

IN SEARCH OF AUBREY ROWE

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Every serious fiction writer is now aware of the critical mortar fire one can expect upon crossing racial barriers. Arguments insisting that ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status form fundamental, if not deterministic, influence on human beings proliferate. Recognizing difference, an act once regarded as oppressive, is the habit of the liberated contemporary mind. Women think and communicate in significantly different ways from men (Showalter 3-18). The vernacular of African-Americans creates the group's "ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue" (Gates, The Signifying Monkey ix). In short, these groups have appropriated their own discourse, and become the arbiters of authority on literature about their kind. Few theorists argue that such difference cannot be transcended, but the leap, once performed by Western men without the weight of doubt, is now one of prodigious distance and peril.

The establishment of departments defined by color and gender in this country's most prestigious educational institutions have greatly fortified these cultural barriers, and inspired intense criticism from prominent Anglo-American literary and social critics such as Mark Helprin, Allan Bloom, William F. Buckley, and George Will. But the

recognition of difference, which is little more than an awareness of individual and cultural complexity, should not frighten white men, because the awareness that empowers and liberates the others offers the same benefits to them. More intimidating than the empowerment of other cultural groups is the recognition that their points of view reveal blind spots in the imaginative visions of Anglo-American men. Nowhere is this more clear than in Anglo-American literary depictions of African-American experience.

Even though for many race and gender-based thinkers, T.S. Eliot now stands for all that is wrong with the tradition, his insistence on the importance of the past is continually echoed in the writings of virtually every postmodern theorist. As Eliot observed, if we think we know more than writers of the past, it is because "they are that which we know" (40). For Anglo-American fiction writers this means uniting their imaginative efforts with an understanding of traditional forms and interpretations.

The narrator of my novel In Search of Aubrey Rowe is of mixed Caucasian and Negro descent--mulatto is a difficult word to use in good conscience since it comes from the Spanish word for mule--yet examining my tradition's interpretations of African-American experience, as well as characters of mixed heritage, was crucial if I hoped to form a compelling character. Most of Aubrey's psychological and social development occurs among African-Americans in a small Oklahoma town. To understand the influence of an experience unknown to me, I conducted research in a number of different

ways: interviewing black Oklahomans who lived in neighborhoods similar to Aubrey's, reading sociological works that examined African-American values and behavior, and examining the variety of this experience rendered in fictional works by African-American authors. But equally important was an analysis of Anglo-American depictions of black characters, which helped me recognize the influence of my cultural background on my racial views.

Sadly, an examination of this tradition reveals severe shortcomings in the renderings of African-American experience, and suggests that racial identity is not a mere incidental but a significant factor in the production of literary works, even the classics of the tradition. Beginning with Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, still the tradition's most highly-regarded anti-slavery text, one discovers an inability and perhaps reluctance to envision the black slave as anyone more than a type. Jim is a Sambo: naive, superstitious, emotional, irrational. Easily manipulated by white boys, he is clearly ill-equipped to handle the responsibilities of a citizen in a free, democratic society. In fact, the text does not question his slave status but rather his treatment. Jim doesn't seek freedom; he simply does not want to be sold to an owner from New Orleans, where he fears brutal treatment. A common characteristic found in Anglo-American works about African-American slaves is a view that their treatment was always worse somewhere else, generally more brutal in the deep South and in states where the author did not reside. The

novel does not quarrel with Jim's station in life, but argues that as a human being he deserves kinder treatment from his owners.

In many ways, Faulkner's work offers the most profound insights into the effects of race of any Anglo-American writer, and his black characters possess much greater dignity than Twain's. Lucas Beauchamp in Go Down, Moses and Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury are not traditional types. He is not a happy-go-lucky Sambo, nor she a Mammy. Beauchamp is a proud, strong, and bitter man, unhappy with his status, but aware of the enormity of white power. Much of his dignity originates from his restraint and self-control when confronted with the extremes of white racism, his ability to remain true to his own moral vision despite the outrageous extremes of Anglo-American bigotry. For many scholars, including biographer Frederick Karl, Beauchamp is one of Faulkner's greatest heroes (654).

Yet it seems to me the dignity which so impresses Anglo-Americans is as much a product of Beauchamp's stoic acceptance of Jim Crow laws, of his ability to endure an unjust fate, as it is of his resistance to them. Certainly, part of the tradition's tragic vision, including Faulkner's, includes a recognition and acceptance of human limitation. Yet the restraints Beauchamp must endure are unjustly and ignorantly imposed by the dominant white group. How much dignity can one acquire accepting conditions which should be changed? Furthermore, although Beauchamp's thoughts and actions reveal moral complexity, his personality does not

approach the psychological intricacy of Faulkner's white characters, such as Jason or Quentin Compson. Beauchamp may attain greater dignity, but he does not possess the same internal complexity.

Likewise, Dilsey's most redeeming and impressive quality is her strength of endurance in a fragmented, collapsing ante-bellum household. This characteristic is so integral to Faulkner's conception of her that he concludes her section, and the novel, with this view. But of the novel's four viewpoint characters, she is the only one who needs the mediator of a third person narrator. And from an African-American's point of view, the fact that she endured is not as significant as the fact that she had to endure.

If Twain and Faulkner cannot be excused for their views, they can at least be understood by briefly examining the tradition they inherited, a tradition which privileged European, hence white, forms of communication alien to the African. Henry Gates succinctly outlines this tradition in Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars:

After Descartes, reason was privileged, or valorized, among all other human characteristics. Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the visible sign of reason. Blacks were "reasonable," and hence "men," if--and only if--they demonstrated mastery of the "arts and sciences," the eighteenth century's formula for writing. So, while the Enlightenment is famous for establishing its

existence upon the human ability to reason, it simultaneously used the absence and presence of "reason" to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been "discovering" since the Renaissance. The urge toward the systemization of all human knowledge, by which we characterize the Enlightenment, led directly to relegation of black people to a lower rung on the Great Chain of Being, an eighteenth-century construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale from animals and plants and insects through humans to the angels and God himself. (54-55)

The consequences of this view on racial understanding had undergone little serious revision by Twain's time. Although Modernists such as Faulkner were challenging an inherited past founded upon reason, no European or Anglo-American writer to my knowledge confronted the effects of these views on racial identity. The civilized world was experiencing rapid change at the beginning of this century, both in theory and in actuality; however, even the most daring and imaginative thinkers operated from assumptions determined and reinforced by members of their tradition, including Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Hume, when it came to matters of race.

However, these views were undergoing radical revision by 1967, and the publication of William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner appeared to signal a new and more

complex understanding of race on the part of white men. With the publication of this work, the Anglo-American tradition crossed the color line most famously and overtly. Widely praised and heralded, the novel apparently proved that a white man could understand a black man and that American civilization and its literary tradition was not inherently corrupt, as was now being alleged by many African-Americans such as Amiri Baraka and Stokely Carmichael. Even though, as Wayne Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction demonstrates, the categories of third and first person narrators generally inform us of little more than grammatical distinctions, allowing Turner to tell his own story appeared to reveal a greater understanding and appreciation on the author's part. Speaking in first person gave Turner greater liberty and control than his literary predecessors had enjoyed, and implied greater personal identification between author and character. But as it turns out, the novel did not break new ground in terms of human understanding. It is an Anglo-American text, one which received undue praise from critics responding out of fear generated by race riots of their time and which should now cause all Anglo writers great anxiety.

To his credit, Styron attempts to bring us closer to his subject than Twain or Faulkner did by placing his readers inside an African-American's mind for the entire length of the novel. In addition, he offers his character the Anglo-American tradition's greatest tribute: attempting to fashion him as a tragic hero. In Styron's own words,

Turner is "a figure of tragic magnitude and nobility" ("William Styron Replies" 547). Gifted, articulate, called by a higher power, Turner struggles in vain against the forces of white tyranny to achieve liberation for his people. Upon his insights and actions hang the lives of many fellow slaves. His impassioned tale brings to light his awareness of his doomed but necessary struggle.

However, the sad truth of his story emerges from the realization that Nat Turner, an actual historical figure, is no more tragic than he is black. His demise does not result from a tragic flaw but from the armed response of white Southerners. Because he seeks to make Turner tragic, Styron shows he is not as interested in the slave's revolt or the reasons that inspired it as he is in his character's elevated, dignified, self-conscious resistance to forces he cannot conquer. These characteristics may make Turner's story sublime in the Kantian sense, but not tragic. (A similar view of revolutionaries appears in Yeats's "Easter 1916.") Furthermore, if we remove the oppressor from the situation we remove all remaining tragic features from Turner's character, even his sublime yearnings. Thus, the novel, like Twain's before it, enforces the tyranny it appears to be resisting.

Of greater concern to this writer is the realization that Nat Turner is also not a black man; he is Styron in black face. His voice--learned, elevated--would appear to be the most significant clue to his identity. However, even though as Stanley Kauffman observes, in many passages

"Styron elbows Turner aside and takes over," the voice actually tells us little about Nat's racial heritage (679). (I will explore the curious relationship between race and voice later.) Rather, Turner's views of his fellow slaves and Styron's development of him as a child reveal values and attitudes far more likely to be held by an Anglo-American than an African-American.

Turner shows little emotional attachment to any of his fellow slaves. His vast intellectual development isolates him, giving him an awareness his enslaved counterparts lack. He becomes an intellectual and cultural snob, distanced from his crude companions by his learned gentility. Such alienation from learning is no doubt plausible--in fact, it seems an inevitable consequence for most twentieth-century Anglo intellectuals--but this development denies his family and friends, children and adults, any power of influence, which in turn demeans their worth as individuals. His mother apparently conveys little wisdom or values to him. As a result, in the words of Vincent Harding, Turner's life is "robbed by Styron of its roots" and is "neither black nor white," which causes the "loss of particularity as well as power" (26).

Turner's development begins dramatically in the novel when he demonstrates a precocious facility for the written language. This ability astounds his fellow slaves, who interpret his acts as signs of divine grace. Such interpretation is perfectly plausible from an historical perspective. Hearing the white man's Talking Book was

frequently interpreted by African slaves as an indication of divine power. The appearance of slave narratives and autobiographies throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were African-American attempts to demonstrate powers of reason through writing, to become a presence in a world where they were absent, which would in turn make them more human and elevate their status on the Chain of Being.

But as Gates demonstrates, attempting to represent what is not there, to fill the void created by the contradictory term "silent voice," does not liberate but further enslaves:

Indeed, how can the black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence?. . .Black writing, and especially the literature of the slave, served not to obliterate the differences of "race," . . . rather, the inscription of the black voice in Western literatures has preserved those very cultural differences to be imitated and revised in a separate Western literary tradition, a tradition of black difference. (65-66)

Styron may be excused if, in 1967, he did not possess a complete awareness of his tradition's racial beliefs. But his depiction of Turner as superior to his fellow slaves because of an ability to read the white man's words clearly reveals an Anglo-American prejudice. His novel argues that blacks made little impression on young Nat because they were too dumb and he too smart. Isn't it also quite likely that

such developments result from Styron's personal history? He was not likely influenced by black children or a black mother, but was by the power of Anglo-American books.

Even in 1967, it is difficult to excuse Styron's insistence on the power of white influence. By this date, anthropological studies repeatedly revealed the complexity of thought and communication in the most primitive human societies. In the most basic, crude, and brutal communities, such as the Yanomamo of South America--one of the few primitive cultures alive to date--ironic word play, insights into human desires, and vast understanding of the geographical world abound (Chagnon 18-53). Neither Twain nor Faulkner had access to such findings. Styron did, but they failed to influence him, or many other Anglo-American writers, because he was writing about American blacks, this country's bastard stepchildren, whom Anglos habitually approach in a paternal fashion.

Ralph Ellison's vision of the African-American as an invisible man is equally true and false from this Anglo-American's point of view. Whites often do not see blacks, even when in their presence. But when they do, they typically only see color. They fill in the rest--dreams, desires, fears, intelligence--as it suits them. If an Israeli interpreted the life of a notable Arab revolutionary, who died fighting the Israeli's countrymen, Anglo-Americans would surely approach the work with great caution, aware of the author's cultural influence on his interpretation. But in the past, Anglo-American works about

blacks have not been challenged by many critics with the same skepticism, a habit which suggests Anglos traditionally respond to works out of an intense hope that they will somehow redeem the injustice of the past.

These observations encourage one to think that writing from the point of view of another culture is an impossible task. But this generalization would elevate cultural difference to unrealistic heights, deny fundamental similarities in human experience, and create destructive limitations on human inquiry, tolerance, and mediation. Instead, these observations suggest that fiction writers need to recognize and relinquish as best they can the effects of their own cultural backgrounds, to strive for the condition Keats described as "negative capability." This feat is much easier said than done, but examining the Anglo-American tradition offers insights into the past that might better inform our present endeavors.

I also studied African-American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison to gain a better understanding of black Americans. This research provided me the same appreciation for the subject that concentrated investigation offers any student: among African-Americans, an incredible variety of forms and personalities exists, and members of this cultural group only think about race when forced to. The common denominator I discovered in reading African-American novels was the characters' frustrations with their imposed limitations, whether they be slave

status, Jim Crow laws, or more subtle forms of racial prejudice. These conditions forced the authors and their characters to examine the effects of race, even when other concerns appeared equally significant and worthwhile. As James Baldwin observed, "I have not written about being a Negro at such length because I expect that to be my only subject, but only because it was the gate I had to unlock before I could hope to write about anything else" (8).

Alienation and fragmentation of identity are also common elements in the African-American experience. Ellison's metaphor of the invisible man most profoundly reveals this sense of simultaneous presence and absence. His unnamed character embodies all the complexities of human ambition and desire, yet walks through life like a ghostly phantom, anonymous in situations where he desires recognition, made aware of himself in circumstances which seem mundane. In Toni Morrison's literary and critical works, the most pervasive and insidious effect of racism is the fragmentation of the self, which is both present and absent, there and not there (Playing in the Dark x).

Imagining a character of mixed heritage, I felt the sense of duplicity and alienation to be his most agonizing concern. Depictions of such characters are prevalent in the Afro-American tradition. The presence of black blood makes them Negroes from the white world's point of view, but as in Hurston's Jonah's Gourd Vine and Their Eyes Were Watching God, they often receive better treatment because of the lightness of their skin. Within black communities, they

receive various reactions, from unchallenged acceptance to ostracism. The effects of heritage on their individual personalities are generally not explored in great detail, as these thematic concerns are subordinate to the novels' more pressing sociological concerns. Slaves, sharecroppers, and janitors are not usually afforded the time or privilege to worry about the nature of personal identity when they must struggle to meet more fundamental human needs of food and shelter. James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) shows the effects of alienation on such an individual, but even here the need for personal survival often shapes his sense of identity, and diminishes his ability to explore the effects of his mixed heritage and define his own sense of self.

Similar characterizations exist in the Anglo-American tradition; however, as the tradition made individual psychology the landscape of study during this century, some authors recognized the fragmentation sociological forces could render on persons of mixed heritage. The most notable example is Faulkner's Joe Christmas in Light in August. Actually, although characters in the novel assume Christmas possesses Negro blood, and many critics take it for granted, the novel never offers proof (Karl 448). But his biological status does not matter as much to Faulkner as do the other characters' perceptions of him and the effects these perceptions exert on his uncertain identity. Christmas does not know if he is part Negro or not, and in Light in August Faulkner examines the debilitating effects of this

uncertainty. Christmas does not belong to either group. He has no place, and as a result, must wander in a permanent state of doubt and confusion. Although he frequently questions his identity, he cannot define himself because his society insists on the existence of only two groups, the black and white.

Racial divisions continue to shape American society, but many of these walls are falling or shifting. Currently, the subject is one of great debate and examination, which allows us to explicitly confront the effects of racial background on personal identity in a more open and tolerant manner than Faulkner experienced. For that reason, I attempted to treat this theme explicitly in my novel In Search of Aubrey Rowe. Unlike Christmas, Aubrey Rowe knows his racial heritage, and lives in a time of expanded freedom for people of mixed backgrounds. Although he experiences discrimination from both groups, he can make personal decisions that were not offered to people like him in the past. Thus, I decided to let him tell his own story out of the realization that he would want and need to confront his condition head-on. This decision required a sophisticated narrator, one highly articulate and self-aware, in order to render the psychological effects of such divisive turmoil. Highly dramatic events occur in the novel, but their importance is felt in the impressions they made on the young Aubrey then, and on the present-day narrator's ability to sort and understand them at the moment of narration.

The motivating impulse for his narrative is his personal desire to gain a sure sense of self before entering medical school. For Aubrey, the acceptance of professional study implies a desire for social integration. Cognizant members of all American ethnic groups have felt the pangs of cultural loss and separation as they assimilated into the American mainstream. The prospects of material wealth and social status have reduced the trauma for many individuals. But for African-Americans, this country's most tormented ethnic group, assimilation cannot be achieved without experiencing attendant feelings of guilt and doubt. In the preface, Aubrey recognizes the personal and social advantages a medical degree will bestow him. Yet he must wonder if by accepting a mainstream profession he is unconsciously accepting inherent racial attitudes which will continue to oppress African-Americans as a group, despite the efforts of a few conscientious individuals.

This concern is further compounded by doubts about his personal identity. Aubrey's consciousness, hence his identity, is even more severely divided by an awareness of his mixed heritage, a fragmentation which characterizes his first significant memory, revealed dramatically in the first chapter. At an early age, he sees himself as both black and white, a member of two distinct and separate groups. The white group dominates the outside world; the black group controls his neighborhood. While most people of mixed Anglo and African-American descent decide they are one or the other at an early age, more than likely from the need for

self-preservation, I make Aubrey struggle with his split nature throughout the novel, so his story can examine the effects of this duplicity in great detail. This persistent conflict causes him to feel alienated no matter where he is. Throughout, he feels like a mockingbird, imitating the behavior of those around him, gaining comfort from momentary assimilation, feeling regret and greater doubt in hindsight as he recognizes his lack of personal control.

The novel attempts to throw this conflict into greater dramatic relief through the characters of his father and Uncle Charles. Obviously, his father embodies the white part of Aubrey, both genetically and socially. Even though his father comes from a family of middle-class income, he is a laborer by profession and in temperament, and serves to represent the working-class Anglo-American. Uncle Charles represents the African-American proletariat. Both characters are strong, independent men who speak in the tempered dialects of their particular subcultures. They share common values of respect and personal dignity, but possess differing views of manhood and society. These differences appear when they respond to their sons' lies, and teach them self-defense. But they are most dramatically demonstrated in their fight over the All in the Family episode which causes Aubrey's family to leave the neighborhood and move to the country. Through these proud, tough-minded, obstinate characters, I hope to show the difficulty Aubrey has in unifying the diverse and at times opposing elements of his racial identity.

The third feature of his personality appears in the voice that tells the story, that of a middle-class urban Anglo-American. Making two parts Anglo and one African would appear to indicate an Anglo bias on my part. But the two aspects represented by his father and Uncle Charles are present throughout his life and form the most fundamental aspects of his personality. The third is acquired through formal study. I have already pointed out Aubrey's awareness of this part's limitations, but he is also cognizant of the liberating effect learning such a language and becoming a detached intellectual can offer. This language, hence this aspect of his personality, allows him to see the other two more clearly. And as the conclusion reveals, despite this language's restrictions, he can only unify the twin sides of his split nature by virtue of this voice and the awareness it provides. By the end, Aubrey still wonders if he may be renouncing his blackness by accepting this sophisticated, mainstream voice, but he recognizes its powers of integration. Although it too is limited, it is his best alternative, providing him with a more varied and sophisticated vocabulary than the other voices offer.

Seen in this way, standard American English is not the innate product of a particular group, but a form of communication available to anyone who wishes to learn its conventions. Houston Baker and Henry Gates, whose theories differ in significant ways, have done as much to raise consciousness of African-American traditions and Anglo-American prejudice as any contemporary black theorists. Yet

they do so through standard American English, in rational discourse that contains thesis, support, conventional usage, even unified paragraphs. Have they become white in the process? Is Aubrey? No. As Gates notes, "Virtually no one, it seems clear, believes that the texts written by black authors cohere into a tradition because the authors share certain innate characteristics" (100). Rather, they form a literary tradition because "many black authors read and revise one another, address similar themes, and repeat the cultural and linguistic codes of a common symbolic geography" (101). Gates has taken a place in the American critical tradition through his works, which revise previous works, address similar themes, and repeat the codes of a common group. On a personal level, Aubrey Rowe is using the language toward a similar goal, seeking to understand his experience and integrate the diverse elements of his personality through the best means available.

Finally, the form of the novel marks the work as a product of the Anglo-American tradition. In 1967, John Barth observed that certain forms of literature, particularly the novel, appeared to be exhausted (29). But when faced with the realization that new forms, such as self-reflexive narratives, possess even less stamina than traditional methods, the fiction writer has little choice but to return to the past and by uniting it with the present make something new.

My novel is traditional in many ways. Anglo-American novels typically form structures of two types: biographical

and dramatic. Essentially, the structure of In Search of Aubrey Rowe is biographical and episodic, much like many nineteenth-century novels such as David Copperfield. In the twentieth century, numerous Anglo-American novels, such as The Great Gatsby, formed stories with much greater dramatic unity. I cannot hope to achieve the same kind of unity with such a loose form, but I did attempt to tighten the novel's structure with a focused theme, which is explicitly delivered in the prologue and unifies the novel's dramatic episodes. A variety of scenes appear in the novel, but they serve to develop the narrator's exploration of his racial identity. Henry James defined the novel as "a direct impression of life," and argued that the work's value emerges from the "intensity of the impression" (8). Through its narrative voice and structural form, In Search of Aubrey Rowe attempts to render the most intense impressions of events that shape the narrator's life, and creates what I believe is the objective of any novel: a significant, compelling story.

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IN SEARCH OF AUBREY ROWE

PROLOGUE

It's like this: having reached an important turning point in my life, I pause momentarily to reflect on the chronicle of my experience, to page through the desultory catalogue of memory in the hope of locating a sense of identity, shaped as it may be by the various influences of culture, environment, language, and lineage.

Or is it this: I done went this far, been through all this up and down, and still don't know what it is with me, who I am. Straight up, now, I don't know if I be me cause of my folks, my neighborhood, or the white man. You dig? I know my boyz do, but do you? I think I just be me, but then I ain't so sure. You down with what I'm saying?

Or this: Well, I don't know, reckon it jest got to where I wasn't feeling right, sort of like my back tire had come off, and I couldn't go til I sat down a spell and thought it all through. Nothing too terrible earth shattering, just what I thought about what I'd done and what I was gonna do, I guess. Figured if I turned it over a time or two in my mind, I might work it out and be able to get back up and go.

The question for me is, which is it? That's what I hope to figure out because I've been all three, am all

three, and can switch from one to the other in a heartbeat depending on the circumstance. I have lived with blacks, lived with whites, lived in the city and on a farm, run with the brothers on Red Hill, played science games on sleepovers with little Jeffrey Morris, tried to ride a calf without a saddle, been called a hick, spic, nigger, half-breed, Oreo, delinquent, genius, smart ass, half-n-half, criminal, homeboy, and med school applicant. In short, I am a mulatto who looks like a Mexican, and when filling out applications, under race I take turns checking none, one, two, or three categories, as the mood strikes me.

I am not a writer. Let me clarify that point from the outset. I am 25 and have just graduated from Southern Oklahoma University in Otto, Oklahoma with a degree in biology. My gpa was 3.82. I scored 14 on the biology section of the MCAT and have been accepted to the University of Kansas medical school for the fall term. I learned to mimic the educated sounds of standard American English in writing papers for humanities courses, and in the process, developed an appreciation for the precision of grammatical constructions. But when I listen to the sound of this voice, I am sometimes suspicious of the identity it defines. I know that all people who speak this way learned it, and perhaps gave up a part of themselves in the process, whether white or black: the Oklahoma farmer, the West Virginia coal miner, the Louisiana shrimper, the Harlem preacher. Yet

when you are black, or even half-black, you learn to be wary of changes promoted by whites, knowing many still hold racist attitudes and fear black encroachment, knowing racism has been part of the American package, in the north and south, from the start. So for these reasons, I must wonder if the conventions and attitudes are inextricably bound, and that in accepting the conventions of American civilization, I unknowingly accept the racial attitudes as well.

At this point, though, I don't believe the system is irredeemably corrupt even though much of the country's society and economy was founded on racist principles. I also do not believe I am renouncing my blackness by speaking in this conventional way or am becoming white by pursuing a middle-class profession. Obtaining such a position seems to me the best way to create change, for myself and my community. But I am not sure. I could be fooled. I have been wrong before, so I feel the need to consider where I have been, before I decide where I should go. That is what I hope to do in these pages.

I must admit I feel an additional uncertainty because I am not sure of my audience. This is the voice I want to use, but it does not speak to all facets of the audience I want to reach. Can I believe that I am writing equally to Shelby Steele, Jesse Jackson, Spike Lee, Amiri Baraka, Ralph Ellison, Richard Pryor, Brandon Marsalis, Ice T? (Can you hear me, Boyyyyzzz? You word-wise to the white chat? The

smack-to-smack?) How about William Buckley, Mario Cuomo, Oliver Stone, Pat Buchanan, John Updike, Robert DeNiro, Garth Brooks, Axl Rose? (You've noticed so far they're all men. Haven't mentioned the women yet, have we? Nor the Native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, European Americans and the many others I just excluded.) Yet if I cannot speak to them, how can I conjure a vision of myself as an integrated person, about to take a place in an integrated society? I don't know the answer. All I can do is tell my story and see what happens, knowing schizophrenia--madness, chaos, anarchy, for me and my country--may be but one cell away.

It is not for a lack of answers that I suffer. For example, even as I write, I hear a distant, academic, white-collar voice professing: "Who is this Aubrey Rowe? I think it's quite clear from his first paragraph whom he would benefit most by becoming. Notice the fluency and clarity of his initial elocution, the product of a cultured, civilized England, its sophistication, elevation, grace, compared to the colorful but ungrammatical vernacular of the black neighborhood or the local dialect of the white rustic. Certainly, no matter whom he chooses to become in this land of democracy and free enterprise, he will be able to articulate his sense of self and therefore know this self more assuredly by accepting the English tradition than by

pursuing one of the other viable but less sophisticated cultures."

And just as quickly, almost simultaneously, another voice says: "Hell, yeah, he want you to talk like him cause it's his language. His game by his rules. Wise up, homes, this is a colonized land talking a colonized language, where there's the oppressor and the oppressee, and no in between, no matter what people say. Accept that way of talking and you accept the oppression. And it ain't no better than any other talk. He tell you it gives heightened self-awareness, self-assurance, self-knowledge. Just ask Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton or Ernest Hemingway what it do. Or maybe we shouldn't, since they all iced themselves! Or maybe ask William Styron, American man of letterssss, who just claimed he went mad too but had enough sense to write about it 'stead of chilling himself for good. And lot of folks paid money to read such Geraldo-noise and believed it! White and black too! Ignorance don't care who it run with. Give me a fuckin' break, what I say. If Homey the Janitor claimed he needed a few years off cause he thought he teetering on the abyss, they'd say, 'Enjoy the view! Cause you ain't working here no more.' And the same'd go for Redneck or Rodriguez too for that matter. Admit it! Hell, if Homey really felt like he was going mad, he'd tell 'em, 'I ain't feeling so well.' And they'd say, 'Take the day off and go to the doctor.' And if he really felt it--really feared he was

going off--then came back, why you think he'd be talking about it? Hell, no, cause if he did they'd know he didn't really feel nothing--only thought he did."

And to all this dialogue, this back-and-forth, this throwing down, Redneck would say, "Ya'll just go on your own ways and leave me alone. All I want to do is stay right where I am minding my own business, and don't want no one bothering me. I don't really see how any of this makes a bit of difference one way or the other. Just stay off my property."

So that's where it stands.

CHAPTER I

My mama's black and my daddy's white. That's how I figured it out. I don't remember when the realization occurred. My mother and father are blunt people, yet they never told me this. I guess that was one thing they felt like they didn't have to say--the boy can see, he'll figure it out soon enough. When I did, I must have been very young, so young I recognized the difference but didn't know it had meaning. But it did, as I soon discovered, a meaning as certain for others as it was confusing for me.

I was born in 1965, year of the Watts Riot and the assassination of Malcolm X. My infant years were spent in Kansas City, but I don't remember anything about them. I came to consciousness in a small southern Oklahoma town called Otto, population 25,000, ten percent black. Founded on oil and agriculture, Otto gradually became a factory town in the 70's. Local manufacturers now make styrofoam products, Winchester rifles, automotive tools, glass bottles and jars, bricks, campers, salt water pumps and Dorene's Cookies. The city limits contain a feed mill, two hospitals--one owned by the Chickasaw Indian Nation--a regional university, about 50 churches, mostly Baptist, almost as many convenience stores, and a black section, which most people call Black Town, but which, in the early

70's, a progressive city official gave the euphemism Union Heights. I guess he got the idea because Black Town is on a slight hill, but there are no two-story buildings or any other heights united in my neighborhood, far as I can tell.

We lived on the northern edge of the Heights, in a block of decent frame and brick houses. Financially, we were upper lower class. We had a few bourgeois habits, but were mainly lower class in lifestyle and temperament. A few black families in the neighborhood were far more middle-class in attitude than we, but when I was growing up, no blacks in Otto had middle-class means. Attitude was all they could afford.

My parents aspired, but not as much for things as for a sense of place, opportunity, and tolerance. These elements were like three keys that rarely appeared on the same ring. My father was a carpenter, who moved around a lot from job to job. My mother did a number of things for years until she finally got a better-paying job as a cashier at Safeway in 1974. She was only the second black employee in the store's history.

A couple of white families lived across the street--we lived on the border of Black Town. But whites disappeared and the houses turned shabbier as you went south, becoming two-room hovels with exteriors made of shingles near Red Hill, the edge of town. The poorest people in the city lived there, staying alive on food stamps and the fish they

caught from Cedar Creek. I was about 12 before I fully realized the poverty that afflicted this part of my neighborhood. Elmo Jenkins, the first black to work at Safeway--as a janitor--occasionally brought home fruit the store thought too old or rotten to sell. I later discovered this was the only fruit a friend of mine named Nathan Gaines ever ate as a boy.

I ran around with a few white kids, but lived mainly among blacks--I later discovered my father's family shunned us. My mother's parents, her sister and brother-in-law and their kids, and other friends were frequently in our house or we in theirs. Because of this, I think I considered myself black when I was young. I knew my skin was lighter than most faces and arms I saw, and my father's lighter than mine. But we were family, so to my mind the differences, even my own, were minor. I guess, to me, these differences were like one person having a lot of freckles or red hair in white families where no one else possesses such traits. But since the people in my house were black, I think I thought of myself as black--I'm almost sure of it.

Yet when I went to school, a peculiar thing happened. I still don't think I can explain it fully. Then, most blacks attended the all-black Jefferson Elementary School, held in the buildings of the former Dunbar School, the public school for Negroes during segregation which the city closed in 1964. In 1968, after numerous battles in state

courts over continued discrimination in public schools, the state legislature finally drafted and ratified its own civil rights bill, outlawing segregation in all public places. Most state high schools and junior highs were integrated by this time, but few elementary schools were. So in the summer of 1969, the Otto School Board extended the all-white Franklin district three blocks into my neighborhood, which brought approximately twenty black children into the town's first integrated elementary school.

Many white parents in the district, which was mostly lower middle class, were furious. They feared once blacks enrolled others would come, and the entire school and neighborhood would soon be black. Some whites, gripped by such fears, helped them come true by moving to another part of town so their children could attend an all-white school. A mass migration of whites would have likely occurred--of the type that many larger cities in the state experienced--but there were not enough houses on the market or new housing additions to accommodate such a large number of people. Most people reluctantly stayed in the Franklin district, keeping their eyes open for a suitable vacancy. Construction of Brookhaven, a new addition of middle-class homes, began four months later, on the northeast edge of town.

When the time came for me to enroll in first grade, in August of 1971, Franklin was still predominantly white. My

mother was not upset because I had to attend a white school. Franklin received better funding than Jefferson, and integration of grade schools had to start somewhere, she said. It might as well include the son of the only mixed couple in town.

She tried to explain the situation to me. I remember understanding that I would see more white people when I went to school, but at the time, this seemed as significant as learning my school had sky blue walls.

When I arrived, I was surprised at first. The visual display of so many whites was unnerving. I was not frightened as much as shocked. They looked so pale. I remember thinking they would all sunburn next summer, just like my father whose shoulders bubbled and peeled severely last year. It made me sad thinking about so many sun-burned people.

But the differences I saw did not immediately disrupt my sense of the world. There were light and dark-skinned people at home and at school, only there were more whites at school, more blacks at home. My family had these differences, and so did my class. That was the way of the world. And though I do not long for that time, I must admit those few months in first grade were as close to a feeling of social harmony as I've ever been.

But those feelings were short-lived. The disrupter of my peaceful state of harmony and coexistence was a classmate

named Freddy Barnes. Freddy was white, but since that doesn't tell you much, I'll venture to say he was a mix of at least English, Irish, Welsh or Scotch, and, since he lived in Oklahoma, probably some Native American, and maybe even, since his family was American and Oklahoman and therefore settlers--drifters, nomads, outlaws, idealists, or just hopeful landowners--some unrecognized African-American blood. Horror of horrors!

But to Freddy, then and now, he was white, and I can only imagine how different his perceptions of first grade were during those first few months than mine. Of course, his family lived in a white neighborhood, and chances are, unless he went downtown a lot with his mother, he hadn't even seen a black person before first grade. If he had, he probably didn't ask and his parents didn't explain, so he forgot about it.

But sitting in that first grade class five days a week for several months brought Freddy into contact with blacks on a regular basis--there were five in the class counting me. To Freddy the world was white except for these five people and the handful of others he saw on the playground. We must have been a shock to him.

Lacking an explanation, how else could he see us but as aberrations, deformities, aliens whose spaceship blew off-course and landed on Earth, and were allowed, out of the generosity of white Americans--to Freddy the only

inhabitants of the Earth--to live here. I'm sure these differences disrupted Freddy's sense of social harmony, and in November of my first school year, he disrupted mine.

Even though Freddy never did well in school, he was more aware and quick-minded than most kids his age. He even looked mischievous: his thin sandy hair stuck up in back--as if his head were too electrically charged for it to lay down--and he had an angular grin that spread across half his face. Freddy was a smart aleck and something of a bully. Now I see he is simply very much like his father, a local mechanic whom my father can't stand and calls a "dumbass redneck." A raw, skinny kid, he wasn't big or tough enough to physically intimidate his classmates, so he tried to do it psychologically instead.

One of his first victims in our class was a friend of mine named Sam Rushing. Sam was a quiet, nervous, wary boy. You can imagine how different his perceptions of the class were than Freddy's, or even mine in some ways, which no doubt contributed to his edginess. He had more exposure to whites than Freddy had to blacks before coming to school, but still assumed, I'm sure, the world was black. His block was entirely black. Then he stepped into a white school with only four people like him in class.

I sat next to Sam. After the first month, the teacher moved Freddy into the desk behind Sam because he was causing too much trouble where he was seated. It wasn't long before

Freddy started irritating Sam on a regular basis. He threw wads of paper under his desk to get him in trouble, wiped boogers on his chair, took things out of his desk when he wasn't there.

Then he started rubbing Sam's hair. I'm sure he did this the first time out of curiosity. My own hair is loosely kinked, so I was never the object of head rubbing, but I know by late elementary or early junior high, most white kids, even nice ones, want to touch an Afro to get a feel of kinky hair.

But once Freddy started, he didn't stop. He rubbed Sam's head every chance he got, Sam shrugging him off for weeks without confronting him.

Sam was no weakling. He ended up becoming one of the most feared guys in high school, but even at such a young age, he must have been wary of himself, of what he might do if he let himself go. Or perhaps he was so aware of all the white people around him he was afraid to stand up to one of them.

One day, Freddy was unusually bored and irritable. He rubbed Sam's head countless times, Sam shrugging him off, mumbling responses. Freddy contrived reasons to get close to Sam all morning: he sharpened his pencil, dropped his pencil, kicked his pencil, threw paper away, dropped paper, kicked paper, rubbing Sam's head so much I became irritated watching them.

Finally, enough was enough for Sam. We were coming back in from afternoon recess, during which Sam managed to stay away from Freddy. Sam and I were seated, and as Freddy walked by, he rubbed Sam's head. It was an unusual rub, nonchalant, the way you might briefly pet a dog, as if he were doing it more out of habit than to irritate Sam.

But to Sam a line had been crossed. He spun around in his chair and with a backhand motion, sent a right fist and forearm slinging into Freddy's ribs.

The blow surprised Freddy as much as hurt him. He sat down in his chair, panting, tears forming in his eyes. "Gonna get it now, Sam," he said. "Gonna tell teacher, and you're gonna get in trouble."

Suddenly, Sam looked more frightened than Freddy. "Better not tell, chicken. I'll get you worse. Beat you up."

"No, you won't. Cause then you'll really get it."

"You'll get it too. Wait and see. Better not tell teacher."

"I am."

"Better not."

"I am."

As witness to Freddy's irritation all these months, I didn't want to see Sam get into trouble, so I joined the argument. "You rubbed Sam's head," I said to Freddy. "You tell on him, I'll tell on you."

"Shut up, you nigger."

I was stunned. I don't know why this was so confusing to me. I knew the word meant black and, to this day, believe I thought of myself as black. Yet when Freddy said that, it made me mad, not because he was putting me down for being black but because I thought he was calling me something I wasn't. "I'm not a nigger!" I said.

"Yes, you are. You're just like him," he said, pointing at Sam.

"Am not."

"Are to."

"Am not!"

"Are to! My daddy told me. Your mama's a nigger and so are you."

That did it. I don't know why, but mild-mannered, gets-his-homework-in-on-time little Aubrey Rowe flew out of his chair and jumped on Freddy. We fell to the floor, wrestling. I tried to hit him in the face, and when I couldn't do that, pulled his hair.

We weren't on the floor long before the teacher, Miss Pritchard, broke us up. "What in the world is going on back here?" she said, separating us.

I didn't say anything. Freddy looked right at me, as if somehow he'd won, and smiling said, "Nigger."

Miss Pritchard told him to never say that in her class again and took us to the principal's office, where we were both paddled for fighting.

When I got home and told my parents, my father became furious. He tried to keep a distance from most things and people, but when someone insulted him or his family, he was ready to fight. A sizeable man--he went 6'2 and 200 pounds--he commanded my attention when he got mad, even when he wasn't mad at me. "That figures, don't it? Some little punk calls Aubrey a nigger, they paddle them both. Weak-minded, hypocritical, no-good sons of bitches. Tomorrow, I'm going down to that school and tell them a thing or two. Then I ought to go look up Richard Barnes. Dumbass redneck."

"Calm down, Lewis," my mother said. "What you do now is gonna tell Aubrey what he ought to do. He's who we ought to be worrying about."

"That's just what I want him to see. When someone insults you, you give them reason to think twice the next time."

"That's not how you deal with it. You don't go flying off every time you think you hear someone talking about us."

"What they say to each other is none of my business. But if someone came up to me tomorrow at work and insulted me, I know exactly what I'd do. They know it too, which is why they don't do it."

"So Aubrey's gonna spend his whole life fighting."
There was a long pause after my mother said this. Even though I was very young, I stood there imagining this kind of life, frightened to death of it, yet excited by the notion that all I had to do the rest of my life whenever I had a problem was fight. Somehow, it made me feel as if all my worries were over. "Lord have mercy, what have we done," my mother said. "Why do I keep thinking the future will be different?" A strong woman, she suddenly looked deeply pained and disconsolate, as if she had made a terrible mistake.

"We knew this when we brought him into this stinking world," my father said.

"I know, Lewis. Guess I figured our love would be enough to keep all that away from him. I just didn't think he'd have to face the same things we did, least not this young."

"He's got to learn to deal with idiots some day. There's plenty of them."

There was a pause, during which I decided it was my turn to talk. "Why did Freddy call me a nigger?"

"Here we go," my mother said. "Six years old."

"But I'm not a nigger."

"What does the word nigger mean, Aubrey?" my father asked.

"Black. Means black."

"The word nigger does not mean black," he said.

"Mama never calls you nigger," I said.

