to-explain love, for our love. It's in this wonderment that I realize how much of my mind is controlled by the growing, divisive crack in our nation's foundation. When I share these concerns with Joe, he shakes his head and says, "No, boo. I love you. I want you," and I believe that he believes that. But if I can internalize racism, if I can be shaped by the jagged edges of what divides us, can't he? Is it possible that racism makes him want to love me?

As our plane to New Orleans slid down the tarmac at a snail's speed, I sensed a strong wave of nerves from Joe in the seat next to me. It could have been jitters about the flight itself. It could have been anxiety about the profound, blurry shift waiting for us on the horizon. No matter what, I wanted him to know we were in it together, so I reached for his hand. Joe, I learned later, was scared. This was only his second time flying, and he didn't know what to expect. Our knuckles knocked like tectonic plates.

Ope, sorry, just wanted to hold your hand, I said as if we were on our first date again. Joe smiled.

I know, he said. *Me, too.*

There's this pocket of a moment, a sweet, short moment, right after Joe and I first link hands in public. In that sweet, short moment we are together, we are one, and I'm sure everyone can see it because I feel radiant. I see Joe

radiating. Following that sweet, short moment is another that's longer than the first but still quick. In this moment, a pair of eyes belonging to a third party struggle to compute what they see. Despite the third party's best efforts, their pupils pry us apart, unbraid our hands, and put us back wherever makes them feel more comfortable. These are the moments that remind us that we are, in the grand scheme of things, an interracial couple. Not Nora and Joe, not spouses, not partners engaging in a subtle, common, acceptable form of public affection. We bring out the worst in people sometimes.

Despite all of this—because of all of this—we hold.

Our plane turned a corner and started to pick up speed. The faster we charged down the tarmac, the tighter we grasped each other's hand. The plane's front wheels lifted from the ground, and our skulls pressed into our headrests. The wind roared as we sliced through it at 150, 160, 170 miles per hour. The back of the plane lifted and tucked its wheels into its belly. The cabin wobbled as the wings struggled to catch smooth air.

We shook in our seats, and I peered at Joe peripherally. He closed his eyes. He took deep breaths. I looked down at our braided fingers and caressed his thumb with mine as if to calm the turbulence that tossed our bodies from side to side. I've never grown tired of the way our hands look intertwined, like a small set of piano keys resting, waiting to compose their own harmonic scale.

Joe squeezed harder.

After we got married and I completed graduate school, Joe and I took a belated honeymoon through the Guanacaste region of Costa Rica. For our flight from MSY→LIR the computer had assigned us seats in the very back row. Conscious of how much we'd already invested in an Airbnb that promised an outstanding vista of the Bahia Coco, wrapped on both sides by hills filled with howler monkeys and songbirds, we opted to forego the additional \$60 fee to select our own seats. The aisleway separated us.

"We'll fly first class on our next honeymoon," Joe promised.

Though it's difficult to take anyone seriously when they're wearing a bro-tank, matching board shorts, gigantic sound-canceling headphones, and a pillow shaped like a toilet seat around their neck, Joe's words and smile cued my jaw to unclench, my shoulders to melt, soften. As they always do.

When our plane to Liberia sped down the runway, we both reached across

the dividing line. We locked our hands together, his left, my right. Though the expected turbulence threatened to undo our bind, we radiated. Nothing could get in the way of tradition, especially en route to the honeymoon we'd been pinching pennies for three years to make a reality.

In the middle of the takeoff, a young white flight attendant with hair dyed chestnut brown unclipped and approached us from behind. She squatted beside me and rested her hand on my armrest, craning her head like an owl. "You won't be able to do this during the flight, miss." I looked across the aisle at Joe, whose eyes were closed, his flip-flopped feet tapping out the beats pulsating through his headphones.

"Of course, it's just for the takeoff." I smiled and added, "We're on our honeymoon." I shimmied my shoulders slightly, which is white-girl speak for *I'm very happy right now. Share this happiness with me.*

The flight attendant ticked her head toward Joe and tocked it back to me.

