



"I was born a poor black child." So begins Steve Martin's character (who is white) in the 1979 film *The Jerk*. Adopted by an African American family, he only later comes to realise he is white.

I was born a privileged, white, middle-class American. But since 9/11, I have slowly been made to realise that I am a brown person.

I carry the names of a general from the Muslim conquest and of a clan from Burqa, near Nablus in Palestine. But I grew up in Orange County, California, a particularly odious suburb full of Republicans in hot tubs.

My father was light-skinned and my mother as pale as her English forebears - I saw hardly a trace of olive when I looked in the mirror. Before 9/11, most people did not recognise any but the most obvious Arab names, and more than a few people supposed mine was German!

Like Oxbridge graduates at the height of the British Empire, I thought one day that I, too, would play my role in a US-run world, perhaps in the command posts of foreign policy or as a policy intellectual.

It is part of the privilege of whiteness to casually imagine such futures for oneself.

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