He looked at my mother. I didn't know why then, but I do now. He was blaming her for my knowledge of this word, because my mother's family, as do most blacks, used the word commonly in casual conversation. "Mmmh, mmmh, mmmh," my mother often says on the phone, to this day. "Ain't that just like a nigger?"

Of course, among blacks the word has different meanings, and I often wondered if my father could ever use it casually in the same way when speaking with my mother's family or even my mother. No doubt, he couldn't. It simply would not work because, despite their love, the word would make them aware of the difference in color. I can just see him walking up to my grandfather, Preston Carter, an 80-year-old retired mill worker, and saying, "What up, nigger?"

Obviously, this wouldn't fly, even though my father was part of the family. And I never found out if he could use the word casually because he never did and was endlessly frustrated that our family continued to do so. It was the one point upon which he was an absolute ass.

My mother told him he was taking it too seriously, which was, she said, the white man's main problem. But my father pressed on. He tried every possible method he could think of to persuade my mother and her family to give up this habit. He got emotional about it: commanding them,

then pleading with them to stop. Then he got intellectual and whenever he heard the word, took off on these long discussions about history and the current social effects of any use of the word--his point being that no matter how blacks used it, it was bound to make ignorant whites believe they had been right all along. When this didn't work, he turned to sarcasm, calling everyone in the house nigger, over and over. Once he made my Uncle Charles mad doing this--my father simply would not let up--and they nearly came to blows.

At times, his actions would have an effect, but a short-lived one. No one in our house would use the word for a week or a month or two, but then eventually, and usually within earshot of my father, I'd hear my mom on the phone: "Mmmh, mmmh, mmmh. Ain't that just like a nigger?"

All of this was behind my father's stare that afternoon. Then he turned to me. "Aubrey, sometimes blacks call one another by the name, but they don't mean it the way whites do and they shouldn't do it. No one should. The word is an insult stupid white people use to put down blacks. Understand?"

I nodded my head, but didn't understand. I was too confused at the moment to comprehend anything. "But Freddy called me a nigger," I said, "and I'm not. I'm white like you." I held my arm toward him to prove it.

My father took a deep breath, ran his hand over his head. "Are you ashamed of being black?" my mother asked.

I hesitated. I wasn't sure what shame felt like.

"No," I said.

"Is someone at school telling you to be ashamed?"

"No."

"Then why did Freddy make you so mad?"

I didn't know. The only thought in my mind was a question. "Am I like you or like Daddy?"

"Oh, boy," my father said. He wasn't ready for this, but fortunately, my mother was. She walked over and knelt beside me. It was a moment of tenderness I've never forgotten. "Your father is white and I am black. See?" Smiling, she held out her arm. I took hold of it. "You're our son, which makes you white and black. You're a mix of your folks just like everyone else. Only most of them are a mix of people who happen to be the same color. But they're still a mix, just like you. Some of them just don't want to believe it, so they put other people down."

"Why?"

"I don't know. They just do, and all we can do is live the best we can and love each other as much as we can. That's all that matters. And if people insult you or want to fight at school, tell the teacher. She'll take care of it. And if she doesn't, tell us. Fighting doesn't solve anything. Okay?"

She gave me a big hug, then said, "You know you really are special. You're just like vanilla ice cream and chocolate syrup, mixed together, and mmmh, mmmh, good." She gave me a hug and a kiss, and that night after supper I had a bowl of vanilla ice cream and chocolate syrup. I took that image to bed with me, tried to cling to it as tightly as I could because I knew the world was separating and dividing. After that day, I no longer looked at my family or my class as harmonious entities. They had been divided into two parts.

I thought of my father, who was white, and my mother, who was black; Freddy Barnes, who was white, and Sam Rushing, who was black. Despite what my mother told me about every person being a mix, I was too young to see the world this way. And despite the love I felt that night from my parents, there were only two groups, as I saw them then, the black and the white, and I was not a member of either one. I felt frightened, sad, and terribly helpless as if I could already tell these two groups would determine who I was, yet I did not belong to either one.

Now I think my mother may have been right. I may have been ashamed of my blackness in the company of so many whites. Or afraid of it. Or simply afraid of my difference, the distinction that separated me from the dominant group. All I know for sure is that night as I lay in bed, I kept hearing Freddy Barnes calling me nigger, and

was frightened by the fact that I was, yet even more by the fact that I wasn't.

CHAPTER II

My life was greatly changed after that day, a change so fundamental it is rather difficult, even now in reflection, to believe things were any other way. For the next several days, at school and home, all I did was sit and look at people: at the children who were white or black, at my mother who was black, at my white father. My black mother loved my white father, and he loved her. They spoke warmly to one another, kissed, hugged, laughed. They were the same--people. Yet they were different, like the kids at school were different, like Freddy Barnes and Sam Rushing and I were different.

I didn't know how deep those differences were, perhaps still don't. But I know if it weren't for my mother and father, I would have thought them to be enormous as I sat in that first grade class. Freddy obviously thought they were. If I had different parents, I would have assumed Freddy knew something I didn't. In skin color and hair texture we were perceptibly different. Obviously something had to explain these differences. But what?

This little incident had an effect on Freddy and Sam as well. It made Freddy--whom the teacher moved to the front of the class so she could keep a close eye on him--more convinced of his beliefs, and did the same to Sam, who

seemed even more sullen in subsequent days. Like Freddy, Sam was an alert kid who didn't do well in school. But I could tell, even at his young age, he was trying to sort through a whirlwind of thoughts and ideas. He was different. He was black, a nigger to some. The world he was in was mostly white, and there were some in that world who didn't like blacks. Such a realization had an appreciable effect on Sam, and on me. But I believe the source of his sullen paralysis was the haunting question that accompanied such a realization. What do I do about it?

At that point, even though I was just a first grader, I thought the teacher needed to stop all talk of letters and numbers, and start talking about us, the children sitting in the room, about who we were, how we were similar, how different, and why. These were the most significant questions on our minds--even Freddy's, though he would have never admitted it. I am sure Sam couldn't begin to worry about $3 + 5$ until some of these questions were answered. Yet they were never discussed.

Such class sessions would be difficult to conduct, I realize. Yet here I am, age 25, headed for medical school in the fall, a student of nearly 155 undergraduate hours--it took me a while to settle on a major--a product of all this public schooling, and I have never had a single course or even a lengthy unit that examined human beings and race. The only open discussions of race I ever experienced came in

junior high during the airing of Roots, and when we were studying Huck Finn in Mrs. Holcomb's seventh grade English class. The former was more of a way for Coach Robbins to kill time in history, and the latter was no discussion but a lecture aimed at me.

And that was it, in twelve years of school, for me and the other kids in class, for all the other thousands of kids in schools like ours, for Sam Rushing and Freddy Barnes--one class period lecture and a casual discussion to kill class time. I wonder how many of these kids now hold the unchallenged assumptions of their parents and only think of such things when confronted with words like Affirmative Action at work or at home watching the news.

The world was black and white after that, and I was somewhere in-between. My mother, whose name is Angela Carter Rowe, pushed me to do well in school. An average-sized woman with beautiful cocoa skin and a generous smile, she, more so than my father who distrusts what he calls "educated idiots," stressed the value of education. She told me the world held opportunities for me she never had, and education provided the keys to most of those doors. She made me mind at home, taught me as much as I learned in school. She and my father were both much franker about subjects than parents of my classmates, which removed the mystery and silliness from many sensitive subjects. I knew

where babies came from by second grade, and was sent to the office one day for explaining the process to a friend.

Mother always told me to be double good at school, to never sass the teacher, who had the hardest job in the world trying to teach thirty kids to read, write, do arithmetic, know science, and history. "I don't know how they do it, even to good kids," she said. "And I really don't know how they do it to the bad ones. If I was a teacher, I'd be in jail for murder the first day. That's why I want you to be one of the good ones, Aubrey."

She also thought I was a sharp kid and could do well in school if I tried. Maybe I was sharp at a young age, maybe I wasn't, but being told I was, again and again, didn't hurt. She read to me every night, something few of my friends experienced, black or white, and was constantly on me to do my homework, understand it, and do more if I had time. "Why aren't you doing your homework?" she'd ask.

"Did it already."

"Have you read the next chapter?"

"No."

"Then you got homework. Go get your book and bring it in here to read to me. School's not something you just do, Aubrey. It's supposed to teach you things. What you learn, you take with you the rest of your life. Then when you get older, you can decide which thing you like best and go into it to make your living. It's just like going to school to

learn to build a house, only you're learning how to do all kinds of things now. And it may not be house building. You might go into business or be a doctor or lawyer or a teacher, and that's how you make your living when you get older. Without school, you won't have those chances."

"You can bet they won't be teaching him to build houses," my father chimed in. "There's not a teacher in this town could build a dog house."

"Maybe not, but they can do a lot of other things, a lot of things you can't, Lewis."

I often wondered about my mother's ambitions. She would only tell me she spent a year at college, liked it, but didn't have the money to continue. She wouldn't talk about her interests or why she could not afford another year. She preferred speaking of the future instead of the past, and insisted I see the chances before me in time to grab one.

"What if I can't get into college?" I asked.

"You will."

"What if I can't afford it?"

"You will. We're saving for you now, and when you start to work, you'll be saving too."

"What if I get through, but they won't hire me because I'm half-white and half-black."

She looked at me, gauging my intent. "You knock on another door."

"What if it doesn't open?"

"You knock some more."

"Maybe kick a few in," my father offered.

My mother was equally persistent about other matters in her life. Although she didn't like many of her jobs, she accepted the fact of work. She once told me working could not be separated from life in her imagination because she had never known a time without work of some kind. She often told her friends to find another job before they quit their current one, and to think of their children's futures as a way of getting through another day. I heard her say these things a lot when I was a child, and at times, thought her caution a little strange. But I had no idea then of the paucity of choices available to her or the strength of will, determination, and irrepressible faith it took to endure the tedious details of her work day after day.

While my mother worked, I spent summer days with her sister, Tamra Winrow. Aunt Tamra and Uncle Charles, who worked for the city's Parks and Recreation Department, had three kids: one boy, Timmy, a year older than me, and two girls, Melinda and Regina, both younger.

You'll notice most of my friends and relatives have Anglo names. Names such as Anfernee or Taynika didn't appeal to many Otto blacks in the 1960's--though this changed during the 70's, especially after Roots aired. To many people in the neighborhood, unusual, creative names

were either a sign of airs or ignorance, depending on the family. Even people like my Uncle Charles, who was critical of the white world, gave his children familiar Anglo names. Yet I don't think I ever saw him, or my father with him, as happy as during the Watergate hearings which seemed to dominate afternoon television for months. "What did I say about Nixon? What did I say before he was elected the first time? You can tell he's a crook looking at him. I knew it back in 1960. Don't say I didn't. White chumps at work trying to tell me what he did ain't so bad."

"Doesn't seem like a crime when the thief is on your side," my father said.

"You got that right. Whites must think no one else can run things, but that's cause they so eat up with lies they don't know the truth when it's staring them right in their hypocritical faces. That's why the white man smiles all the time, Lewis. You didn't know this. To cover up the lie he's about to tell. Put a few black men in power, you'd at least get the truth. It may not be pretty, but least they'd tell it like it is."

"Not if they had power. That's the problem. If you have it, you've got to lie to keep it."

"Oh, now listen to you. . ."

The Winrows owned a nice frame house a block south of us. We lived in a small rental four blocks south of them, near my grandparent's place, our first year in Otto. When

the larger, black-owned frame home we now occupied became available, we grabbed it before someone else could rent it. There was one black family on the block at the time--the Davis's, who owned the house next to us, the best-kept place on the block. When we moved in, the white family across the street put their brick home up for sale. We thought of buying it, but didn't have the means, and wondered if we should reward their fear. A black family moved in.

Before we moved to Otto, the dividing line between black and white lay two blocks south of Charles and Tamra's home. The modest black business district occupied the southern half of this block: Tootie's General Store, Jackie's Barbecue, Al Burley's barbershop, and the Southtown Garage. The northern half of the block contained white or city-owned, weed-infested vacant lots the city refused to zone for construction. The lots became a buffer between blacks and whites, blacks living south of the businesses, whites north.

In 1967, a year before we came to Otto, a black family tried to buy an old run-down frame house on the north side. The man of the family, Jack Clemons, was a former teacher at Dunbar who now taught at Jefferson. The owner was frank. He would not sell to niggers, scoffed at their impudence for wanting to leave their neighborhood, even though the house looked worse than many on the south side.

Denied, Jack and his wife Jessie, staged a sit-in on the street. The cops drove them off, but they came back the next day, the vacant lot behind them filled with supporters. The block contained nothing but dilapidated rental property, and at the sight of so many blacks, two poor white racist families moved out, in search of another cheap, run-down rental house, away from blacks.

People from the neighborhood returned day after day. Their presence must have frightened the police as well, because on the third day--no doubt faced with pressure from city officials and the white landlords--two cops lost control of themselves and tried to beat the crowd back with their nightsticks. Another Jefferson teacher took a photograph of one cop breaking a woman's nose.

The protestors endured several blows before they knocked one cop to the ground, his arrogance so great he was shocked they would resist him, much less beat him senseless. Jack Clemons saved the man's life, and encouraged the crowd to withdraw. After he saw the photographs his friend took, he drove them to the offices of The Black Dispatch, Oklahoma City's black newspaper. The local paper, The Otto Times, had only mentioned the sit-in once, on page seven, and didn't print a word the next day about the police assault on the crowd.

A day later, The Daily Oklahoman, Oklahoma City's white newspaper, covered the story, without the photographs, and

sent a reporter to monitor the situation. Coverage from an external source broke the will of the city. The owner agreed to sell to Jack Clemons. The incident also revealed a pattern of desegregation common to our town, and many others. The whites resisted until an outside source examined their actions. And that's all the Oklahoman did, report it. The paper has always been a conservative rag, and didn't editorialize against the city. The examination incited in city officials a mixture of shame and fear, I guess, and they quickly relented, acting as if they meant to all along. They were simply waiting for the proper time, and didn't want their hand forced by unruly protestors. Within a year, the entire block was black.

I liked staying with the Winrows in the summer because there were more black kids in their block than ours. I often hated to see my mother pull up at day's end, and frequently talked her into letting me stay a few more hours. I ran around with cousin Timmy and Sam Rushing, who at the time lived with his huge family a block down, and several other kids in the area. The Boys' Club kept a gym open all summer, and we went there a few times, but it was too far away and I don't think anyone liked staying inside during the summer except fat kids. We played basketball when we went, which was fun, but you could only play so much of that and ping pong. There weren't any open fields where we lived so we played most games in the street--there wasn't a lot of

traffic. We played kickball and sometimes football even though it was summer and no one was really in the mood for it. But mostly we just goofed off, spraying water from a hose on one another and getting excited when the ice cream truck came by in the afternoon.

There were a few white working-class families on my block, and as I remember it, the blacks and whites got along all right. But it was far from an integrated neighborhood. The whites who lived in this area--and it's not much different today--were mostly lower-rung working-class whites, people who had jobs but not the higher-paying, higher-skilled blue collar jobs in town. I now know from the white middle-class perspective living in the black part of town meant these whites lacked the knowledge and self-respect to live in a better area. They didn't own anything nice and wouldn't appreciate it if they did, which was why they could live comfortably around blacks who didn't care about things either. To move up socially meant to move to one of the all-white working-class neighborhoods in the Franklin school district where most of the homes are brick and there aren't as many cars in the yards. Of course, if a black family were to move into such an area, it would indicate Black Town was once again spilling over and degenerating this once-respectable neighborhood. The whites would either have to keep other families from moving in or find a new neighborhood.

Two of the white families who had kids my age were the Bryants and the Knuckles. Jack Bryant worked for Arkla Gas and had two boys, Glenn and Britt. Although I never knew Mr. Bryant well, he reminded me of my father in many ways. His experience made him disenchanted with the white world, which is why he lived in our neighborhood when he could afford a house in another part of town. He often showed up at our church with Glenn and Britt. A former all-conference basketball player, he liked to hustle up games at the Boys' Club, and though the high school guys made fun of his set shot, word was he could still play. I rarely saw his wife. When I did, she was usually in a bad mood. I don't think she liked our neighborhood as much as her husband. They divorced when I was in eighth grade.

Glenn loved sports, especially basketball, and spent a lot of time during the summer at the Boys' Club. Britt, who was two years younger than me, also ran around with us, but he was harder to take because he was such a whiny smart ass.

The Knuckles were a strange family. They lived in an old house that looked like a punch-drunk heavyweight fighter about to fall. The roof had missing shingles, the yard and porch were often cluttered with junk, broken windows were covered with black plastic.

They had about ten children, mostly girls, but one was a boy my age named Donald. Poor Donald was dumb as a post, and whenever things got dull, Timmy or Britt would use

Donald for entertainment. There is no telling how many free ice cream bars they pilfered from Donald during the summers by pretending to do him a favor and counting his money.

Donald was big and strong for his age, but because he was so dumb he was trusting no matter how many tricks Timmy pulled on him. Like the rest of his family, he was usually dirty--his dark thick hair was always oily--and this seemed to give Timmy justification for picking on him. I guess he thought anyone too dumb to clean up deserved what they got. He used to joke that Donald's father, a janitor at the junior high, ought to clean his family before he went to clean the buildings. Timmy told that joke a lot.

Timmy was an ornery kid, likeable because he was always thinking up things to do, but often unpredictable and worthy of caution. I remember one hot day, we were bored, and Donald was complaining that his mother was mad and wouldn't give him ice cream money. This gave Timmy an idea, and he began to instruct Donald on how to get control of his mother.

"I always got ice cream money, don't I?" Timmy said.
"My mama don't tell me what to do. Know why?" Donald shook his head. "Cause I'm in charge. You think cause she's your mama she tells you what to do. That's what most people think, but I know better. I found out you tell them what to do, they do it. But you gotta let them know who's boss."

Because he was particularly mad at his mother--as anyone would be, having been denied ice cream money--Donald sat listening as if Timmy were revealing the secret of the universe. And I have to admit, Timmy was so compelling, so sure of himself, the rest of us were nearly convinced as well.

"When you start bossing," he continued, "she ain't gonna like it at first and will act mad. But do it enough and she'll give in, just like my mama."

"How you do it?" Donald asked.

"Start out simple. Go into your house, get a big glass and fill it with water. Then walk out on the porch, drink it, put it down and say, 'Woman, I'm finished with this glass. Come get it.' When she does, tell her to fill it up and bring it to you. If she act lazy, tell her to hurry up."

"When do I get ice cream money?" Donald asked.

"Tell her you want it next. But it might take a time or two. Every mama's different."

Donald didn't wait another second. Given instruction, he ran across the street in that hulking, loping stride of his. He could run too; Sam was the only one of us who beat him in a race, though Timmy always changed the rules to make Donald believe he lost. He went across the worn yard, bounded over a tire and onto the porch, and raced into the house.

Seconds later he came out, glass of water in hand. He didn't even look at Timmy for affirmation. He did just as he was told. He drank the water in a gulp, then banged the plastic cup on the porch and said, "Woman, get out here and pick up this glass!"

Nothing happened. Donald waited. We waited. I figured he would come ask for new instructions, but apparently he was convinced he had the right plan. "Woman!" he yelled, banging the cup again. "Come here and pick up this glass!"

Again, we waited. The screen door flew open. The ratty door banged against the house, and Donald's mother stormed out. A fat, dumpy woman in an old polyester blouse and red pants, both a size too small, she was as dirty and ugly as Donald and the other Knuckles. She barrelled out so quickly, I think we all literally jumped back in fright. We would have run for safety, I'm sure, had we not each been equally surprised by the object she carried. It took me a moment to figure it out, but then I recognized, in her slightly trembling hands, a big metal sauce pan.

Before I could wonder what she was going to do with it, she spotted Donald, who was sitting beside the porch steps, and lurched toward him. We took another step back. Even though he was quick for his size, Donald just sat there. Maybe he thought this was part of the process of training his mother, having her come out with food in a sauce pan.

It wasn't. As it turned out, the pan was filled with water, which the woman apparently intended to dump on Donald. But because of anger or lack of coordination or both, when Donald's fuming mother poured, she overshot her target, flinging the water past him and onto the old tire on the lawn.

Things got worse, for her and Donald. The momentum required to sling the water was so great it carried the woman past him. Her right foot hit the top porch step, the sudden drop-off jarring her heavy body, but her left foot missed, and she fell tumbling off the porch. She landed on her side next to the tire, making an awful dull but flat thudding noise, a sound I will never forget, dust rising around her.

I remember thinking, the woman's dead. I've just witnessed my first death. I took a step toward her, but she scrambled up, her round, chubby face flushed red, hand still clutching the pan. She stumbled toward Donald, who hadn't moved, and beat him with the pan, yelling something like, "Want water?!!!" We tensed, ready to run, thinking once she finished with him, she'd come after us, wondering why Donald just sat there. But that's what he did, arms covering his head.

She beat on him awhile, then moved to the base of the porch steps. I thought she might be leery of the steps and hesitate before scaling them, taking them one careful step

at a time. But the only thing she did before starting up was hitch her left pant leg up a bit at the thigh, the way a person might do before sitting. She did this quickly and in stride, and I remember this little act adding a touch of sadness to the scene, even to my young mind.

When she reached the porch, she made us all laugh again because without looking back she flung the pan at Donald, striking him in the shoulder. "Water," she said, as the pan fell to the ground, and she strode back into the house.

Relieved she hadn't come after us, no one made a sound except Timmy. He was in stitches. He sounded like he was forcing himself to laugh, which he often did after one of his pranks. Even if no one else laughed, he would, just to prove the prank was funny. But he retained a certain charm because even his natural laugh, when he and everyone else was laughing at something genuinely funny, sounded a bit forced. So you could never be sure, at times like this, if he was faking or not.

Sitting on the porch, Donald had a look of dejection that said a thousand things: he had been fooled, he had made his mother mad, he had watched her nearly fall to her death, he had been hit with a pan, but worst of all, the plan had not worked, and he would not be getting ice cream that day. As we walked down the block, listening to Timmy describe the event and laughing that same forced laugh, I turned and looked back at Donald. He slid off the porch and stood for

a moment, then walked over to the pan, which lay on the ground a few feet away, and kicked it.

With Timmy around, we were rarely bored. I was an active kid, but at times I enjoyed sitting inside, doing nothing--both my parents and Timmy's could afford to run a window unit air conditioner on the hottest days, another item seen less and less as you headed north. But air conditioning matters more to most adults than to children, and it certainly didn't have a major influence on Timmy's daily designs. He liked to be out doing things, and because I spent the summer days with his family, I was usually out doing things too.

Timmy was a thin, wiry kid, with bright eyes and a small, flat nose. There was something about his face that looked open to me. His head was up when he walked, his eyes looking out at the world. I don't think he ever had a reflective moment in his life. He seemed to meet the world head-on. Oddly enough, as a result, he possessed little fear, I guess because he knew what was coming or because he saw things and wanted to get into them without fretting over the consequences. I couldn't help admire his energy and curiosity, but I was always wary of him, as were most other kids, even Sam, because somehow we knew when things backfired, Timmy would not be protected from the results. He would take them, as he did everything else, square in the face.

His daring made him something of a leader. He often gave direction to our activities, mainly because he was always thinking up things to do, like the episode with Donald. We didn't see Donald until two days later, and for a moment there was some tension because of the incident. But children forgive more readily than adults, and Donald forgave more readily than most children. It wasn't long before he was joining us in a game--Timmy liked cops and robbers. If Timmy bothered with television, it was usually to watch a John Wayne movie on Sunday afternoon.

Running around with white kids didn't matter most of the time. When we went to the Boys' Club, several blocks away in a mostly white working-class neighborhood, the kids immediately formed groups, usually blacks with blacks, whites with whites, until a game brought them together. This seems natural, I suppose, but when our white friends, Glenn or Britt or Donald, were with us, they grouped with us, not the other white kids. Entering this slightly larger world, we banded together because we were from the same neighborhood. Skin color had nothing to do with it. Yet when we remained in our neighborhood, race sometimes did separate us.

I remember one evening we were playing hide and seek, and kept playing even though the sun was going down. We knew our parents wanted us in before dark, but using the logic of children, we thought, since they hadn't called us

in, they changed their minds, deciding we could stay out as late as we wanted. Timmy didn't like hide and seek that well, but he was playing it. Sam and I were the champions. If you found Sam, he was too fast to tag, and I could find the best hiding places--under cars, in a tree, under a porch. One time I broke up the game because I stayed hidden so long they got tired of looking for me and began a new game. That was the mild thrill of the game for me, to be in a place where you could see but not be seen.

The night I'm speaking of, Donald was it, and we were preparing to hide. Since it was getting dark, Sam said, "No one'll get Timmy now. Unless he smiles." Timmy was a dark black--too black to be a nigger, the joke sometimes went--so his color was the source of ridicule at times. This was one of the first times I can remember hearing the joke. Sam had older brothers and sisters and must have heard it from them--his older sister Yolanda was as black as Timmy.

When Donald heard Sam's joke, he got an idea. He counted, we hid, and as he searched, he called out, chuckling, "Smile so I can see you, Timmy. Smile so I can see you." He said this over and over. As it turned out, it was the only joke he needed on Timmy because he used it for years.

But that first night Timmy decided to do something about it. Donald said the line for the twentieth time, and Timmy stepped out and said, "You better hope you can see me

coming, Knuckles, cause the black nigger 'bout to kick your honky ass."

I'll give Timmy this--he could put up a front. We broke from our hiding places and circled around the two as Timmy swaggered up to Donald in that jerky, cocky, half-skip walk he learned from watching some of the older brothers in our neighborhood and from the loudly-dressed, inner-city black narcs on Starsky and Hutch and Baretta, whose purpose was to show us that cool brothers trusted the police and informed on people in their neighborhood.

"You joking 'bout me smiling?" Timmy said. "Gonna fix your smile for you. Gonna knock your teeth outta your head."

Strong talk can take a kid a long way, and because of it, Timmy was always thought of as tough. But Donald was not easily impressed. We had seen his mom pound him with a sauce pan and knew his father occasionally beat him with a belt. So I'm sure Timmy's wiry body did not strike fear into Donald's heart. I never saw Donald start a fight, but I never saw him run from one either. Certainly, not this one. "Smile so I can see ya," Donald said, chuckling.

Britt laughed, and Timmy turned on him. "You think it's funny, little punk? Little Britt?"

"Yeah, I think's it funny." He laughed again, and Timmy pushed him. Britt was a little, curly-haired kid, smart for his years--he was probably eight years old--the

kind of kid who gets under your skin and makes you want to smack him whenever he smarts off. So I understood Timmy's pushing him, but I also understood when Britt's brother Glenn stepped up and said, "Leave him out of it, Timmy. Fight him, you're gonna fight me."

That suddenly positioned three white kids against one black, so Sam stepped up behind Timmy. I stepped up, too, but as I did, felt a moment's doubt. Looking at the white boys made me think of my father. For a second, I felt drawn to their side. Then I looked at Timmy and Sam as if I were on the white side. When I did, I thought of my mother and relatives, and immediately felt a stronger pull toward them.

Because of these reflections, I was not ready to fight, and was hoping I wouldn't have to. But feeling his army gathering behind him must have given Timmy the incentive he needed, because without another word, he jumped on Donald. As if ropes were attached to Sam and me, we fell in behind Timmy and started fighting too. Since he was bigger than me, Sam took Glenn and I ended up with Britt.

Even as this was happening, I kept wondering why were fighting, wondering how Donald and Timmy's silly argument had gotten four others involved. I felt like I was still playing hide-and-seek, there but not there, seeing but unseen.

Then I realized I was on the ground with Britt who was punching me in the face. I was trying to hold him and keep

both of us from punching, but he freed his right arm and hit me again. After the third or fourth punch, I realized I was getting beat up by an eight-year-old!

I rolled around until I got on top of him. I made a fist and started to hit him, but as I looked down, I saw how damn young he was--I was probably ten at the time, Britt eight--and wondered why were fighting. Because of Timmy and Donald or because of skin color? Or both? Maybe we were destined to fight, and there wasn't anything we could do about it.

For some reason, these thoughts even further reduced my will to hit this white kid named Britt Bryant under me. Fortunately, for me anyway, Ruby Davis rushed out to break us up. In her fifties, she lived with her husband, a former high school teacher at Dunbar and now principal of Jefferson. They lived in a small but neat brick home, had middle-class attitudes, and seemed pretentious to my mother. But she didn't talk badly of them. Their two sons enlisted in the army in the early sixties, and died in Vietnam.

The presence of an adult stopped the fight. She started a lecture no one heard as we went our separate ways. Timmy looked a bit scared but confident since he had survived and apparently done better against Donald than he or anyone else expected. His walk became livelier with each step. "We showed them honkies, didn't we?" he said.

I smiled and nodded, still thinking the fight had proved nothing. But even though I thought the whole thing stupid, I have to admit, the biggest concern I had was Timmy making fun of me because he saw how poorly I did against Britt. He didn't; apparently Donald kept him too occupied to witness anything else, and I felt a tremendous sense of relief. The feeling was so strong it convinced me the conflict was over, when actually, as I would later discover, the relief itself was a sign of an even greater internal conflict I would some day have to resolve.

CHAPTER III

I thought about the fight in the days that followed. Fighting Donald was a waste of time as I saw it, but I realized Timmy's actions would affect Glenn and Britt. They would think twice before crossing him, and I remember wondering, even at such a young age, if it was Donald's remark or his skin color that motivated Timmy's aggressive response. He would not have reacted to Sam or me the same way--at least not as quickly.

I wondered if Timmy's reaction resulted from his desire to make a point to the white kids. We were all old enough to know more whites lived in our town than blacks--Timmy went to Franklin too. We also knew blacks were once slaves, and many whites still looked down on us. I wondered if Timmy's fight with Donald was his response to these perceptions. Was this his way of saying, "Don't fuck with me, whitey." Like I said, he was not a reflective person, but he was aware. Maybe the fight was his way of ensuring he would get some respect from the whites he encountered.

I never spoke to my father about this. Because he was white, I didn't think he would have an answer. I didn't ask my mother because I felt like I would be hiding something from my father by confiding in her. I still saw them as a

linked pair, but these concerns made me see them as separate parts, disconnected from me as well as each other.

I knew one thing: my father would have approved Timmy's actions. He was a fighter. Skeptical of the law, as well as many other things, he believed you handled problems yourself, whenever possible. Although they decreased in number as I got older, my father got into several fights over my mother when I was young.

I remember one day he came home with a swollen lip. My mother asked him what happened, and he said he'd been punched a few times. She asked what they did to the guy who hit him, and my father said they were probably still trying to get him on his feet.

"Why can't you ignore them?" she asked, dabbing his lip with a wet rag. I was squatted outside the kitchen, listening.

"They don't listen as well when I ignore them."

"You ever think how long this might go on?"

"As long as they keep insulting us."

"That may be the rest of our lives."

"Then that's how long."

"These people are idiots, Lewis. Some day, one of them will pull a gun, and then where will you be? You can't do me or Aubrey any good dead."

"I have to defend myself, Angela, you know that. It's been this way for us since the beginning. Don't know why it upsets you so much now."

"Because we have a son who needs a father."

"And he needs a father who will show people the price they pay for demeaning us. It may not change the mind of the guy I fight, but it damn sure makes an impression on the others. I can't control how they think. Would be my problem if I tried. But I can respond to what they say and do. More and more of them are thinking instead of talking. Word gets around."

"How did this one start?"

"Some new guy. A hick just moved into town from Levi. When he heard about us, he probably wondered why the others in the yard weren't putting me down. He walked up, called me a nigger lover as if he were the first one to spot the sun in the sky. I couldn't help laugh. I told him I was in love, but not to a nigger. He said, 'I seen a picture. She sure looks black to me.' Dumbass redneck. When it was over, I asked him how things looked now. Both eyes were swollen."

My mother sighed. "You don't need to take delight in it."

"Starting to feel like a paid boxer. Just don't know when my fights are scheduled. I got a right uppercut now catches them all by surprise."

"This isn't funny, Lewis. Aubrey's gonna see this some day. It don't look ugly to you because you don't have to watch it. But he does. Is that why we had a child? To give the world another street brawler?"

"You act like I'm starting it!"

"There's other ways of handling it."

"It's getting better. More time passes between each one. And I didn't get fired this time. The owner usually makes it an excuse to get rid of me. But they know I'm the best carpenter they've got, so this time they told me to go home and come back tomorrow. First time that's happened. Sometimes I think I'm fighting the hard battles so Aubrey won't have to."

"You going back tomorrow?"

"Don't know. Think I will so they'll see I'm not the problem. If I don't, they'll end up blaming me."

"What if that guy wants to fight again?"

"Then I'll fight. I don't start them, Angela, you know that. But when they bring it to me, I have to deal with it. That's just the way it is."

And that's exactly what he told me a few days later.

"That's just the way it is, Aubrey. They want you to think you're the problem, but they've got the problem. Never forget that. Now if there's a bunch of them ganging up on you, take off running or make a lot of noise. But if it's just one, then you got to fight. Run from him and he'll

chase you the next day, you can bet on that. Fight him hard, and even if you don't win, you'll make him think twice before starting another one. You need to remember that too. I don't tell you to fight just to fight. You fight when someone brings the fight to you. Sometimes you can't avoid it. Understand?"

He got down on his knees so he could look me in the eye. "People who are afraid to fight are afraid of getting hit, and that's because they never been hit so they think it's gonna be worse than it is. You probably feel that way too, but it don't hurt near as bad as you think. Once you realize that, you won't be afraid and you'll think about what you're doing. Because you gotta think when you fight. It's like anything else."

He reached out and tapped me on the cheek with his open palm. "See, that didn't hurt, did it?" I shook my head--it didn't hurt--but then he slapped me harder with his other hand. "What about that? Think about how it feels. Burns a little, but just a little, right? Really don't hurt at all, does it?" I shook my head again, and he slapped me hard. "Think about that. Feel it. Hurts at first, but look how quick it goes away. Feels warm, but the pain's probably already stopped, and I slapped you pretty good. That's what I'm talking about. That little pain is what most people are afraid of. Now in a real fight, it's gonna be fists, so it'll hurt more, but not much. And in a real fight, you

won't feel any pain until it's over. You'll be too busy thinking about the fight."

He moved back a bit, and I watched him, frightened by his words, by his acceptance of the necessity of violence, but feeling a love and respect I was only vaguely aware of then. My father is a light-complected man who would have been better off in a milder climate. His skin always burned the first warm day of spring, and my mother had a good time joking about it. His eyes are green, his hair thin and dark, parted on the side, his hairline rather high, his ears long, his jaw square. I share many of these features, though my hair is more like my mother's in texture, and my nose is thin but flat like hers, not pointed like his.

As I listened to him explain how to stand my ground, ward off haymakers, lead with my left and get my weight behind it, I figured he would have approved of Timmy's actions, though perhaps not his technique. Timmy felt insulted and took action to stop it. This further confused me, made me think I was not a man because I feared I would hesitate again in the same situation. I shared my mother's point of view: fighting determined physical dominance, but had nothing to do with resolving the conflict. But, like my mother, I guess I wanted to believe we lived in a world where he could not only hope but expect rationality.

Uncle Charles certainly approved of Timmy's actions, but he made sure Timmy didn't start the fight. I was at

their place the next evening when they talked about it, and he asked for my side of the story to verify Timmy's. I think he knew Timmy was a live wire and might be the one who stirred things up at times. Uncle Charles is a big, garrulous man with a heavy voice and laugh, and the biggest head I've ever seen. I mean that literally. The man has a huge head. He coached our little league baseball team one year, the only year Timmy and I wanted to play, and I liked to look at how the cap just sat on top of his head. He wore it tilted forward--I don't think he could find one that fit--because if he didn't, the slightest breeze or movement would knock it off. It still fell off quite a bit.

"You get all over him, son?" he asked.

"Sure did," Timmy said.

"I hear Donald whupped him," said Melinda, Timmy's sister.

"Did not. Did he, Aubrey?"

They looked at me. "No," I said. "Timmy beat Donald up."

"And Aubrey beat Britt up."

"Who's Britt?" said Uncle Charles.

"Britt Bryant," Timmy said. "That little white boy."

"You beating up little Britt? Why you picking on those little ones, Aubrey? You need to find someone your size," Uncle Charles said, laughing his big, heavy laugh.

"Wasn't none," Timmy said. "Sam had Glenn, Britt's brother. Britt was the only one left."

"Charles, are you crazy?" Aunt Tamra said, coming into the room with a load of washed clothes. "Bragging on these boys for fighting."

"I ain't bragging on them. I'm just finding out what they did. Sounds like Donald started it. Even Aubrey said so. You want your boy to stand there and get beat up."

"No, but I don't want him thinking it's okay either."

"Son, it ain't okay less the other boy starts it. Then you gotta do what you gotta do."

"This is what I did, Dad," Timmy said. He bounced up and started prancing the way he did at Donald, only even more exaggerated than before. "Told him, 'Watch your mouth, sucker.' He didn't quit, so I went after him." Timmy threw some wild punches in the air, then stepped back and shuffled his feet like a boxer.

"Now hold up, Muhammed," Uncle Charles said. "You said one thing, then started punching?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"Can't you handle a dumb white boy better than that? You oughtta be able to make his head spin without laying a hand on him?"

"How?"

"Talk him silly. Ain't I raised you better than that?"

"What was I supposed to say? Knuckles too dumb to understand anything."

"Then you shoulda confused him so bad he wouldn't know how to punch."

"I told him this nigger's about to get all over him."

"Any fool do that. But can you mess with his head? That's the trick. Tell him he stink so bad, flies won't touch him. Tell him he so ugly he gotta sneak up on the faucet to get a drink. He so hairy his mama live in a tree. His daddy must be a zookeeper. He so dumb he locks himself in 'stead of out, breaks wind with a hammer, puts moonshine on his shoes. Any chucklehead can fight. But if you can strip him down talking, then when he starts punching everyone know he the fool. Then you tag his head for him, and you beat him both ways. He won't mess with you no more. Most fools forget about busted lips, but they don't forget when you bust their souls down."

"I do that next time."

"You don't just do it. You gotta work on it. Let's hear ya."

Timmy thought a moment. I was glad Charles didn't ask me. He already had my head spinning so fast I couldn't tie my shoes. "I tell him his mama so fat she bleed gravy."

"That's my boy! You gonna make a man yet."

That night I lay in bed trying to think up lines like Uncle Charles used, but saw it was going to take me a while.

I knew even then this was not the approach my father preferred. Words offered little protection, as he saw them, and could be used to start a fight, but not stop one. Talking trash was foolishness to him, telling stories-- Charles encouraged this from Timmy too--flat out lying. The next night at dinner I told him his ears were so big he could use them as bath towels--the best one I'd come up with after 24 hours of thinking. He started to whip me, but Mama, who was laughing, stopped him. She told me to go watch TV, while they talked.

As I sat in the living room, I thought about my father and Uncle Charles, and myself, half-white, half-black. At times, these two parts seemed to easily blend with my light brown skin; at others, they seemed like worlds separated by an ocean, and with every passing day I was being stretched farther apart.

CHAPTER IV

My father didn't think much of church. He didn't believe in turning the other cheek, didn't have faith in miracles, and was skeptical of the existence of God. So, as he said, there didn't seem much point in going.

My father grew up in Otto's First Baptist Church, the most powerful congregation in town, where his father was a deacon. He still complained about the hypocrisy and narrowness of its 1,200 members, which I decided were the features that drove him away. He wasn't as skeptical of my mother's church, Philemon Baptist. He thought it served a more genuine religious purpose because it administered to oppressed and needy people. His only complaint was it spent too much time looking for spiritual answers to physical problems. In that respect, he said, Philemon was just like First Baptist, the difference being First Baptist could afford to wait because its members didn't have as many financial ills to cure.

Although he wasn't a spiritual man, my father lived by a defined moral code. He was tolerant of many human vices except greed, which he believed was the major source of the country's injustice and suffering. Greed had so deeply warped American values, in his opinion, the country would never experience social harmony and had to find other evils-

-people of color, welfare recipients, Communism--to explain its expansive and often violent tendencies. My mother refused to let him keep beer in the house on a regular basis because alcohol made him reflective, and inevitably, white America would become his focus. When drinking, he could think himself into a well only he could pull himself out of, and his rope was often rage.

