"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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