

# A Very Basic Decision

*Mary Mebane*

*Mary E. Mebane discovered that prejudice can exist within as well as between races when she attended a North Carolina college for blacks in the 1950s. The light-skinned, urban, middle-class blacks who made up the faculty and most of the student body could not believe that a dark-skinned black girl from a poor rural family could be a superior student. In "A Very Basic Decision," a passage from Mary: An Autobiography, Mebane tells of two meetings she had with the wife of the English department's chairman, a light-skinned woman who was convinced that Mebane could not be as talented as her grades showed. But Mebane decided not to give up her quest for a college degree. She graduated at the top of her class and is now a college English professor.*

## **Words to Know**

**appalled** dismayed

**bolstered** supported, propped up

**criteria** standards

**defer** submit, yield

**indistinguishable** not able to be recognized **or**  
seen as different

**noncommittal** to show no opinion or preference

**nonplussed** confused, perplexed, baffled

**pinnacle** peak, top

**recourse** choice, option

**N**orth Carolina College at Durham (it used to carry the words "for Negroes" in its official title—it said so on the sign right on the lawn) is located in the southern part of the town. Its immaculately groomed lawns and neat, squarish, redbrick classroom buildings and dormitories mark it as an oasis of privilege and ease. Looking at the postcard scenes through the low-hanging branches of the surrounding trees, one would not have believed that this was six minutes away from some of the worst slums in the South. The college hadn't forgotten their existence; it simply never acknowledged that they were there. The black dispossessed murmured against the "big dogs," and bided their time. I often thought that if and when "the revolution" came and the black masses in America awakened from their long sleep, their first target was going to be the black professional class and it would be a horrendous bloodbath. . . .

During my first week of classes as a freshman, I was stopped one day in the hall by the chairman's wife, who was indistinguishable in

color from a white woman. She wanted to see me, she said.

This woman had no official position on the faculty, except that she was an instructor in English; nevertheless, her summons had to be obeyed. In the segregated world there were (and remain) gross abuses of authority because those at the pinnacle, and even their spouses, felt that the people "under" them had no recourse except to submit—and they were right, except that sometimes a black who got sick and tired of it would go to the whites and complain. This course of action was severely condemned by the blacks, but an interesting thing happened—such action always got positive results. Power was thought of in negative terms: I can deny someone something, I can strike at someone who can't strike back, I can ride someone down; that proves I am powerful. The concept of power as a force for good, for affirmative response to people or situations, was not in evidence.

When I went to her office, she greeted me with a big smile. "You know," she said, "you made the highest mark on the verbal part of the examination." She was referring to the examination that the entire freshman class took upon entering the college. I looked at her but I didn't feel warmth, for in spite of her smile her eyes and tone of voice were saying, "How could this black-skinned girl score higher on the verbal than some of the students who've had more advantages than she? It must be some sort of fluke. Let me talk to her." I felt it, but I managed to smile my thanks and back off. For here at North Carolina College at Durham, as it had been since the beginning, social class and color were the primary criteria used in determining status on the campus.

First came the children of doctors, lawyers, and college teachers. Next came the children of public-school teachers, businessmen, and anybody else who had access to more money than the poor black working class. After that came the bulk of the student population, the children of the working class, most of whom were the first in their families to go beyond high school. The attitude toward them was: You're here because we need the numbers, but in all other things defer to your betters.

The faculty assumed that light-skinned students were more intelligent, and they were always a bit nonplussed when a dark-skinned student did well, especially if she was a girl. They had reason to be appalled when they discovered that I planned to do not only well but better than my light-

skinned peers. . . .

When the grades for that first quarter came out, I had the highest average in the freshman class. The chairman's wife called me into her office again. We did a replay of the same scene we had played during the first week of the term. She complimented me on my grades, but her eyes and voice were telling me something different. She asked me to sit down; then she reached into a drawer and pulled out a copy of the freshman English final examination. She asked me to take the exam over again.

At first I couldn't believe what she was saying. I had taken the course under another teacher, and it was so incredible to her that I should have made the highest score in the class that she was trying to test me again personally. For a few moments I knew rage so intense that I wanted to take my fists and start punching her. I have seldom hated anyone so deeply. I handed the examination back to her and walked out.

She had felt quite safe in doing that to me. After **all**, she was the chairman's wife, and so didn't that give her the right to treat the black farm girl as she chose? (Life is strange. When in the mid 1960s the department started hiring native-born whites, it was she who most bitterly resented their presence.)

It was that incident which caused me to make a very basic decision. I was in the world alone; no one bolstered my ambitions, fed my dreams. I could not quit now, for if I did I would have no future. . . . If I was going to get through college, I would have to be bland, noncommittal. I would simply hang on. I needed a degree and I would stay until I got it.

### Questions About the Reading

1. The writer says she made "a very basic decision." In what way was the decision "basic" and also very significant for the writer?
2. The writer says that she would have to be "bland and noncommittal" to get through college. Did she act in a noncommittal way when she handed the exam paper back to the chairman's wife?
3. Does the writer reveal that she has any prejudices or strong opinions about any members of her own race? Explain and cite specific statements to support your answer.
4. We learn what kind of person "the chairman's wife" is through the writer's own **subjective** interpretation of events. Does Mebane

create a negative impression by narrating incidents or by explaining them?

### Questions About the Writer's Strategies

1. Is the thesis of the essay directly stated? If so, in which sentence(s)? If not, state the thesis in a sentence of your own.
2. Of the ten paragraphs of the essay, six actually deal with the narrative incidents. Identify those paragraphs. Explain what happens in each of the paragraphs. What is the **order** in which the incidents occur?
3. The other four paragraphs of the essay provide background information and details that help you understand the narrative. Identify those four paragraphs. What is the **main idea** of each of the paragraphs?
4. What time does Mebane establish as her **point of** view? Which words in the first sentence of the essay tell you that North Carolina College at Durham still exists? Where does Mebane indicate the time for the incidents in the essay?

### Writing Assignments

1. Write an essay describing an experience that caused you to make a major decision about your life. Write this description in the **first person** and explain how you felt about the incidents involved (that is, be subjective).