He was suspicious of complex thought, of anything abstract, so he didn't like philosophical or spiritual discussions, and didn't read the Bible much. He exercised his morality through gratis work performed in the neighborhood, even though his first attempt resulted in the white landlord's eviction of the old woman and five grandchildren who lived there, so he could raise the rent. But as a carpenter, he was usually of great service, hanging doors, installing windows, patching roofs. He also knew how to repair a lot of basic plumbing and electrical problems. He did several jobs for Wilma Rushing before her sons got old enough to help. When Leon, her estranged, drunk husband, came home for a while, he often destroyed the repair because he wouldn't take charity from a white man.

Leon wasn't the only man suspicious of my father's efforts. Most black men in the neighborhood were mechanically inclined because they didn't have any alternative. They couldn't afford paying for basic repairs, and few could hope for jobs in the white collar world.

Uncle Charles shared these suspicions, and at times, called my father Jesus. Since he was not a witty man, I'm surprised my father didn't double his fists in response. Once, I did hear him say, after a long pause, "The Rushings have a front door that fits in the frame. What have you given them?"

"Guess the kids can take turns opening and closing it for fun."

"Least it'll keep the draft out this winter."

My father wanted to help, desperately. He turned away from many beliefs and habits of his white middle-class background, but its optimism remained with him. He was no idealist, but believed the problems of the black community could be solved with effort, work, and determination. However, because he was not an abstract thinker, he was incapable of realizing the size and complexity of the problems, and the length of time required to change them --ideas my Uncle Charles knew from experience, that had become a living part of his bloodstream from the time he was born.

When I was young, we attended Philemon Baptist, located several blocks south of our house in a white-frame, gray-shingled building. My father was usually the only white person in attendance. He was used to this, but I still think he had mixed feelings about it. He didn't care for

the white community, but was always something of an outsider in a black church, no matter how often he attended.

As a kid, I naturally would have preferred to stay home, but once at church, I didn't mind the services and often enjoyed them. The preacher, the Reverend James Leatherman, was an older man with salt and pepper hair and a spry but wrinkled face. He was emotional and long-winded, but sincere and compassionate, and my mother held great affection for him. In a small but powerful way, he helped bring her and my father together.

The congregation's service was conservative and restrained compared with services of black Baptist congregations in other states. But the singing was always pleasant, and often stirring --so much so my quiet, reluctant father would often raise his voice during a particular song and join the deep bass of Uncle Charles. He preferred the services of Philemon more than those of First Baptist because, according to him, they possessed a much greater level of joy. Worshipping pleased them, whereas at First Baptist it grudgingly purged them of their private guilt.

The power of the congregation's voices was so overwhelming at times even Timmy and I, who were usually seated together and not paying attention, would start singing. Our little voices, of course, were lost among the adults', but by joining in, we sang with the power, rhythm,

and harmony of the congregation. And more than once the feeling of that communal power sent goosebumps up and down my spine.

Reverend Leatherman was fond of one image that stuck in my mind: harps that hung on the willow. The image came from one of the Psalms, I think, and for a long time I thought he was saying, "Hearts on the willow."

He frequently used it when he told the story of King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian captivity. "Taken into bondage," he might say, "they were harps that hung on the willow. And they had a right to. They had a right to cry. Just like parents who are trying to keep house and home together, have a right to cry. Just like those who are holding strong to a job with one eye on the bills and one eye on the children, have a right to cry. And children have a right to cry too. Children faced with the constant temptation of drugs, who must turn them down not once or twice but everyday; children faced with the temptation of sex, and its every increasing use in today's society, a society that pushes image after image of sex their way, that says sex is nothing but a game to play, without any rules or consequences, these children have a right to cry. Yes, brothers and sisters, the children have a right to cry."

Reverend Leatherman was aware of the trials that confronted his congregation. For some reason, it made me feel good listening to the problems, as if we were taking a

close look at our wounds. But, of course, he could not stir passions without offering a solution. As he reminded us, "There are harps that need not hang on the willow. Those of us that have accepted Christ as Savior, that sees these problems as only physical ills, that knows no physical solution can ever remedy such problems, that sees the land of healing and comfort and rest that lies ahead, these are harps that need not hang on the willow. For they know these turbulent times shall pass, they know this pain and strife is temporary, they know of an everlasting balm, of waters that heal at the touch, singing praise God, my Savior, let my harp not hang! Let my vision not be clouded by these earthly ills! Let my soul not be lost because I lost sight of its proper home, its destination! Let my harp not hang on the willow because I know Thy everlasting hand is always underneath me, praise God!"

A few people, sometimes several depending on the mood of the church, stood as the sermon reached its peak, an uplifted hand shaking, head nodding, voice quivering, sometimes tears flowing. The reverend's sermon would slowly merge into a song of his choosing, and the congregation would join him. Such sermons, and the reactions they inspired, interested and frightened me. I was fascinated by the facial expressions of the people who stood--my grandmother was often one of them. They neared a state they desperately sought, some looking as if they had suddenly

reached it within the walls of our small church through the aid of James Leatherman. I wanted to go with them, but wondered what happened once you reached that state. Surely, you no longer had to deal with this world's problems. But what did you do? And why were the same people back the following Sunday, the same unfulfilled longing expressed on their faces?

I may have been something of a romantic as a boy, but I was no mystic, seeking apocalypse. The prospect of time's end, God's coming, frightened me. Just thinking of it conjured images of wild beasts and violence and chaos. And, of course, I had the same question about heaven many children have: what do you do all day? I much preferred to think of this tangible world. It may have been bizarre, strange and troubling, but it was also, at times, explicable.

Reverend Leatherman baptized me when I was nine. Most members believed my acceptance at such a young age was a sign of God's calling me to the ministry. But it wasn't. I knew I would have to be baptized some day, so I wanted to get it over with.

I was saved, along with several other people, one Sunday afternoon in July, in a deep part of Cedar Creek. Philemon didn't construct a baptismal until 1975, and no white church would let us use theirs. The flies were abundant, the humidity heavy, and the creek stank of stagnation. Timmy got mad at me for doing it because now

people wanted him to accept the call. He said he wouldn't jump in Cedar Creek if he was on fire, and didn't hear God's voice until the baptisml was built.

We didn't attend church as regularly as I got older, and I eventually lost interest completely. But at times I never felt a stronger sense of community than sitting in that church on Sunday morning, so I wonder if I won't return some day. Sitting in the haven of that small building, within the presence of God, clapping and singing those marvelous hymns, I felt part of a group that could accomplish anything.

But when we broke from the shade of the church and stepped into the sunshine of reality, we could feel the oppression, as present and dominant as the Oklahoma sun in summer. God seemed to have disappeared. As a child I was only vaguely aware of this oppression, but I was aware, and my perceptions of it became more intense and more painful as I grew older. And I could tell every member of the church was aware of it, though they smiled, conversed but said nothing about it, as they stepped toward their cars or started their walk home. Like the sun, this oppression could be tolerated, lived under with precautions, but one could not flourish under it, only survive.

Many blacks find a way out now. More roads of escape are available, but for many those roads are still long and hot, riddled with difficulty and the memories of past abuse

and shame. The mere presence of these conditions subdues the desires of many. They prefer to exist where they are as best they can, sustained by the relieving shade of the church every Sunday.

We brought some of this shade home after church and let it cool the rest of the day. We often went to Uncle Charles' for lunch or they came to ours. My grandparents usually joined us too. We frequently had chicken--and my pappy would say, 'Boy, us niggers shore do loves our chicken.' Or perhaps it was because the grocer did not want nearly as much for chicken as he did for roast beef or ham--and corn and sweet potatoes and black-eyed peas or sometimes hot link sandwiches and potato salad. Uncle Charles and my father and grandfather watched football, though Grandpa usually fell asleep soon after the meal.

Charles and my father got along all right when I was young, but a current of tension generally ran between them. I later discovered Charles did not approve of my mother and father's marriage, and remained distant from them for some time. He thought the marriage foolish, bringing unnecessary hardship on my mother's life when, as a black woman, she already had enough to endure. He also disapproved for racial reasons. Uncle Charles believed whites and blacks were different and should remain separate. He also believed whites would never tolerate complete integration, and blacks

needed to unite to make progress. Marrying a white man did neither of them any good in his view.

My grandparents were also not pleased with the marriage but eventually accepted it. My parents lived in Kansas City the first few years of my life, and when they returned to Otto, I think the presence of a child encouraged tolerance from my mother's family. Maintaining distance from a baby is harder to do--though my father's parents managed it. My existence showed my mother and father's commitment, regardless of the families' reactions.

I never felt that close to my grandmother. Her name was Arlene Carter, and she was in her sixties and suffering declining health by the time I was ten. She had kidney problems, and high blood pressure, but she put off medical treatment as long as she could because she and Grandpa, despite all they endured, believed they could heal themselves. They had never been able to afford health care, and did not have much contact with doctors and hospitals in their lifetime. This made them too fearful and resentful to turn their lives over to modern medicine at the end.

My grandmother was a heavy, large-bosomed woman with fleshy cheeks and a double chin. She often sat in the kitchen, with my mother and Aunt Tamra, after lunch, talking. She accepted and loved me, but it was clear Timmy was her favorite. He was her first grandchild, and she always beckoned him to give her a hug. She pulled him onto

her lap, wrapped her soft, fleshy arms around him, squeezed and rocked him. "You are the sweetest child, Timmy Ray. You know that? Sweet as sweet is, and ever will be."

If I was there, she gave me a hug too. I didn't mind receiving less attention. When we got outside, Timmy complained about the smell of Grandma's breath.

Aunt Tamra was a warm-hearted but nervous, fidgety woman. The only member of the family who smoked at the time, she was tense and high-strung, seemed to always have a tight but tenuous grip on her emotions. The anxieties of day-to-day life had a noticeable effect on her. She wanted a control of life impossible to attain living with a husband and three children.

Her large eyes and high forehead gave her face the same open, vulnerable quality Timmy's possessed. Her nose, lips, and chin were narrower, though. She was a thin woman with dark skin, and despite her slight physical build and nervous personality, she possessed a hardness that would not allow life to wear her down. She could be warm and gentle, but when she felt the need for greater control, she got it. When her voice became serious and she told Timmy and I, "Boys, I want these toys picked up. I want them put in Timmy's room, and I want it done now," we did it.

She didn't expect Charles to be the disciplinarian. She did most of the spanking. If she told us to pick up some toys and discovered five minutes later the job hadn't

been done, she usually didn't give directions a second time. She got the belt and spanked the guilty one. She spanked Timmy several times in front of me, and when I was to blame, she spanked me too. I never did know if my parents thought that all right--she only did it when I was staying with her during the summers--but I never asked. I was too afraid.

As I got older, my respect for Tamra and her desire for order and control increased. But it amazes me looking back on it how little force it takes to intimidate children. I avoided her as much as I could when I was young, fearful of making a mistake in her presence. Timmy and I stayed outside a lot.

Around family, Tamra was more relaxed. She sat in the kitchen after lunch, talking and laughing with my mother and grandmother, looking as if her daily concerns had been relieved for a while. I liked to listen to them. My mother's voice would not change considerably, but did change somewhat, became more relaxed, due in large part to the loose Sunday atmosphere.

"Heard about Wilma Rushing?" Aunt Tamra asked once.

"No," my mother said.

"Where you keep your head, girl? In the sand?"

"I usually keep it at work, case you forgot."

"You noticed she wasn't at church today."

"No, I didn't notice. I ain't the roll taker."

"Don't you open your eyes? What do you do the whole

time--"

"You have a point to make? Or were you just gonna rattle on all day?"

"Leon run off again."

"Do what?"

"Third time. How many kids she got now? Six? Seven? He too sorry for a fly to land on."

"Mm-hmm, I seen that one coming," my grandmother said. "Don't say I didn't. Said so after he left the second time."

"When did he leave?"

"Some day last week. Told her he was going to work and never came back. Sorry ass. . .I knew he was sorry, but I didn't think he was that sorry."

"Are you sure he ran off?"

"What else would he be doing? You think he been kidnapped?"

"Just wondering. That's awful. Why would he do such a thing?"

"Cause he a man, that's why, and men are sorry. Word is he only came back to get away from men who owed money to for gambling. But the only thing keeps any of them around is you know what. When they can get it with someone new, they gone."

"Poor Wilma. What she gonna do?"

"What would you do if Lewis left you?" Tamra asked, lowering her voice.

"I got a job and only one child, not seven and no job. What I'd do is go to work."

"You never know," Tamra said, smiling, "when he just might wake up one day and say, 'Sure would like some white meat.'" Everyone laughed.

"Tamra, you watch your mouth," Grandmother said, chuckling.

"And you never know when Charles might wake up and say, 'Sure would like me a woman with any kind of meat on her bones. White, black, brown, green.'"

"He know better than that."

"How he know better."

"He know if he leave me I'm coming after him. He better get his ass to Egypt cause when I find him, I'll kill him. He knows it too. Then I come back and say I'm crazy."

"They'd believe that, sure enough," my mother said.

"The whole lot of you's crazy, you ask me," Grandmother said.

"You know what Brother Leatherman asked me today after church?" my mother said. "If we heard from Julius. Said he just had a feeling we heard something."

"What he do, eat too many spare ribs and have a vision?"

"Tamra!" Grandmother said.

"Why's he want to ask that? If we heard anything we want him to know, we'd tell him. He's a good man, but he say some crazy things."

"Prayers are our only way of helping Julius now, and you'd be wise to listen to our pastor where they're concerned."

"I'm sorry, Mama."

"I told him we hadn't. He said he was sure we had. That he was going to pray all week for some news."

"I'm sure the boy's doing just fine. He's still young, and don't realize how much a family means. But he will one day, and we'll all rejoice his return some day."

I don't think anyone believed my grandmother. Julius was my uncle, the youngest child in my mother's family. All I knew about him at this point was he left home at 17. No one said why, except he wanted to find a better job. I knew he went to Dallas, where he claimed he was working for a construction crew. He even sent \$200 in one letter, but it didn't convince my grandfather who said Julius couldn't hammer a thumbtack.

On Sundays, Melinda and Regina played in their room or the backyard, and Timmy and I either watched football or went outside and played. To be honest, I preferred Melinda's company, in many ways, to Timmy's. She wasn't as reckless, and was extremely smart. A year younger than me, she had her mother's eyes and high cheekbones, and her

father's physical heft. She was a plump girl with a cute, chubby face.

Melinda was good with language, and continually corrected our speech. In third grade, she won the city spelling bee at her age level. She kept the room she shared with Regina neat and clean, and liked to play house with her dolls, imagining them as nurses and doctors, teachers and students. I envied her self-possession. She was calm and self-assured no matter the situation, whereas I seemed to allow my personality to be determined by the people around me. In her room, I easily imagined myself as a doctor or lawyer, and thought all I needed to accomplish these goals was to remain in the protective custody of her imagination.

"Okay," she said one Sunday afternoon when we were alone in her room, "Your doll is George and we'll pretend he's white like your father. This is Samantha, his wife, and they're going to the doctor because Samantha is pregnant with their first child." I picked up another doll. All her dolls were white; they didn't sell black dolls in Otto. I don't even know when they started making black dolls.

I pretended George was talking to the doctor. "No, Aubrey," she said, "we see the nurse first. She takes the vital signs, then the doctor comes in."

"Do you think they'll get mad because George is white, and Samantha black?" I asked.

"Not any more. People used to, but we'll pretend this is happening when we get big, and no one will mind then. You know," she said, lowering her voice, "they used to believe children of black and white parents would have birth defects. But they don't now."

"How do you know?"

"My dad told me. He said whites made that up to keep white women from marrying black men."

"Do you think I have a birth defect?"

"Your hair is different, but I don't think it's a birth defect."

Listening to her assurance sparked feelings of love I couldn't control, and I kissed Melinda on the cheek that day. I was embarrassed, but she didn't make a big deal of it. To me, she seemed nine going on eighteen.

I spent a few Sundays in her room, while Timmy watched television. Then one day, he and Sam Rushing spied on us through her open bedroom window, and harassed me for a week. They made me so mad I tackled and punched Timmy to get him to stop. He rolled on top of me, hit me a few times, then bounced up, saying at least I wasn't acting like a girl anymore.

In the fall, Timmy and I entertained ourselves for a few hours on Sunday, while the other neighborhood kids watched the Dallas Cowboy game--little Britt Bryant was the only kid on the block who didn't adore Dallas. When they

emerged, we often played street football, which I liked because we usually played touch, not tackle, and the only thing you had to worry about was getting run into by a speeding Donald Knuckles, who was fast but didn't cut well.

I couldn't throw the ball with much zip or accuracy, but I could catch it. I preferred defense, though, one eye on your man, the other on the quarterback trying to anticipate where he would go. Sideline catches became popular, and Glenn, who was not as powerful as Sam but more graceful, showed us how to do it with style--how to plant your feet on the edge of the street, the sideline, and fall into the yard as you caught the ball, the way Drew Pearson did it for the Cowboys. It was such a valued move even Donald and little Britt could do it well.

We kept score--Sam and Glenn usually picked the teams--but we did so only to ensure a sense of competition. More significant meaning, even to those for whom the score really mattered, came simply from the sensation of movement and unexpected results, from cutting, finding an open spot, seeing the ball coming your way, catching it, dodging a defender.

For this reason we played the game for hours in the late afternoon until dusk, stretching the length of the game as far as we could, knowing tomorrow we had to get up and begin the grind of school again--it seemed like a grind even as a child. Looking back on it, I don't remember particular

games or scores or moments, but the memories of Sunday are special. Even though I never played a down of high school football or excelled in athletics, those childhood Sundays are significant to me, the images vivid and a bit sad as I recall us running our free-lance patterns on that rough asphalt, casting long shadows in the waning afternoon light. It was that fading golden light, perhaps, that makes me see those Sundays a bit romantically.

But because those days seemed so contained and carefree, the recognition that the sun was falling behind the horizon, the day was ending, made me fearful of the future. Nothing good could last, and although I didn't know enough to imagine what lay ahead, I thought of Leon Rushing and my Uncle Julius, and sensed, even then, whatever the future held, its companions would be conflict and sorrow, not only for me but for my family and the Winrows and the Rushings, for the Knuckles and the Bryants, for everyone in Otto and Oklahoma and America and the world. Rich or poor, powerful or weak, black or white, we were all caught in the struggle of that curving light, all hearts hanging tenuously upon that bending willow.

CHAPTER V

I did well in school when I was young. I was in class with the same kids year after year, which made my racial heritage a less important concern as time passed. I was quite self-conscious in first grade, but by the second, familiarity made me less unique. I tried to please the teachers and have fun, like everyone else.

My mother's influence motivated me to do homework and prepare for tests. A calm, patient woman, she helped me see how preparation could reduce the anxiety of examinations. At times, I thought she enjoyed the subjects more than I.

Because I maintained consistent study habits, schoolwork was easy most of the time, so I didn't place great value on it. I knew other kids, like Sam, struggled in school, but I didn't know why and didn't know what to do about it. I assumed the work was easy for everyone and believed Sam struggled simply because he didn't find it interesting. If he ever decided to improve, I assumed he could in a short time.

He didn't have time for school because he was too busy cutting up. I now think he cut up in response to the difficulty he had with school. The kids who struggled either responded in outrageous ways, like Sam or Freddy Barnes, or quietly isolated themselves. By fourth grade,

Sam was no longer a shy, nervous boy. He was as big as anyone in our class, and was developing a personality to match his size.

He wanted to be known and liked by his classmates, and realized he couldn't receive these things through schoolwork. Even if he did well, high grades might earn him respect but not popularity. He concentrated on getting laughs instead.

In time, Sam became the class clown. There were others who tried to attain this position but were not as consistently funny and failed. They became minor clowns, or frustrated smart alecks, like Freddy. Some of these kids did so simply because they liked pestering people, but others chose this route. Since everything they did at school received unfavorable responses, they figured they might as well provoke such responses intentionally and make their victims suffer as well. I think Freddy fit into both categories.

Gradually, Sam flourished as a funny man. He became the kid who dared make the outrageous comment, pull the riskiest stunt. I remember one day in fourth grade Sam asked permission to go to the bathroom. It was a hot, muggy day, and the afternoon dragged on interminably. The other kids, including myself, were bored and listless as we tried to do spelling worksheets and SRA assignments, constantly

checking the time and groaning when we discovered only five minutes passed from the last time we looked.

I never did find out, but I think Sam was consciously aware of this general boredom, and asked for bathroom permission so he could think of a stunt. When he returned, he delivered what sounded like a punch line to a great set-up. Walking into the class, he said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Thanks. I needed that."

This phrase came from a popular television commercial-- I think it was Alka-Seltzer. I'm sure TV ads were silly in the fifties and sixties, but it seems like at this time, 1974, the airwaves were filled with weird imagery and goofy slogans that appealed to children, even if the ad was promoting an adult product. Sam used the ad brilliantly, for a fourth grader, and the class's instant recognition of the ad, combined with the context in which Sam placed it, made it work beyond anyone's expectations. The class burst into laughter.

Those who heard him say it immediately laughed, and the few who didn't, asked, and finding out, laughed. Then those who heard it the first time realized how funny it was and laughed again. I had never heard, nor did I ever hear again, such overwhelming, spontaneous laughter from a class.

The teacher, a narrow-minded, picky white woman named Mrs. Cherry, was appalled. She marched Sam to the office

and had him spanked, lecturing him the entire length of the hall. But I know Sam didn't hear a word. He had just become a legend.

Having attained this prestigious status made Sam even less concerned with schoolwork. It became a hindrance to his more important social concerns. He was big enough even then to bully other kids into doing his homework, but never did. That would have hurt his chances of remaining the class clown. And it wasn't long before he discovered his poor efforts on tests could be used as a reliable source for laughs.

When the teacher returned homework, the questions in our corner of the room immediately followed: "What'd you make?"

"85, 92, 87, 90," went the replies. If I made in the low nineties, I was disappointed because I was in competition with Jeffrey Morris, the top brain in the class who seemed to never score below 95. I outscored him often enough to keep the competition interesting, but he won most of the time. Once, he scored 88 on an English assignment--I think he got predicate nominatives and predicate adjectives confused--and looked so shaken we thought he was going to cry.

After we offered our scores, Sam told us his. He learned to wait for effect. "What'd you make, Sam?"

"Man," he said, shaking his head. "Thought I did good on this one. Made 37. I was going for 40."

The kids laughed. "37. Did you hear? Sam made 37. 37."

We could feel a hint of disappointment and pain in his low scores, not so much from his voice, which he controlled beautifully, but from the simple failure of the test. It was as if we knew a deeper problem existed, but did not know how to confront it. And neither did the adults. His teachers, even the less concerned like Mrs. Cherry, usually let him know they were disappointed and thought he could do better. But he must have needed some individual assistance they simply couldn't provide, even if they wanted to.

Such help--and as I discovered later, Sam needed it--had to occur early for it to help him, because by the time he was in fourth grade, doing poorly offered too many benefits. We knew he was capable--he was already the best athlete in class, and even we knew it took some smarts to be funny--so the other kids believed the way I did: since Sam could do some things well, he chose to do poorly in school because the work bored him. That was his excuse. Schoolwork bored him, so he had to do something to make it interesting.

Consequently, instead of ridiculing him, we liked and respected him because most of us agreed school was boring. We did the homework only because we were afraid not to. Sam

was our rebel, the one who reminded us schoolwork and high marks weren't that important. In return, we gave him our laughter and admiration.

I also thought schoolwork was often tedious, but when I did like it, I certainly didn't admit it. I guess I was too interested in being liked. You could be smart, that was okay, and naturally smart, where you didn't study much, was better. But you couldn't be a brain unless you wanted to be regarded as a weird kid who didn't like to do anything fun.

Jeffrey Morris was one such kid. He liked school, openly admitted it. There wasn't a subject he didn't find interesting. We would have hated most kids like him. But he didn't care about public opinion. He was one of those rare kids who possess enough self-assurance to not only ignore his classmates' opinions but make those opinions seem petty and small-minded. So, since he was oblivious to our concerns, we liked him.

The power of his mind often intimidated us, including me and the one or two other kids who outscored him from time to time. It seemed like a razor he used to slice the subject. His sharp physical features added to that impression. A skinny white kid in wire-rim glasses, he had thin blond hair, a narrow face, and a pointed nose.

Jeffrey didn't like sports. At recess, he never joined a team and none wanted him. He preferred the playground equipment, things like the jungle gym, a barred contraption

you could climb on, where he and others could imagine they were on a raft in shark-infested waters or in a castle surrounded by a treacherous moat.

Occasionally, the teacher demanded we all participate in a structured activity like dodgeball or kickball. Jeffrey was not comfortable in these games. He was not clumsy; he just didn't trust the movement of the ball, the other players, or himself. Playing dodgeball, his actions were nervous and jittery, even early in the game when chances of being hit were slim. He acted as if he were afraid of being blind-sided by an unseen ball. He was too competitive to simply give up and let himself be hit, but he didn't relax or look happy until he was eliminated.

Sam, on the other hand, excelled at these games. He maintained his sense of humor on the court or field, but not at the expense of losing. If you and he were the last two remaining players, you felt a great sense of accomplishment as he drilled you with the ball and won. He prowled the court like a big cat; you wanted to know his position at all times. He was hard to eliminate, even when a group of guys ganged up on him to ensure he wouldn't win his fourth straight game.

Jeffrey was as frustrated with sports as Sam was with schoolwork. The only difference was Jeffrey could usually avoid the source of his frustration--we rarely played structured games

--whereas Sam could not. And since the teachers stressed schoolwork far more than they did physical activities, Jeffrey's abilities seemed more worthwhile than Sam's.

I often wondered how Jeffrey would have reacted had the importance of games been continually stressed and participation for five hours a day required. He may have adjusted and learned to perform well. But he looked so frustrated by sports he may have found some way to avoid it yet still be accepted. Maybe he would have become the class clown.

When we got to junior high, things changed. The school had organized football and basketball teams which traveled to other towns to play. Athletics suddenly became more valuable than academics. By Christmas break of our eighth grade year, most students knew of Sam Rushing, but only a small group knew Jeffrey Morris--or Aubrey Rowe, for that matter.

I became interested in smartness about this time. I never figured out if Sam could have done better in school, but I realized, even then, he wasn't trying very hard. No one at home made him do the work or helped him with problems. I know his mother tried to discipline him, but she had six other children to think of. Just keeping them fed and sheltered was a daily challenge.

This same lack of effort and discipline toward school affected both white and black kids. There were more dumb

whites in my class than there were smart ones. Many of them, and many of their parents I'm sure, believed intelligence was natural--you either had it or you didn't. They didn't realize success at school came from work. Glenn Bryant, who was in my class, was a below average student. When he did poorly on an assignment, he often deflected the frustration with humor, just like Sam. In fact, as they got older, they became pretty good friends. But how would Glenn have done if he had gone home and done schoolwork for two hours instead of shooting baskets?

Because of these concerns, I started hanging around with Jeffrey Morris. I played on or near the same playground equipment, watching, listening. For a while, I didn't notice anything peculiar about him. He shared similar interests with his schoolmates, took delight in imaginary games and silly word play.

But then I noticed he was frequently the creator of the games, the one who defined the boundaries of the imaginary castle, filled the moat with grotesque creatures, determined the rules which saved and eliminated the players. Like my classmates, I was quietly amazed by his ability to create this world. Occasionally, one of us would add an element, but the world into which it fit was always Jeffrey's. He established its realities, and determined whether the suggestion was acceptable or not.

He did so from a sort of naively arrogant point of view which kept him from ever seeming unfairly despotic. He listened to the suggestion, then decided if it made sense in this world. You couldn't just claim it belonged because you wanted it to. You had to explain, to Jeffrey's satisfaction, how this new device worked or a new creature survived in this violent, imaginary world.

"Watch out for the sea serpent," I said one day to a girl named Amanda, whose legs dangled close to the moat.

"Sea serpent?" Jeffrey asked. "There are no sea serpents in the moat."

"There are now," I said. "I just saw one."

"Are they poisonous or do they squeeze their prey to death?"

"They squeeze it," I said, after a pause.

"How long are they?"

"Forty feet."

"Forty feet?!!"

"Twenty feet."

Jeffrey thought a minute. Amanda remained in the same dangling position, awaiting the decision.

"Nope, won't work," he said. "They'd never survive."

"Why not?" I demanded.

"The allisaurus would devour them." The allisaurus were a hybrid mix of alligator and walrus. They were scaly

with long snouts and sharp teeth like alligators, but possessed the walrus's tusks and enormous bulk.

"No, they wouldn't," I argued. "Not all of them. The sea serpents would strangle some of them."

"Strangle an allisaurus?! That I'd like to see. They're too big to strangle. And if the allisaurus got one bite, that would be it."

"Then they live on the bottom and prey on smaller fish."

"That might work. The allisaurus live near the surface, which would force the serpents to stay below to survive. Then why is one up here about to get Amanda?"

"Because," I said, reaching over and grabbing Jeffrey's ankle, "it's a crazy sea serpent who has strayed from home and seeks to capture the leader of the castle and drag him down to the murky bottom and devour him for dinner!"

"But fortunately," said Jeffrey, struggling, "a hungry allisaurus sees the serpent thrashing in the water and swims over, snaps him in two with his powerful jaws and slurps him up like spaghetti."

"Yeah!" Amanda said, allowing her legs to dangle freely.

I let go of Jeffrey, and hung upside down from the jungle gym for a while, feeling the blood rush to my head. Even though I didn't really care about the sea serpent, I was upset that they had been relegated to a dull existence

at moat's bottom. I wanted to do something about it, but to do so meant I had to become more knowledgeable about this world we played in, and I wasn't sure I wanted to do that. Moats and allisaurus were not that interesting to me, but Jeffrey had created such a specific, complex world, it intrigued me. And I couldn't think of another world I wanted to enter, one I wanted to create.

Looking back on these experiences, I think race, from one point of view, had nothing to do with them, and yet from another, everything. On the same playground, cousin Timmy, who was a year older, commanded an even greater following than Jeffrey, comprised of black and white kids from his class playing cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians in a world dominated by Timmy's energetic imagination. Likewise, Sam dominated the court or playing field, often deciding the game, the rules, and the teams. They controlled their worlds just as Jeffrey controlled his, through the force of their ability, expertise, and imagination. Race had nothing to do with it.

Yet there were no black kids creating a world filled with creatures such as the allisaurus, at least not on my playground. To do so required a knowledge derived from sources most black kids were not aware of and had little access to.

I can now see I was quite the romantic as a boy. I wanted to be part of all three worlds, and yet have one of

my own. I didn't recognize that because I wanted to be an integral part of the others, I couldn't have my own.

Although Jeffrey's world and concerns were foreign to me, they continued to compel my attention. I hung around with him to the point that we became friends. I sat with him at lunch, talked with him in the halls, showed him things of interest during free time in class.

We were children, so interest in the castle world came and went. One warm spring day, we walked past the playground equipment toward the open area where kids often played kickball. We were some distance from the other kids, just wandering, when we discovered an ant bed. The thing held no interest for me, but Jeffrey immediately dropped to his knees and peered at the little teeming things closely. I remained standing, looking down, wondering what was so fascinating about ants. A bunch of them were scurrying about near the hole, apparently roaming around haphazardly.

"The workers are out building up the mound," Jeffrey said. "This could become a big bed. They bring dirt up as they dig tunnels. They're making rooms for food, eggs, probably a big one for the queen. I wonder if the males have left to mate yet. They have wings like the queen."

I stood there amazed, thinking he was drawing such conclusions from simply looking at this scrambling red mass. Even though I gained information in class from reading, I

had never applied much of it. The information remained in the school building with the books, so I didn't realize Jeffrey's understanding of the ants combined observation with reading. I assumed he could understand ant ways simply by looking at them, and was more impressed with him at that moment than ever before. "Look, here goes a line of them," he said, following a trail of ants away from the bed. He bent down again. "This could be the soldiers going to find food. And here's the return path." He pointed to a trail next to the other one. It looked like two lanes of automobile traffic. "Oh, yeah, there's great stuff down there," he said, speaking as if he were a returning ant. "We found the humans' garbage can. Great stuff."

Then he jumped up, apparently inspired. He walked quickly toward the tall chainlink fence. There were weeds along the fence a mower couldn't reach. Jeffrey walked, kicking the fence. I had no idea what he was doing, and when he ran from the fence and pounced on something small on the ground, I still didn't know.

"Watch this," he said, hands cupped. He plucked something off the thing in his hands, then dropped it onto the bed. It was a grasshopper, now legless.

The ants swarmed it. The grasshopper squirmed from side to side on its tiny front legs, but no longer had the equipment to escape. The ants quickly overwhelmed it.

I was amazed by the ferocity of the ants, saddened by the grasshopper's plight, and slightly appalled by Jeffrey's lack of concern. He was apparently looking only at the ants, which made me concerned with the grasshopper. I felt pity for it. I noticed its eyes, which looked frightened to me at the time.

"Something, aren't they?" Jeffrey asked, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "The queen's going to eat good tonight. We better tell Mrs. Simms about this." About what you did with the grasshopper? I thought. He was going to do something this cruel, then tell on himself. "Don't think the principal will want ants on the playground. Ever been bitten by one?" I shook my head. "Hurts. Not as bad as a wasp, but still hurts. We could probably kill a lot of them now, but wouldn't do any good. They'd go under and come out after we leave. And we'd probably get bitten stomping on the bed, there's so many of them." We started toward school, but Jeffrey walked over to the two lines of ants and nonchalantly stomped on them for a moment. I watched, then walked with him back to school.

When we returned to class, Jeffrey told Mrs. Simms, our fifth grade teacher, who said she would give the message to Mr. Baldwin, the principal. Mr. Baldwin did not make the matter a top priority. A week later, the ant bed was still there, and we found another one, about twenty yards away.

During that week, I read about ants in the school's encyclopedias. I discovered they were the only creatures except humans who conducted organized warfare. They were highly structured social creatures. They lived in castes: the queen, the workers, and the males. Fertilized eggs produced females which became fertile queens, sterile workers, or soldiers; unfertilized eggs became males who tried to mate with a queen. The role of an individual ant was determined by fertilization and early feeding. The workers were usually poorly fed first-born ants, while soldiers and queens developed as a result of special feeding and care. I remember the book said we didn't know how the ants decided which ones became soldiers and queens.

This reading developed an interest and concern in me for the things. I admired their organization and structure. I don't remember applying their ways to human society, but I was so fascinated with the ants I'm sure I would have thought it a good idea for us to become that organized, assuming of course I would be a high-ranking something and not a lowly worker.

My concern for the ants was such that I was surprised and dismayed by the suggestion Jeffrey made after we discovered the second bed. "Looks like we're going to have to take care of this," he said. "Could use gasoline and a match, but we'd get in trouble for that. Boiling water would work, but I don't know how we'd get it out here.

Hmmm. Could try to find some poison, or I could just bring a can of Raid from home. Would take longer to get them all that way, but it might work. Don't know what else to do."

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to kill the ants. Having learned about them, I felt sympathy for them and didn't think they needed to be destroyed since they hadn't hurt anyone. I understood Jeffrey's concern--Jeffrey, the ten-year-old going on thirty-two. Children played here and their safety was more important than the ants. But few kids ever played on this part of the playground. I didn't see why we couldn't tell the other children to stay away from the ants.

"I like watching them," I said.

"Yeah, me too."

There was a pause. I thought of a way to say this. "Why don't we just let them stay? That way we can watch them some more."

"We could for another day or two, I guess. But we'll get tired of watching them, forget about them, they'll spread, then someone will get bitten."

"You don't know that."

Jeffrey wasn't quite sure how to take this statement. He looked up at me immediately, recognizing the resistance to his plan, but not sure how strong it was. He couldn't tell by looking at me because I wasn't sure how strong it was either. "Yeah, think I'll bring the Raid tomorrow,"

he said, kicking some dirt onto the bed. "See what happens."

I didn't want to exterminate the ants mainly because I felt sympathy for them. But I now know part of my resistance to the idea stemmed from a desire to resist Jeffrey. He had run the show since I had been hanging around him. Now he was suggesting something I didn't want to do, and I thought it time I exert some control over our actions.

The next day I was waiting at the ant bed when he approached. He had a couple of guys with him, Randy Cash and Jerry Yost. If I hadn't shown any reluctance to his idea, I'm sure he would have asked them anyway, so he could have a bigger audience for the extermination. But the additional support wouldn't hurt. He knew something was up, from the way I acted the day before, but was so surprised that someone was going against him he still looked a bit shocked when he saw me standing in front of the ant bed like an armed guard.

"Ready for the show?" he asked. I wonder now if in his mind he had images of himself as a knight, riding up to meet a traitorous foe.

"I don't want you to kill the ants," I said, calmly but defiantly, the proud defender of the weak and defenseless. "They're not hurting anyone."

"Poor Aubrey. Doesn't want to see the ants die." His voice changed. He was on the attack now, and at that moment I realized I wasn't going to alter his plans easily. He had every intention of exterminating the ants, and it was going to take more than me to stop him. "Why don't you stand closer to them, if you love them so much? Let them crawl on you." The other two guys chuckled.

I actually took a step back toward the ant bed. "Why don't you just leave them alone, Jeffrey. They're not hurting anyone."

"Oh, boo hoo. Take another step back, see what happens." I didn't say anything. "Get out of the way," he said, shaking the can.

"Make me," I said, and should have stopped there, but I had learned the value of putting up a strong front from Timmy. "I'll shove those glasses down your stupid throat."

It wasn't a great threat, but it had an effect. I wasn't thinking about race at the time, but now I believe the severity of my threat probably made them remember I was half black. Like most whites, these guys were already afraid and suspicious of blacks and took any threat from a black, whether big or small, well-built or skinny, more seriously--I guess because it reaffirmed their suspicion that blacks are naturally inclined to fight, and good at it, because they are closer to animals than whites.

Something like this was running through Jeffrey's mind, I'm sure, and I bet he was thinking about winning his battle by going to the principal. But he wanted to win on his own if he could, and had me outnumbered.

"Like to see you try," he said, taking a step closer, shaking the can again, his voice straining from tension.

"Maybe I'll spray you with this."

"Try it. Make you eat that too."

He sprayed a little in the air as a threat, but not at me. I didn't wait for him to spray it closer, though. I went after him, thinking I would push him away, but then realizing if I did, he could come at me with the spray can. So I tackled him to the ground.

The other kids jumped on me. Jeffrey was yelling and screaming so loud you would have thought I stabbed him. I wanted to get off him, thinking he was going to die of a heart attack or something, but couldn't budge with the others on me. We lay there, kicking and squirming, then I realized Jeffrey was not yelling from pain or fear but was trying to get one of his assistants to take the spray can and attack the ants.

Before long, Mrs. Simms was separating us with the help of another teacher. She was a good teacher, kind, considerate, funny, and neither Jeffrey nor I liked disappointing her. She started the inquisition in that same personally-disappointed moral tone teachers use, but her

voice soon changed to one of perplexed curiosity when she found out why we were fighting.

She took us into the school building to hear both sides of the story, warning the other kids to leave the ants alone until she made a decision. I knew I was probably going to get in trouble, but I remember feeling a sense of relief and accomplishment because she was taking the dispute seriously and didn't immediately side with the ant exterminators.

Jeffrey and I explained our views. The fight made us both feel even more justified in our causes, but I was surprised by the lack of animosity between us, considering we had been lying on the ground, wrestling, moments ago. I think we were both secretly thrilled to be part of a serious dispute that required the teacher's arbitration.

"Well," she said, looking puzzled but a bit delighted by our argument. "I'm not sure what to do. You both see that fighting solved nothing."

"It got your attention," Jeffrey said.

"Yes, but it didn't solve anything, did it?!" Jeffrey could really get on a teacher's nerves at times. "And someone could have gotten seriously hurt. I'll speak to Mr. Baldwin about it."

"You've already told him," Jeffrey said. "He didn't do anything."

Normally, Mrs. Simms wouldn't have taken this kind of talk from a student, but she was concentrating on finding a

good solution to the problem. A gentle but insistent woman whose dark, loosely-permed hair and casual clothing made her look orderly but comfortable, she treated this situation as she did all others, seeking to resolve the problem not just end it.

"Aubrey, you see the ants are a potential problem, don't you?" I nodded. "But you think the other children should simply be informed of the ant bed."

