

# Balancing the Line

SHIELA HAWKINS

I WAS RAISED AN ARMY BRAT. I met people from all walks of life and learned a lot of interesting things about other cultures. I believe each individual that has touched my life has made it richer and more interesting. Through my life experience and worldview I have become color blind. When I say this I do not mean that I am not aware of the skin color of someone, I mean that it has no affect on my judgment of him or her. Most people I have encountered in my life have found my open-minded attitude refreshing and comforting. Then I moved to Knoxville, Tennessee and found that crossing the color line is not really welcomed here by either side.

I am white or at least that is my skin color. Culturally I fit in better with the African American society. No, I don't run around listening to rap music and behaving like a "wigger." That's just not me and I would never pretend to be something I'm not. I have been accused of "acting black" many times. I am not sure what it means to "act black" but I believe people say this because I don't tolerate people disrespecting me and I have a great passion for fighting a good fight. If this is "acting black," then I suppose I do, and I wouldn't want it any other way. I was

raised in a lower middle class family so the neighborhoods I grew up in tended to be more culturally diverse. I have been a friend to people from all races, religions, and walks of life. So you can see how moving to Knoxville where everyone stays on their own side of the fence leaves me quite puzzled.

Knoxville, Tennessee is a beautiful city full of life and wonder. It has activities for everyone and a pretty low crime rate. It is almost an ideal place to live except for the dirty little secret that is displayed openly. Knoxville has a very deep-rooted color line and there are great social consequences for not staying on your side of the line. No one talks about the color line, though it obviously plays a factor in everyday life here. Knoxville feels a lot like the days before segregation was outlawed. There is a white part of town and a black part of town. This way of life doesn't seem to be changing anytime soon. It has been this way for so long and each side seems overly content with their piece of the pie. I, on the other hand, am miserable living on my side of the tracks. I miss the diversity and the joy of living around people that aren't carbon copies of myself.

I live in a little retirement community in east Knoxville. It is called Halls, and how it got its name eludes me. This community is entirely white. When I first moved here I suppose I choose not to notice the lack of color in the community. I was drawn to the fact that it was a community low in crime with excellent schools near by. I live close enough to every kind of shopping center and restaurant that I never have to travel far. It wasn't until I lived here for about a month that I started to notice that I never saw any black people in Halls. I would go to the grocery store or Wal-Mart and there would only be white people. This situation was odd to me and a little uncomfortable at best. After I had this epiphany I met with great disdain the color line. It was staring at me and taunting me to try to cross. I knew that the color line had been here long before me and there is a good chance that it will be her long after me. I am caught balancing the line like a tight rope refusing to pick a side.

I promise you I am not exaggerating when I say there are no black

people in Halls. Finding this perplexing I asked my brother-in-law what was going on. He then proceeds to break up the color line in Knoxville. Halls is all white, while Magnolia is all black then he went through all these other communities listing the proper color for them. He then told me about my community and what he told me of my neighbors appalled me. Apparently about three years ago there was a black family that moved into Halls. They lived here for a short time and as far as my brother-in-law knows they were nice people. They left after they were woke up one night and found a cross burning on there front lawn. The police never found out who did it but rumors began to spread like wild fire. Some believe that the family themselves did it in attempt to get a huge settlement from the city, others believe that it was the neighborhood that burned the cross and then hid behind the “good old boys” code of silence. Regardless that family didn’t stay around long after that. My jaw dropped I could not believe what I was hearing. Knoxville has one of the biggest and best universities in the south how could this city be so segregated? Then the answer hit me; it has been this way for so long no one cares to change it. The root of my disgust was apathy. It all began to make sense.

I was naïve and still didn’t believe that my community could have absolutely no diversity. I asked around and everyone confirmed my brother-in-laws tale of the cross burning and ignorance. Then I began talking to my stepdaughter who attends the elementary school out here in Halls. She told me that there were no black kids in her class or her school. I was skeptical so when I picked her up from school one day I asked the school administrator if this was true. She conformed that there was “very little to no minorities” that attend her school. She said it in an almost proud and condensing way. I was disgusted and offended because she assumed that I would be pleased by this information. I looked at her with contempt and left with my blood boiling.

I moved here to help with my husband’s sick grandmother. This takes a lot of time out of my week, but also leaves a lot of idle time. So I decided to get a job. I was a waitress for Cracker Barrel in Columbia, South Carolina so I just transferred up here. My store isn’t located

in Halls, but it is located in East Knoxville. Out of a staff of about one hundred and fifty we have six minorities. Three are Hispanics and three African Americans. I quickly befriended a girl name Keisha; she is the only minority in the entire store that would talk to me. We get along great and have a genuinely good time together. It started as pleasant conversations and soon grew. One day I asked if she would like to go see a movie with me. She said sure and I offered to pick her up so we could ride together. She looked at me with great disappointment and apprehension in her eyes. Keisha told me that she didn't think that was a good idea because she lived on Cherry Street. I smiled because I knew where that was and could find it easily. Then the situation got awkward because she explained that it probably wouldn't be "safe" for me to enter her neighborhood. I lied and said that I understood. I was stumped and felt completely lost. How could we consider ourselves friends if we couldn't hang out each other's houses? I am still friendly with her, but a lot of times when her other friends, who are black, are around she changes. It is like our friendship is a huge secret that has to be hidden behind closed doors.

After my incident with Keisha I realized that both sides are happy with the way things are. Each side holds strong to their prejudices and way of life. There is no real villain here because there is no victim. The blacks don't want to live in the white community and vise versa. Each side is genuinely happy with their way of life. They have grown used to it and numb toward change. The color line here is as deep as the San Andreas Fault, and no bridge will cross it. Who am I to attempt to change it? Well, for one I am a person looking for a little more equality, and when you have that as a reason to fight you can't be wrong. It is time for people to stop hiding behind the way things have always been and start moving toward the way things should be. Knoxville isn't completely bad and I don't feel that there is a lot worth saving here. I know that Knoxville is not full of racist bigots, but to deny that it has an obvious color line would be lying to myself.

I find myself without a home here because neither side of the line is welcoming me with open arms. I have trouble abiding by what I see

as archaic social norms. I have trouble figuring out which side of the line I fit on or if I even fit on either side. It is hard to have open and liberal ideas in this town. I wonder sometimes why I just don't pack up and move to a more diverse city. Somewhere that I will be more comfortable and better accepted. But I know in my heart that if I run now I will only disappoint myself. What I have to do is find more like-minded people somewhere in this big town and hopefully by doing so set a new norm. I am not running because I feel passionately about equality for each man and I know I have to stick around and try to make it happen here. I know that climbing on my soapbox won't change things over night, but I also know that I see the problem clearly. Hopefully with a little patience and heart maybe I can stop balancing the line because there will be no line to balance.