"Well," she said. "OK then."

With Joe seemingly at rest, I tried to trust the flight attendant. She's a professional, I thought. She's just doing her job. She's keeping us all safe. She knows more than I do. Maybe one of the food carts could dislodge itself and Red Rover our clasped hands, breaking fingers, scraping skin. Maybe one of the overhead compartments could bust open, letting luggage fall like an avalanche, snapping wrists and busting knuckles. Maybe a bout of turbulence could catapult a passenger to the back of the plane on their way to the bathroom, we'd clothesline them below the waist, and they'd break their nose against the soda-stained aisle floor.

Maybe we'd brought out the worst in her.

I squeezed Joe's hand and envisioned unbuckling myself. I imagined hovering over the flight attendant, now strapped back into her seat, and reminding her that the proper way to respond to someone who tells you they are on their honeymoon is *congratulations, bon voyage, enjoy your stay*, really any pleasantries, but not *OK, then*. I pictured her pupils growing wider and wider as I called her on what I'd decided is her bullshit. "Nora . . ." Her racist bullshit, "Nora . . ." and recommend she reexamine her racist bullshit before she pursues a lifetime career "Nora . . ." in customer serv—

"Nora!"

"Oh, shit. Sorry, boo. What's up?"

"My hand, babe. Jeez."

Joe, who often chooses to look beyond other people's bullshit, lifted his fingers out of mine and wiped his palm on his board shorts. His hand's damp heat left a faint streak on the fabric, then faded quickly. He moved one headphone off his ear and shot a look at the flight attendant. He was pissed, he would tell me later, but we weren't in danger, which means we ignore it, vent if we need to, and move on.

He leaned over the aisle to whisper to me. Our foreheads touched, cresting over the aisleway.

"I can't wait to be in Costa Rica with you."

As a white woman and a Black man in love in America, Joe and I don't always know who should protect whom. A person approaches us in darkness, and we have to name the situation quickly and communicate it to the other telepathically: *This is racism. Sexism. Xenophobia. Misogyny. White supremacy. All of the above.* We are not experts at this yet, and I both long for and live in fear of the day we are, the day after we learn how to make this call with accuracy because of shared memories, scars.

This is how we operate on our home turf. When we leave to explore someone else's, we must integrate unfamiliarity into our already-heightened awareness, both as individuals and as protectors of one another. It doesn't feel right to judge other people so quickly, especially when such judgments play into widespread, fear-based narratives created about people more vulnerable than we are. It also feels hazardous not to.

In order to not make these judgments, to avoid perpetuating the very line of thinking that unbraids our hands, we often choose to keep to ourselves; if we don't interact with the world around us, a world that could and has killed love like ours, we won't get hurt. We won't have to confront the possibility that maybe we can't protect one another. I can also avoid answering the question that follows me everywhere like a child's ghost: If I can't protect Joe, can I really love him?

Because we'd honeymooned in Guanacaste at the beginning of the rainy season and mostly ate at sodas, we rarely ran into other American tourists. We spent the first half of our trip in Marbella, a small, rural, hilly beach town with one

church, one school, one grocery store, and a handful of other restaurants and bars. Aside from two young American men who we'd spotted surfing at Playa Frijolar, we were the only tourists visiting at the time, making for very memorable sunsets on the beach, indeed.

During our second half of the trip spent in Playas del Coco, a more popular area suited to tourists with its paved roads and various bars and grocery stores, we still saw only a few Americans. It seemed Ticos by the beach who spent most of their day selling whistles shaped like toucans and ceramic pots with painted lizards twisted by the tail had also taken note of the decline in gringos. They packed their goods in woven sacks a little earlier every evening as the sun slipped behind the horizon.

At first we'd assumed that our interracial status combined with our obvious Americanness would invite more than locals' eyes computing our bodies. We'd wondered how we'd be received, if they'd have something to say, something to do about what they were computing. We wondered if we were safe. This is not a judgment of Ticos or Costa Rican culture or Central America at large. These assumptions and worries waltz through our minds every time we go somewhere unfamiliar to us, by which I mean Joe awakens these assumptions and worries resting in the back of my mind because they're always running in circles at the front of his. They have to be. He's taking a risk, and I don't want to give him reason to believe we aren't worth it. This does not feel like love. This feels like devotion in some ways. This is always reality. We have to be at our best when those around us may reveal their very worst at any moment.