"Beds!" said Jeffrey. "There's more than one now."

"Of the beds," Mrs. Simms said, glaring at him. "So they can stay away from them. Normally, I would say that wouldn't work, but the ants are far enough away from the playground the younger children would never get close to them." She paused. "Tell you what, why don't we take the matter to your classmates? If you want, we can have a debate and you two can argue for your side. Then we'll put it to a class vote. How does that sound?"

"Yeah!" Jeffrey said. This had become much better than he ever imagined.

"Aubrey?" Mrs. Simms asked.

"Yeah, okay," I said, weakly. I liked the idea, but was troubled by thoughts of having to debate Jeffrey, the fifth grade ant expert. I imagined him presenting documented evidence of ant maulings, providing testimony from special ant doctors, presenting charts and diagrams showing feasibility studies of projected costs and hazards

of the extermination. And all I could say was, "Don't kill the ants."

CHAPTER VI

I knew I had to begin preparing for the debate immediately, but I already felt overwhelmed. I thought Jeffrey had a huge head start, even though we found out about the debate at the same time. He knew so much more about ants, about everything, than I did. How could I be so stupid, I thought, to debate him? I should have told Mrs. Simms to hell with the debate, and taken Jeffrey outside and kicked his little scrawny white ass! Then we'd see who won, who had the right to say if the ants should be killed or not. From then on, I'd tell him what to do, I'd define the rules, I'd decide if a forty-foot sea serpent could swim in our moat. Not him!

That afternoon was one of the most painful of my life. I couldn't sustain enough thought to sharpen a pencil. I felt weak, insecure, frightened. I didn't know anything about ants. I didn't know why I wanted them alive. I had a vague notion, even then, I wasn't fighting to save the ants, but to make a point to Jeffrey. Well, my wish was granted. I was going to get my opportunity. And I was going to get killed.

Unable to concentrate on my math assignment, I glanced at the floor. A red ant was crawling on my blue tennis shoe.

When the last bell rang, I trudged to the school library to begin preparations. I thought Jeffrey might show, then realized he probably had ten ant books at home, on a shelf above his elaborate ant farm. Our school library wasn't much, but it did contain a set of encyclopedias, a few other reference sources, and a lot of paperback novels for children. I pulled the A encyclopedia off the shelf, and without any idea what I was doing, started taking notes.

Mrs. Simms came by some time later. "What are you reading, Aubrey?"

"Nothing," I said, then realized I ought to explain. "Getting ready for the debate."

"That's good," she said, smiling. "But school is over. Why don't you do that at home?"

I looked up at her, as startled by her suggestion as she was by my being in the library after school. I didn't say anything for a minute, just kept writing. Then I realized she was waiting for an answer. "I don't know," I said. Did she really not know why I was here?

"Well, you might want to quit for today. How do you get home?"

"Walk."

"Not very far, is it?"

"No."

"Good. Take a few more minutes, then start home before it gets late." She turned to leave.

"I'm not doing this at home because I can't," I said. She looked at me with concern, aware I was making a confession but unsure of its meaning. I waited, unsure myself how serious this confession was, suddenly aware it might make my parents look bad. "We don't have any books at home about ants."

She looked relieved for a moment. "Do you have any books at home?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. A few. But not encyclopedias. Some don't, though. I've never seen any at Sam's house." I didn't want to tell on Sam as much as I wanted Mrs. Simms to know this. She looked startled. As good a teacher as she was, she should have known better. But I later discovered she lived on the other side of town; her husband was a professor of political science at the university. For as long as she had been teaching I guess she believed that the kids who didn't like out of class projects were simply lazy.

"Why don't we both plan to stay late tomorrow, so you can work. How's that?" she asked.

"Okay."

As I took more notes the next day, still hoping a plan would emerge if I retrieved enough information, I declined her offer of help. I didn't ask my parents either, but don't know why. I think it was from fear more than pride. I was so uncertain about the debate, I didn't want to ask anyone for fear of showing myself just how uncertain I was.

As long as I didn't talk about it, I could encourage myself to believe I had some control of the subject.

But I didn't. The debate was scheduled for Tuesday, and as the date approached, I went into a sort of paralysis. I gathered all the information I could find. I knew ants were organized social insects, divided their colonies into classes centered around a queen, did anything, including bite, to protect the colony--a point which wouldn't do me much good, but which Jeffrey would jump on. But nothing in these books told me why I wanted them kept alive on the playground.

By Monday night, I still didn't have a plan, but didn't ask for help. I tried to put some ideas together, but the best thing I could come up with was the notion that the ants wouldn't bother us if we didn't bother them. Therefore, they deserved a place on the playground. What brilliant logic!

The longer I thought about it, the more I convinced myself this was a strong idea. I quit thinking about my speech, and imagined the positive, overwhelming reaction I might receive from my classmates. Most of them liked me better than Jeffrey. Maybe his logic wouldn't appeal to them, maybe my worries were over.

I got slaughtered.

Jeffrey went first. He worked from a prepared speech, leaving the text occasionally to elaborate key points.

Positioned in front of him was a poster which visually emphasized those points.

He began with a narrative which described an innocent second grader wandering across the playground in apparent safety until she accidentally stumbled upon an ant bed--ignoring, of course, the fact that this part of the playground was off limits to second graders! He described the great possibility of this student being bitten, not once, but several times, then described in detail how painful a single ant bite could be. He then speculated on the probable spread of the ants, observing that the typical life span of a queen was ten to seventeen years, a detail which drew gasps from the class.

Next, he discussed the feasibility of destroying the two existing ant beds. He provided an estimate from a local exterminator, then described how the school could perform the extermination with gasoline or boiling water. In either case, allowing the ants to live would only allow their numbers to increase and make future exterminations more difficult and costly. Then, of course, he tied it up neatly by insisting that even though the ants were interesting creatures, their lives were not worth the pain and trauma even one student might suffer from their attack.

Attack, pain, trauma, what loaded language! But neither I nor my classmates realized it. By the time he was finished, he had me convinced.

As I walked to the front of the class, with my crumpled, disorganized notes, I felt nervous, but was at least relieved he hadn't made me part of his explanation. My face flushed with warmth. I could feel my body overheating. My hands trembled, shaking the papers which made my nervousness visible to the class. I commanded, then pleaded with them to stop, but they didn't respond.

"I think ants have a right to live just like we do," I said in a faulty, nervous voice, looking down at my notes as if I were reading a prepared speech, just like Jeffrey. But the pages were shaking so badly I wouldn't have been able to read from them even if they did contain my speech. I paused, coughed. This was the only point I had.

Describing the ways of ant life suddenly seemed insignificant, trivial. I needed to convince the students we shouldn't kill them even though the ants might bite them.

Later, I realized detailing ant habits was my only hope. If I made the students understand ants well, then many of them might feel the same sympathy toward the things I did. I could have even resorted to cheap emotional ploys, giving the ants and their colonies names so the students wouldn't be voting to destroy anonymous insects but living creatures, like Queen Sophia.

But no such ideas came to mind. I think I restated my first point several times. Unsure of my next point and aware of my nervous struggle, I did something which didn't

work, embarrassed me soon afterward, but now makes me a bit proud only because I didn't just cave in and quit. I abandoned my notes and all other prepared thoughts, and went on the attack.

"He said the ants would bite a second grader," I said, pointing at Jeffrey. "Second graders aren't even allowed on that part of the playground! I guess he thinks the ants will spread so bad, they'll end up taking over the school. We'll never be able to go outside again because of the ants. They'll crawl all the way to the building and try to get in, hundreds and thousands of them. Have you ever seen that happen? Have you ever once not been able to get out of your house because of ants? Of course not. It'll never happen. But he thinks it will because he's afraid of them. All he ever does is read. He's nothing but a bookworm. Everyone knows that. So when he meets something real he gets scared of it and wants to kill it. I got bitten by an ant just the other day, and it didn't hurt that much. He sounds like it would put you in the hospital. That's cause he's just a scaredy cat--"

"Okay, Aubrey," Mrs. Simms said. "I think we get your point."

I got two votes: Sam and Amanda's, the girl who played on the jungle gym with Jeffrey and me. Apparently, she was tired of him too. Some voted for Jeffrey because they wanted to take part in the extermination, others because

they were afraid of being bitten, and a few others remarked they weren't sure until I described the ants trying to get into the building. They said they never wanted to see that happen.

CHAPTER VII

Of course, after the debate, there was only one logical thing left to do for the two smartest kids in the class: become best friends. This didn't happen immediately. Following the ant extermination, which Jeffrey lorded over like a prince, he seemed a foot taller, elevated by his supreme accomplishment. I stayed to myself, angered by my defeat but not humiliated. Emotionally, I felt rather inspired by the event, and thought such debates ought to become part of the curriculum.

The class, which saw us as sworn enemies, buzzed about the debate for a week. I even thought of requesting a rematch on a different subject, but knew I was not yet prepared to battle Jeffrey. I was capable of insights, but didn't have the skills to defend them. The only lasting discouragement I felt came from the realization that Jeffrey was miles ahead of me intellectually. It would take me years to catch him.

Amanda and Sam, my two loyal supporters, consoled me. Sam told me he would taunt Jeffrey the next time we played dodge ball. Amanda said I had the best argument, but the other kids wanted to see the ants killed. (Her sympathy for the ants was greater than mine.) We were standing at the

pencil sharpener when she said this, and as she spoke, she leaned close enough to make my skin tingle.

I never felt this way before about her, or any white girl. My experience made me attracted to blacks, but as I got to know Amanda, I thought about her, not her skin color. She was a cute girl with dimpled cheeks and an upturned nose. During the next few days, I dreamed of us in an innocently romantic way. I was silly enough to think the first time I kissed her would be on the forehead, in the manner of those melodramatic, self-sacrificing soap opera heroes.

But my attraction to her showed I was in the middle again. I assumed none of my classmates would be interested in someone a different color, which made me feel unusual and reduced my interest not only in Amanda but all girls. I knew my level of tolerance was much greater than my classmates, a realization that restricted my behavior instead of liberating it. Before long, I was back on the jungle gym, worrying about crazed allisaurus instead of romantic interludes between the lockers.

It was on the jungle gym that Jeffrey revealed a newfound respect for me. It happened so casually I didn't realize the change at the time. A game of tag began--we often played this on the jungle gym because it limited mobility and added an element of risk--and Jeffrey soon jumped aboard and joined in. The moat and castle metaphor

had lost much of its appeal, but we still used it on occasion, especially when Jeffrey was around.

On this day he introduced it into the game to add some excitement. On his command one section of the contraption was declared off limits because it was infested with sea serpents. Since this idea hurt the game more than helped, it was short-lived. But the serpents, my sea creations, were now a permanent part of our imaginary world.

The next day cemented our new relationship. Jeffrey and I were the first to climb aboard the bars, and we suddenly experienced a mild burst of creative competition. We formed new creatures and rules as easily as if we were tossing empty milk cartons. Before long, movements atop the jungle gym developed the precision and precariousness of a chess game. One false move could cost you a finger; another, your life.

As Tommy Cartwright, a quiet, chubby white kid who always had bad breath and matter in his eyes, grabbed a bar to begin his slow climb up, I said, "You can't do that. Beneath those bars lives a school of jumping piranha. They chomp one finger for every second your hand touches a bar. You have to climb up that section with your feet only until you get to the top."

He made one attempt, then tried another side.

"I guess, he thinks the sea serpents are asleep," Jeffrey said.

"What's wrong with this?" Tommy asked.

"Can't use your feet. The serpents will wrap around your ankle and cut off the flow of blood. We'll have to amputate. You can only use your hands and knees."

Tommy tried without success. "How am I supposed to get up?"

"Go ask Hoss for help," Jeffrey said, laughing, referring to the Cartwrights on Bonanza.

"How'd you guys get up?"

"Think we give that information for free?" I said. "Cost you a quarter."

"Bet you'll let Amanda up. Hey, Amanda!"

"Sure will," Jeffrey said. "She's already paid in fingers. Only has four left."

Tommy looked across the playground and saw her playing kick ball. Jeffrey was making this story up, but our new creatures and rules were already too real for either of us to care. Tommy was too slow to play kick ball, which prevented him from leaving us to our bizarre world. "I don't have a quarter," he said.

"All right," I said, the bleeding-heart liberal.

"Climb up the side behind me, but you have to do it in ten seconds or get burned by the four-eyed dragon."

"What good will that do?" Jeffrey asked, as Tommy puffed his way aboard. "If he gets up, he won't be able to survive."

Jeffrey was right. I began to carefully explain the new world to Tommy, but it didn't do any good. He was so relieved to have a safe place to sit he didn't move until recess was over. The game was too complex and unpredictable for him, and was quickly becoming so for Jeffrey and me.

But that didn't stop us. We ruled the jungle gym for a week, frustrating all participants to the point that we had the thing to ourselves. We revelled in the power of our imaginations. Without touching a single classmate, we defied entry into our world. After two days, no one asked to climb the jungle gym. The two brain trust corporations had merged and obliterated the competition.

Mrs. Simms liked group projects. When she made the next assignment, Jeffrey and I looked at one another, and without saying a word, knew we wanted to be a team. She granted our request, and allowed us to remain a two-person group even though the others had three.

I don't know if this was a good idea. Separating Jeffrey and I would have created two more equitable groups. But our excitement may have won her over. And I know I learned as much from the group projects I did with Jeffrey as I did from anything else that year.

The assignment was to explore the life of prehistoric man. Each group had to make a poster depicting an aspect of that life. Jeffrey and I devoted our complete attention to the project. We worked on it during every spare minute of

the day. We decided to not only make a poster (child's play!), but create tiny replicas of Neanderthal tools. Jeffrey brought small sandstone chunks to school, and during recess, we ground them on concrete into crude clubs, knives and axes. We made tiny spears out of carved sticks.

I became so interested in our project I didn't want to go home from school, and knew when he got home, Jeffrey kept working. Since he could draw much better than I--gaining the skill, I discovered, from numerous sketches of insects and animals--he filled our poster with domestic Neanderthal scenes. We made a written report that explained the function of the images we created. I felt like we had done enough to fill a museum, but for Jeffrey it wasn't enough.

"We need to make a Neanderthal man somehow," he said, two days before the deadline. Sandstone was out of the question, so the next day Jeffrey came to school with globs of clay in a grocery sack. While he worked on the head, carving the nose and eye sockets with a small metal instrument I had never seen before, I fashioned the legs and torso.

Surprisingly, the figure began to look like a man. But as we defined his shape, more questions of anatomy came to mind. I wondered how specific we were going to be. With Jeffrey, you could never be sure. "Is he going to be naked?" I asked.

"We ought to," Jeffrey said, chuckling. "My mom said she's got this old fur cap we could cut up to make a cave man suit and some shoes. I don't know about hair."

I thought a minute, but couldn't think of anything in my house that would work. Then I got an idea. Retrieving a pair of scissors from my desk, I clipped a small lock of my hair. "Try this."

"Perfect," he said, holding the hair in place.

"Probably have a beard too, wouldn't he?" I clipped another small piece.

"With a beard and a fur cap and coat, he'll look just like the real thing."

"I'll get some glue."

"No, I'll do it when I get home. I've got rubber cement. White glue would show through."

The image of dark hair and white glue produced another question, one I asked quite innocently. "What color was Neanderthal man?"

"White," Jeffrey said with certainty, as if I had asked the color of the sky. But a look of doubt appeared on his face after he answered.

"Why wouldn't your hair work then?"

"Just wouldn't stay or look right. Too thin. I thought about it."

"Then how could he be white? If a white person's hair doesn't look right?"

After I asked this, I realized my question had reached the point where neither of us could answer. I was already old enough to tell when words failed, an emotional response soon followed from most people. But Jeffrey surprised me. "I don't know."

He stopped what he was doing and walked toward Mrs. Simms. They talked for a moment.

"She said white, but probably looked brown since they were outside so much," he said, returning.

"Where did blacks come from?"

"I don't know. Africa, I guess."

"Why aren't we doing a project on them?" A quiet pause followed. "Wonder if they lived in caves?"

"No, goofy. The jungle."

We exceeded expectations, even our own, with the completed project. Mrs. Simms wisely placed our presentation last, so we wouldn't overwhelm those that followed. I know that sounds arrogant, but it's true. We put in about ten times the work of most others, so it should have been better.

We presented an array of artifacts in addition to the elaborate and detailed drawings on our poster. The other groups had completed the minimum requirements by making a poster. Some were pitiful for sixth grade work.

Sam was in one such group. I knew he hadn't done anything on the project, but I also knew the project

required knowledge and skills he did not have nor could easily acquire. I don't know how the teacher could resolve this dilemma except to let the students work individually at their own pace. But with that method, teachers couldn't easily measure or assess the knowledge and skill level of the class as a whole. So the teachers, even the concerned like Mrs. Simms, designed class projects most students could perform but which left some students further behind.

The other students were not impressed with our performance. They resented it. They believed the pairing of Jeffrey and me was unfair. To them our accomplishment was nothing but gloating, rubbing our privileged advantage in their faces. They regarded our project with conscious indifference, and by the end of the day, viewed their own efforts in the same way. I was the last one to leave the classroom, and as I did, I noticed Mrs. Simms pick up a poster lying in the corner of the room, sighing as she did. It was already curling at the edges, and had a big dusty footprint on it. The student hadn't even bothered to throw it away.

I could see this indifference in the students' faces as Jeffrey read his half of our report, which was not required but which, to our credit, we kept brief. While Jeffrey read, I looked at Sam who was talking with Glenn Bryant. I felt guilty for participating with Jeffrey, thinking I should have teamed with Sam.

But I knew how it would turn out with Sam. I would do all the work, and as a result, complete the minimum requirements, like the rest. I might get him interested in part of it, but he would defer all decisions and responsibility to me. I would do enough to show concern with the project, but wouldn't explore the subject in near the detail Jeffrey and I did.

This experience gave me insights into Jeffrey and Sam and the rest of the class, but I wasn't old enough to see the insights the experience revealed about myself, insights showing my work and effort was in part determined by my association with other people. I didn't realize that if Jeffrey were in a group with Sam he would have attempted the same ambitious project. His efforts wouldn't have been as successful as they were with me, but they would be more successful than mine and Sam's. But I was young, and just beginning to learn a lot of things about myself and other people, including Jeffrey and his family.

Our next unit focused on ancient civilizations. We studied the societies in our textbook. I remember examining Greek, Roman, and Egyptian cultures, but was disappointed that the Incas or Aztecs, whom I'd read about in a library book, weren't present.

Mrs. Simms designed an interesting project for this unit: each group would create its own ancient civilization. After the group selected a geographical location, it would

then make a model of the society, showing its principal architecture and way of life. Other social elements, such as political structure and religion, would be described in the group's report.

She was reluctant to allow Jeffrey and I to form a group again. When she agreed, she told us she wouldn't give us any help, so she could assist the others. This was fine with us. But as it turned out, we needed more direction than any other group.

We had so much freedom we couldn't do anything. We argued over geographical location for two days. Neither of us had a special preference; we just didn't want to accept limitations. As soon as we decided to put the civilization on a coast, we talked about how neat a desert society would be.

Finally, realizing we were falling behind even the slowest of groups, we settled on a location beside the Mississippi River. This choice was too mundane to please either of us, but the climate and the river allowed us to design, we thought, nearly any kind of society we desired.

We both preferred the Egyptian culture to the others we studied mainly because of its architecture. More than anything, we saw the possibility to construct an ambitious model comprised of elaborate monuments and buildings. The purpose of the architecture and the methods by which it was

constructed were just burdensome ideas getting in our way. But they did get in our way.

Jeffrey suggested we have a king--we'd think up a fancier name later--and the labor performed by slaves taken in military conquests. I said no to both.

"How are we going to explain the monuments then?"

"They're built to glorify the society. Everyone agrees to work the same."

"Yeah, sure. They wouldn't do anything that way. Just stay alive like the Indians."

"Maybe we should do the Indians."

"Maybe we should do separate projects. You said you wanted to build big things."

"All right. But let's make the rulers black and the slaves white."

Jeffrey sighed as if I were still trying to complicate things. "Your dad's white. That would make him a slave. And since your half white, you'd be one too."

"Maybe not. I could pass for black. I look more black than white."

"You could pass for Mexican too. What would they be?"

"Intruders we'd have to attack. I don't know. Let's have no slaves. The people work for a ruler, and those that build the best monuments get paid the most."

"Okay."

This agreement resolved enough questions for us to get started with our architecture. Mrs. Simms gave us a recipe to make clay, and told us to place our miniature society in a large cardboard box. Jeffrey and I began the project with the unstated intention of shattering our previous accomplishment. To do so, we quickly discovered we needed more time, so we split the work at the end of each day and continued it at home.

We quickly caught up. In two days I made a pyramid, which served as a great hall of government, and Jeffrey built a monument to the ruler.

The first Friday of the project, Jeffrey came to school, his angular face stretched with excitement. "There's an Egyptian exhibit in Tulsa. We might see how to make models out of other things than clay, and get some ideas for jewelry and pottery and other stuff. My mom said she'd take me. Want to go?"

"Sure," I said.

"Great. You know, you could spend the night. We're leaving early."

"Okay," I said, surprised by his generosity. To this point, we had just been acquaintances, but now it looked like we were becoming friends. "I'll have to ask my parents."

"I haven't even asked mine yet, but they won't mind. Call me when you get home from school, and I'll see if it's all right."

He wrote down his address before we left school. The irony never did occur to me then: I might spend the night with a friend in a house I had never seen and didn't know how to find.

My request surprised my mother. This was the first time she had even heard me mention Jeffrey's name. She asked me several questions, repeating one again and again: was I sure his parents approved?

I didn't realize she was trying to discover if they knew she was black. Finally, she called Jeffrey's mother. I'm sure she wanted to ask the same question, but was never able to. After she hung up, she told me I could go, deciding, I guess, that if the Morrises found out after I was there, they would still return her boy unharmed. The trip to an Egyptian exhibit pleased her, so the sleepover seemed worth it.

We left before my father, who was late, got home. I was relieved. In some ways, he was more distrustful of whites than my mother, and would likely disapprove.

Jeffrey lived some distance away, in a block of nice brick homes. Neighborhoods in the Franklin school district were largely blue-collar, but his block, on the northwest end, looked like a white-collar area. The adjacent blocks

contained modest brick and frame homes that were mostly well-kept but which might contain an old pickup, motorcycles, or children's toys in the yard. In Jeffrey's block, the yards were unblemished, and most vehicles secured within the two-car garage.

When we pulled up in my mother's old but reliable 1965 Dodge Duster, which we had only owned a year, I began to feel nervous. The house, a roomy red-brick three-bedroom, was one of the nicest homes I had ever seen, much less entered. The roof, shutters, thin wooden columns, and garage door were painted charcoal gray. Neither my mother nor father cared much for landscaping, but this place had an evenly-trimmed hedge in front, the backdrop for rows of petunias and periwinkles. Two planters of red geraniums hung on the porch.

If Mrs. Morris didn't know my mother was black, she did a fine job disguising her surprise. She was a tall, thin woman with permed auburn hair.

She greeted us in the drive, shaking hands with my mother, and expressing delight with my visit. She seemed to know there might be tension, and relieved it by talking about Jeffrey and me. She and her husband were very pleased with our performance on the Neanderthal project, and thought it wonderful we were taking such an interest in school. My mother could only nod her head in agreement. I had told her

school was going well, but hadn't mentioned my accomplishments with Jeffrey.

When I stepped into the house, I felt like I was walking into a museum or what a museum might be like--I had never been in one. The amount and arrangement of the house's objects overwhelmed me. We had a few things on the walls but mainly photographs of family members and a copy of the Lord's Prayer that always slid to one side whenever my father became too excited watching football. This place seemed filled with valuable items, things of such weight, precision and cost I became so self-conscious I was aware of how my feet sounded on the floor when I walked.

We entered a short hall with a maroon tile floor. A charcoal gray eagle, in the shape of the national symbol, hung on one wall; on the other, two small framed prints of small cottage people in pastoral scenes hung in a diagonal pattern. An open doorway leading to the kitchen appeared on the left. At hall's end, another longer, brown-carpeted hall branched to the right; further to the left, a large roomy den appeared with two maroon leather chairs, a dark forest green sofa, a fireplace, and a console television. It was the most inviting room I had ever seen, but one so still it seemed uninhabited.

"Jeffrey. Your friend is here," Mrs. Morris called. We looked down the hall waiting for him to appear. "You'll have to excuse his rudeness. He's picking up his room."

Waits to the last minute to do everything." She smiled. Still, no Jeffrey. "Why don't you go on down. First door on the left."

I opened the door tentatively and saw Jeffrey hurling stuff into a closet. "Hi," he said. I walked in, closing the door. "Don't know why she makes me do this. It's my room." Apparently, Jeffrey enjoyed the amount of stuff his parents could afford, but did not share their concern for order. He was too animated to be neat. I hadn't been able to distinguish the various objects in the room, but was amazed by the amount. I thought there might be more things crammed into this bedroom than in mine and my parents' combined. "Your parents make you do this?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, commiserating. Truth be known, my mother rarely said anything about my room. She always told me it was mine to do with as I pleased, but if she ever tripped on an object as she entered to wake me for school, that object would earn a one-way ticket to the Salvation Army. For the most part, this was threat, but she followed through with her claim a couple of times.

It was my father who made me guard my most precious possessions. Periodically, he would get in one of his moods--the reason for which I didn't understand until much later--and enter with a large garbage bag. "Look at the poor, spoiled American boy. So many toys he's no room in

his closet." Those items I didn't get to first I never saw again.

This practice infuriated me. It did make me keep my most valued toys in the closet, though. But my best response occurred one day when I said in reply to his spoiled American bit, "After we finish my room, let's go into yours. Everything on the floor goes in the sack."

That stopped him cold. On weekends, my parents cleaned house, but during the week, all kinds of things accumulated in their room. "Touche, Aubrey," he said, emptying the sack.

Everything in Jeffrey's room appealed to his desire for knowledge. The posters on the walls depicted geographical locations, ancient architecture, the solar system, and dinosaurs. A dinosaur zealot, he had several life-like dinosaur figures on his clean desk. The boy had a desk!

"That's clean enough," he said, noticing my interest in the figures. "Wish we could use those in our project."

"Hard to believe they really existed," I said, picking up the largest one.

"Of course, they did." He rattled off information about when they lived and their life span, then mentioned theories about their extinction.

"This one looks like a rhinoceros," I said.

"That's stegosaurus. He's pretty cool. The only one who could give Tyrannosaurus Rex a fight." He picked

Tyrannosaurus up, his obvious favorite, and admired it a moment, then identified the others. The pterodactyl appealed to me. "What would it be like to look up and see one of them swooping down at you?" he said, almost longingly, as if he had been born out of time.

Mr. Morris frightened me as much as any man I ever met. He was as serious and formal as the house he lived in. He had very short dark hair which, despite the length, he seemed to fear would rebel, so he greased and parted it neatly on the side. It was so controlled you could distinguish nearly every hair. He was about the same size as my father, but didn't have the same look of strength. His skin was loosening at the neck from age, and he wore wire-frame glasses nearly identical in shape to Jeffrey's. I imagine he picked the style for his son.

He was a private accountant with his own firm. He didn't seem the type for a partner. Weeks later, I had my mother drive by his office, which was bigger and nicer than most homes in my neighborhood.

I couldn't unite five words speaking with the man. Mainly, I grunted yes or no to his questions. None of them were personal. They concerned my association with Jeffrey, and while I answered, I wondered if he knew I was half-black.

This brief interrogation occurred in the den. He sat in one of the leather chairs, newspaper in his lap,

television news on, fiddling with a pipe he never lit. When my father came home he went straight to the kitchen looking to eat, or straight for my mother, telling me, jokingly, to go outside--dinner would be an hour late.

While Jeffrey and I were in the bathroom washing our hands, something I didn't do before eating unless they were dirty, Jeffrey ran a comb through his hair. I wondered if mine would pass inspection, but knew there was no since trying to comb it. Jeffrey had on a short-sleeved, collared shirt, the style of our fathers and many men at this time. My blue and white striped shirt didn't have a collar but was clean, so I didn't feel too self-conscious about my appearance. I was cocky enough to think I looked better than Jeffrey no matter the circumstance.

When we took our seats, Mr. Morris still had his tie on. His presence made me so nervous two bites of a sandwich would have satisfied me. But then someone appeared who immediately relieved my anxiety: Jeffrey's older sister Jamie, a ninth grader.

I didn't know where she came from, if she was in her room or came in after I arrived, but I didn't care. I directed all of my nervous energy at her face and busty chest, which was clothed in a tight, short-sleeved shirt. She was not exceptionally beautiful, but was attractive, and even though I had no experience with girls, I easily

imagined Jamie was looking for someone to relieve the terrible boredom of her stuffy home life.

While Mrs. Morris passed the hot rolls in a small wicker basket, I imagined secretly meeting Jamie later in her room. She would scoff at Jeffrey's interest in ancient civilizations. Her radio would be on, tuned to a popular station. Books, she would say, were for bores. I would agree.

I wondered how Jeffrey could do anything but look at her breasts. Having seen her for so many years without them, he probably didn't even notice what I could not take my eyes off. I ate a half-dozen rolls that night, and Mrs. Morris wished aloud that Jeffrey had my appetite.

Jamie looked like her mother, though she wore her hair long and loose. It was obvious she was in the process of withdrawing from her family as much as possible. She made little eye contact and employed few words in response to their questions. Simply sitting at the table for dinner seemed to be gesture enough that she was still part of the family.

All teenagers, I guess, go through some type of separation from their parents' track of life, even Jeffrey. But it was clear to me, even then, that although he might waver once or twice, Jeffrey would not disappoint.

Jamie, however, was a different story. Her every word and gesture manifested a sense of oppressive weight she

desired to shake. There appeared to be nothing in the house or of the people in it with which she identified. Sooner or later, she would try to find herself through some action far away from the confines of the Morris home.

"What are your plans tonight, Jamie?"

"Don't know. Ride around with Rhonda, I guess."

Mr. Morris started to speak, then made eye contact with his wife. Her head turned slowly, like a tight screw, in my direction, and the pressure stopped her husband's tongue. Suddenly, we all became aware of the sounds of forks and knives on plates. I took a drink of milk--it was Jeffrey's beverage, so I had it too--enjoying this secretive communication.

We were having some type of chicken and mushroom soup casserole. We didn't eat casseroles, so I was skeptical at first. But it was all right, a bit bland but good.

We ate hard meals at our house, the kind where everything merged into one big stew on your plate: round steak or hamburger or chicken or link sausage and corn, beans, rice, mashed potatoes and gravy, cornbread. The food was usually spicy. Occasionally, my mother would make spaghetti, and my father liked Mexican food, so often he invaded the kitchen and whipped up a mess--exactly what it looked like--of the spiciest enchiladas I've ever had. One bite of this Morris casserole, and my father would have headed straight for the Tabasco sauce.

Unable to interrogate his daughter, Mr. Morris turned his attention to me. "So how long have you had an interest in school, Aubrey?" Mrs. Morris's head turned a degree tighter. "I mean, you've always been a good student. According to Jeffrey."

Jeffrey looked up, puzzled, and I had the feeling then that Mr. Morris knew of my racial heritage. A witty remark came to mind, and I almost said it. Looking at Jamie and fondling the bread relaxed me greatly.

"Me and Aubrey are the smartest kids in class."

"Aubrey and I, Jeffrey," his mother said.

"That's great," Mr. Morris said. "Can't understand why every kid doesn't take a serious interest in school. You are absolutely lost in this world without a good education. All you have--"

Another quarter turn from Mrs. Morris intercepted his last sentence. It was clear he was getting in another dig at the disinterested princess who was nibbling her food like it was school cafeteria leftovers.

"Your parents take an active role in your education?" Mr. Morris asked.

I thought of another remark I didn't say. Something about this situation, and Jamie's obvious boredom with it, inspired the more mature, resolved, and cocky aspects of my personality, but I didn't express them. I wanted to tell him being half-black and half-white created the perfect

combination of genes, making me naturally intelligent, sophisticated, funny, and attractive. Instead, I said, "They help a lot. My mom's good in math and English. My dad helps me with science." The last remark was a lie, but I didn't want to exclude my father or tell Mr. Morris he taught me how to fight so well I could beat the shit out of his son with one hand, even though that type of unexpected, straightforward remark would have put me in good stead with Jamie, for at least fifteen minutes.

"That's great. Just great," he said, bored with the question before I even answered.

"We'll have a lot of fun tomorrow," Mrs. Morris said.

"Whew, I bet." Jamie said this quietly, as if as she said it she realized it was risky because it would embarrass her parents in front of company. Mr. Morris glared at her, then at his wife, as if he were trying to loosen the screws she had put in him since we sat down, arguing with his single look that because of her restraints on him they now had to suffer Jamie's loose-lipped impudence.

I was learning from this experience. I never realized the dynamic tensions possible beneath the calm, serene, comfortable exterior of middle-class whites before. I felt like a detective discovering clues, and loved every minute of it. The Morrises lacked the flamboyance of my family's squabbles, but their intrigue more than compensated.

The rest of the evening was boring compared to dinner. Mr. Morris finally lit his pipe and read; Mrs. Morris cleaned the house and prepared for tomorrow's trip. I didn't see Jamie again that night. Jeffrey and I spent the evening in his room, working on another monument for our project--this one to the god of hunters.

That night, I think I was the last one asleep. It was late. Jamie came in a few minutes past midnight, a sign of her developing resistance to curfew. I could hear the wind blowing but not feel it. The week's warm days compelled the Morrises to turn on the air conditioner even though it was only late April. I thought of how nice and comfortable the house was, nicer than I imagined it would be.

But the people were disappointingly mundane compared to the cost of their furnishings. They were really no different from people I knew. Just people with everyday worries. I had seen a new side of life and could tell it was the same side, really, as the old one. And if I could have found my house, I might have just walked home, stepped over the old toys in my cluttered but bare room, and lay down in my own bed, where I could feel the cool wind through my screened window.

CHAPTER VIII

I knew the trip would not go well before we left the house. We had eggs for breakfast.

I hated eggs. The yolk I could take, and even enjoy occasionally, dipped on toast. But the moment they entered my mouth, egg whites activated the warning saliva that triggered the stomach's vomit control. In emergencies, I could have used them as a stomach pump.

I think it was the combination of the taste and feel of the slimy things that made me hate egg whites. But Mrs. Morris cooked breakfast before waking Jeffrey and me, and walking into the kitchen, I was horrified to see two eggs, sunny side up, sprawled across our plates, adorned by two strips of bacon and a piece of toast, looking up like two dull, dim-witted, malevolent eyes.

This was in the time when people were more concerned with gasoline prices, which had risen to nearly a dollar a gallon, than cholesterol. Eggs were a staple of breakfast, and my mother repeatedly tried to encourage them on me. My cousin Timmy devoured them every morning, even liked them scrambled on sandwiches with ketchup, and, as a result, became the model child. The country was so easily brainwashed, most parents seemed to believe failing to eat them would do irreparable harm to your physical development.

But, as I asked my mother, how can they help you if they end up in the swirling waters of the toilet?

Now, of course, my abhorrence of eggs has been vindicated, a development my mother jokes is a sign of destiny for me in the field of science. On this day, however, they were not so easily dismissed.

Adults don't often ask twelve-year-olds. They assume and insist, making polite refusals difficult. A more immature, self-centered child or mature, self-possessed one could have avoided the eggs that day. But I was somewhere in between, as it seems I have been all my life, and knew the best I could hope for was to avoid one of the eggs.

Of course, Jeffrey was no help. He dug into them as if he lived in a refugee camp. I attacked the egg carefully, combining the yolk and white, and marshalling the toast and bacon to cover the taste and feel of the whites. However, my efforts did not prevent the activation of the warning saliva, and sweat literally appeared on my forehead.

At one point, to my horror, a piece of white remained in my mouth alone. I got it down, feeling as if everything were about to come right back up. But the embarrassment of vomiting in the Morris kitchen was a greater force that day, and I kept it down. I begged off the other egg, claiming I was still too full from last night's wonderful dinner, and drank another glass and a half of orange juice to kill the slimy taste.

Tulsa is about 140 miles northeast of Otto. Because of the forced Indian removals, the whites' aggressive and haphazard settlement patterns, and the land's extreme diversity, Oklahoma is a place whose inhabitants feel unity only in small geographical pockets. In a sense, it is really four states linked by the sprawling capitol of Oklahoma City in the middle. Of the four, Tulsans consider their city the cultural center of Oklahoma, at least for those who seek refined Anglo-American culture, but it doesn't have much competition. Most Oklahomans look down on the place because of its large size and the lack of success of Tulsa University's football team.

The exhibit took place at the Philbrook Museum in central Tulsa. I had never been to Tulsa before. We went up the Indian Nation turnpike until we reached the city, then took Highway 44 to Peoria Avenue. I don't remember the particular focus of the exhibit aside from its concern with Egyptian culture. I'm sure it wasn't an enormously expensive, elaborate display--Oklahomans go to Dallas for that. But Jeffrey and I enjoyed it, amazed by the age and particularity of the assorted objects.

We saw small items of jewelry and dress, paintings and tapestries depicting Egyptian myths, and replicas of mummies and tombs. But the most memorable item for us was a miniature replica of the Great Pyramid of Khufu. Placed on a large table in the center of one room, the detailed

replica was surrounded by plexiglass, to ward off children, and placards providing information about dates and various contemporary construction theories.

We were astonished to discover it was over 400 feet tall and built with over one million limestone blocks weighing a couple of tons each. Despite its enormous size--large enough to hold half a dozen of the grandest European cathedrals--the pyramid's design contained such precision, according to one placard, that the errors in its foundation "could be covered by placing one's thumb on them."

But it was the construction and design of the replica that most fascinated Jeffrey and me. "Think what everyone would say if we walked into class with something like this," Jeffrey said. The replica was so flawless and realistic, even his disbelief was suspended. It looked like an easy thing to make. But we soon realized the difficulty of such a project when we discovered we couldn't even figure out the replica's material. It looked like hard plastic, but we had no idea how they cut and shaped it with such precision.

Before we left the piece for good, Jeffrey, out of frustrated curiosity, waited until no one was watching and, reaching over the plexiglass, touched it.

"What is it?" I asked as we were heading into the next room.

"I don't know," he said dejectedly. Meeting a project with which he couldn't compete humbled him, in the same way,

I realized later, that my friend Sam Rushing was humbled by school in the first grade. It took Jeffrey six years to encounter the frustration Sam felt in his first nine weeks of school, and Jeffrey only experienced it because he had enough knowledge, awareness, and naivety to think he could compete with professionals.

And that was it--the exhibit. Our tour was both interesting and a waste of time, as such events are for amateurs who cannot confidently evaluate their impressions. We were glad we came, but would remember little of the exhibit in a month's time, even though for me the event was something of a cultural awakening.

To ensure the trip held some lasting value, Mrs. Morris bought Jeffrey a calendar depicting Egyptian scenes. She couldn't help glance down at me after she received her change, and I couldn't help look up even though I didn't want a souvenir. But the brief exchange produced an uneasiness between us that, unexpectedly, was about to become worse.

Our plan called for a refueling, then a quick lunch--Mrs. Morris's treat. Since we left Otto so early that morning, we would be returning before dark, around four o'clock. This brightened my mood. Even though I wouldn't do anything but watch television, having a sliver of time at the end gave the day greater value in my estimation. The exhibit was not worthy of an entire Saturday; it could

fulfill a half-day at best. For me, our trip fell somewhere in between and could be remembered as a partial success and a partial failure.

The weather was overcast and gusty when we emerged from the museum. The sky did not look heavy or dark enough for a violent storm, but the mixture of hot and cold air produced the feel that often preceded a tornado.

Jeffrey and I were both tired and reflective. We sat in the back seat, slumping and relaxed, instead of the front as we had on the eager trip up. Jeffrey slowly turned the months of his calendar. I looked out the window, letting my mind roll with the passing images, when I was surprised to see an old black man walking on the sidewalk.

I was so startled I noticed nearly every detail about him at a second's glance. He had on a tattered gray and black fedora, and a brown corduroy coat too warm for the temperature. His brown shoes were thin-soled and had whitecaps of wear at the toes. In his right hand, he carried a black and gold plastic athletic bag with Tulsa Washington Hornets printed on one side. And he was talking to himself.

