


JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

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“One of the deepest, most penetrating documents yet set down on the racial question.” —*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

October 28, 1959

For years the idea had haunted me, and that night it returned more insistently than ever.

If a white man became a Negro in the Deep South, what adjustments would he have to make? What is it like to experience discrimination based on skin color, something over which one has no control?

This speculation was sparked again by a report that lay on my desk in the old barn that served as my office. The report mentioned the rise in suicide tendency among Southern Negroes. This did not mean that they killed themselves, but rather that they had reached a stage where they simply no longer cared whether they lived or died.

It was that bad, then, despite the white Southern legislators who insisted that they had a "wonderfully harmonious relationship" with Negroes. I lingered on in my office at my parents' Mansfield, Texas, farm. My wife and children slept in our home five miles away. I sat there, surrounded by the smells of autumn coming through my open window, unable to leave, unable to sleep.

How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth? Though we lived side by side throughout the South, communication between the two races had simply ceased to exist. Neither really knew what went on with those of the other race. The Southern Negro will not tell the white man the truth. He long ago learned that if he speaks a truth unpleasing to the white, the white will make life miserable for him.

The only way I could see to bridge the gap between us was to become a Negro. I decided I would do this.

I prepared to walk into a life that appeared suddenly mysterious and frightening. With my decision to become a Negro I realized that I, a specialist in race issues, really knew nothing of the Negro's real problem.

October 29, 1959

I drove into Fort Worth in the afternoon to discuss the project with my old friend George Levitan. He is the owner of *Sepia*, an internationally distributed Negro magazine with a format similar to that of *Look*. A large, middle-aged man, he long ago won my admiration by offering equal job opportunities to members of any race, choosing according to their qualifications and future potentialities. With an on-the-job training program, he has made *Sepia* a model, edited, printed and distributed from the million-dollar Fort Worth plant.

It was a beautiful autumn day. I drove to his house, arriving there in midafternoon. His door was always open, so I walked in and called him.

An affectionate man, he embraced me, offered me coffee and had me take a seat. Through the glass doors of his den I looked out to see a few dead leaves floating on the water of his swimming pool.

He listened, his cheek buried in his fist as I explained the project.

"It's a crazy idea," he said. "You'll get yourself killed fooling around down there." But he could not hide his enthusiasm.

I told him the South's racial situation was a blot on the whole country, and especially reflected against us overseas; and that the best way to find out if we had second-class citizens and what their plight was would be to become one of them.

"But it'll be terrible," he said. "You'll be making yourself the target of the most ignorant rabble in the country. If they ever caught you, they'd be sure to make an example of you." He gazed out the window, his face puffed with concentration.

"But you know—it is a great idea. I can see right now you're going through with it, so what can I do to help?"

"Pay the tab and I'll give *Sepia* some articles—or let you use some chapters from the book I'll write."

He agreed, but suggested that before I made final plans I discuss it with Mrs. Adelle Jackson, *Sepia's* editorial director. Both of us have a high regard for this extraordinary woman's opinions. She rose from a secretarial position to become one of the country's distinguished editors.

After leaving Mr. Levitan, I called on her. At first she thought the idea was impossible. "You don't know what you'd be getting into, John," she said. She felt that when my book was published, I would be the butt of resentment from all the hate groups, that they would stop at nothing to discredit me, and that many decent whites would be afraid to show me courtesies when others might be watching. And, too, there are the deeper currents among even well-intentioned Southerners, currents that make the idea of a white man's assuming nonwhite identity a somewhat repulsive step down. And other currents that say, "Don't stir up anything. Let's try to keep things peaceful."

And then I went home and told my wife. After she recovered from her astonishment, she unhesitatingly agreed that if I felt I must do this thing then I must. She offered, as her part of the project, her willingness to lead, with our three children, the unsatisfactory family life of a household deprived of husband and father.

I returned at night to my barn office. Outside my open window, frogs and crickets made the silence more profound. A chill breeze rustled dead leaves in the woods. It carried an odor of fresh-turned dirt, drawing

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