We pulled our rental car up to our hillside Airbnb in Playas del Coco at dusk. When we ventured down Avenida Central, it was completely dark, putting a city unfamiliar to us in disguise. A faint beat pulsing out of the row of bars that led to the beach slowly crescendoed as we got closer to the shoreline. A young man no more than twenty years old in slip-on sandals and cutoff sweats crossed the street to talk to us.

"Hey, where you from?"

Joe moved me to the inside of the sidewalk so that he walked between the young man and me. *Is this it?* I thought. *Is this danger?* The three of us headed into the most congested part of the main strip, with people on motorbikes zipping around parked taxis and shop owners packing up sidewalk displays of woven purses and stuffed animals.

"Hey, you two. Where you from?"

I placed my left hand on my hip, hovering it above my front pocket. *Should I take my phone out? Is this it?* The young man walked backward to face us, ahead of us by a couple of strides. He held a banana leaf expertly folded into the shape of a long-stemmed rose with two thorns. *Which one of us is in danger?* I thought.

“This your first time here?”

“Yes,” I said. Joe stared ahead. He grabbed my hand. *Is this danger?*

“You are Americans?”

“Yes,” I said. Joe stared ahead. He squeezed my hand. *Should I start recording?*

“Nice. Never been. I’m from Nicaragua, but this is home,” he said with his arms spread wide. “You like it?” *He’s only talking to me.*

“So far, so good,” I said smiling. Joe looked to the left. To the right. Over his shoulder.

“You like this?” He held up the rose. “I give it to you for whatever you like.” *It is beautiful. But is this danger?*

“I’m sorry, we don’t have any cash on us,” I said. This was a lie.

“Ah, no worries, no worries. I see you around, OK? Pura vida!” “Pura vida!” I said. Joe stared ahead. He maintained his grip.

The young man skipped down a side street and hopped in a rusted red Honda with three other young men his age inside. They had all of the windows rolled down, and cheerful music we didn’t recognize poured out. I exhaled. Joe stared at the Honda until it slipped into the darkness.

We were close enough to the bars at this point to make out the lyrics to Nelly’s “Country Grammar.” I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk to do a few body rolls and booty shakes in Joe’s direction to break the tension. A few men at the bar nearby cheered and lifted their pint glasses in salute. Joe laughed his fake laugh and shook his head.

“You’re something else,” he said. I shrugged.

“I hate moments like that,” I said. “I never know what to do, during or after.” Joe pulled me into his arms and rested his cheek against the top of my head.

“Me neither,” he said. “You never know what’s going to happen.” I closed my eyes and let everything fade away, all the while knowing nothing was going anywhere.

We crossed paths with the same young man a few more times before we left for the States. Each time, he came up to us to say hello, ask about our

most recent adventure, and make suggestions for the next day's itinerary. He didn't try to sell us anything or ask us for money. He wished we would come back again soon but for a longer stay maybe? Each time he left us, Joe and I looked at each other and laughed at how scared we were of him that first night. Each time our smiles faded as we recalled that fear, realizing we could never let it go, not even in Costa Rica, where everyone we'd met looked us in the eye and smiled.

The honeymoon is over. It's time to go home. We take in some last-minute scenery on our cab ride to the airport, remarking how lush and vibrant everything is. We imagined how we might capture a morsel of our time spent together and free of jobs, bills, computing eyes and bake it into our reality. We scroll through photos on our phones, desperate to keep the paradise in our shared memory alive for as long as possible.

After we make it through customs and security, we walk to our gate down a carpeted path about as wide as a city sidewalk. We pass rows of seats stationed in front of other gates, the majority of them occupied by travelers, most of whom are white, none of whom are Black. An airport security guard, a Tico who appears to be no more than twenty-five years old, walks down the path toward us. He is guiding a German shepherd by a harness similar to those worn by seeing-eye dogs, but this particular pup is trained to sniff out drugs. He is on his way to customs to start his afternoon shift.