I knew there were blacks in Tulsa, and wondered where they had been. This man was the first I had seen all day. Then a moment later, I saw two men in their mid-twenties who looked like two guys off Soul Train. Black men who looked

like this lived in Otto, but because of their small numbers, didn't go to the same fashion extremes. These two had big hair and platform heels. Because they were popular at the time, I had seen big Afros. Several young men in my neighborhood had big hair, and in less than a year, cousin Timmy would grow one that doubled the size of his head. (My hair grew down as much as out, so I never let mine get as long.)

But such monstrous heels were new to me. You couldn't help strut on the things, it seemed to me, because once you gained forward momentum slowing down would be difficult. I had only seen shoes like this on TV, worn by black snitches and hustlers on cop shows. I had also seen them during a half time report on a Pittsburgh Steeler running back named Frenchy Fuqua, who owned an immense collection of platforms, including a pair made of glass that contained a swimming goldfish in each heel.

No one I knew owned such heels, yet. And if a person did, there were no city sidewalks in Otto a black man could strut on. On our Main Street, these guys would have been quickly noticed by an Otto patrol car, and quietly ushered to a less prominent and fashionable part of town. And I guess the same is true if they had been on a different Tulsa sidewalk.

I didn't realize then, and neither did Mrs. Morris, that she lost her bearings exiting the museum's parking lot

and was driving in the wrong direction. We were going north instead of south, heading into Tulsa's black district, ironically, on Morris Avenue.

Since she was unfamiliar with Tulsa, it took Mrs. Morris a while to realize her mistake. She seemed as tired and reflective as Jeffrey and I. Aside from the three men, we didn't see a lot of people on the sidewalks, which would have tipped her off sooner. The buildings were changing, though. Small three-story brownstones began to appear, as did many abandoned store fronts.

Mrs. Morris made a few turns, thinking I guess she would find a recognizable street name. But none appeared. What did appear were more people with black skin. While I relaxed, glad to know of a place where so many lived, Mrs. Morris's nerves began to tighten.

"Jeffrey, lock your door," she said, making another turn, speaking with the same quick, direct insistence she might use if she caught him playing with a knife. Slumped in the seat, still perusing his calendar, Jeffrey had no idea where we were or why his mother was giving him such a command. "Jeffrey. Lock your door," she repeated.

"Why?"

"Because I said so!" She recognized the panic in her voice. "There's no special reason. We should always lock our doors."

"What if we go off a bridge and into a river?" he asked. I started to laugh, but feared Mrs. Morris might stop the car and beat us. She was that tense.

"There are no rivers anywhere around! Now lock your door!"

After he complied, there was a silence which intimidated me into locking mine even though I had less understanding of her reasoning at the time than Jeffrey. Then she leaned over and locked the front passenger door, unconsciously turning the steering wheel as she did and aiming the car at a vehicle parked beside the curb with a woman getting out.

"Look out!" I yelled. For a moment, I was afraid I overreacted, but soon saw I did the right thing. We would have slammed into the back of the car if I hadn't spoken.

Mrs. Morris regained control of the car, but still passed the parked car so closely we would have taken the driver's side door off if it had been fully open. As it was, the woman getting out yelled something that included, "Goddamn!" then bolted out of the car, cussing us as we drove on.

"That does it," Jeffrey said, unlocking his door.

"Jeffrey," Mrs. Morris said, spinning around, "lock that door, right now." I pushed the lock on my door down again, even though it was already locked.

We were in a mixed business and residential district. More people were visible. Jeffrey looked out the window, and the expression that surfaced on his face told me he realized where we were for the first time. He glanced at me quickly, but didn't say anything. It was clear to me he was curious; the hint of fear on his face was being transferred to him from his mother.

At the next intersection we pulled into an old, run-down U-Tote-Em convenience store. The store's dark glass front was covered with sun-faded beer posters, and at one corner, the broken white rain gutter hung like a jagged tooth. The asphalt in the parking lot was rough as rain-soaked leather, and pockmarked with small holes and ridges.

Mrs. Morris looked around before stopping the engine. "I'm going in to get directions," she said.

"Are we lost?"

"No, we're not lost. Just turned around."

"You know where we are?" Jeffrey asked me.

Mrs. Morris turned with a look of hope on her face.

"Yes, do you, Aubrey?"

"No."

She turned around, disappointed.

"I'm thirsty. Can we get something to drink?"

"We'll get something later."

"I'm hungry too. What time is it?"

There was a pause. Mrs. Morris scanned the parking lot, and squinted her eyes, as if she were trying to peer into the store. "Okay, we'll all go in. But we're only getting drinks. We'll get food later."

We opened our respective doors and stepped from the car. But soon as we did, three young black men came out of the store. One wore a broad, felt hat and a t-shirt with the word FLUID scrawled on it in black magic marker. He cocked his left wrist back as he walked. Another wore an orange and white-striped shirt that was too small, and the biggest of the three had a Fu Manchu, mirrored sunglasses, and a bald caramel-colored head that looked as clean and hard as a fist, at least to Mrs. Morris.

"Get back in," she said, and literally shoved Jeffrey in by pushing the back car door against him. I stood motionless outside the car, my door already shut, unable to comprehend the motives of her actions. Thinking we were all in, she started the car and thrust the transmission into reverse. She quickly backed out, failing to see me until she was moving forward toward the street.

"What the hell this?" I heard one man say.

"Aubrey!" she said, eyes wide, speaking over her half-cracked window. "Get back in the car! I changed my mind. This store doesn't have what I want."

I didn't move. I wasn't intentionally defying her. I just didn't know what she was doing. I felt like I had been

suddenly dropped into a weird black and white science fiction movie, and any second expected to see Godzilla appear behind the store, breathing fire.

"Aubrey, get in the car," she said again, but the car was rolling toward the street. I didn't move, and when the car's front bumper reached the street's edge, she hesitated, then pulled out of the parking lot.

"There went your ride, Julio."

I turned and faced the men with the bravery you expect from movie characters. Normally, their presence would have intimidated me, but this experience was too bizarre to seem real, so I felt no fear. "My name's not Julio!" I shouted.

"Look like it either Julio or Oreo," another said.

"Maybe it Oreo, and she just finding out her man black. Dumped the small change off to live with his own kind."

"She's not my mama. She's yours."

They laughed and slapped hands, then walked on. Standing alone in the parking lot, I didn't know what else to do except walk into the store and get directions.

Mrs. Morris showed up a few minutes later. Still baffled by her behavior, I wondered if she thought the men had held up the store. But when she walked in, holding Jeffrey's hand, I realized the cause of her fear. I didn't immediately think, Mrs. Morris, but instead, white woman.

She allowed Jeffrey and me to get a coke, as long as we hurried, while she received directions from the cashier, a

fat, middle-aged man in a brown-checked polyester shirt. I wanted to tell the man what happened, but knew this was a silly notion, even though I saw him glance at me more than once. He answered Mrs. Morris's question, then sensing our hurry, frustrated her by making change as slow as humanly possible.

Before long, we were sitting in a McDonald's off Highway 44. Mrs. Morris talked at length about the exhibit. She had been talking non-stop since the convenience store in an attempt to make the experience disappear. My mind was filled with questions, and I kept waiting for inquisitive Jeffrey to ask her about it. But he didn't say a word. Somehow, he knew not to inquire. This was one of those experiences too serious to discuss. His mother's actions told him everything he needed to know, and I knew sure as my name was Aubrey Rowe that they wouldn't say a word about it until I was a safe distance away.

As we entered Otto's city limits, I felt like I had aged significantly in one day. I could not completely articulate this new maturity, but I had a new understanding of myself and the Morrises. They were white, but not the same white of my father. And I suddenly feared most whites were like them, not him.

Mrs. Morris didn't take me home. After we arrived, she called my mother while I collected my stuff. Prior to the

trip, I wouldn't have second guessed her. Now I did. If I had been white, she would have driven me.

In the week that followed, my efforts on the project were lackluster. I finished my monument, then piddled with things. I kept thinking there was a more important experience Jeffrey and I should be discussing than our imaginary society. His enthusiasm waned, as well, and I couldn't help thinking that the weekend had changed his view of me.

To test my assumption, I conducted my first experiment: I asked him to spend the night with me Friday night. The purpose was to work on the project, which was due next Tuesday. He said he needed to ask his mother, then reported that he couldn't because they were going out of town. On Monday, I asked about the weekend, and he told me he and his father worked on the project, having forgotten the Friday night excuse.

This experiment was not good science, but it convinced me of a truth I think was reliable. The Morrisises would never think themselves racist, and would be offended of the accusation because they did not openly attack or discriminate against blacks. But their recent actions suggested differently.

Jeffrey and I presented our project, which was good enough for an A-, but disappointed expectations. One structure, a monument to the society's wisest leaders and

past triumphs, remained half-finished. Mrs. Simms was visibly surprised; the other kids pleased. They suddenly liked us better.

I quit going to the jungle gym at recess, left the world of allisaurus and sea serpents to Jeffrey Morris forever. On the next project, I teamed with Sam Rushing.

CHAPTER IX

Nationally, these were times most people look back on with anger and dismay. I was gaining awareness of national events, but their effects seemed remote. Regardless of the turbulence I witnessed on the news, homework remained my biggest concern. I could not yet see the influence national developments had on my little neighborhood, in my little town.

The national economy was struggling. Most Oklahomans were furious with OPEC, and saw a weak President Carter as a big part of the problem. His suggestion that Americans lower their thermostats did not delight them, nor did his attempts to bring peace between Israel and Egypt. Few Oklahomans drew distinctions among Arabs, and included Persians, a term few ever heard or understood, in the same broad, homogenous group. To most Oklahomans, everyone in the Middle East except the Jews were Arabs, all members of OPEC, all responsible for driving up oil prices and reducing domestic profits. The only images we saw of them on the national news were of mass protestors chanting anti-American slogans and burning American symbols. Oklahomans, including many in my neighborhood, wanted a president who would confront them, not negotiate with them.

The most prominent domestic protests I remember were staged by homosexuals, who were coming out of the national closet in mass numbers for the first time. The news showed them marching in city streets, chanting phrases like, "We're queer, We're here!" Anita Bryant, a focal point of their frustration, was hit in the face with a pie during one protest.

The black problem had apparently been solved by the Civil Rights Movement. There were few organized demonstrations that captured national attention. One television show, Good Times --which we watched regularly--explored the problems of the ghettos for several episodes before becoming a stand-up routine for Jimmy Walker. This show aired opposite Happy Days. I remember watching a first-year episode during the summer reruns, thinking this show will never catch on. Before long, it was the most popular show on TV. For a while--a long while it seemed to me--every boy in school did a Fonzie imitation.

I thought of my father and Uncle Charles a lot watching the John Amos character on Good Times. The three shared many strengths and passions. When the character died--I think he was killed in a car wreck--I thought of my father's situation, of the fights he continued to endure, of his future.

In 1975, the Jeffersons appeared, a spin-off from All in the Family. There was a mixed couple, just like my parents, on the show, but they were such goofs, especially the white father, you couldn't begin to take them or their problems seriously. Primarily, they supplied George Jefferson with joke material. I remember they did have two kids: a boy who looked white, and a black girl. There were either no mulatto actors available, or the show didn't want to show a person who actually looked mixed. The show's premise emerged from the success of Jefferson Cleaners, which allowed the family to move up to an apartment on the East Side. The East Side of what I wasn't sure, except it meant big city. In one episode, the opinionated housekeeper, looking at the successful blacks gathered in the living room, asked why no one told her that blacks had arrived.

A few blacks had arrived in Otto, but most were still waiting. The feed mill began hiring more blacks in the 70's. Once the hub of the town, the mill was no longer Otto's largest employer, but during peak seasons had a payroll of 100 or so people. For decades, the mill hired blacks as maintenance workers and loaders, hauling fifty-pound feed sacks onto the train. My grandfather worked there as a loader most of his life. In the 70's, the numbers of blacks hired for these jobs began to expand because of the increasing number of black men needing work.

A few men moved up to mixer, sorting and mixing the various grains. Once this occurred, the town began to see the mill as a black place of employment. Whites remained in the upper management positions, but many in the lower looked for other jobs.

There was a downside to this development for the black community. News about job opportunities spread to surrounding communities, and many young black men and families moved to Otto looking for work. I was only beginning to become aware of the dire poverty that afflicted blacks in my neighborhood and the state. This influx of people kept the unemployment rate high in our neighborhood, and created a large group of young men with little to do but hang out. We heard news of greater drug use and domestic violence on the south end of town. Most streets remained peaceful, but they were interrupted more frequently by cars filled with teenagers, blaring soul music. My mother narrowed my range outside the house, and became more insistent I return before dark. The only time I remember her whipping me occurred during the spring of my sixth grade year when I came in an hour after the sun went down. This was a week after a woman had been raped and beaten to death five blocks away.

In that same spring--my last year at Franklin--the principal announced the hiring of a black woman to replace the departing white second grade teacher. Our neighborhood

was thrilled, but most of the Franklin district was not. Some protests were expressed at the next school board meeting. The protestors were not racist, they explained. But they feared such a hiring would open a valve, as one man put it, to the south side. Allowing more blacks in would allow the problems of violence, poverty and drug abuse to funnel into the school as well. They would not give us jobs, yet blamed us for the problems spawned by poverty and unemployment.

Everyone knew the problems of the all-black Jefferson school, which was overcrowded and underfunded. To Franklin's white parents, an increased number of blacks would turn Franklin into another Jefferson. Hiring a black teacher, to them, was a sign of this imminent development.

They left the meeting disappointed. The school board was sympathetic, but stood by the decision, claiming they had no choice. They blamed federal mandates which insisted on black faculty presence where there were black students. Then they dropped another bombshell. Because of the severe overcrowding at Jefferson, which had more students and received less funding than any elementary school in town, the board was expanding Franklin's district by three blocks to the south. That spring and summer, more white families moved out of the Franklin district than in 1969 when the first black students were admitted. By this time, there were more new white housing developments to accommodate

them. Since 1969, in addition to Brookhaven, neighborhoods called Northridge, Oak Manor, and Lakewood had been constructed.

That spring another development occurred that shaped my life on a personal level more seriously than any of the other community happenings. My father applied for a loan. Always out of step with the times--at least the white times--he picked this spring to ask local banks for funding to begin his own hardware and fix-it store. He claimed more people would be doing their own repairs to save money, and needed assistance the big lumber stores wouldn't provide.

We could take this risk because we were doing better financially than at any time in my life. My mother had been working as a checker at Safeway for about two years, making a union wage. She would not quit that job until my father showed the store would make a profit. He had dreamed up other less-ambitious schemes before that hadn't panned out.

As it turned out, my father's vision was accurate. With money tighter, more people, especially middle class, began doing their own minor plumbing repairs, carpentry, and even small remodeling jobs to avoid labor costs. But his store did not capitalize on that vision. Although they never asked, I'm sure the bankers assumed my mother would work at the store. To survive in this business, he had to attract white customers, and the only empty buildings were

on or near Main Street, still the major business street in town. Not one of the businesses was black-owned, and at a time when the city was feeling the push of black encroachment, the last thing the bankers wanted was to infuriate their clients by providing a mixed couple the money to become a visible presence. They all said no.

After the last bank's refusal, my father took his frustration out on the kitchen. This was the first time I saw him really drunk and angry. My mother sympathized with his frustration but could not understand his disappointment. She tried to warn him before he approached the banks. His reaction, she told me later, showed the difficulty white men had in understanding the effects of racism. He had lived in the black community for nearly a decade, yet was still infuriated that his idea could be denied. From his point of view, all you needed was an idea and determination. He could not accept the existence of forces that could completely stifle those dreams with a simple refusal. Neither my mother nor I felt threatened that night, but I bet he knocked the kitchen table over fifteen times.

My father also began to feel greater tension within the black community as well. Married to a black woman, he was used to remarks from whites, but we had become such a known presence in our neighborhood we were accustomed to a quiet acceptance from the people on the south side.

But as the number of people increased on our side of town, that changed. We started to get some stares from newcomers when we were in Tootie's grocery store or Jackie's Barbecue. Unaware my father was married to a black woman, young men taunted him for being in Black Town.

One Saturday, when my father and I were in Al Burley's, the south side barber, four teenage boys came in. My father enjoyed going to Burley's, and was such a fixture the good-natured ribbing about his thin hair rarely occurred now. "Crop it off, maybe it'll come back with some weight," was about all he heard when he sat in Al's chair.

But these four guys didn't know my father; in fact, they didn't know the other men in the shop either. They muttered to themselves, glancing at my father, then showed they weren't here for haircuts. They talked, loudly, about insults they received from whites, about white police and white politicians, about what a white man could expect if found on the south side after dark.

No one said a word to them because they were supposedly talking among themselves. One of them, who had a big Afro with a Black Power pick wedged near his crown and was wearing a loose, unbuttoned rose-colored satin shirt, said, "Say, blood, why don't ya let me borrow them shears. Shave that white neck."

Al turned off the shears. "You boys get out."

"For what? You cuttin' a whitey's hair. Let's go down on Main, see if they cut our hair in their shops."

"I 'spect they would if you didn't go down there talking noise to the owner."

"Shiiit. No wonder we in the shape we in, brothers," he said to his friends. "Black man still kissing white ass."

"This man's been trading with me for over five years," Al said harshly. "You boys get yourself a track record like that, you'll get more respect."

"What the fuck's a whitey doing down here, anyway? First one I seen in nigger town since I been in this rathole town. He own the place? He probably take half the money home at night." He slapped hands with another guy.

"Out!" Al said, walking toward them.

"All right," the leader said. "Trim my own fucking 'fro. Whitey, you better not be on the street after dark. These old slaves bow down to you, but we don't step aside. Payback's a motherfucker, you dig?"

Ripping the sheet from his neck, my father emerged from the chair, his size, disguised before, now scaring the boys out the door. But when they were gone, no one felt safe or victorious. "Don't fret, Lewis," one man said to my father. "These young punks don't want to get along with no one. If you wasn't here, they'd be talking trash to us."

The two other men in the shop nodded in agreement, but glanced back at the seats the boys occupied, as if some truth in their words remained, lingering in the air with the smell of the lotions.

My father and Uncle Charles always had a strained relationship. It took Uncle Charles longer than anyone in the family to accept the marriage, even though he was an outsider himself, having married my mother's sister. In some ways, he was an integrated black man. As overseer of the city's youth program, which included coordinating little league baseball, he was the highest-ranking black man in the city's Parks and Recreation department, working more with white adults than black, with black kids than white. Everyone considered him a fine role model, especially whites who thought such a presence was all the black world needed to improve its financial standing.

But Uncle Charles was wise to white ways, to the quiet but insistent limitations they desired for the black community, to the disparity between their attitudes and acts. He tried to create a persona that would speak out against these restrictions, but he showed such frustration at home he must have choked on his tongue a lot at work.

Ironically, he shared so many similarities with my father it was often hard for them not to get along. They were both big men with control of themselves, disciplined enough to provide for their families, experienced enough to

know the struggles of the working man. Often, they shared a story or joke that shook the house with laughter. They both loved the Dallas Cowboys, and spent Sunday afternoons sizing up the game beforehand, then analyzing it afterwards. When Dallas lost the '75 Super Bowl to Pittsburgh, you would have thought a death occurred in the family.

But since both men were direct and outspoken, minor disagreements were common, and a current of tension could be felt whenever they were together. At times, these disagreements built needlessly into heated arguments.

Watching the two most powerful forces in my world engage in such serious conflict frightened me more than anything I ever experienced or witnessed on television. It is difficult to describe the effect an angry father can have on you. His disputes with Charles left a deeper impression than any of my own fights. Seeing the man who controls you lose control of himself embeds that act in you, not just in your brain but in your body as well. And when you get into a conflict, that man emerges. I now know if my father and Uncle Charles had not restrained themselves as much as they did, I would be a different person. It's that simple.

But neither of them exercised enough restraint on many occasions. My father's nigger tirade--his method of persuading the family to stop using the word--is a good example. That night, Charles warned my father if he said the word again, he would spend the night in a hospital bed.

Our house got so quiet you could hear the sounds of television coming from the house next door. I didn't think the walls could withstand the tension. It seemed so great to my young mind I thought they might explode. And if my father and Charles did begin to fight, the entire neighborhood seemed too small to contain it.

My father realized he had taken it too far, but was not in the habit of accepting such threats. He and Charles glared at one another long enough to paralyze everyone in the house, including my grandparents, but also long enough to slowly dispel their anger.

Most serious disagreements stopped at this point, at the threat of the fight. Both men had enough self-control to realize violence between them could produce irreparable damage. But this didn't reduce the potential for conflict.

All in the Family was another show we watched regularly. Or at least my father did. My mother didn't like it, but tolerated it. At times, they argued about how well the show revealed Archie's shortcomings. The program depicted him as a narrow-minded bigot, according to my father, but Archie remained the show's most sympathetic character from my mother's point of view. He was the central figure whose views had to be placated, week after week. Whites tolerated him because he didn't threaten them. Create a show with a black Archie and let's see the response, she said.

Listening to them, it was clear to me my father understood her point of view. His defense was often weak, and at times, he wouldn't respond. As a result, I didn't understand why he watched the show. It was a comedy, but he didn't laugh much. Most of the time, he muttered to himself.

I now know he watched the show because of the similarity between the Bunkers and his family. His father, Harold Rowe, was a sheet metal worker until the late 1950's when he went into the heating and air conditioning business. He became the town's Carrier dealer, serving a dependable middle-class clientele. That's all I knew about him at this point in my life. I had never seen him or his wife, Martha Rowe, and never expected to. I knew my father's decision to marry a black woman appalled them. My father did not long for a renewed relationship with his family, nor think he made a mistake marrying a black woman. But he could not completely sever himself from his past either. He could no more turn away from Archie Bunker than he could deny the presence of his own father. He watched All in the Family each week hoping it would solve the riddle of the two men. But it never did.

Uncle Charles hated the show and Archie Bunker. As a result, we left their place or saw them out of ours well before eight o'clock Sunday nights.

One night, however, we did not. I think we celebrated my grandmother's birthday that afternoon, and the party ran into the early evening. Most people were gone by eight o'clock, but my mother was helping Aunt Tamra clean the kitchen. I walked into the house for a drink of water. My cousins were playing in the yard. It was summer, and we still had an hour's daylight. Entering the front room, I saw my father sitting alone, watching the television as the show's opening song and credits played.

I stopped, looked at him, then toward the kitchen. I felt as if I caught him doing something illegal. I waited for him to realize where we were and turn the channel, but he didn't move. Slumped in the chair, he looked tired. He may have been sitting there when the show came on, and decided he would let someone else turn the channel.

But it was hard to know. This night occurred after he was denied the loan. Since, he had not been a pleasant man. The denial sent him into a funk. One door of his life had been abruptly closed. The decision made him resent the bankers and the town, and romanticize the life this opened door would have led to. He seemed to be mourning the loss of a once-promising opportunity, and indulging smaller desires to compensate. He drank more, quit helping around the house, and was as abrupt as the bankers in conversation.

"Well, well. Look who we watching." It was Uncle Charles. He and my father had been verbally jabbing one another all afternoon, without the balm of good humor. Charles spoke as if he had just caught his children smoking cigarettes, and I tensed, hoping this might be one show that didn't deal with race but instead focused on Edith's gall bladder problem or some other less controversial issue.

"Watch what you want, Charles," my father said, sitting up. "The TV was on this channel."

"No, no. Don't want to miss it. Angela told me it's your favorite." My father looked at Charles with surprise. "Aubrey, sit down," Charles continued. "Know you watch it every week too."

"Aubrey, do what you want."

The show began. As soon as Edith and Archie appeared, Uncle Charles said, "Edith! Quit yakking with them niggers next door and bring me a beer. Which one you telling Aubrey to be, Lewis? Archie or the Meathead? Or maybe Lionel, the good nigger who takes the crazy honkey in stride."

"It's not a mirror, Charles, it's a TV show. Find yourself in it if you like. Better yet, turn the damn thing off. It's your house."

"I ain't talking about me. I'm talking about you. I would already turned the knob. You didn't because you must want to watch it. You watch this at home, don't you, Aubrey?"

"Leave him out of it."

"What does your mother do while you watch it? Or does she just stay in the kitchen with Louise and the other Jeffersons."

I was surprised my father remained seated. This was more than I thought he would take. His tone sounded guilty, but he didn't know how to react. Charles had him cornered. Starting a fight looked like an overreaction, taking it quietly like an underreaction. Either way, Charles appeared to be right, to have found a buried nerve of truth. The situation called for a discriminate, judicious response, the type of which my father never mastered.

So they did the worst thing they could do under the circumstances. They sat, and watched the show.

This episode wasn't about Edith's gall bladder. It was about her going to work for the Jeffersons. Archie's union was on strike, and money was tight. He didn't want her to work for anyone. When she told him she was taking a clerking job at the Jefferson's cleaning store, he went nuts. Had she lost her mind? Working for coloreds? Think of the neighbors, Edith, the neighbors!

It felt like the air was being sucked from the room in thin streams at the corners. I was conscious of the noise and movement breathing required. Uncle Charles didn't say a word for a while, as if the show were making his point. Neither did my father, as if there were no point to make.

Finally, during a commercial, Charles said, "Aubrey, what do you think about this show?"

"It's okay, I guess," I said, trying to smile the tension away.

"What would you say its view of the black man is? Of the coloreds?"

"That's enough," my father said.

"I'm just asking what he thinks. You do allow the boy to think."

"But not be interrogated."

"I think--" I blurted out before I realized I didn't know what I thought. I wanted to be peacemaker, my words bringing these two opposing forces to reconciliation. Looking back, I sometimes wonder why I wasn't more inclined toward the ministry or counseling, then I realize it was because every time I made such a grand gesture I failed.

"Yes?" Uncle Charles inquired.

"Archie's a moron, but they make fun of him, but it doesn't do any good, so they have to put up with him some more, but he's not completely a bad guy, he just has some bad ideas, but. . . so. I mean. That's what I think."

There was a pause before Charles burst into laughter. "That's about as much sense as Archie makes. Aubrey, this show is on so whites can relieve their guilt."

"Thank you, Professor Parks and Recreation." My father's tone suggested he was through underreacting. "The

show doesn't endorse Archie's views. Having a bigot on the show doesn't mean the show is racist."

"I know it don't think it's racist. That's the problem. They make fun of Archie, but he's still the one running things at the end of every show. And next week he's back, saying and doing the same things. And whites sit there, thinking glad I ain't him, but he sure funny."

"At least it's dealing with racism. How many shows do that? You can't very well examine the problem without having a racist on the show."

"But what are they doing with him? He comes on, talks about the niggers, the rest shake their heads, and that's it. How is that dealing with racism?"

"He never uses the word niggers." For some reason, my father glanced at me when he said this.

"I wish he would. Then you'd know he was a racist, and the show would have to do something with him. Either change him or admit he, and all the whities like him, ain't never gonna change. But they just string it out like whites have done with racism all along, saying, 'Yes, he's racist, but he isn't violent. And he's got so many other good qualities.'" My father didn't say anything. He looked like he was suddenly occupied by a new thought. "Think if they had a black man on TV like Archie. How long you think it would last? One show. That's how long. One goddamn show. The whole country would be in an uproar over the nigger

racist. How can we improve race relations with this kind of attitude? Hell, even Carter and those other fools in Washington would speak out. But Archie. He's okay. He ain't so bad to whites cause he's white. And you sitting there watching it, thinking you ain't got a racist thought in your head."

Charles waited for a response he never received, so he kept going until he got one. When he did, I knew things would turn ugly. I could feel it with terrible certainty, the way the saliva in your mouth tells you you're going to throw up.

"So he watches All in the Family, but he married a black woman. Those two don't mix too well. What was it, Lewis? You wanted to see what a black woman was like, and couldn't stop? Wanted to rebel from your lily-white, middle-class family and show the world you weren't like the rest. Wonder when you're going to wake up and long for home. I know where your folks live. Driven by their house. Nice place. How much longer before you start missing that money? Before you and Archie make up?"

"Once a nigger, always a nigger, huh, Charles?"

"Your wife's a nigger."

"My wife is not a nigger. But you sure as hell are."

"So it all finally coming out, ain't it, Archie? How long you been thinking that but not saying it?"

"I guess it is, Black Elmo. Coming out the only way you'll see it. Angela!" he said, standing. "Aubrey and I are walking home!"

"Taking him home, so ya'll can watch Archie in peace? Why don't you leave him with his mother?"

"Come on, Aubrey."

We were all standing now.

"That black won't come off him, no matter how hard you scrub."

My father stopped, released my hand, and faced Charles. "Neither will the white, no matter how much noise you make."

"He's a black man. One drop of nigger blood is all it takes. Time for him to live like one."

"Time for you to shut up."

"You talking tough. You going home to put on the white hood?"

My father swung, but Charles blocked it. Then they went at it. Even though I knew it was coming, I couldn't believe it was happening.

It was worse than any dream.

I didn't say a word. Their arms were swinging in a frenzied, machine-like rhythm, one after the other, some landing I could tell not from sight but from that awful, flat, smacking sound that a fist makes on flesh.

All I wanted to do was hit something. I jumped onto them and was thrown back.

"What the hell, you crazy!" My mother and Aunt Tamra ran into the room. Mother put her arms between them, seemed to separate them for a second. Then I saw and heard Charles's right fist miss my father's withdrawing head and smash into my mother's face.

She fell to the floor, landing with a hard thud. The men stopped and looked down. Tamra dropped to her knees, bent to my mother's face.

I never felt such anger. If I had a gun, I would have shot everyone I saw. I turned over a chair, and the act released a craziness of destruction in me. I knocked over a lamp, picked up the table, looked at the television, and despite the riot in my mind, heard as clearly as my mother's voice reading to me at night, Archie tell Edith, "Now you pick up that phone, and you tell George Jefferson, 'No, no, no!'"

I hurled the table at the set, then went after it, knocking it over, as if I could pull Archie from the thing. Timmy raced in, screen door banging behind him.

"What happened?" he asked excitedly. I jumped on him, taking him easily to the floor, the feeling of physical power exciting me even more, and began hitting him as he lay beneath me.

Two hands pulled me off and restrained me. I saw Timmy get up with my father's aid, and felt whatever had risen within me begin to quickly descend. Timmy surged toward me,

but was held in my father's arms. My father spoke to him in low words I could not hear. I cowered in fear, and turned for help to Charles, clinging to his chest, wanting to cry but feeling no tears.

"Cool down, Aubrey," he said, patting my back. His face, normally strong with tension, had lost all determination. He was looking at my mother, whom Tamra was holding up. She was conscious, but looked dizzy, her head listing from side to side. Suddenly, it tilted back for a moment, then dropped forward as vomit rushed over her body.

CHAPTER X

The next morning the house was as quiet as if our finances had been declared bankrupt. I was the only one up, sitting in the living room watching TV, the volume low. I saw my father walk into the kitchen, fill a glass with water, return to his bedroom. He did not acknowledge me.

A knock on the front door disturbed the silence. I didn't move until I heard the knock again, and was afraid to answer it. I waited, but apparently, my father did not hear it. I peered furtively through the front window; my grandfather stood on the porch alone.

I was glad to see him.

"Anyone up in this house?" he asked after I opened the door. "I'd ask to come in 'cept I'm planning to enter whether I'm asked or not." I stood aside as he walked in. He rubbed my head, hugged my shoulders. "Must have been some kind of nonsense you witnessed last night."

I didn't know what to say, but was surprised and pleased by my grandfather's directness. Most of the time, he was a quiet, old man. That's all I knew of him. He didn't marry until he was in his mid-30's, and was over 70 before I was ten.

A short, broad-shouldered, bow-legged man with receding gray hair, he walked slowly, feet apart. Because of his

physical limitations, I was surprised, in the way most American kids are, to discover an old person could have interesting thoughts, and I regret he did not live longer.

He was as direct as a gas flame. "Get used to it, Aubrey. You won't believe the foolishness you'll see in your lifetime. Appears your father and Uncle Charles are determined to do more than most. Your father here?" I nodded. "Would you get him, please? And your mother, if she's able."

Hearing voices, my father entered the room. The look of defiance on his face made me feel a surge of hatred for him I'd never felt before. "Aubrey, go to your room," he said.

"Let him stay," grandfather replied. "You let him watch you fight, you ought to let him watch you talk."

My father hesitated, surprised by his bluntness. "Last night was my fault, I guess."

"Was your fault. Soon as Charles started mouthing you should have told him what you thought, then come straight home."

"Never that easy, Preston. You know that. Doubt you ran from many fights when you were younger."

"Avoiding them and running from them ain't the same thing. I avoided every fight I could. Case you haven't noticed, there's plenty of crazy people in this town. No

shortage of folks wanting to fight. You and Charles make two of them."

"You gotta fight when the fight's brought to you. But I don't expect you to take my side."

"And I didn't expect my daughter to marry a white man." He paused a moment. "I didn't like it, you know that. But I was wrong. You're part of the family, and so is your son. And because of you and Charles, my grandchildren learning to fight." He paused again, as if he suddenly felt the accumulated weight of his life's frustration and fatigue.

"You gotta fight at times, ain't no denying that. The problem is deciding the time. You fight over anything, it ain't got no meaning. You and Charles both thinking you ain't to blame, but you're both so ready to make a fist, you'll swing at the air if it offends you. Fighting over a TV show! How much pride you take in that?"

"Charles pressed it," my father said. "I'll know that til I go to my grave. I don't care what he says."

"Ain't saying he didn't. Only you two and Aubrey know what happened, and it ain't gonna do no good to decide who started it. But ask yourself if it was a cause worth fighting for, in front of your own child. Think of it. That night will tell Aubrey how to act more than all the words you speak in your lifetime." He put his thin, shaky hand on my shoulder. I looked at it. The brown skin was drawn and cracked, blue veins bulging. "Aubrey's gonna have

enough trouble as it is. You don't show him another way to deal with it, he's gonna have a chance to fight every day of his life. Be a long line of whites want to take him down, longer than for blacks, cause he's half-white. They'll want to show him he belongs to the black side."

"It's not our fault idiots base everything they know on skin color."

"It ain't no secret. You knew that before you had the boy. I may offend you with what I'm about to say, but the way things are going, I feel I have to. You've been in our neighborhood for some time, but because you're white, I don't think you've seen it all yet. I know whites do they're share of killing one another, but the black man's got more reason to fight. He gets mad at the white man every day of his life, and thinks of fighting him. And if he does, he ends up dead or in jail. So many don't fight, and come back home mad as hell, and the first trouble they have with the black man the fight is on. In that case, he may end up dead, but he likely won't go to jail. It's just a nigger fighting another nigger. There been two men stabbed this month up at Red Hill. Black men cutting black men because they can't cut the white man. The white man don't have that. He don't think about blacks unless we make enough noise to get his attention, or show up where he don't want us." He paused, looked right at me. "Aubrey's both, so he's gonna feel anger from both sides. If you don't

prepare him, he's gonna be in more fights than Joe Frazier by the time he's eighteen. But in his fights, there ain't gonna be no rules."

Just then, my mother walked into the room. Her lower lip was purple and swollen. It looked like a piece of spoiled fruit. "We not just teaching him to fight, Daddy," she mumbled. She could barely talk.

"My sweet girl," he said, walking toward her. He made her look at him, so he could examine her wound. Then he looked at me. "This is what you always get with fighting. So you better be sure the cause is worth it. Otherwise, all you're doing is bringing blood."

"See Charles this morning?" she asked.

"Yeah, I've seen Charles. He's as stubborn as your husband. Said he ain't no Martin Luther King. I said, 'Damn right, you ain't. Martin Luther never spilled his own family's blood.' He said peace might have worked in the past, but niggers had to stand up for themselves now, to show they're equal. I asked him who he was equal to, fighting over a TV show. He's seen some things in his life, but he ain't never seen a lynching like my daddy did. Never seen a nigger beat up for sport in broad daylight like I have, or drug from a car for fun. I know things still ain't right, I know they ain't fair. But he's making more money in a year than me and my daddy did in our lifetimes. And he thinks he's got cause to fight over a TV show. Well, I told

him he hurts my daughter again, either of them, for any reason, he's gonna have fighting to do. With me. That goes for you too, Lewis."

He started toward the door. "I had more reason to fight than either of you. I hauled grain sacks my whole life with white folks thinking I should be happy and content I had a job. I seen folks so poor all they ever had to eat was commodities the government gave 'em. Beans and rice, their kids eating sandwiches made of Spam and corn pone. Make a man so ashamed he want to drink or fight so he wouldn't have to think about it. Drove most black men I knew away. Would have made me run too, but every day I came home I looked into the faces of those two little girls, and said I'm staying til I die. They'll have to drag me away. I'll haul feed sacks til my feet meet my knees, but I'm going to see these two beautiful girls grown, hoping they get a chance we didn't. Then I'd read about blacks in Harlem and Chicago, about some changes occurring in places far away from here. Then I'd read things we're getting worse, then time would pass and they'd get better. And I knew my part was to keep my girls fed and protected. Hell, I didn't have no choice. I kept my hands from making fists as white men called me nigger, and we had to eat beans and cornbread three times a week to make my wages provide. And I read about brave men taking beatings for peaceful protests, and Medgar Evers shot, and Malcolm X shot, and

Martin Luther King shot, and felt the despair of all my people. But I saw things get better. About as slowly as I walk, but they got better.

I'm an old man now, and old men think they need to make speeches to show they learned something. Maybe I haven't learned, but I've seen the past, and know enough to say looking at you two, a white and black couple, I'm seeing the future. It bothered me for so long I'm ashamed to admit how much it ate me up. Then one day after you were gone to Kansas City I saw an Indian man and a white woman walking down Main. It may have bothered some people, but they weren't stopping them. And it hit me this whole country's filled with mixed breeds. Irish marrying German, English marrying Mexican. I was a mix too, an African mix, I just didn't know what kind. The next day I felt like I woke up in a new world. Strange at first, but I liked it. Felt more peaceful in a way. I haven't had trouble with your marriage ever since. It looks different from other marriages cause the colors are so different. But that was it. My eyes had lied to me again. You mixed your blood, just like I had with my wife. And now you're fighting over shades of color, and I bet you've got one mixed up boy as a result."

He turned to me. "I've probably confused things more than helped. You're wondering why this old man never said nothing for years, then starts making speeches. Well, I

been letting it build," he said, winking. "I couldn't stand by quietly when my family is fighting. I know you understand that, and I know you're glad to hear somebody talk about it." He headed for the door. "That's all I got. We're having everyone to our house for Sunday dinner. You're all welcome."

His words were the most passionate and truthful I ever heard, but I saw truth didn't always change things. No one showed, except my mother and me. Neither Uncle Charles nor my father wanted to see the other until they received an apology. They also didn't want their families to attend, but my mother claimed this silly dispute would not prevent her from seeing her family. I think she took Charles's side because she didn't care for All in the Family either, and believed my father could have easily resolved the situation by turning off the set.

Oddly enough, my grandmother, who always showed greater affection toward Tamra's family than ours and hadn't adjusted well to the presence of a white son-in-law, seemed to sympathize with my father. She was proud of her color, but suspicious of Charles, and anyone who professed Black Power views, because she saw such overt pride as arrogance. A deeply religious person who cried often at church, her religious views required such humility and repentance she could not accept the kind of blatant assertions of self-pride professed by many black men. "Talk to Lewis, Angela,"

she said. "You know how stubborn Charles is. He won't give in til he's dead."

She admitted later she didn't see anything wrong with the show, and often watched it. Archie reminded her of her father, she said, and it was clear the Jeffersons were superior in every way to the Bunkers. She wished one of her daughters had married a boy as good-looking as Lionel Jefferson.

My grandfather maintained both were equally at fault, and was visibly distressed that neither man would offer an apology, in the name of peace. I saw such wisdom in him I didn't pay much attention to Charles or my father for some time. I was amazed how strong he seemed because he wanted to make peace, and how weak they seemed because they remained divided by a fight.

We played checkers, but it was clear his mind was not on the game. "Things have to get worse before they get better," he mumbled, more to himself than me. "I've known this all my life. Guess I thought knowing it, I could stop it, could make things better without them getting worse. But knowing it don't change things. Just makes you able to see what's coming, even when it ain't pleasant or pretty. That right there is the despair of old age. You sure you want that move, Aubrey? Look at the board again."

CHAPTER XI

My grandfather was right; things did get worse before they got better. Neither my father nor Uncle Charles would offer an apology until they received one first. My mother and Aunt Tamra continued to talk on the phone, but the conflict put a strain on their relationship. We stopped going to their house, and I stayed inside after school, so I wouldn't come into contact with Timmy. I was afraid of him, not because of any threat he made but because I assumed since our fathers were fighting we would too.

I didn't know what I was going to do when the school year ended. Normally, I spent summer days at Aunt Tamra's, but I didn't know if that was the plan this year or not, and I didn't ask.

Then one day, a week before the end of school, my father came in and dropped a bombshell: he wanted to move. He found a house for sale in the country. It was not as nice as our house, but the price was cheap. And the place would be ours. Even the banks couldn't stop us; the owner was so desperate to sell he was willing to carry the note. All we had to do was make the down payment.

My mother had mixed feelings about his idea. She did not want to leave the neighborhood, but she did want to own a house and knew no matter the condition of this country

place my father had the skills to repair it. By this point, we probably could have gotten a loan for a similar house in Black Town, but it was obvious my father wanted distance from all human communities, black and white.

My mother actually sympathized with this desire. In the fall I would enter junior high, and none of us were sure of the reaction I would receive. She feared I would be shunned by everyone, and thought isolating ourselves geographically might offer all of us a peaceful place of escape. We weren't there long before she changed her mind.

The house was on five rugged acres, ten miles west of town. You made a series of turns on section roads after you left the highway to reach it. We no longer had an address, but a post office box number.

The land was good for cattle and little else. Our plot was big enough to feed a few head, but my father wanted to work on the house before he took on anything else. For him, the land could have been composed of Arabian sand and been as valuable. It gave him space.

The old frame house needed some work. It had a sagging front porch, patchy roof, and peeling paint. The place stood much closer to the road than most country homes, which added to the impression that it had been built in a hurry. The simple, one-gabled, gray-shingled roof bore black streaks of wear. At one corner, the porch's wood had rotted

completely away, leaving a dark, jagged hole. Seeing that and hearing the porch groan after your first step lightened your next one considerably. The screen door, screenless at the top half, did not fall back into the door frame after releasing it, but sagged and leaned at the spot where your hand let go.

This house made our former place look like an admirable middle-class home. I enjoyed the new house for a few days, believing our move to be something of a brief adventure. Then I realized we would not be going back, and the sense of adventure slipped from my head the way wind slipped through the cracks in our new house.

Inside, the place was dusty and drafty. No matter how long my mother swept the dirt from the floors, dust seemed to float down from the walls and ceiling. I could hear the wind, strong gusts of which seemed to shake the shoulders of the house, zip into the rooms in long, whistling streams through the loose wooden window frames.

I quickly discovered such a rugged, casual house held a mixed attraction. It was easy to relax because in this place it didn't seem to matter whether you were a slob or not. The house required clutter. The spotty wooden floor seemed to absorb spills; stains seemed to add color.

But even the simplest of jobs required more work than necessary, a reality my father soon recognized but had trouble accepting. I thought twice before opening one of

the numerous windows, and once open, the late spring breeze had to be cold to make you think of closing one. All windows--every single one, I checked--would stick in the frame before being fully open. With effort, you could work the thing up, bumping one side, then the other with the base of your palm, waiting for the time that never came when the window would break its hold and shoot up with greased efficiency.

There were two bedrooms, a bath--no shower, just a deep tub, a sink, a small cabinet, and a gas heater--a kitchen and a living room. The rooms were small, cramped and cool; my father loved them all.

"Isn't this great," he asked periodically as we moved in. "Finally have a place of our own. Don't have to worry about the landlord or neighbors."

He was right on both counts, especially the neighbors, or so it seemed those first few days. The nearest house was about a mile west, a blond-brick place up on a ridge, separated from ours by a thick line of trees--blackjack, cedar and elm. My father was so convinced the intrusion of others was the source of all the world's problems, including ours, he believed, without doubt, creating distance was the only way of reducing that conflict, even if it meant occupying a place old and shaky enough to replace the old conflicts with new ones.

I remember our first night in the house. The electricity was not yet on, just one of many details my father neglected, but it was a warm night so a sheet for cover was enough. We worked hard all day, but I could tell my mother was not happy. As I lay on my mattress, the bed frame not yet up, I wondered what she was thinking.

It felt eery, this new house. It was so damn dark. The stars and Otto's weak glow were the only lights you could see. I looked out the window at the sky, at all those distant specks of light, but they did me no good. They looked like a bunch of twinkling rich kids, whose lives were calm and still.

I tried to sleep, then realized it was the silence disturbing me. Our old neighborhood was not a den of anger, but most nights, you could hear a yelling voice or a slamming door or spinning tires searching for sound. Here, I heard nothing but the wind.

My father spent the next few days laying pipe for a washing machine. No such appliance had ever occupied this home, one of the bigger details my father overlooked. My mother, who did not preview the house before its purchase but did give her consent, pointed this out to him ten minutes after we were inside.

This quickly became a time of sorrow for her, as she realized living in the country, our place of escape, really meant living apart from human community. She moved about as

if recovering from a surgery which had removed her emotional capacities. She feared instability was lying in wait, perhaps nearby in a weed-choked ditch, ready to pounce and consume our lives.

She told me years later she never had as much difficulty resisting an impulse to flee a problem as she did during the first days in our new house. Although she encountered many infuriating restrictions in her life, she had not relinquished hope for the future. Such hope allowed her to maintain grace and dignity, but she feared this move signaled the break-up of all her dreams, for herself and her family. Every night, she lay in bed, imagining a simple, quiet move in the middle of the night could start her down a new road.

I knew she was unhappy, and so did my father. He tried to compensate with enthusiastic talk. My mother was not easily influenced. She did not abandon her skepticism and join the team of Lewis Rowe, determined to settle the frontier. She didn't complain, either. She just looked at him, as he spoke with wonder about the amazing complexity to be found under a house, her dark brown eyes, capable of such warmth and light, boring holes in his exuberance.

In effect, the move not only isolated us from other people, but from ourselves as well. My mother did not make me her confidant, and together conspire against the radical

obsession of my father. She never needed a partner in that sense. She was closer to him than anyone else, and now he had violated her trust. The emotional distance she maintained frightened me more than any violent outburst could have. I feared her distance would gradually increase until one day she would be gone. And I would not be with her.

In a few days, I realized I was more strongly connected to her than my father. Fearing her disappearance, I wanted to be with her instead of my father, no matter where she went.

Such a decision made me feel more black than I ever had in my life. I know this will be hard for many people to understand. They will wonder how I could ever feel otherwise, having a black mother and grandparents, living among blacks. It is a puzzle to me as well, but that was my experience. My only explanation is that my identification with my father was strong enough to make me feel white, or at least partly white throughout most of my life. Going to a predominantly white school, looking at white teachers, also encouraged the whiteness in me--I don't know how else to say it. But this move, which separated the members of my family, separated the elements of my consciousness. My sense of self clung to the one linked with my mother.

My father didn't help matters. This move was his way of defeating his frustration with the world. Assuming his family shared his frustration, he assumed the solution

resolved our troubles too. He didn't involve me in his work because he had too much to do. He possessed little patience, and had only taught me things that mattered most. Surprisingly, though he valued mechanical skills, he taught me few of them, and to this day, I don't know where the alternator is on a car, or how to make a beveled cut. He must have known what I was discovering --I was more her son than his.

So I assisted my mother. Ironically, although I felt closer to her than before, she was acting like a different woman. Always a steady woman who distributed her emotions and energies with restraint, she now moved as if she were walking in molasses. At one point during the second day, she stopped wiping a cabinet shelf, sat down at the table, and lit a cigarette. She didn't smoke. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Look in that box for an ash tray." We only had one, which we kept for Aunt Tamra's visits. I couldn't find it. "Never mind." She flicked the ashes on the faded linoleum floor, which stopped short of the far wall, revealing the wooden flooring below.

She had a lot to do to make the house livable, but after a few days, she went back to her job, showing little concern for the state of the house. The windows had no curtains, some kitchen cabinets needed knobs, the old

refrigerator was dirty and virtually empty. Days passed, and she brought home only enough food to prepare for one night, as if we were camping out.

My father did not plan to return to work for some time. Our house payment was much lower, so we could survive a while on one income. We did not purchase any extras, and found other ways of cutting expenses. Air conditioning was the biggest luxury we relinquished. The house didn't have a window unit, and my father didn't look for one. He took great delight in our first electric bill. Although he wouldn't have known Thoreau from Adam, this place was becoming his Walden. He talked at length that night about the few things people needed to survive. "Especially when you don't have a job," my mother said, lighting a cigarette.

It was June. The days and nights grew warmer, and I was bored to death. I would have longed for school, but my next year would be my first at Otto Junior High, where all former elementary school students converged for seventh grade. No one said a word about school, and I'm sure my father hadn't given a thought to the disruptions our move would cause if I had one year left of elementary school. But the thought of seventh grade's unification of so many people into one huge, ancient, three-story building, which housed the eighth grade as well, inspired enough nervousness in me to make me tolerant of this country boredom.

My father was at work on a garden, hoping to get some vegetables going before it became too hot. He gave me a little job each morning, then forgot to inspect my work. I stole cigarettes from my mother, and watched television.

As mornings faded into afternoons, and game shows were replaced by soap operas, I began to explore the acreage, roam the Ponderosa, I joked to myself. Our back steps were connected with a bank of trees to the south by a few hundred yards of open plain. This pasture, which I assumed contained grass, was filled with an amazing variety of grasses, wild flowers, and bizarre weeds. It looked like a simple, unified place from the house, but walking through it, I saw it was really a broad collection of specific, assorted plants. I didn't know any names, but to relieve boredom, I started a catalog of pasture grass, and was startled by the number of new discoveries I made.

The grove of trees intersected with another line to the west. Hidden beneath this grove was a small creek, a discovery which made this dull, lifeless, but varied world suddenly come alive. I stopped watching TV in the mornings, and headed for the creek, accompanied by a pack of matches and a stolen cigarette. At the creek, life was not immediately apparent. But if you waited a while, you began to see a variety of living things. I saw turtles and frogs, birds, squirrels, skimming bugs and buzzing green flies.

Compared to the bugs, the squirrels looked huge, and made me cautiously desire to see something big, a deer or coyote.

An old barbed-wire fence ran the length of the creek on the other side, stretched casually upon an assortment of supports--a wooden post, a tree, a metal rod. I thought of crossing and extending my explorations, but the blond-brick house on the ridge, though not visible, was on that side of the creek, and I thought I might be trespassing.

I drank water from the creek, which tasted muddy, and looked for things to eat. I didn't find anything. It dawned on me that humans had to work to survive. If I were going to live here, I would have to hunt, grow food, raise animals, make clothing, construct a shelter. I envied the creek's little creatures who apparently survived with much less effort. I watched squirrels find acorns in the grass. Holding them to their mouths like hungry men cupping food, they pried them open, ate a quarter of the nut, sometimes half, then scurried on. Winter, I realized, would be a struggle, but for now, they appeared to have an easy life, far removed from the incessant turmoil of human affairs. No wonder some people found peace in the country. But I did note that the squirrels were not as relaxed as I was watching them. As they ate, their eyes were continuously alert for a predator. Then one day late in the afternoon, I saw something big and alive that put me on alert, and made my heart nearly jump through my ears.

Standing on the other side of the fence, partially hidden by an oak, was a boy about my age, looking at me. He had short, thin, dark hair, the color of my father's, that swirled in a few strands across his forehead. He was wearing a red t-shirt, cut-offs, and an old pair of blue, low-cut Converse tennis shoes without socks. He was white, but his tanned skin was nearly dark as mine.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"This is our property," he said.

"I'm not on your property."

"I know. What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Looking at the creek."

This interest must have convinced him we had something in common. He walked toward me, slipping through the fence with the ease of a feather floating in the air. He was a couple of inches taller than me, and broader-chested. His square shoulders made me level my own.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Aubrey," I said. "I live over there."

"I know." He looked at our house, then quickly glanced behind him, as if checking to make sure no one was watching.

"Mine's Troy. Troy Nail. Like to hunt?"

"Don't know. Never tried it."

"You live in the country and never hunted?"

"We just moved here, from Otto."

"Have a gun?"

"No."

He looked at me with suspicion. "Like to catch crawdads?"

"What's that?"

"In the creek. Look like little lobsters."

"How do you catch them?"

"With your hands."

"They pinch you?"

"Can."

"Hurt?"

"Sometimes." He paused, looked across the field at our house, then at me again. "You can borrow one of my guns, if you want to go hunting."

"You got more than one?"

"Got a .12 gauge, .22, and two BB guns."

"What do you hunt?"

"Bunch of stuff. Birds, mostly."

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Twelve."

"Me, too."

"Your dad have any guns?" he asked.

"No."

"What do you do if someone breaks into your house?"

"Don't know."

"No policemen out here."

Just then we heard a voice calling, "Troy!!!"

"That's my dad. Gotta go. We have supper every night at 5:30. I have to be in by 5:00." He leaned toward me, lowered his voice. "Want to catch crawdads tomorrow?"

"Sure."

"Meet me here in the morning. Nine o'clock."

He crossed the fence and disappeared through the trees, accelerating in the same way my interest was in my new home.

I woke early the next day. Before my father could think up my job, which he would forget to check on, I told him I was going to the creek.

"There's a creek down there?" he asked, delighted by another surprising discovery of our country estate.

"Yeah," I said. "Didn't they tell you?"

He wasn't listening. "Have fun."

I waited at the creek for about fifteen minutes, wondering if Troy decided to stay home. Then I heard a weird whistle and looked up. He was sitting high up in the tree next to me. As he climbed down, I began to think Tarzan really existed.

A few yards away, he uncovered two guns from a pile of leaves and brush. "Thought you might want to hunt later. Come on, let's catch some crawdads."

We followed the narrow creek to a spot where the water fell over a bed of large rocks and pooled. The creek widened at this point, too wide to easily jump. We walked

onto a moss-covered rock, large enough for both of us, and sat down.

Following Troy, I peered into the water. It was like walking into a dark room. At first, I couldn't see anything but the slight swirl and ripple of the water. Then, eyes adjusted, the world beneath the surface emerged.

It wasn't much to see. Not at first, anyway. The creek bottom was formed of mud and silt that shifted with the water. A few weak prongs of plants or weeds poked through.

"Look for a dark spot where they can hide," Troy said. "They like to get under rocks." We looked for a while. "There's one," he said, finally. I didn't see it until he dipped a stick into the creek. Two tiny claw-like pinchers responded to the appearance of the stick, and the crawdad's figure emerged.

The crawdad, a word found in few dictionaries, is the term many Oklahomans use for the crayfish. It looks like a miniature lobster, with a tiny head, long antennae, a ribbed thorax, and five pairs of legs, the first pair extending into big pinchers, or as the dictionaries prefer, pincers. Pinchers is the better term because these things don't pince, they pinch, with surprising force.

The first crawdad I saw was about three inches long, its pinchers wide as its body, and about a quarter of its length. The pinchers snapped at the stick before the

crawdad darted backwards and disappeared in a rising puff of silt.

"They all that fast?" I asked.

"Yep. And they go backwards."

"How do you catch them?"

"By hand."

"No, I mean, how do you do it?"

"You grab 'em from behind, so they can't pinch you."

He poked the bottom, then laying the stick aside, leaned over the creek, waiting for the water to clear. A few moment's later, his hand shot into the water and came out with a wiggling crawdad between two fingers.

As Troy held it for my inspection, its pinchers snapped slowly and harmlessly at the air, its thorax curling under.

Troy teased it with the stick.

"What do you do with them?" I asked.

"Look at them. Use them for catfish bait. Catch a bunch and have fights. Once I put a crawdad and a wasp in a jar. The wasp won."

"Let me hold it."

"Sure," he said, dropping the crawdad into the water.

"Soon as you catch one."

Catching crawdads showed me, in spite of the fights I'd been in at school, I was still a wimp. I saw one, reached in quickly but blindly at the spot I thought the crawdad

would be, thought I felt it pinch me and pulled my hand back with a whining, "Oww."

"Get ya?"

"Little bit."

"They don't get ya a little bit."

"What do I do if one gets a hold of me?"

"You'll figure it out."

I thought he was setting me up. But when one did get me, I saw what he meant.

I plunged my hand in several times, pulling back soon as I thought I was close enough to touch one. Realizing I had to catch one sooner or later, I gave up worries of technique and smothered the next one I saw, the way you catch a grasshopper. I hoped to pull it out and fling it on land, then catch it safely behind the pinchers. But it nabbed me before I released it, on the fold of skin beneath the thumb.

I couldn't believe the power in this little crawdad pincher, nor the pain it was inflicting on me, but I quickly saw Troy's point. I snapped my wrist in the air, as if my finger was on fire, sending the thing sailing into the weeds. "Goddammit!"

I cried.

Troy looked at me with shock and consternation. He was both appalled and fascinated by my language, but I was in

too much pain to care if I offended him. "Told ya," he said, laughing.

The pinch was like receiving your first blow to the face in a fight. It hurt, but I realized it wasn't that bad. The fear became tangible, rather than unknown, and I caught the next one more carefully.

The combination of my family's move, the new environment, and my own fanciful imagination overwhelmed me for a moment. I taunted the crawdad, who was a little bigger than the first one, proclaiming myself and Troy kings of the creek. Then, holding him against the rock, I snapped off his pinchers with my foot.

"Now let you be tormented the way you tormented us!" And I dropped him into the water.

"Might as well kill him," Troy said. He looked at me suspiciously, then picking up both guns, said, "Let's go get some mulberries, then go find some birds."

We walked deeper into the woods. I found out Troy had an older sister in the eighth grade named Kendra, who was no country Tomboy but a sheltered daddy's girl. His father worked in Otto, as a maintenance man at the university.

"He says you gotta own the whole county to make a living as a farmer. But we still got thirty head of cattle. You'll have to watch us brand them sometime."

"Where are they?" I asked.

"Our land runs back that way. Twenty acres. The creek curves around, gets deep in one spot. We'll have to follow it some time. It's fun. Also two ponds way back. We'll go swimming some time."

"Why didn't you buy the land we own?"

"Didn't need it. Dad thought about it. He didn't like the guy who lived there. Called him a drunk and a bum." We both paused, realizing our parents would be forming their opinions of one another before long. Troy looked at me again, the way he did when he first met me, which made me think his parents had already formed their views. "He wouldn't let me play on this part of the creek until the guy moved. I never saw anything to worry about. The guy never came out here. He was a dummdard. He tried to raise some cattle, but your land doesn't have much water. The creek's only enough for a few head, and if it's a hot, dry summer the pasture grass will be gone by July. That guy's cattle kept crossing the fence onto our property to get something to drink and eat. Some looked so skinny, Dad thought they were suffering. He called the animal welfare people out." Troy paused a second. "The guy came to our house that night, cussing like crazy. It was scary. Dad walked out with his .30-30 and the guy drove off. Never came back."

"That must have been who we bought the house from."

"I think that's why my dad is suspicious of ya'll. He doesn't want the same thing to happen. Are ya'll gonna raise cattle?"

"I don't know. Dad wants to, but doesn't know much about it. He's a carpenter."

"Have to be lucky the way things are."

"How long you lived here?"

"Five years."

"Where did you come from?"

"Hugo."

"Where's that?" I'd heard of it, knew it had a black population much like Otto's. A few people in our neighborhood came from there.

"It's about two hundred miles southeast of Otto, near the Texas border.

"Why did you move?"

He didn't say anything for a moment. "Just did," he uttered, and kept walking.

We stopped and ate some mulberries. The berry looked like a cluster of grapes shrunk to fit a baby's hand. They weren't very nourishing, but they tasted good and left purple stains on your fingers.

Troy handed me a BB gun, showed me how to shoot. It was an old one, he said, a single-action, lever-cocked Daisy. His was a Daisy pump, which somehow used a Co2

cartridge for power. He pumped it from one to ten times, depending on the amount of power he wanted.

He tied a red handkerchief to a short limb for target practice. Shooting required more concentration than I imagined. I kept flinching before I pulled the trigger. When I finally steadied my guide hand, my eyes blinked. Troy handled his with the ease and certainty of a person drinking a coke.

"You'll get better with practice," he said. "Let's go find some birds."

We walked through the woods. He had both hands on his gun and was quiet; I held mine in one and talked. "They're hard to shoot if you tell them you're coming," he said.

I tried to become a serious hunter, but when we didn't immediately see one, relaxed again. Then I spotted one, some distance away on a high branch of a big elm tree. "Look," I said, excited.

"Yep. Blackbird. Come on." He started to approach quietly.

"Let's get him from here," I said.

"Too far. You'll never hit him."

With the same lack of concern for skill and technique I used to capture my first crawdad, I brought the gun to my shoulder, aimed, feeling inspired by the notion of the long shot, and fired. The bird fell to the ground.

"Sure you never hunted before?" he asked as we walked toward the bird.

"Yep," I said, thinking I had found my natural calling, even though I didn't really like hunting yet.

I found out how much I didn't like it looking at the dead bird. Like every first-time hunter, I didn't realize the gun could actually kill. I had my fun. Now it was time for the bird to fly away.

It was a red-wing blackbird. I wondered why a bird would have a splash of color on its wings, wondered how that would ever occur or develop. Seeing this striking color in such detail deepened my regret. I was ready to give up hunting.

Troy examined the bird, still in shock over my shot. His hands lifted and turned every part of the bird's body, to my disgust. I wanted the thing alive, but didn't want to touch it. To his surprise, he couldn't find a mark.

"You must have hit it in the head. Maybe knocked it out, and it died when it hit the ground."

"Maybe I missed, and it just died."

He looked at me. "Guess the BB skimmed it. No sign of it anywhere." He pitched the bird into some weeds, and started walking, gun ready. I watched the bird fall to the ground for the second time, and knew there was a lot about hunting I had to get used to.

I didn't kill another bird that day. I couldn't, even if I wanted to, because my aim wasn't steady. Troy got a starling, two sparrows, and, to his great delight, a blue jay.

"They'll attack you if they think you're messing with their nests," he said, handing the dead bird to me. This was the first dead animal I ever held. It spooked me. The bird was much heavier than I imagined. I kept expecting the thing to awaken and jab my eyes with its long beak. I wondered how a thing that could fly could so easily be stilled. I remember thinking of church, which we hadn't attended in a while, and wondering why Jesus stopped with Lazarus, why he didn't show someone how to find the breath of life before he left.

We came to a place where the creek bed broadened into a deep gully with a sort of thin sandy beach and high red-clay walls.

"I like this spot," Troy said. "I always wanted to dig a cave here. Maybe we can this summer."

"We've got all summer," I said, liking the thought of a long project.

Then Troy put an end to our thoughts of a cave.

"Aubrey, why is your skin so dark?"

I figured he knew the answer, and was only asking as a way of talking about it. Otherwise, I didn't think the question would ever arise. But when I answered, I could

tell he had been warned to stay away from the neighbors, but didn't know why. I could feel him, or whatever mysterious but palpable thing our personality's project, withdrawing as if it were a snake slithering into a damp hole. His looked as surprised as when I used the word, "Goddammit."

He slid the guns, which were lying between us, toward him, and picking them up, said, "Think I hear my dad calling. Forgot some chores I gotta do." He walked downstream to a narrow spot, crossed, and walked home. I knew he was lying. It couldn't have been noon yet, and his father didn't come home for lunch. As he walked away, I wished Troy had left me a gun because I felt like shooting him in the butt.

CHAPTER XII

I stayed home and watched television the next couple of days. I hated Troy Redneck Nail. But for the first time in my life, I also hated my parents.

I wondered why they married. They seemed intelligent, yet it was obvious they made a stupid mistake. Why didn't they leave things alone? Black was black, white white, and that was it. There wasn't anything else, at least not to the people I knew.

Seeing me hanging around the house, my father gave me chores, which I performed listlessly. It took me thirty minutes to wash a window. More than anything, I wanted to light a cigarette in front of him and blow smoke into the air he breathed. I wanted to ask why he married a black woman. Did he want whites to hate him? Did he want to be black?

I couldn't ask. I was too angry to talk about it, and he was in his own world. I couldn't ask my mother either, and I had questions for her too. Weren't there enough problems being black? Did she want to be white? What did she want me to be? But she was in no mood for questions. So I stole her cigarettes.

I had to leave the house to smoke them, and television was boring. So I went back to the woods.

I wanted to see Troy and kick his ass. I was so angry I didn't even consider if I could whip him or not.

But he snuck up on me, the tree-climbing, Tarzan bastard. Since I hadn't seen him for several days, I walked onto his property. I thought I might leave signs to let him know I was here, but I couldn't figure one out. I didn't have an ax or a knife. I tried to dig a hole in the red-clay cliff, but it was too much work. I smoked cigarettes, hoping he'd see the smoke.

He must have. He may have been watching me the entire time I'd returned to the woods. One day, after I tossed my cigarette into the creek, he appeared from behind a tree, BB gun pointed at me.

"What are you doing on our property?"

"Sitting."

"Better get off."

"Make me."

"I will."

"Gonna shoot me?"

"If I have to."

"Oh, he's a big man with a gun," I said, standing.

"Put the gun down, see what happens. I'll kick your ass."

I learned from cousin Timmy strong language can be good as a first punch. Troy backed up a step. "Try it."

"Put the gun down."

"You'll steal it."

"Cause I'm a nigger, right?"

He didn't respond. I saw his hands relax on the gun, and I ran at him. We wrestled over the gun, falling to the ground. He was a lot stronger than I thought. He rolled me over, then pulled the gun from my hands. Standing, he backpeddled a few steps, then pumped the gun once and shot me in the foot. The one pump still stung at close range.

"Hey, shit!" I yelled. "That hurt."

He relaxed again, looked sorry. "You grabbed my gun."

"You had it pointed at me. I had to keep you from shooting me."

"I wasn't going to shoot you."

"How do I know?"

"I've been watching you the last few days. I could have shot you any time I wanted. You're quiet as a hog."

"I wanted you to find me. That's why I made so much noise."

"Sure."

"Why you been watching me? I didn't come on your property til yesterday." He didn't have an answer. "Your daddy stop coming home for lunch?"

"He never comes--"

"What I thought."

"What are you doing here?"

I hesitated. "I needed a smoke," I said. "Bet you never smoked."

"Have too."

"Let's see you."

"Give me one and I will."

Surprising him, I fished one out of my sock, the only place I could carry them without breaking them. I threw him the pack of matches.

"You having one?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, bringing one to my lips as casually as I knew how. He tried to light his twice but failed. "You don't know how to smoke."

"The wind blew the match out."

"The wind's not even blowing. You've got to suck in hard."

He did. A big puff of smoke flew from his mouth, powered by a retching cough. I laughed. "Sure, you do."

I walked over, and retrieved the matches. The gun lay on the ground between us. I lit mine, blew out a thin stream of smoke. I didn't inhale, but didn't know the difference and neither did Troy. "Still lit?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, puffing carefully.

We walked toward a big cottonwood tree, whose shade was only produced by its trunk because its broad leaves were sparse in numbers, and sat down. I hadn't forgotten I was mad at him, but was waiting for a good opportunity to seek revenge, thinking the cigarette might make him sick. He smoked his, waiting with each drag for it to get better. I

practiced smoke rings. I had little success, until the cigarette was nearly out. The ring shot from my mouth, as if by magic, then hung in the air, a perfect circle, before dissolving.

"Show me how."

"I don't have any more."

"Can you get one tomorrow?"

"You gonna be here? They're my mom's. You might get black germs."

Troy glanced at me, then looked away. "My dad would kill me if he caught me smoking," he said, chucking a rock at the creek.

"He doesn't smoke? Neither does my dad. My mom just started."

"We're real religious."

"What church you go to?"

"Church of Christ."

"Do anything weird?"

"No," he said, insulted.

"We don't go to church. Used to. Baptist."

When Troy rolled over to pick up another rock, I saw the tail of a long, pink welt coming out of his cut-offs, running down his leg. "What happened to your leg?"

"My dad whipped me yesterday," he said, with more embarrassment than animosity. "Thursday is mowing day. I'm

supposed to have the yard ready. I do the front, he does the back. I left the hose lying in the backyard."

"He beat you for that?"

"It didn't hurt that much."

"My dad did that to me, I'd kill him."

"Yeah, sure. You'd just pick up the hose next time. Besides, you'd have to borrow one of my guns to do it." We laughed.

"I could stab him."

"You couldn't stab a dog."

There was a long pause. Troy threw more rocks, then said he wished I had more cigarettes. I told him I'd bring some tomorrow. Then he asked, "What's it like having a black mom?"

I didn't answer for a moment. There were so many things in my head, I didn't know where to begin. "Same as having a white one, I guess. Except the way people look at you. They think I'm black, which I guess I am. But a lot of people can't tell looking at me."

"Must be hard. You seem normal."

"Screw you."

"What?"

"Why wouldn't I be normal?"

"Cause you gotta a black mom and a white dad. That's supposed to cause birth defects."

"You're the one with the birth defect."

"Well, I been thinking about it. I didn't mean nothing the other day."

"Could have fooled me."

"My folks told me to stay away from your place, but didn't say why. When you told me about your mom I got scared."

I was about to make a remark, but I could see Troy was thinking hard about something. The thoughts made his breathing quicken. "My dad shot a nigger once," he said. "I mean, a black guy." Neither of us said a word for what seemed like a long while. The stir of cottonwood leaves in the breeze was the only sound we could hear.

I think Troy wanted to leave it at that, hoping I could understand the story from the conclusion. When he went on, his voice sounded bitter and frightened. "That's why we moved here. Dad was afraid they were going to get us back. Said he'd have to watch me and Mom twenty-four hours a day."

"What happened?"

"We came home from church one Sunday night, found them in our house. There's a lot of blacks in Hugo. There were two of them, in the back of the house. Dad had a .38 hid near the front door, and went after them. They got out, but dad shot one of them in the back." He paused a second, scratched the ground with a rock. "He drug him back into the kitchen and called the police. The guy was still alive. Had blood all over him. He begged for his life, but was in

so much pain he could barely talk. All he could do was yell ever so often, and moan." He paused again. "My mom started to call the hospital, but Dad stopped her. He told her to wait for the police, see what they said. The last thing he wanted was to get into trouble because some guy had broken into his house. He said this real loud, made us go in the bedroom and wait. When the police got there, we went into the hall and listened. They had my dad tell the story, while the guy lay on the floor, begging and moaning. They stayed in the kitchen thirty minutes, then called the ambulance. He was dead when the ambulance got there."

Troy scratched the ground, then hurled the rock into the water. "Why'd they wait so long?"

"Dad told me they called right after the police got there, but I know they didn't. The next day he had a long talk with me. It's the longest talk we ever had. He told me he drug the guy back in because if he didn't, he'd get in trouble. He told me that's why there were so many criminals now, because the laws no longer protected people. He said the criminals had all the rights. He said in the old days, there wouldn't have been any questions asked. Everyone knew you had a right to shoot someone who broke into your house. But things had changed. He asked me if it was right for people to steal stuff and get away with it, and I told him no. He said that's the way things were now. You had to protect yourself. Even the police knew that, he said."

Troy looked at me, deciding whether he should go on. "He knew something was wrong with me, though. That's another reason I think he's so hard on me. I kept telling myself he was right, but all I could think about was that guy in our kitchen. You could hear him choking on the blood. He was real quiet at first, then he started crying, saying it wasn't his idea. He didn't want a TV anyway. You're the first person I ever told about this."

"What did the other guy do? The guy that got away?"

"I don't know. Never heard about him. He never said nothing, and the police didn't catch him."

"Man."

"Well, what would you do if someone broke into your house? Wouldn't you try to stop them?"

"Yeah, I'm not saying nothing. But they let the guy die."

"I know," he said. "I didn't like going to bed for a long time after that. I kept thinking I heard someone in the house. I think my folks did too. That's another reason we moved." He picked up another rock and chucked it into the creek bed. "Sometimes it makes me mad thinking about it, about them being in our house, about what they might have done if we'd been there sleeping. Other times, all I can hear is that guy begging for his life. I really think he was telling the truth. I think the other guy talked him

into it." He paused. "What would you do if someone broke into your house?"

"I'd have to borrow a gun," I said, trying to relieve the tension. It didn't work.

"You better get one."

After that, Troy and I became friends. We didn't have that much in common, things were just easy between us. He was as interested in me and my world as I was in his.

I told him why we moved to the country. My Uncle Charles's actions surprised him. He seemed to believe blacks would want to be white because of the way they were treated. He also said he thought whites were scared of blacks because they wanted revenge for the past. I told him some whites thought slavery wasn't so bad, but Troy knew that was a lie. I asked him how he knew, and he said he wouldn't want to be anyone's slave, no matter how they treated him. But he believed blacks wanted revenge--who could blame them, he said--and since he was white that made them enemies, meant they needed to live apart. This seemed as obvious to him as the clouds in the sky.

I told him most blacks I knew didn't want revenge. We just wanted a chance to do things whites did. I don't think he believed me, so I asked him if he was afraid of me. He didn't say anything. Even though in some ways he came to trust me more than his parents, he could not imagine himself as black. The thought depressed and frightened him.

I taught him to smoke, he taught me to shoot. My mother was smoking a pack a day, so pilfering a cigarette or two wasn't difficult. I watched her smoke in the kitchen after supper, noticed she pulled it into her lungs before exhaling. I tried this the next day at the creek and coughed worse than Troy had lighting his first cigarette. It felt like I inhaled fire, singed my lungs. We forgot about inhaling after that.

Troy helped me become a pretty good shot. After I learned to steady my guide hand and quit blinking, I discovered the trick was in controlling your arms. The gun provided the power; all it required was a squeeze of your finger. I remember feeling weightless at this discovery, my shots piercing the tin can target.

I never beat Troy in a shooting contest. No matter how much pressure I put on him, he always drilled the target one more time than I did. The more I tried to distract him the better he shot. He also could outrun, eat, sleep, and armwrestle me. It seemed to me he'd been pulled right up out of the mud when he was born.

He wondered how my father was going to make a living. My father got the garden dug and planted, but became obsessed with projects and had difficulty distributing his attention to a variety of things during the day. He was much better suited for carpentry work, one project at a time. Troy said vegetables needed a lot of water,

especially in the early stages. I wasn't watching Dad that closely, but I was sure he had let an entire day pass without watering, more than once.

Troy said that was why his father followed such a strict schedule, like mowing every Thursday. He didn't want to get behind, end up with more than he could do. Even then, Troy said, there were times, like when the cattle broke through a weak section of fence or got sick, that your schedule was shot.

He also wondered how we were going to run cattle if the pasture dried up. We might have to spend all summer getting the place ready for next spring, he said. Digging a well would be a good idea.

He wondered if his father would let mine use some of their land, just for this year. He didn't sound like it would be easy asking. Fences would have to be opened in places, but maybe they could make one big herd and work them together. The cattle would also need hay in the winter, a lot of it. I wondered how much of this my father knew. Very little, as it turned out.

"Well, I didn't want to do much with cattle anyway," he said that night at supper. "We don't have that much land. I was thinking we might get a couple of cows, just for our own use, to butcher when we need meat."

"We're still going to need water," I said, irritating him with every syllable. "Did you water the garden today?" My mother smirked.

"You know so much, why don't you start helping out," he said.

"All right. I'll water the garden."

"I don't want you messing it up."

"You can't mess up a dirt pile," Mother said.

When I met Mr. Nail, he scared me to death. He was a big, husky man, shorter than my father but broader. Nearly bald, he had a few tufts of red hair, and freckles on his big arms which looked like two logs. The first thing I heard him say was, "Hello, girls."

We were standing in the barbed wire corral behind their house. Between the two was a long, smooth garden with fingers of green growth apparent. It looked like a Cadillac compared to our clumpy, spotty plot. "Nothing like good old homegrown dirt," my mother said, looking at our garden.

The corral was adjacent to an old wooden barn, filled with stacks of hay bales Troy and I sometimes played in. Inside the corral was a holding chute, which clamped the cow's neck while they vaccinated, dehorned, branded, or castrated it. I hadn't seen any of this yet. Troy wanted me there next time they brought the cattle in, but said I would have to help. Mr. Nail wouldn't let people, even a

neighbor kid, watch; they had to work. He wasn't a performer in a spectator sport, he told Troy.

I can't help respect his attitude, looking back on it, but at the time he frightened and intimidated me like no other adult. Talking to him was like dribbling a ping pong ball, he made me that nervous. He made my night with the Morrises seem relaxing. I see now I should have responded in kind to his remarks, but you never know how far you can go with adults. I remained polite, and for the first month he knew me he thought I had a stutter. He probably thought it was a birth defect.

I felt hatred toward him the first few times I saw him because he didn't want Troy running around with me, and because of what he did to the guy in Hugo. This hatred intensified when he made me nervous. But I didn't do anything. I didn't want to endanger my friendship with Troy. The country was too boring without him. And, though I didn't realize it at the time, the best way to get back at Mr. Nail was to make him know his kid was spending time with a mulatto.

I don't know why Mr. Nail changed his mind about Troy and me in the first place. He wasn't aware of our activities for some time, so he may have decided, when he did find out, that restricting Troy might be difficult, and end up causing more problems. Usually, we stayed in the

woods. When we did approach their place, I noticed the corral was as far as we went.

I only saw Kendra from a distance. She rarely ventured beyond the back porch. Troy told me she played in the woods when she was younger, but now preferred staying inside, a habit Mr. Nail encouraged. All she thought about now was make-up and boys. On the times I did get a better look at her, I could tell she took after her father. She had thick sandy-red hair, fair skin, and a pudgy face.

One of the biggest surprises of the summer occurred when I saw Mrs. Nail for the first time. She was dark as an Indian. When I asked Troy about her, I discovered she was half-Chickasaw. During the winter, she looked like a dark-complected white woman, but in the summer she tanned so deeply she looked Indian. The irony was not lost on my young mind: Mr. Nail, the bigot, was married to a half-breed.

Mrs. Nail was a handsome woman. I don't know why but I was struck by how straight her back and shoulders were. Her thin, pointed Anglo nose was the only facial feature that didn't look Chickasaw, and it blended well with her dark eyes and prominent cheekbones. She had straight black hair which she usually wore in a bun. Once, I saw her on the back porch watering marigolds, hair hanging down to the middle of her back. I knew why Mr. Nail or any man could fall in love with her. I must admit I fantasized more about

her than I ever did Kendra. Mrs. Nail worked the garden a lot, and when she did, I tried to conjure reasons for Troy and me to stay in the corral a few minutes longer. The few times I heard her speak her voice sounded as rich and smooth as I imagined her skin would feel. I couldn't understand why such a woman would marry a nondescript bulk of a man like Mr. Nail. But this became another inexplicable item on the world's growing list of incongruities.

"If I was a real farmer, I'd cut this thing down," Mr. Nail said one day. He was trimming branches from the elm tree that stood in the middle of the corral. Troy and I stacked them in a wheelbarrow to haul off. It was an old tree with a deeply-grooved trunk from which branched a couple of large, low-hanging limbs. "You girls would cry, though. Wouldn't have your shade. Could use a couple trees around your place, Aubrey."

"Guess so," I said.

"Ya'll gonna run cattle on that pasture?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Let me know before you do. Last fella tried it ended up on my land."

"I told him already," Troy said.

"That's enough for today. You girls haul that off to the woods. Troy, strip a barrow full of them branches down and stack them on the wood pile. Use them for kindling."

While we worked, I noticed Troy kept glancing at the house. When he saw his father's pickup speeding down the dirt road toward town, he dropped the wheelbarrow. "Come on," he said, jogging toward the corral.

A year-old calf was the object of Troy's interest. Mr. Nail bought the thing--they did some breeding, some buying--a couple of days ago, and had been checking it out before releasing it into the herd.

Troy didn't waste any time. He told me to wait in the corral, while he rushed to the barn. When he returned, he had rope in hand. "Ever ridden a calf?" he asked.

"Sure, used to drive one to school."

"Betcha won't be driving this one."

It was a red calf with a few large white spots, a hereford I think they're called. I could tell it was young. It didn't have the huge gut of the older cows, but was no longer a cute little calf either. It looked down at us as we approached, its big dark round eyes steady but suspicious.