As the security guard and the dog approach, I slide behind Joe to make room for them on the path. My knee knocks into the large gray duffel bag Joe is carrying at his side. "Sorry, boo!" The dog passes Joe, me, and is yanked back by the security guard, who shoves his own body and the dog's between Joe's body and mine. I didn't expect us to be separated, so I stumble over my sandals and try to steady myself. The security guard clicks his tongue, signaling the dog to sniff the object he is forcing the dog's snout to press: Joe's duffel.

I find my stride, remain vigilant, and watch, just like all of the other white travelers, as the dog sniffs Joe's bag, finds nothing, and tries to walk away only to be yanked and clicked at by the security guard. Again. And again. Sniff, walk, yank, click. Sniff, walk, yank, click. Sniff, walk, yank, click.

My eyes ping-pong from the back of Joe's head where he's pulled his locks back with one of my hairbands to the pairs of eyes that study us, surround us.

Is this it? Is this danger? Did the security guard plant something on Joe? Where's my phone? Do I start recording? How well trained is this dog? What do the clicks mean? Has he even started his shift yet? Why Joe? Why behind his back? Why always behind a Black man's back? I know why. You know why. We all know why. Is this it? Is this danger? Should I say something? What do I say? Is this it?

Joe stops next to a row of seats and turns to face me. "This is our gate, boo," he says. His eyes trail the security guard, the German shepherd, the onlookers, me. He holds everything for a split second. Then he makes a decision. "Come on." He reaches for my hand. "Let's just sit down." We sit in silence while we wait for our plane. We stand in silence while we wait to board. We buckle ourselves in, side by side, waiting to take off, waiting to return to a reality we now know we never escaped. I feel compelled to apologize to Joe, so I do.

"What could you have done?" he asks. "Anything you might have said would probably have made it worse."

I nod because this is true but say, "I can't stay silent about this shit anymore." While I want to call out bullshit like the security guard, the owlish flight attendant, indulging in this impulse, speaking up because it feels right for me, can throw Joe into the very danger from which I'm trying to protect him, protect us. But not saying anything feels like breaking that pane of glass and inviting the danger inside. As a white person I've learned that, for better or worse, I hold an invisible megaphone, and there are no observable, recordable results when I'm silent. Which I'm realizing, as Joe's wife, is the point.

"Let's look at the photos again," Joe suggests. I welcome the distraction and scroll to what we agree is the best part of our trip: eating Joe's homemade gallo pinto beneath a loud, tumbling waterfall that looked fake it was so real. Joe holds his thumb down on the screen to activate the Live Photo feature. He scrolls left and presses down on the next photo. And the next. We relive our honeymoon three seconds at a time, building a bridge of shared memories across the gap we sense growing between us.

There's this pocket of a moment, a sweet, short moment, right after someone has shown us their worst. In that sweet, short moment, Joe is my husband, and I find solace in being able to share and resolve everything with him. Following that sweet, short moment is another that's longer, another where Joe is a Black man who I shouldn't burden with my inability to handle someone's worst with grace. Joe is my comfort. He puts me at ease. He unclenches my jaw, he melts my shoulders, he reminds me to breathe. When

he's my husband, I can rely on him to do this for me. When he's a Black man, I can't. He's always both.

The flight attendant announces that it's time for takeoff. I put my phone away, and Joe retrieves his headphones and neck pillow. The plane inches down the tarmac, and I look at Joe wondering if I should be pissed we're ending our honeymoon on a bullshit note or if we're composing the last note right now.

Joe's eyes meet mine as the plane turns a corner. We don't say anything. Our breathing synchronizes. The plane picks up speed. We reach for each other's hand at the same time. We hold, squeeze at 150, 160, 170 miles per hour. The plane tosses our bodies side to side, back and forth. There's no smooth air to catch.

Still, we hold.