I had learned that cattle were like dogs. If they had contact with humans, they became fairly docile and passive. If not, they became as unpredictable and dangerous as any wild animal. Since the calf was used to us, it didn't mind Troy's touch, but it seemed like the thing was standing on springs, ready to bolt at the slightest provocation.

"Why'd you wait til your father left?" I asked.

"He wouldn't let us ride. Oh, he might if he was in a good mood, but probably not. Calves cost quite a bit. He wouldn't want to risk breaking its leg. And anything that makes them lose weight makes him mad."

"Maybe we shouldn't do it." I didn't like the thought of Mr. Nail's wrath. I was afraid even my father was no match for him.

"One ride won't hurt." As disciplined and obedient as Troy was, he had a mischievous streak he could not always tame. And, unlike me, he didn't flirt with danger through talk; he hadn't said one word about riding the calf. Like a good hunter, he got the urge, waited for the opportunity, then struck.

He fashioned a lasso, slipped it over the calf's neck. "Use this as a bridle. Just for something to hold onto besides the calf. Okay. Ready?" He held the rope toward me.

"You go first. I don't know how to ride."

"Watching me ain't gonna help you."

"Sure it will. Help me decide if I'm gonna do it."

"Stand back." Troy leapt onto the calf's back the way Indians do in movies. Then I saw what he probably already knew. The calf didn't mind human hands, but it drew the line at bodies on its back.

Before Troy was upright, the calf bolted across the corral in a hurried trot. Staying low, Troy bounced like a

rapid pulse on its back. As they approached the fence, I thought the calf was going to run right through it. Troy stayed on it as the calf slid to a stop, looking for a way out. It turned and swung back my way, around the elm.

Then it scared the hell out of me. Once past the tree, it lifted its back legs and kicked like a mule. This was the first bucking animal I had ever seen, and for a moment, I felt like an innocent bystander in the path of an approaching stampede.

I was halfway up the fence, looking back to get a final glimpse of my friend Troy. But he was still on.

He let out a whoop of delight as the calf skidded to a stop in the next corner, spun, then headed back. It kicked again, harder, and Troy went high enough in the air to literally lift the heart in my chest with him. He held on through that, and sensing the frantic calf's next move, bailed off before it broke into a series of fast, back kicks. He even landed on his feet.

"You sorry sucker," I said. "How'd you do that?"

"Skill, son, skill. You're next."

"Oh, sure. After you get him all fired up."

"I asked you to go first."

"I'm not getting on him now."

"Want me to get the dog? How about the chicken?" He flapped his wings and clucked.

"It's not fair. You been doing this all your life."

"You want to learn or not? You're the one who moved to the country."

"All right," I said, even though I knew I shouldn't. When you know things aren't going to work, you should listen to that voice, respond to that feeling, or whatever it is trying to communicate with your unresponsive brain, and not do it. Failing to heed the warning is like forecasting your own disaster. Troy was prepared for an opportunity to ride a calf and wanted me to take advantage of the chance. But he had skills, understanding, and experience I didn't. It was an opportunity of a different sort for me.

But I got on, my unwillingness revealed in the mount. I didn't jump on like Troy; I crawled. When the calf felt me, it took off, as expected, but three-fourths of me was on one side of the calf. My butt was riding its side. I thought of falling to the ground after the calf's third step, but knew if I did, I would just have to mount again.

In a burst of strength and determination, I pulled myself up to the calf's back, feeling as if I had accomplished all I needed to do. But the ride was just beginning.

The calf did the same thing it did with Troy aboard. I recognized this, but because I lacked experience, couldn't use the foresight to my advantage. I was too busy trying to adjust to the rapid bouncing. Whereas Troy let out a whoop after the calf's first buck, I started moaning before the

calf made the first turn at the fence, my voice sounding like a child making a continuous sound while he taps his chest repeatedly.

My voice grew in volume as the calf approached the elm. I knew what was coming, but didn't know how to prepare except to close my eyes. I felt the buck, felt my butt and legs break contact with the animal's back, felt the glorious liberation the release produced. I can't remember if my voice stopped or I was screaming.

But I came down, legs astride the animal, as if an angel had placed gentle hands upon me. I opened my eyes to see the calf dizzy me with a quick spin in the corner, then closed them again. When I did, I felt the angel let go.

The world began to crumble. I could feel it falling apart, as I teetered to one side, then the other. I became so disoriented I could no longer discern the part of the calf I was touching, so when I finally lost contact completely, I wasn't sure it happened. I clung to the rope because it seemed like the only thing supporting me.

This was a mistake. I don't know how long I made it, but do know I would still be holding on if my hands hadn't tired.

When the world quit crumbling, I opened my eyes, feeling dazed but delirious knowing I survived. Troy was looking down at me, his face animated by surprise and concern.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Sure." I didn't feel a thing. Until I tried to move. It didn't take long for the numbness to fade--what a powerful narcotic our bodies produce, but how quickly it dissolves--and the pain to emerge. My back and hips ached so badly I thought for a moment I broke a bone. But the worst pain was the feeling of fire on my right arm.

A rope burn, the size of a garter snake, ran the length of my inner forearm. In my delirium, I examined the burn the way a dope addict would a coffee stain. The skin had been stripped, or more specifically singed, leaving a narrow, shallow swath of peeled skin. It looked like a tiny wandering bulldozer had just scraped a path down my arm. The burn became the most prominent part of my body, lying on my arm like a long, injured finger aching with a red pain.

"Shoulda let go," Troy said.

I wanted to blame him, even though I knew it was my fault, and felt like he ought to apologize. But Troy apparently had the same thoughts, and knew it was my own doing. Having experienced many similar injuries, he knew my view would change.

And it did before I even reached my house. I was as proud of myself as I'd ever been. The challenge seemed worthy, the calf due some respect. I felt like a cowboy.

I did not lie to my parents about the injury. I explained it to them with pride, although I did embellish the story of my ride a bit.

"Looks like we might make a cowboy of you after all," my father said.

"Now if we can just make one of you." I regret saying that. I meant it as a joke, but it had a sharp edge. My mother liked it all the better.

The summer drifted on. Our garden was a wreck. We planted too late in the year for some plants--only a few onions and radishes came up--and didn't give the others enough care. I watered daily, but didn't examine the plants, didn't know what to look for if I did. The tomato plants were shrivelled and bug-infested, the green leaves pockmarked with holes, the undeveloped green tomatoes rotting on the vine. The green beans, which turned yellow, suffered a similar fate. My father, who was not naive about many things, was genuinely disappointed. He still wanted to believe the earth would produce naturally if you threw seeds in the ground.

He knew how to use a saw and hammer, though. He repaired the porch, hung a snappy screen door and porch swing--which only he used--patched a hole in the roof, framed the windows with black shutters. From the road, it looked like the place was coming to life, breathing

respectable air. But inside, the house was still cold and solemn.

My mother had not adjusted to country living. Her zest for order and precision waned. Her once lively mind now seemed limp as a mattress. Her body was alive, but that was it. She conducted her daily affairs as if she were in permanent transition.

In the woods, these concerns could not hold me. The look of the leafy trees, the clear calls of the birds, the sound of the creek trickling over mossy rocks, of the crickets and frogs as the sun dipped behind the horizon, the feel of the earth under your feet, of the thin weeds brushing your hairy legs, the taste of the air, the very air, was liberating. Troy and I swam in his pond, so murky it appalled your briefly opened eyes under water, hunted birds, fired shotguns which kicked your shoulder hard as a fist, roped dogs and pigs, dug a small cave in the red cliff, and one night camped out with sleeping bags and cigarettes.

That night, I looked at the stars, and for the first time saw them no longer above but around me, drew comfort from their numbers and their light. They symbolized the wonders and freedom of the daylight earth, beamed like Plato's realities evident now that the world was quiet and dark, clustered in the sky like shining pebbles in a gentle black

hand. In short, my feet were in the country and I was feeling fine.

And then some country boys made a social call.

CHAPTER XIII

One night, I heard some loud talk coming from the road. In the country the sound of a human voice gets your attention. I went to the window and looked out. It was dark, but I could see the silhouettes of two pick-ups parked in the road. A bunch of teenage boys were standing beside the trucks, their movements and voices rapid enough to indicate they weren't just hanging out.

They talked loudly among themselves for a while. My father asked me what I saw, and I told him. He sighed, thinking they picked this spot to party, and he might have some difficulty getting them to move or be quiet. Then we heard a loud, clear voice yell, "Nigger, go back to Africa!"

I later discovered a few black families did live in this part of the state, owning rugged, choked land deep in the woods and off the main highways, surviving somehow as farmers. But there were no mixed families anywhere in the area, except us. "Baboons is for burning, not fucking!" a voice cried. He then made monkey noises.

"Aubrey, get away from the window," my father said. He hurried back to his bedroom, returned loading a .12 gauge shotgun.

"Oh, my Lord," my mother said, holding me tight, sounding more frightened than I ever heard her before. She

feared a country-style KKK lynching was about to occur, which made me understand why blacks often feel greater safety in a black neighborhood riddled with crime than they do isolated in a white section. She hustled me back to the kitchen to call the sheriff. For some reason my father tried to talk her out of calling. He thought it better to get ourselves out of this, but I don't know why. Maybe he believed the sheriff would sympathize with the boys and somehow encourage their behavior.

"It might not do any good," my mother said, her voice trembling. "But we've only got one gun. No telling how many they have. If we call, least we'll know where he stands."

She had the operator put her through to the sheriff's dispatcher. She used a voice that made her sound white, and made no mention of the boys' racial threats. She said they were drunk, causing a commotion, throwing bottles in the yard. As soon as she hung up, we were glad she called. A bottle hit the front porch, shattering. "Stay away from the windows!" my father said, peering out. "One of those bastards steps a foot in the yard I'll blow his ass away."

They were all yelling at the house now, from the banal to the awful. "Go back to town, nigger lover! This country ain't for niggers! It's jungle bunny season! The best nigger is a skinned nigger! Nigger pussy stink worse than a sheep's ass! Gonna castrate that black baldy!"

I was glad I didn't understand that last reference until much later. Telling Troy about it, he explained that a black baldy was a cross between an Angus and a Hereford, creating a black cow with a white face. That was me.

We were relieved to see headlights approaching. The car stopped next to the pickups, and a man got out. He talked with the boys for a long time before they left.

He then came to the door, and he and my father talked for a while on the porch, my mother and I listening at the window. He was a thin man with no hat, which I thought funny for a sheriff, named Darrel Rhodes.

"Why didn't you arrest them?" my father asked.

"Can't charge people for calling names."

"They threw a bottle on my porch."

"Show me the damage it did to your property. File a report if you like."

"So you ain't gonna do anything. You're telling me to take the law into my own hands. I own this place, and I ain't gonna sit here and do nothing."

"I ran 'em off. What more you want? Mr. Rowe, I enforce the laws when they're broken. These boys ain't broken any yet."

"Throwing a bottle at my house is within the law?"

"Like I said, show me the damage. Look, you should know people in these parts don't favor mixed marriages. You had to know that before you moved out here."

"So whatever they do is fine."

"I ain't saying that. But I can't change the way they think. I told 'em they step foot on your property they'll go to jail for trespassing. But I can't keep 'em from driving by and yelling. I bet that's what they'll do til they get tired of it. I suggest you ignore them. If they think they're getting to you, they'll keep it up."

"Yeah, guess I'll ignore them while they march in and torture my wife and kid."

"I wouldn't worry about that, Mr. Rowe."

"If they said those things about your wife, you wouldn't be taking it so easy."

"I wouldn't have married a black woman and brought her to this part of this country. You had to know how people felt about it before you did. This ain't no small matter to them. Most of their parents would like to be doing the same thing."

"When there's dead bodies lying around, I guess you'll do something."

"Now listen here. You ain't gonna change the minds of these people, and it's a good bet those kids will be back. I can't stop 'em from driving on a public road. And if you get mad and shoot one of them, I'll be arresting someone all right. You for murder."

"Wonder what you'd do if my wife weren't black, and I was county commissioner. Think you might find a law that's been broken."

"I'm not gonna stand here and be insulted. Good night."

This conversation occurred in 1976. Fifteen years later, I don't think Darrel Rhodes would have been so frank with my father. He would tell him essentially the same things, but not make such open statements about the racial attitudes of his constituents. By 1990, even most people in rural Oklahoma became aware of changing attitudes and stopped revealing their racism, except to other whites.

As it turned out, Rhodes was right, but so was my mother in calling him. His presence didn't stop the teenagers' actions--they returned the next two nights--but it may have discouraged them from taking things a step further. In fact, they came back that very night, yelling and throwing bottles. My father stood watch by the window, shotgun in hand.

He slept during the day, stayed up all night for the next week. He wouldn't let me out of the house except to pick up the bottles in our yard. Every evening, he and Mom talked in the kitchen. She wanted to move back to town; he didn't want to be intimidated. They concluded the discussion each night with my father getting the last word, but my mother sounded like she had her mind made up.

We did not experience any more social calls from the neighbors that summer. But the boys who came to the house that night seemed so potentially wild, their voices filled with hatred and a lust for violence, we could not believe we had heard the last of them.

Troy was surprised when I told him about the teenagers. It didn't frighten him as much until I told him what they said. His geographical location and religious upbringing kept him isolated from most of the world's vulgarity. He thought we did the right thing, standing watch at the window with a gun, and sounded disappointed he wasn't there.

When August came, with its relentless, oppressive heat, I stopped going to the woods as often. It was not the weather that kept me away, but thoughts of school. All schools in the area opened in August--the rural schools at mid-month, city schools near the end--and Troy and I would not be attending the same school. He would go west ten miles to a school in Briar, a small town off the highway. I would go to Otto Junior High, which had more students than the entire Briar school system, kindergarten through grade twelve.

Earlier in the summer my father suggested I go to Briar. My mother wouldn't consider it, and neither of them spoke of it now. Troy later told me the school was all-white except for one large Indian family named Fixico.

Otto only had one junior high, grades seven and eight, which pulled students together from the various elementary schools in town into an old brown-brick three-story building constructed in the 1930's. This integration created some uncertainty and tension for most students, including myself. White kids from affluent Sequoyah and Will Rogers schools were now walking through halls with students from blue-collar Horace Mann and Woodrow Wilson, from which most Native American students came, and with kids from my old school, Franklin, and the all-black Jefferson. The immediate response of the kids was to form small, intense groups for safety and security.

I was nervous about going, but ready to get as far away from the racist hicks as I could, even if I had to return to the country at day's end. I was also anxious to see my old friends, like Sam Rushing. I immediately joined up with him and my cousin Timmy, who as an eighth grader was an old pro, and some friends they knew. For me, as for most people, these initial groups were not only made up of kids from the same grade schools but from the same neighborhoods. The weak bond I had with so many former Franklin students was not enough to pull us together in the swarming halls of junior high. Even students I knew fairly well, like Jeffrey Morris, were nothing more than recognizable faces. We all felt the same way. When I saw Jeffrey in the hall during the first week, we experienced surprise, relief, then

recognition that there was only enough connection between us to warrant a quickly mumbled hello.

I felt nervous and small the first few weeks. I didn't have the courage or maturity or self-awareness to establish an identity apart from a group. I wasn't an athlete or a scholar or a member of student government or a fighter. I wasn't anything but a scared kid, concerned only with self-preservation. So I hung out with this new group, even though many of Timmy's friends did not want me around. I was the only person of mixed race in the crowd, and no longer lived in their neighborhood.

One of Timmy's best friends was a short, chunky guy with a broad nose and thick neck named Nathan Gaines. He looked like a bulldog, had the temperament of one as well, which made everyone wary of him. He liked meanness the way some kids liked bubble gum, and his best-honed skill was thumping people's heads with his middle finger. He called it "butting de heyd" and could bring tears to your eyes with one strike.

"What color you?" he asked the first day I met him.

"Black."

"Timmy say your daddy white."

"He is."

"Then you white."

"My mama's black."

"So."

"Whites think I'm black. They don't want me."

"We don't want you neither. Bet your dick's white, like your daddy's. And puny."

"Pull it out and let him suck it," Timmy said, coming to my defense.

"Do it and I'll thump it off. Then go fuck both your mamas."

"You try and fuck my mama, I'll slap your ugly round head into next week," Timmy said.

"Shiiiiit," Nathan said, curling his finger, feinting at Timmy. "He got all that padding cause I thumped his head so much for him," Nathan said to me. Timmy had the biggest Afro in school, in a time of big Afros, twice the size of his head.

I stood there, speechless, feeling these words rattle in my head like blind punches, almost longing for the serenity of the woods. But the woods were no longer a place of escape for me; they were thick camouflage for gun-toting, nigger-hating rednecks. My new home lay within these ugly, sterile, cracking plaster walls, and I realized I needed a new attitude if I was going to survive in this place.

It took a while for this attitude to develop. The fear required was present, but I didn't have any immediate provocation to bring it out. Day after day I hoped it would go away, that I wouldn't need it, but then decided I was

going to have to hide and scurry through the halls to avoid it.

Oddly enough, a reaction from an Indian kid brought it to the surface. His name was Billy Jessie or Jessie Billy, I don't remember. He was a wild guy, so wild few people ran with him. He didn't go to our school very long, but before he left, Mrs. Byrd, our social studies teacher, moved him into the chair next to mine. He gathered his books--he only had one--walked back to the empty chair, and stopped in the aisle, looking down at me, disgusted.

He scared me to death. He had long hair, and scars on his face and arms. Rumor was he liked to play a game of daring where he and his opponent placed burning cigarettes on their forearms. The first one to knock the cigarette off lost. He looked at least sixteen.

"I ain't sitting by a nigger," he announced to Mrs. Byrd.

"Do what?" she said.

"You heard me. I ain't sitting by this nigger. He stinks."

"Young man, you go to the office this minute."

"I'll tell them the same thing. They shouldn't allow niggers in this school. They're worse than stinking pigs."

"That's enough!"

"You're going to pay for this," he said to me. "For every lick I'm gonna cut you three times."

If Mrs. Byrd hadn't been there, I probably would have just lain down and let him kill me. That's how frightened I was. But after he was gone, my courage slowly returned and I began to get angry. I realized there was no way to survive this experience without fighting. My anger was further encouraged by the snickers of the white kids after he left the room. This single incident--an Indian disgusted by a black--probably served to condone racism in many of their minds for years to come.

In the hallway between classes I found Timmy, told him what happened. He had a conflict with an Indian student in the first week, and said we better attack them before they attacked us. He spread the word to our group, and to the Indians, that we were going to rumble after school.

I don't know where this word came from, but it was the one we used. We must have heard it on TV. It was popularized, at least in our neighborhood, a couple of years later by a gang film called The Warriors, which we saw several times, sneaking into the drive-in.

I had only been in this place a couple of weeks and was already tired of being scared. So even though a group fight seemed silly, I was ready to go. When I saw Nathan, my courage doubled. He looked as happy as I'd seen him.

But we didn't rumble. Not this time. Billy Jessie had already been sent home, expelled, and the Indian kids Timmy challenged weren't worked up enough to fight for him. We

gathered outside the gym after school anyway, six of us, five of them. Timmy explained our view, and they talked among themselves for a while. Then Timmy started talking trash, taunting them. They talked back, but didn't move toward us. I stood silently, looking for one of them I thought I could handle. Then a coach came around the corner, and we took off running.

With this occurring, schoolwork seemed like menial tasks required to receive the noon meal. I swear I don't consciously remember a thing from junior high, though I'm sure some of it stuck. My grades began to slip, though. I got behind in algebra and never caught up. Finding a way to respond to Nathan was a far greater concern.

He was a seventh grader too. I didn't find out until a few months later that he was dirt poor. He and his brothers and sisters lived with his grandmother, surviving on government aid. His mother lived in St. Louis, but I didn't know why. Nathan often wore the same shirt to school two or three days in a row. Making fun of his poverty was the one way Timmy always got the best of him when they talked trash. Sometimes, Timmy was merciless and I felt sorry for Nathan. But giving him pity was worse than making fun of him.

I was beginning to notice how these guys used talk to deal with the tension we all felt. At first, I thought such talk would lead to a fist fight, so I was reluctant to get

involved. While they talked, I curled my fists, thought of my father's fighting lessons.

But they rarely led to fights, and the more I was around them the more I relaxed. What I initially thought was a fight, was really more of a competition with words. And somehow, though I couldn't begin to understand it, these words could help you defend yourself against the feelings of stress and uncertainty that continually assaulted you in this place. Even more surprising was the skill required in talking trash. My early attempts were pathetic and made me sink lower in their estimation than my mixed blood.

I had one class with Nathan, science, fifth hour. After the third week, I moved into a chair next to him in the back of the class.

I soon discovered how he got his homework done. The work was due at the beginning of class, and he always had his even though he didn't spend a second after school doing it. A curly-headed white kid named Cooper Harris was doing it for him.

"Got it for me, peckerwood?" Nathan asked after the teacher announced she was collecting it. Cooper handed it back without looking at him. "Good. Who'd you have do better this time, me or you?"

"You."

"Don't let your own grade slip. Make your folks mad." Nathan smiled. "You better score higher next time. Make

mine a B. Hell, don't want too many A's. My old grandmama get s'picious."

Nathan scrawled his name on the top, as I sat amazed. He handed the paper to Cooper as the homework went up the row to our teacher, an old near-sighted woman named Mrs. Riggs, who was so particular you couldn't throw wadded paper in the trash. It took up too much space that way. You had to lay the paper flat in the rusting green metal basket.

After Nathan returned the paper to Cooper, he surprised me again. He thumped Cooper on the head. It wasn't his hardest thump, just an average one. Neither he nor Cooper said a word about it.

Nathan's style, as I was discovering, was one of pure intimidation. I later learned Timmy completed his homework the same way but with slightly different methods. He intimidated, then ingratiated himself with the victim, so it would seem like the guy was doing him a favor, not acting out of fear. Timmy used force sparingly, whereas Nathan used it whenever the mood struck him. I wondered why Cooper didn't change seats, but later discovered Nathan had already threatened him with a beating if he did.

I felt sympathy for Cooper, but wasn't about to take up for him. He was a wealthy kid from Sequoyah school. His father was a lawyer--Nathan often asked him how the trial was going. He wore bell-bottomed slacks and fancy knit shirts with wild designs. Everyone wore wide collars and

flared pants then, but few were as elaborate as Cooper's. Nathan called him, "Discohead."

Cooper was part of a group that didn't have anything to do with blacks unless they were athletes, like Sam, who was starring on the seventh grade football team, and as a result, very popular. These privileges greatly reduced my sympathy for Cooper, and made me think Nathan was making him pay for his undeserved wealth.

Of course, it wasn't long before Nathan asked me why I still did my own homework. "You oughta be getting it from that white boy in front of you, unless you a pussy."

"I'm smart enough to do my own."

"I'm making an A. Who smarter now?" He had me there. I was making a B. "That white blood made you a pussy."

"Fuck you."

"You so eat up you too scared to thump him. Scared he'll whup ya."

"Bullshit."

"Ain't never seen ya. Ain't seen you once butt de heyd."

Without a second thought, I leaned over and thumped Cooper's head. It was an act of cowardice not bravado; I knew this even then. I was too frightened to thump the head of Paul Martin, the white kid in front of me, so I drilled Cooper, knowing he wouldn't resist.

I'm not proud to admit these things, but I can't deny them either. I'm also not proud to admit the act stirred a source of pleasure inside me. I didn't like the physical contact, but did enjoy making a confident rich white boy squirm. I thought of the country bigots as well when I hit him.

I was seeing more whites, especially more affluent whites, than I had ever seen in my life. Their sense of freedom and possibility was daunting, made it seem like they had spread an invisible net over us so they could have free play. In Cooper Harris, Nathan and I found a thread in that net and were going to pull like hell, hoping if we yanked hard enough the whole damn thing would come down. If not, we were still doing Cooper a service. Life was too easy for him. We were simply making him pay some dues.

I don't know how Cooper could be anything but a racist now. He must have wondered why he was receiving such treatment, and could not see his own behavior was contributing to it. Whites act superior, then wonder why they infuriate blacks. And Cooper could not see that even his lack of resistance was a blatant act of superiority. He didn't remain passive because of principle. A rabbit, even a damn chicken, will defend itself. Cooper took the abuse waiting for someone to intervene on his behalf: God, the principal, the teacher, his father, knowing he would eventually be relieved, maybe not tomorrow or next week, but

eventually and with abundant compensation for his suffering. Life promised him a destiny he knew--knew!--would be fulfilled and could never be thwarted by a couple of raggedy niggers in a seventh grade science class. I could not articulate this then, but I knew it, and it made me want to thump his silly white head all the harder.

"Butt de heyd!" I said proudly, thumping him again.

"Find your own heyd, boy!" Nathan said, thumping me hard in the forehead. "This one's mine. Don't want it wore out with no amateur thumper."

I leaned forward and thumped Paul Martin's head hard as I could. Then I thumped Nathan's head, to his surprise. Paul, whose father was owner of the brick plant, spun in his seat, as confident in his own destiny as Cooper but apparently not as willing to accept his suffering. However, his resistance calmed when he saw me thump Nathan the brute. Tears welling in his angry eyes, he glanced at Cooper, from whom he now seemed to desire assistance even though he remained shrug-shouldered while Cooper received his blows. He turned around without saying a word, head forward.

I saw Nathan's fat hand coming at me, ducked, then nailed him again in the eye. I felt no remorse, as he cussed me, even though the eye was out of bounds. The only thoughts in my mind came from the delightful realization that quickness was apparently as beneficial as strength when it came to butting de heyd.

Nathan murmured he was going to get me after class, and I told him to suck my zebra dick. By the end of class, Cooper had his head on his desk, beseeching the gods of destiny to intervene, Paul was agreeing to do my homework, and Nathan was asleep.

CHAPTER XIV

Things got worse at home. My father had not returned to work. He continued to repair the house, but we were running out of money to fund his projects. He wanted to remodel the kitchen, repair the windows, modernize the bathroom, build a screened-in porch. The winter weather forced him inside where he tinkered and brooded. And then drank.

The house had become his haven. He did not want to leave it; the country boys stopped taunting us. Unable to work on it, he didn't do anything. He drank to occupy his idle hands. The more weight his depression gained, the more wrath my mother felt.

She was not quick to express anger. Since that was all she felt, she didn't say much. Instead of speaking, she suffered.

My mother believed in the value of suffering, a trait I didn't understand then. I think she often saw her capacity to suffer as a measure of her character. Lacking the opportunities for public challenges, she accepted her private conflicts as the defining experiences of her life. Endurance, she seemed to believe, would lead to revelation and reward, suffering to meaning and transformation. But her actions, as I saw them, suggested that suffering itself

had no meaning. Rather, it agonized and fatigued her to the point where she took action to alleviate it.

Her belief did have a windfall: it prevented hasty decisions. While she suffered, she thought. She spent time considering her options, then waited on the time and place to seize one, knowing an opportunity does not exist outside of a given time and place.

She had said little since my father and Uncle Charles's fight, less since our move to the country, and by December, I could count her words by the end of the day. She quit trying to goad my father into action. She stopped asking him about a job or his remodeling plans. She no longer felt a part of him, and was preparing to go in a new direction. I could tell this looking at her, but didn't say anything. I knew it wouldn't do any good. Her mind was made up. She seemed to be waiting for the right moment, and all I could do was wait and see if this new direction involved me.

Christmas was bleak that year. My mother made no apologies. My father tried to salvage the season--and perhaps our lives--with a tree. It was a small cedar he chopped one night, sneaking onto the Nails' property. He even decorated it. At another time, it could have been the most thoughtful act of his life; at this point, it was one of his most pathetic.

We didn't join the family for Christmas dinner. Christmas Eve, my mother drove me into town. We spent the

evening at Aunt Tamra's. She and mother talked for a long time in the kitchen. Timmy and I went outside and sneaked a cigarette. I had increased my position within our group at school by passing out pilfered cigarettes. Nathan taught us how to inhale.

When we got home, my father was drunk. Drinking made him withdrawn, but this night he had enough to want to take on someone besides himself. "What'd your family get me?" he asked, chuckling.

"Same thing yours got us," my mother said.

"What about Charles? He get me a Ku Klux Klan robe? Mine's getting old."

"Not the only thing."

"That's right, we're all getting old. Every damn thing, every damn. . .one."

"You figured that out."

"What's that? Don't start with me. You're the one going back to the people called me a racist."

"It was just Charles. I told him he was wrong. He knows it."

"He don't know it well enough to admit it."

"What do you want him to do? Beg?"

"How about speak, ask? The man still talks."

"What good would it do? You're looking for something Charles can't give you. No one can."

"You sure as hell don't seem able. I ought to drive into town, see my folks. Can't remember the last time. The old man's capped teeth would fall out. I'd say, 'Hell, Pops, you was right! I'm a nigger hater too! Pass the turkey. Make it white meat, Ma, the way we all like it.'"

"You do that."

"Oh, yeah. I can't go see my racist family, but you can see yours."

"Don't compare your family to mine!" my mother said, with more fury than I had ever heard in her voice. "It's yours that would shoot themselves before letting me step foot in their house. It's yours and all the lily white bastards like them said I couldn't eat a goddamned hamburger at a lunch counter but had to take it outside. It's yours made it against the law for us to get married." She paused, tears welling in her eyes. "It's yours that hasn't set eyes on their own grandson."

"Shut up!" my father yelled.

"Don't ever say they're the same."

"They are the same!" he said. "The only difference is mine is shit, and I know it. You want to think otherwise. You think Charles will let his kids marry a white? If he owned a lumber yard, would he hire blacks first or whites? Would he think blacks are better workers or whites? If the money and the power were in black hands, it'd be the same story, just reversed."

"He's just one man, Lewis. He ain't all black men. Just because your race did it, don't mean everyone else would be the same."

"My race wasn't the first. There have been slaves and masters since Moses. Men are men. He'd do it because he is doing it. The way my father and brother are doing it. The way this whole fucking, stinking-ass world does it!" He walked the length of the room, hands looking for something to grip. He saw the tree. "Goddamn, piece of--" He pushed it over, pulling the single strand of tiny flashing lights out of the socket, breaking a colored ball or two. He hurled it into the corner, the force of his actions throwing him against the wall. The windows shook. "Merry Christmas, Shithole, Oklahoma! Happy New Year!"

His reaction did not vent his frustration; it released it. He could not contain himself. He picked the tree up and threw it again, beat it against the floor, then drove it like a battering ram out the front door. He walked across the pasture, yelling and cursing.

I'm surprised he didn't kill us all that night. For the first time I understood why people commit suicide, saw it might not be such a bad idea.

I went to bed thinking I would wake up to find my mother gone. But she was in the kitchen the next morning, drinking coffee and smoking, undisturbed. She was so distant from my father emotionally his actions didn't bother

her, and since she was not an impulsive woman, she was going to leave when she decided to, not in reaction to him. I ate my cereal thinking she was already gone; we were just waiting for the moment of her announcement.

She waited longer than I thought. Then in January-- this was 1977--the miniseries Roots aired. I would remember this show no matter the circumstance. But it could not have come out at a more troubled time, for me and my family. Oddly enough, I felt little of my parents' conflict internally. I placed the entire argument of color, and with it my notion of identity, in their hands. I awaited their decision, my mind a blank slate, prepared for their resolution to give it shape and direction.

The show was a public event. I think one or two episodes ranked in the top ten for prime time network shows. White kids were watching it, as easily manipulated by this melodrama as by any other. It seemed to make no difference that the antagonists were white and at least symbolically, if not in some instances literally, their ancestors. I'm sure they felt some responsibility and guilt, but these people were from the past, talked with funny accents, wore strange clothes, didn't have cars. And, in keeping with a melodrama, they were nearly all bad. Most of the whites at my school felt as much connection with these people as they did the Nazis. As a result, the few attempts at class

discussion failed, in spite of the fact nearly everyone watched the show.

For blacks, however, it was a landmark, at least as I experienced it. There were shows with black characters, but none that so explicitly pointed at whites and said, "Look, what you've done." The night they cut Kunta Kinte's foot, you could hear the town, even the country, go silent.

Everyone I knew watched it. Timmy was less brash for a week. It was one of the few experiences that gave him cause to reflect, and his inexperience made dealing with it difficult. He didn't know what to do, though he felt compelled to take some action. He said Uncle Charles watched with him, the whole time saying, "What'd I tell ya? You thought I was lying. Whites think slavery wasn't that bad. Hell, no. What I been saying for years, but no one listen."

Even Nathan saw it, or at least parts of it. It didn't make much of an impression on him, which, ironically, increased my admiration for him. He was himself, at all times and in all places, a characteristic particularly compelling to me, one lacking a sense of self and readily influenced. The only remark of his I remember was in reference to the Kunta Kinte foot scene: "My brother say he gonna do that to me I fuck up again."

The series made a stronger impression on my father than my mother. It deepened his depression, convincing him, I'm

sure, the world's sins were irredeemable. He drank before each show, heavily afterwards.

My mother's response was more intellectual. She had long denied, or ignored, her African ancestry. She didn't want to believe she came from voodoo-worshipping cannibals in bizarre masks and loin cloths, which was her only vision of Africa's past. Roots didn't completely alter this view, but did humanize it for her and excited in her a sense of discovery about the past.

Black Power and Black is Beautiful slogans had been present among blacks in my town throughout the seventies, but I had never sensed as strong a swell of confidence and unity as that which occurred during the airing of this series. The show served to visualize history and identity for many people, including me. For various reasons, I was no longer wrestling as much with identity. I was black now, at home as well as at school. I didn't know what that meant, nor the direction it would take me. But it did tell me who I was in relation to others, and late in February, I began to define that self for the first time.

In English class we read The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. The teacher was an attractive, meticulous, upstanding white woman named Mrs. Holcomb. She wore a formal dress and high heels every day, and moved with such ease, it was hard to imagine her in another kind of clothing. Her husband was pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church, the main competitor with

First Baptist for souls in our town, and if her faith did not reward her with eternal salvation in the next world, it had at least granted her undying enthusiasm in this one. The polished cabinets of her mind did not contain a cup of doubt, about anything. Her trust in authority was so great she had as much confidence in the local police force as she did a brigade of angels.

A primary duty of a teacher, as she saw it, was to inject her students with the fevers of confidence and enthusiasm. The administration shared these values, and considered Mrs. Holcomb a model teacher. The view of her students was split: to the middle-class kids she was a guiding hand of encouragement; to the lower, she had as much credibility as Snow White.

To her credit, she did actively manage the class. You couldn't cheat, and failure to produce homework assignments led to long discussions at her desk. Occasionally, I'm sure she motivated a lower class kid, serving as a surrogate mother. But her service in that role was temporary, and I'm equally sure the student left the cozy confines of seventh grade English to encounter problems that never entered Mrs. Holcomb's consciousness, even in the form of nightmares.

We didn't read the entire novel. Our textbook contained several excerpts pulled from various sections of the book. That practice alone deserves ridicule. The students didn't need to experience the entire thing; just

get acquainted with it, know the author and title so we could take part in our American culture.

Despite my parents' conflicts, I did my homework. (And was doing my own again in all classes.) Reading the first chapter gave me the greatest thrill I had received from a written text. The NOTICE alone, which begins the book, surprised me and set the tone of nonconformity and irreverence that held great appeal for a young reader suspicious of form and convention.

But it was Huck's voice in that first chapter, from the very first line, that did it to me. Listening to it was like hearing a tree speak to you, and discovering the natural world has consciousness and is sympathetic to human concerns. The voice sounded so true it made me want to pray. I didn't talk this way, I didn't know his situation, I didn't relate to it. But his voice was so animated, consistent, and precise--and I suppose at least close enough to my own experience I could hear it and understand--it compelled my attention. I was so enthralled by the voice, I read too quickly to comprehend, and had to reread most paragraphs to follow the concerns of the first chapter.

I was also young and malleable, so as I read I became Huck Finn. I sweat in the new clothes, grumbled while waiting for the Widow Douglas to finish the prayer before victuals, felt so confined and lonesome I was ready to bust. And then I came to the second chapter.

"We went tiptoeing [Huck, Tom Sawyer, and me] along a path amongst the trees back toward the end of the widow's garden, stooping down so as the branches wouldn't scrape our heads. When we was passing by the kitchen I fell over a root and made a noise. We scrouched down and laid still. Miss Watson's big nigger, named Jim, was setting in the kitchen door. . ."

The spell ended. I flinched when I read that paragraph, and tried to read on, pretending it hadn't appeared. But Jim didn't disappear from that chapter or the novel--and neither did the word nigger.

I was so angry I threw the book against my bedroom wall. I thought I was angry at Huck, and I guess I was. But I was also angered because I couldn't be Huck or Tom Sawyer. I was Jim, the nigger.

Startled, Jim's first words are, "'Who dah?'" Then he asks, "'Say, who is you? Whar is you? Dog my cats ef I didn' hear sumf'n. Well, I knows what I's gwyne to do: I's gwyne to set down here and listen tell I hears it agin.'"

I didn't even understand what he was saying. It took several readings for me to figure out sumf'n and gwyne. I was a nigger who couldn't talk with the nigger.

As the story continues, Tom decides to trick Jim. When Jim falls asleep, Tom slips off his hat and hangs it on a limb. Huck says when Jim woke up he claimed witches put him in a trance, carried him all over the state, and hung his

hat on the tree to show who done it. Niggers came for miles to hear Jim tell his stories, standing with their mouths open, "'same as if he was a wonder.'" I threw the book again.

I realize it was my own immaturity that made me believe I had to identify with one of the characters. White readers, regardless of their age or gender, are no more Huck Finn or Tom Sawyer than I was Jim. Any reader who seeks identity in a text is searching for something no book can give them.

But that's what young readers do. I felt more tricked than Jim. And worse, I was aware of it.

I tried to pick the book up and continue, but couldn't. I was deeply ashamed, of Jim and myself. I wondered if this was how the whites at school viewed blacks, as silly and superstitious. We could go to the same schools, use the same bathrooms, ride the buses, but never be equal.

I thought of Cooper Harris. He wasn't in my class, but in another, reading the same pages. This book was bound to have great appeal to him. It showed slavery wasn't so bad because it kept blacks in their place. Neither Tom nor Huck showed any fear of Jim's retribution. He was too dumb to figure their scheme out, for one thing, and if he had, too restrained by his slave status to get revenge. Now freed, blacks could exercise their impulsive and brutish natures upon poor, innocent, defenseless whites like Cooper, who

would have to endure such indignities until he could flee to safety behind the walled fortress of middle-class suburbia, content in his views, convinced his children should not have to suffer the same indignities.

It was a no-win situation. If a young black man followed the appropriate forms of conventional behavior, he was becoming white. And the school's social grouping showed most whites favored equality but not black integration. But if a black man resisted through various forms of anti-social behavior, then he was demonstrating his natural impulses, which could not be restrained by the manners of civilization.

There are your shades of the prison-house enclosing the growing boy, Mr. Wordsworth! They were as real as the plaster walls of my room. I wanted to lash out against them, but remained still, knowing these walls were not as easily perceived or destroyed as my bedroom walls. I lay on my bed for a long time. I now know I was experiencing my first real encounter with the confines of my race, and was beginning to understand, through experience, my mother's patience for suffering.

I thought of Jeffrey Morris and Troy Nail, and in my rage, say myself as Jim, the dumb nigger, traipsing behind them. "What dat, Jeffrey? Pyramid? That shore was a funny house dem 'Gyptians built, wudn't it? You say it was a

house for one person? And a dead one, at that? Tell me no."

"That some mighty fine shooting, Troy. Show me how you catch dem crawdads, agin. Me? No sir, I'm too slow. Stick my hand in where? Ow! You fooled me agin. Thinks I'd learn arter a while. Dem pinchers shore do hurt a fella. You smart as Huck Finn, Troy, you know dat. And I'm dumb as Jim."

The next day at school I became an angry young Jim.

CHAPTER XV

Entering class, I discovered the white kids were as enthralled with Huck Finn as I initially was. However, their pleasure was not derived from Huck's voice, but from one word: nigger. They took as much delight seeing it in print as they would finding words like damn, shit, fuck, pussy, dick. "Here it is again," I heard one say. Three guys peered over his shoulder to see it.

Mrs. Holcomb began the lesson with a long lecture about Mark Twain which dulled the class's interest and allowed her to introduce the racial theme to a less responsive audience. She said the novel was a testament to the equality of mankind, and was the first legitimate work of American literature, though she didn't say why. She pointed out Twain's skill in using humor to get the reader's interest, then his gradual shift to one of the most moving stories ever told: Huck's decision to sacrifice himself to aid Jim's escape.

"Now you will be surprised to find the word nigger used," she said calmly. She didn't skip a beat, but the word itself was so captivating to the students, hearing it again stirred them a bit. "But Mr. Twain had no choice. The word was used then commonly, so it had to be used if the novel was to be realistic. But don't think the novel or Mr.

Twain approved of the word. The story clearly shows a compassion for blacks, and that's what we want to focus on. Now let's look at chapter one and examine Huck's relationship with Widow Douglas."

The class quietly groaned the way classes do when the teacher asks them to focus their attention. But I relieved their apathy. "This book is racist!" I said. I stood up to make the point stronger.

"What's that? Who said that?" Mrs. Holcomb was so startled she asked these questions even though I was the only student standing. Her gentility controlled her, and even though it was clear to me she didn't have the slightest interest, she asked, "Why do you say that, Aubrey?"

"Because it is."

"It may seem that way now, but you've only read the first two chapters. Don't be misled by the language. As I said before, Mr. Twain had to use the language of his time to make the novel realistic. But once we read further, you'll see the book is not racist."

"I've read them, and it's racist." I wasn't lying. Ten of the novel's 42 chapters were in our book. They omitted the sections about the Duke and Dauphin, and the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons. They didn't want young minds exposed to mindless feuding between white families, I suppose. I read the excerpted chapters, though, to see if

things changed. I didn't think they had, despite Huck's decision. "Jim's an idiot."

"Aubrey, Jim is not an idiot."

"He doesn't know how to do anything except make up stories about witches. If it weren't for Huck, he wouldn't be able to float down the river, much less escape. And he's a man. Huck's just a little boy."

"Aubrey, I understand your concerns [which meant she was ready for me shut up] but you're taking the novel out of the context of its time. Jim is limited, you're right, but he was denied the opportunity for education because he was black. His very limitations are caused by the whites, and a sign of the racism of the times."

She wasn't looking at me by the time she finished. She was gazing into the air above the students. I think she was replaying her words in her mind, surprised by how precisely they came out. She looked down at her book, prepared to go on with the lesson.

"Huck didn't have any education," I said. "But he knows how to do all kinds of things. Jim is so dumb he's about to starve to death when Huck finds him on the island. All he's had to eat is strawberries. Five minutes after Huck's been there, they're frying catfish."

"Well, maybe Jim doesn't have the equipment or supplies Huck has," she said without looking up. "That would be

another sign of racism. Not allowing blacks to have things."

"He's got a knife. Why can't he make a spear or a bow and arrow or a wooden hook to use for fishing? He doesn't because he's black which means he doesn't know how to do anything. Whites have to show him everything."

"It's apparent I'm not going to be able to make you see reason, Aubrey. But consider this. Jim is just one black man. You can't say he stands for all blacks. That in itself is racist." She looked particularly pleased with this turn of logic. The other kids, bored with the argument, grumbled to get me to sit down. There was only one other black student in the class, LaTina Scales, whom I didn't know and hadn't heard say a word about anything. I discovered after I went to college that the junior high and high school controlled enrollment so one class would not contain a large number of blacks or Indians-- unless it was a special education class--as a way of preventing social conflicts. But despite lack of support, I went on, convinced I was right.

"But Jim is the only black in the book. And it makes it clear he's as smart or smarter than any of the rest because it says they come for miles to listen to his ridiculous stories about witches."

"All right, Aubrey, that's enough."

"It's not enough. I'm black and I'm not going to read it."

"I think he's right." Everyone turned in their desks. The voice belonged to a white girl named Lisa Dickerson. She was an attractive but unpretentious blond, who looked like she came from a middle-class family, but whose dress suggested she was trying to rebel. She wore tight bell-bottomed jeans, loose-fitting tops, and necklaces made of shells and puka beads.

"You better think twice, all of you, because Aubrey's about to take his views to the principal's office and defend them there."

Lisa wasn't that courageous, nor was anyone else, but I insisted until Mrs. Holcomb sent me to the office.

After I told my story, Mr. Gerth, the principal, an older man with greased hair and glasses with inch-thick lenses, shifted in his seat and said, "You obviously just want to make trouble, Aubrey. It would be one thing to make such a protest if you had a point. But everyone knows Huckleberry Finn is the greatest anti-slave book of all time. I'm sure Mrs. Holcomb pointed this out."

"If it is, then whites haven't done much of a job writing them."

"That's enough. Three licks ought to do it."

"You can't bust me for speaking my mind."

"No, but I can for disrupting class."

"Won't do no good. I'll say the same things soon as I get back."

"You're going to do this the hard way, huh? All right, let's try a three-day suspension. See what your parents think."

"They'll back me up."

"Good. They can support you by looking after you for three days."

My father did not sound supportive on the phone. I had to tell him twice to come get me. He asked to speak to Mr. Gerth, who explained the situation briefly but refused to elaborate over the phone. He encouraged my father to drive to school and hear my story firsthand. Apparently, interrupting the parents' day was Mr. Gerth's best strategy for dealing with problem students. "He's on his way," he said, hanging up the phone. "Wait for him in the outer office."

My father was drunk. When he saw me, he came at me with such force I thought he was going to knock me through the wall. "What the hell you doing refusing to go to class?" he asked, grabbing me by the shirt. "Got to stop what I'm doing to come down here and take care of you?"

"I didn't refuse to go," I said, trying to break his hold on me. It was the first time I could remember actively resisting him. "I told the teacher I didn't want to read that racist novel."

"Who the hell you think you are, Malcolm X?" I only had a vague notion of who this man was, and didn't even know he was dead. "You're going back to that classroom and keep your mouth shut."

I looked into my father's eyes, but could no longer see the man I thought I knew. In the past, he would have been a more ardent supporter of me than my mother. But he now looked like his mind had closed a thick door. He no longer wanted to deal with conflict of any kind. "If I go back, I'm gonna say the same things," I said.

"Then get your ass to the car." He threw me into the hall. At the top of the wide staircase, he grabbed me again and pushed me down the steps.

When we got home, he told me to go cut some firewood, a chore he usually handled. I stopped in the kitchen on my way out to steal a cigarette, but found none. It was a cold afternoon, without pleasure except for the feel of the ax blade sinking into the hard, innocent wood.

That evening, my mother responded to my story with the same detached reaction she gave everything now. However, this time she seemed amused by my tenacity. As we talked, I could tell she too believed my reaction had little reasonable foundation because of the novel's reputation. I explained my views, then asked her to read the sections in my textbook. She did.

"I think you've got something there," she said afterwards. "I never thought about it before. I'm sure blacks acted that way, but whites wanted to see them that way. Emotional, limited, happy-go-lucky. Those that were, affirmed the whites' views and were treated better. Those that weren't," and she stopped, looking right at me as if she suddenly had a realization, "were troublemakers."

But that's all she said. I was glad she agreed, but wanted to do something. Fight the suspension, attack the novel, storm the junior high making pronouncements to Mrs. Holcomb, Mr. Gerth, the entire faculty and student body. But apparently, this was all my victory would come to: a pat on the back from my mother. I went to bed discouraged, and was surprised to be awakened in the middle of the night. It was my mother. "Pack this bag with your clothes and schoolbooks. We're leaving."

I spent the night on the floor of Timmy's bedroom; my mother on the living room couch. Uncle Charles, disgruntled and sleepy-eyed, was surprised to see us, but he didn't gloat when he heard my mother's explanation. He stayed up to talk with her and Aunt Tamra.

I didn't sleep much that night. Lying on the floor with only a blanket under me, the floor's stiffness feeling good and, for some reason, appropriate, I couldn't shut my mind off. It kept circling from point to point of my fragmented life. The circuit became familiar, even though

it was disrupted and expanding, but I couldn't find a coherent pattern. It was like looking up at the night sky, which I did a lot of in the country, and being unable to recognize the meaningful forms and shapes you know other people can see, except for the Big Dipper, which seems too simple to matter. As it turned out, even a cautious, temperate kid like myself had a desire for disorder. Now I was getting my wish, and all I wanted to do was reassemble the parts as quickly as possible.

This reassembling was not going to be easily accomplished, as I realized the next morning. Everyone was surprised by the news of my suspension, and even more surprised by my mother's approval. Aunt Tamra and the girls, Melinda and Regina, both still in grade school and earnest students, were shocked. I'm sure Uncle Charles was secretly pleased, but he didn't show his delight for fear of encouraging Timmy, who had no interest in the reason, only in the result of my suspension, and looked at me with greater respect than he had ever shown me before.

The excitement of being the family's central concern quickly abated, however, when everyone left for work or school except Aunt Tamra and me. The world went on without me, including Mrs. Holcomb, Mr. Gerth, and Huck Finn. But I was still pleased with my actions and assured of my convictions. I watched television for a while, then claimed I was tired to avoid the chores I knew Aunt Tamra was

preparing, and lay down on Timmy's bed. I felt like I was invading his privacy, but the bed felt too good to move. Even though I had been in their house numerous times, the bed sheet had a distinct odor, reminding me of the feeling I had, of the odor I smelled, spending the night with Jeffrey Morris, which seemed like a long time ago. I was too simple to realize the odor was determined as much by laundry soap as anything else, and thought every person had a distinct smell. I wondered what mine was, and for some reason, these wandering thoughts and impressions made me think of my father, who now seemed as distant as Jeffrey Morris's father--a white man sleeping in a faraway house, in his own bed. On that thought, I went to sleep.

We were homeless. This didn't really hit me until we ate supper that evening. Aunt Tamra made barbecue ribs. They were delicious, but it was too rich a meal for the occasion. It seemed like a celebration feast, but no one was in a joyous mood except Timmy who ate more than I imagined would fit in his skinny gut. I finished everything on my plate, but felt compelled to in the way you do when you aren't at home.

My mother took off work the next day to find us a place to live. I realized then why we didn't move to a larger city where there might be greater opportunities. We didn't have much money. Together, my mother and father did all right. Apart, they would struggle.

There was quite a mixture of houses in this neighborhood, some owned, most rented. There were few apartment buildings or tenement houses because the black population was not large enough to support them. This was an older part of town, one of the oldest, developed in the 1930's and 40's during a boom time in the oil fields, then transformed into Black Town as workers left and the black population slowly grew. Apartments were located in old renovated houses which looked disarrayed and neglected. Mother didn't want to live there unless we had too. Other houses had been turned into duplexes, containing three to four rooms on each side.

We found a narrow, four-room frame house for rent four blocks south of our old place. We couldn't have done much better. The house was in poor condition, but it was cheap. The four rooms included one bedroom and a tiny bathroom which had slugs climbing the wall when we moved in, and cracked linoleum curling in at the corners.

"We'll get along fine here," my mother said, and I knew we would. If anything, she was a survivor.

"Why didn't we move in with Grandma and Grandpa?" I asked. "Could save some money that way."

"We need a place of our own," she said sharply. "I'd have to take care of them as well as you."

A tone of resentment toward my grandparents appeared in her voice, one I hadn't heard before and didn't understand.

I was getting used to the bluntness, though, and knew without being able to articulate it, that her language reflected our experience. She felt exposed, and saw no need to censor her expressions. The ugly worn sofa in our new place would look rough and threadbare no matter how many decorative blankets you threw onto it.

I was pleased to discover Sam Rushing lived a few houses down, in a house that looked just like their old one to me. They moved a few months after we left for the country because the landlord raised the rent. Sam was starting on the basketball team now, and I didn't see much of him. One of his older brothers, Smoke Rushing--his real name was Scott, but even the newspaper called him by his nickname--was starring for the high school team. His other brothers hung out. They were a presence in the yard from the first day we moved in, and apparently, there were other high school guys on the block hanging with them. They interested but frightened me to the extent I would not have believed that first day how quickly I was going to get to know them.

We ate out the first night. We drove around town, trying to decide where to go, with little money to spend and little desire to be near people or alone in our new house. We pulled into the Sonic Drive-In and ate our hamburgers in the car.

"Your father and I are separating," Mother said after the food arrived. This was the first time I'd heard her mention him since we left. "I don't know if we are divorcing or not. I can't live with him, so neither can you. He's in no shape to make any decisions right now. He'll come out of it some day. If it's soon, we might try again."

I wanted to speak, but all I had was desire, not words, so my comment made things worse instead of better. "Why don't we move? Go somewhere else?"

My mother restrained herself. She heard hope in my voice and wanted to give it a shock of reality. Instead, she offered a smile of incredulity. Despite her experience and current circumstances, she didn't want to kill a belief in the future in me, even though it seemed as useful as lace curtains to us at the moment. For my sake, she entertained the idea. "We could go back to Kansas City, or maybe pick a new place. But things aren't good in the cities, Aubrey. They're not good anywhere. I couldn't get any better job than I have now. And I'm doing all right." She was working at Safeway now, making a decent union wage. "We'd have to live in an apartment bad as the house we are in. Maybe worse. Only difference would be the crime. Those streets might swallow us both, and no one would notice. At least here we have some people who care." She stopped, stared blankly ahead for a moment, a mixed look of resignation and

determination on her face. "We can't think about the future. Get it out of your head. Go one day, one second at a time. Be glad you've got air to breathe."

I returned to school to discover a pile of make-up work and Mrs. Holcomb awaiting me. I didn't want to return to her class, even though I knew the other English teachers would teach the same material and with less energy. But a calm, tedious classroom appealed to me now.

Her approach was, as always, gentle but firm. After roll, she told the class to talk quietly, and asked me to step into the hall with her.

"Aubrey, I just wanted you to know I'm glad you're back in class, and that I don't believe our disagreement needed to result in a suspension. I was not happy to hear about it because running away from our problems is no way to solve them."

I had never been this close to her. Having such a serious discussion with an adult produced a lot of nervous anxiety in me. I relieved it by looking at everything but her eyes. She was wearing a pink blouse and corduroy skirt, and since it was chilly in our old building, a white sweater covered with little nubs like cotton balls. White hose covered her legs, and on her feet were pink and white high heels. Pink and white, shoes she could only wear with this outfit. Everything matched and fit in Mrs. Holcomb's world; I was an unpaired shoe.

"You know I think you're smart, but you're not going anywhere with this attitude. And there's no reason for us to go back into that classroom if things haven't changed."

Her face was covered with make-up. She smelled like a perfume bottle, the odor so overpowering it made your eyes wince. Her rose-colored lipstick had smudged slightly in the corner of her mouth.

She explained her view of the novel again, and talked about respect. Her long fingernails were pink.

I nearly said, "Yes'm," when she concluded. I didn't hear her question. Instead, I said, "I respect you, Mrs. Holcomb. But I haven't changed my views."

And I still haven't. I have expanded them, though. I know the novel is one of the first attempts to create a distinctly Anglo-American literature. It shows some expansion of the American social conscience. However, it's not Jim's slave status against which Huck rebels, but his removal to New Orleans. The irony and satire are rich at times, and Huck's voice is a work of genius. In addition, the novel also shows a distant, simple, singular, and naive view of African-Americans, which makes it a representative document of its time and place. Simple Jims no doubt existed. But look at the complexity in simple Benjy, Faulkner's white idiot. He is a maze of complication compared with Jim. And if you think Jim a prototype, you

haven't looked closely enough, you haven't thought long enough.

But this is what the novel is to adults, and why it warrants study. To seventh graders, it is a work that's not hard to read, contains an appealing narrator, and uses the word nigger a lot.

CHAPTER XVI

Sitting in class, the person behind me tapped my shoulder and handed me a note. This was the first time I'd received a note since fourth grade, but I knew white kids did this regularly, even in junior high. It read: You were right! You should have asked her if she was going to sell you to New Orleans. Glad you're back!

I didn't know who this was from, and glanced around the room until I saw Lisa Dickerson looking at me, smiling. After class, she came up to me with surprising familiarity. "What'd she say?" she asked.

"Same stuff she said in class. She told me I needed to show more respect."

"I'm surprised she didn't suspend me too."

"For what?"

"Taking your side."

"Oh, yeah."

"I should have made a bigger deal about it."

"What'd we do in class the last three days?"

"She didn't tell you?"

"No. You have to take a zero when you get suspended."

"Really?" Lisa seemed surprised that suspension had consequences. "It was funny. After you left, it seemed less interesting to her. She wasn't nearly as fired up

about it as she is about most stuff. I didn't like it from the very beginning. I thought the whole thing stupid."

"I didn't think it was that bad. I kind of liked Huck. I just--"

"The thing we're reading now is even more stupid. Wait til you see it. I can't remember the name of it." I was ready for Lisa to continue down the hall, alone. Then she looked right at me, and the impression of her face found a soft spot in my mind. She was pretty. She tried to look a bit wild and rebellious which made her more attractive to me. Her lack of refinement gave her features a toughness I found appealing. Her shoulder-length hair was straight but had some body. I didn't like straight hair, the style most white girls preferred. It was too formless, made them look weak and timid. I guess those were the qualities they desired. Even those people whose hair had body tried to straighten it, including black girls. At least half of them at junior high straightened their hair.

But things were changing. A lot of black girls were leaving their hair kinked or styling it in cornrows, to my delight. One girl, Serita Talton, wore her hair in rows and was the most beautiful girl in school, in my opinion. Every feature seemed to add to her form: her hair, high cheekbones, flat nose, narrow chin, dark brown color, and her body which had shape and form. I heard she was smart and talented, but she was going with an eighth grader named

Angelo Sanders, son of Billy Sanders, the Otto Fire Chief, one of the few black men in town who held a position of prominence. Until the late 70's, they were the only black family in town who didn't live on the south side.

But he was from Dallas, not Otto. He played tight end for the University of Oklahoma in the sixties, blocked for Heisman Trophy winner Steve Owens. Another white member of the team, Sid Crouch, a starting defensive tackle, grew up in Otto. After college, he returned to inherit his father's drill bit supply store. He encouraged Billy to come with him, got him a job at the fire station. Billy was handsome, good-natured, and an excellent worker. And he also held no grudge. Because of these things, and because the Otto firemen did not fear an influx of blacks on the staff, competing with them for jobs, he earned promotions, and became chief in 1973.

I stared at Lisa Dickerson. She had a high, broad forehead, which gave her face a look of strength and definition. My eyes slid down her pudgy nose, then up to her green eyes. Her eyelashes looked as long and wild as her hair.

When she spoke again, I was listening. "Want to eat lunch with me?"

I said yes, then watched her walk away until she disappeared in the crowded hall.

You could discern a lot about the white kids by their eating habits. We could not leave campus, yet many of them would not eat cafeteria food. This meant their parents had money and were losing control over them. For many, the food was too vulgar, common, and domestic for their refined fast-food tastes. They could also swipe the leftover lunch money without their parents' knowledge. They would go through the line, pay fifty cents for juice or a shake, so they could get change for the vending machine, then spend the other fifty on potato chips. If they were really hungry, they doubled both.

Some lower class kids did the same thing, or didn't eat at all and used the money for cigarettes. But they were amused by the middle-class kids' habits, thinking the pep club girls didn't eat so they wouldn't get fat. The food wasn't that bad. The kids who got free lunch weren't about to pass it up, and some of them--white, black, and Indian--would have eaten anything because they couldn't predict what they might have to eat when they got home.

Because of this, I assumed Lisa was middle-class when she purchased a chocolate malt and a pack of taco-flavored Doritos. I did the same, so she wouldn't have to sit at a table with me. That was another reason middle-class kids didn't eat cafeteria food. If they didn't have a tray, they could sit anywhere they pleased in the old gymnasium, where

the lunchroom tables were placed, or go outside if the weather allowed.

The temperature was in the fifties on this day, and felt especially warm since it followed a week of cooler weather. We sat on the back steps of the building, facing the gymnasium, apart from but within range of a large gathering of popular people.

It was the day of a home basketball game. Many girls wore navy blue pep club skirts and sweaters; the select few cheerleading outfits. These things looked normal and appropriate to the people in the groups, but silly to the rest of us.

Lisa talked about them the entire lunch period. She was not part of them, but couldn't conduct her life without them, as I was discovering. She was their other side, and as a result, relied on them for her identity.

I didn't listen to everything she said. Even though I was not confident in my identity, I had no desire to join this group. Their only appealing characteristic was their popularity, but they spent all their time trying to maintain it by being nice to people they couldn't stand, and putting down people outside the group they didn't know. They were determined to prove they were alike, and when they detected a difference, treated it like a rupture, expanding it by way of rumor until it forced the person from their group, or the person gave up the distinctive behavior. Sam Rushing was

one of the guys in the group. He was standing in a circle of people, mainly boys, the obvious center of attention because of his prowess and wit. He was potentially the most feared guy on campus, at least to the socialites, because he was the biggest black guy in school. But they loved instead of feared him because he didn't take advantage of it. I didn't discover until some time later that such love did not necessitate respect and acceptance.

Watching him, I experienced about as many confusing thoughts as I do now reflecting on it. He had not become white as a result of his actions. He was Sam Rushing, a personality as well-defined as anyone my age, one which was not easily influenced by the people around him.

But he was part of a group of white guys. The only other black in the group was a skinny boy named Clarence Young, who made the basketball team but never got to play. A lot of guys complained about the selection of the team. They claimed the team would have been all black had a black man been coach, claiming if two guys were close in ability, the white would be selected.

Sam and Clarence were the only two blacks within my range of vision--Angelo Sanders, the other black starter, was usually in their company but not today. Seeing them from this distance, surrounded by whites, made them look white to me, as if they were dissolving themselves and their color by becoming part of this white mass.

"I heard Sam and Scarlet Davis are going together secretly. Do you know?"

"No." Scarlet was a white girl, considered to be a bit weird but still part of the pep club.

"You know Sam, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Could you find out?"

"I might. I don't see him a lot since he's so involved in sports."

"He's funny. I've got him in art class. He even makes Mr. Milligan laugh. And he's really good-looking for a black guy. I mean, he's just real good-looking."

I saw Timmy and Nathan with a groups of guys in the distance, coming around the back of the gym. "I gotta go," I said.

"Why?" she asked, touching my arm. The feel of her hand momentarily dispersed the other thoughts from my mind. But Timmy was coming my way, so I stood up.

"I gotta get my homework assignments for my next class."

"You want to do this again tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure. We'll see."

I didn't show the next day. Instead, I had lunch with the boys, and couldn't stop myself from asking about Sam and Scarlet.

"You goddamn right, they together," Nathan said. "He fucking her already."

"You don't know," Timmy said. "Me and Sam tighter than you. I known him since grade school."

"So? He don't have no care for skinny niggers now. He gettin' that white thang. And it look good too. Like to take a bite outta that ass."

You could feel the admiration rise, as palpable as the stench of hamburgers in the air, in response to Sam's accomplishment. We didn't talk much about white girls, but the idea of Sam going with Scarlet was special. It was like he was openly stealing from the rich whites and getting away with it. We didn't know Scarlet's family wasn't rich.

Talking about Sam and Scarlet made me think of my parents, of the attention they must have received. Any two people could go together without making news, except a white and black. Most guys lusted after Leslie Harjo, a Native American cheerleader. No one thought it odd that Tony Migliorino was dating Kathy O'Brien. But you couldn't kiss a black.

These thoughts further affirmed my feelings of belonging to the black world. I knew many people couldn't discern my identity looking at me. In two second semester classes I didn't know anyone, and the whites around me interacted with me much more readily than the two other blacks. My skin looked to light to be black, but my hair

too curly for an Indian. They might have thought I was Mexican, I don't know. But the reaction to Sam and Scarlet, even news of their relationship wasn't true, made me see the repulsion most whites still felt toward blacks, and made me more determined to affirm my black identity.

"You deaf, Choco?" Nathan was talking. He had been calling me Choco, short for chocolate milk, for a few weeks.

"What?"

"You heard me. I seen you with that white girl in the hall. You think she give you some? Shiiit. You can't get white or black, too goddamned ugly. Maybe old Indian squaw give you some."

"Why don't you shut up, you nappy-headed, crusty-eyed motherfucker," I said. Thinking of such things made me angry, and I didn't feel like taking any of Nathan's shit. Talking about his hair or his poverty was the easiest way to put him down; he didn't spend much time in the bathroom before school. "Why don't you pick that shit out? Bet you can't get a pick through it. Need some battery acid to comb that shit."

He touched his hair out of embarrassment, then said, "Guess you wanting your zebra ass whupped. Need to thump all that high and mighty white blood outta ya. Then you still be only half-nigger. Walk around like this." He stood up and walked, dragging his left leg, left arm dangling at his side.

"That's just the way you walk, monkey-faced whore. Your mama's Bigfoot, and your daddy's King Kong. You be dragging your ugly ass around like that the rest of your life, begging from white people downtown. Please help a poor ugly orangutan-looking, jungle-lost, no-necked motherfucker."

"I'll be giving half to you to keep your slobbering, wino-stinking, bat-breath away from me. I be going please give to help a poor chocolate milk, Oreo cookie, half-baked and all ugly motherfucker from starving to death. You so ugly, no honkey or nigger want you around. You think talking to that white girl make you different? She only do it cause she too dumb to know what you are. They hate you worse than any ugly-assed nigger cause you what give them nightmares. That's why your old man went crazy out in the country. Them hicks probably shoot him, put him out of his misery."

I regret my next move. I let him get the best of me, a sign of defeat. I walked calmly up to him and punched him in the face. But I knew I was fighting for me, not my father.

I wasn't aware of the fury built up inside me. I was getting the best of Nathan, who was a tough son-of-a-bitch, before two teachers pulled us apart.

As they led us out of the gym to the principal's office, we passed a group of pep club girls, who looked at

us and snickered. I broke the teacher's grip on my arm and ran at them. They huddled like deer, too frightened to move. "We gonna get ya when we get back. Gonna spit nigger blood in your ears. It don't wash out."

The teacher was so shocked she was afraid to touch me, but when she did, I didn't resist. Nathan was amused. My actions had just earned his respect. The principal called my mother this time, and gave me a week's suspension.

CHAPTER XVII

My mother was not pleased, but I didn't tell her the cause of the fight. She knew I was going through a tough time, and assumed school was more of a hindrance at the moment than a challenge. Instead of cracking down on me, she gave me some distance. She let me stay home during the week, instead of going to Aunt Tamra's, but told me this would be my last suspension.

The neighborhood had changed since we left for the country. Or maybe I changed. Or maybe both. It seemed to have a sharper edge. Little kids stayed in the yard because the streets were busy. There were more people and cars coming and going, a lot of young men, full of energy and desire, hanging out.

Sam Rushing's yard was the main hangout on our block. His mother, Wilma Rushing, a big, heavy, forceful woman, tried to disperse them at times, but Smoke, Sam's oldest brother, told her if they didn't hang there, they'd go somewhere else--a parking lot, a street corner, places trouble was more likely to appear. I noticed the gathering the second day we were in our new place, but waited a few days until I saw Sam outside before I risked an appearance.

There were seven of them, excluding me and Sam, all high school age, standing around the family's old Ford

Torino. I only knew two, both Sam's brothers: Roshon, a junior, who had a thick head and neck, and long arms, and Smoke, a senior, whose body was so well-proportioned and his movements so smooth it hurt to watch him. He looked lean and strong, like a whip. His features seemed to taper to a precise and intended point--his long fingers, his hard jaw, even his flat nose. He acted as if he knew the place where human grace and desire met--a place the rest of us blindly longed for--but also knew you could only reach it through movements as controlled as his. The others talked loudly, their words flapping off in fits and starts like the sparrows drinking from small pools collected in the pot holes; Smoke's volume was that of a mumble, yet you heard every word.

I was a tangled knot of nerves that stretched my skin so tightly it produced a silly smile on my face I couldn't remove. They didn't respond to me for a long time. Sam smiled when I walked up, but I got the idea you couldn't talk unless you spoke to the group, so we didn't say much. An Earth, Wind, and Fire tape played in the car's 8-track player as they talked about sports and girls, then ragged on one another for a while.

Finally, one of them, an ugly, skinny guy with nappy hair and a cigarette tucked behind one ear, looked at me and said, "Who dis?"

They looked at me, but no one said anything. "Can you talk?" Roshon asked.

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"Tell the motherfucker your name."

"Aubrey."

"Aubrey? What kind of funky name is that?" I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't think he talks. Bet he sucks dicks instead." I glanced at Sam and Smoke, waiting for someone to come to my defense. But, of course, none did.

"He awful pale for a nigger," another said.

"His daddy white," Roshon said.

"No shit. Thought whities killed all zebra motherfuckers in this town. Took them to the dog pound and shot 'em."

"He live with his mama in that tiny house, two down. She one fine old lady. Like to move in and be your daddy, boy. Like to--"

"Shut up, Roshon," Smoke said.

There was a pause. "Who you think you talking to?" Roshon asked weakly, as if his tongue was the only part of him wanting to speak. Smoke didn't say a word, just glared at him, his face as fixed and hard as a car grill.

"Hope Roshon be no one's daddy," Sam offered. Even he was tentative in this group, which surprised me. He was as big as half the guys there.

"What you know, fool?" Roshon slapped him lightly. When Sam tried to tap him back, I saw why he was tentative. Roshon slapped him twice, then put him in a headlock. Sam yelped, and broke away holding his nose.

"Sorry, motherfucker!" He picked up a rock.

"This shit will stop," Smoke said. "Stupid niggers. The both of ya." Just then an old gray Buick Skylark full of brothers pulled up. "Ya'll be cool," Smoke said, walking toward them. The one in the passenger seat was wearing a worn blue-gray fedora with a red band. In this neighborhood, you had to piece cool together; there wasn't enough money to do it right. Smiling, he rubbed his thumb and forefinger. Smoke leaned on the car, and glancing to the side, dropped something into the guy's lap.

The guy examined it as they talked for a while, then they slapped hands as the car pulled away, Smoke's hand curled around something in his palm which he slid into his front pocket.

Sam had already turned and walked around the side of the house. I followed, aware something had happened, but unsure of the contents of the exchange.

The calm of the backyard felt good. The grass, worn to dust in front, was just starting to grow in back. Bed sheets draped the clothesline. A couple of small baseball gloves and a ball with a ripped cover lay near the concrete back steps, which had a long crack running down the side.

"Stupid-ass Roshon," Sam said. "Gonna fuck him up some day."

I felt like a five-year-old. There was nothing I could say or do to commiserate. I knew Roshon had done worse to him, and only restrained himself because he was afraid of Smoke. I was more interested in asking about Smoke, but didn't dare bring it up.

"Good thing Smoke's around," I said, feeling like a chump soon as I said it. "He's cool."

"Had 27 Tuesday night. Burning from everywhere. They gonna win the conference."

"How ya'll doin'?"

"Okay. 5 and 5. Smoke says all we need is a ballhandler. You quick, Aubrey. Should have played when you was younger."

"Roshon ever play sports?"

"Naw. Too fuckin' clumsy. Could've played football, but too damn wild even for that. Wanted to play the whole field all at once."

"He and Smoke ever get into it?"

"Used to, but Roshon know better. Smoke fucked him up good one time. That was the last lesson Roshon needed."

"He's bigger than Smoke. Looks like he could take him."

"Shit. You ain't seen Smoke fight. Quick. He shoulda been a boxer." Sam threw a few quick jabs in the air.

"Bip, bip, bip. On you before you know what's up. And when they land they mean something. That's what he told me about fighting. When you know you in one, get it on. Don't wait."

"That why they call him Smoke?"

"What?"

"Cause he so quick."

"Smoke ain't quick, fool. You never see a fire?"

"Then why do they?" I paused. "Cause he so black?"

Sam didn't speak. He glanced at the house. We could hear loud talk and laughter. "I ain't told many people this. Smoke got burned in seventh grade. He was a big stud in sports, and one day after school, some white punks cornered him back of the gym. Said they wanted to see how big his dick was. Smoke asked 'em did they want to suck it. They jumped him, pulled his pants down. They told him they gonna cut it off, then one dude squirted him with lighter fluid and dropped a match on him. They took off, 'cept one dude. He pulled his shirt off and put the fire out. Smoke was burned pretty bad, but could've been worse."

He paused, glanced again at the house. We couldn't hear anything, and Sam lowered his voice when he continued. "They brought the white kids in who done it, but they claimed they didn't know about the lighter fluid. It was just the one kid's idea. He never came back to school, and his old man said he'd gone to live with his aunt in Texas."

Guess he did cause no one saw him again. They suspended the others for a week. That was it."

"They call him Smoke for that? Don't that make him mad?"

"Roshon started it to piss him off. Called him Smokey the Bear, then just Smoke. Smoke beat hell out of him, but Roshon so dumb he forget and do it again. Did it a few times at school, and other kids started using it. Smoke said it didn't catch on til that white sportswriter, Edgin, heard Roshon say it at a ball game. He thought it was cool, and without asking nobody, used it as if it were his real name. Even put it in the headline. Smoke Burns the Cords. White folks saw it, and it stuck. Smoke said he didn't like it, but he saw it made whites scared of him. They think he some kind of mysterious dude with that name. That why he don't say much. He said he still remembers what that fire feel like, and don't want to it to happen again. If they scared of him, maybe it won't."

"Damn. What's his real name?"

"Scott."

"Scott?"

"Don't call him that, less you want a fight. And don't tell nobody what I told ya."

The back door opened, and Sam's oldest sister, Yolanda, who was a year younger than Roshon, said, "Sam, get in here 'fore supper gets cold. Bring Aubrey, too, if he hungry."

"You hungry?"

"Naw. I'll get something at home."

"Might as well eat here. Them dudes in front will. Eat here half the time."

"How's your mama feed ya'll?"

"I don't know. She got that job, working as a maid at a motel. Yolanda working there too now. The old man send us some when he in a good mood. Rosa next door bring some over when she got extra. Get some from the government, food stamps and shit. You saw how Smoke get his."

"Your mom know what he doin'?"

"Yeah. He tell her he don't when she asks, but she know. She ask him how cool dope gonna be in jail. He say prison bars can't hold Smoke. She say white prisons can."

I followed Sam inside, even though I wasn't going to eat with them. I didn't want to leave for some reason. When I was younger, I went into Sam's house a few times, but we usually played near Timmy's house to get away from the older kids.

But now, even though the number of guys set my nerves on edge, I wanted to be there. The place was alive. Bodies were everywhere, coming and going, your head surrounded by voices that put you on alert for a moment, but then made you feel protected. Little Artis, the youngest, a first grader, sat at the table crying. The head of his plastic Mickey Mouse doll had popped off. I picked it up to repair

it; he cried louder. Sam's mother, a big woman in a cotton dress, big enough it seemed to hold every child on her lap at once, stood at the stove beside Yolanda, stirring a pot.

The boys were in the front room. Most, including Roshon, were already eating, steaming bowls of beans and rice. Some wanted ketchup on it; Roshon preferred Tabasco.

"Get up, punk," Sam said to one of Roshon's friends on the brown sofa. "This my house."

"Fuck you, fool." He stopped, looked toward the kitchen. "I's here first."

I sat down on the floor.

"Sam sit down," Roshon said.

"I ain't sitting on no hard floor in my own house."

"Then stand, fool. But get out of the way." The TV was on, an old Beverly Hillbillies rerun playing. The show came on at 6:30, before prime time started, on one of the three Oklahoma City stations we could get. Roshon rarely missed it. "Goddammit, Sam," he continued. "I miss any more this show, you gonna know what pain is."

"I ain't sitting on the floor. You bring all these raggedy niggers over. You sit on the floor."

"Who you calling raggedy, chump?"

"Possum-breathed, nappy-haired, bug-eyed sucker."

"Roshon, hold my bowl. I'm gonna kick his ass. Can't believe you let your little brother run this place."

"Shut up, all ya'll!"

Mrs. Rushing appeared at the door. "Sam, get in here and get you a bowl. Where's Scott?" She was the only one who didn't call Smoke by his nickname.

"He took off," Roshon mumbled. "Said he'd eat later."

"He gonna be sorry as his daddy. Wait and see. Aubrey, come on, son, get you a bowl."

"My mama's cooking supper."

"Huh?"

"My mama's cooking supper," I said.

"Then why you here?" Roshon asked. I shrugged, smiled. "This ain't no TV show."

"Sure it is Jethro," Sam said.

"You ugly as Jethrene," Roshon said.

"Funky niggers slurping, what it be called," Alishia said, coming into the room. My nerves calmed for a moment as I stared at her. I hadn't seen her in a while. A ninth grader, she went to the mid-high.

She had changed. She was always cute, but she turned into a woman since I saw her last. She was wearing old faded clothes--a thin floral-pattern blouse and a pair of jeans--but she made them look like the latest fashion. Every guy in the room, except Roshon, was staring at her.

"I think this Oreo here don't have no brain. He can't hardly talk," I heard Roshon say.

"That must be what wrong with Jethro. He dumb as a fucking tire tool."

"If Aubrey didn't have no black blood in him, he just walk around with his head swinging like a retarded cat."

"Aubrey? That his name?"

"Yeah, fool. You deaf?"

"What kind of fucked up name is that?"

"God damn," Roshon said. "You dumb as Jethro."

"What?"

"We talked about that not thirty minutes ago."

"When?"

"In the front yard, fool!"

"Oh. Well, what kind of fucked up name is it?"

"It's better than your fucked up name." I didn't even know what his was. Roshon laughed.

"Say what?"

"I'm smarter than all you dumb asses."

"Says who?"

"Says me."

"Aubrey is smart," Alishia said. "Sam said so." The sound of my name on her tongue made my heart quicken.

"He don't sound smart to me. They think he smart at school cause he half-white. He still got a fucked-up name."

"Fuck you, blanket head!"

"Blanket head?!" Roshon was giggling at my attempt to make a showing. "What the fuck that mean, you two-toned motherfucker?"

"Mean his head so cold, cause it so empty."

They all burst into laughter. Roshon giggled so hard he had to set his bowl on the floor. "Blanket head. God damn, you quick, son. Little Richard Pryor."

I earned some respect for trying. But I quickly became more disappointed by my proximity to the TV than by my wit's failure. Sitting closer to the set than Alishia prevented me from gazing at her the way the other fools did on the other side of the room. Talk slowed as we watched the show. Jethro wanted to be a sculptor. He carved a boulder down to the size of a stone, disappointed that the sculpture didn't emerge. Roshon had to explain to his friends why that was funny, and said it was a damn shame he had to hang with a bunch of dumb asses.

After the show, I went into the kitchen. Sam was sitting at the small table with his mother and Yolanda, Artis, and Carlotta, a third grader. Sam's father, who lived in Chickasha--or as the family put it, stayed in Chickasha--left a year after Sam's birth, stayed gone five years. He returned for a couple of years, fathered the two youngest children--all the kids were his --then left again. I don't know what he did for money. Rumor was he worked most of the time, but couldn't quit

gambling. This same rumor said he came back to Otto to escape trouble. When he thought things cooled, he left.

Family break-ups bothered me then, still bother me now. I didn't yet understand the plight of black men in our neighborhood, but I was becoming aware of their low numbers. Most families in the neighborhood were headed by a single mother. The only explanation I heard was men were sorry.

I was still a young man, more boy in fact than man, and the awareness of missing people bothered me. It made me mad that I didn't know my Uncle Julius, never seen or heard from him, and now it made me mad that Sam's father was gone. Their presence was felt, but only through their absence. As I became accustomed to my new house, I began to feel the same things toward my missing father.

Mrs. Rushing and Yolanda were talking when I came in, but stopped when they saw me. Sam had repaired Artis's Mickey Mouse doll, and was encouraging him to finish his food. Sam was something else. I wished those white chumps at school knew what his life was like compared to theirs. But it did have one advantage. He knew what struggle meant, which I'm sure helped his intensity on the field.

"Aubrey, how's your mama?" Mrs. Rushing asked.

"She all right."

"She going through hard times, I know."

"I ain't even gonna look for a man," Yolanda said.

"Won't be none looking for you," Sam said, smiling.

"What you know, all-star? Who paid for that food?"

"Ya'll hush up," Mrs. Rushing said. "Aubrey, you tell her to come up here and see me soon. She don't need to be staying in that house alone, keeping it all to herself." She reached over and wiped Carlotta's mouth. It made me feel good to be around so many people, especially little ones, and for the first time, I understood why some families had so many kids.

CHAPTER XVIII

One evening, late in April, my mother went outside after supper to sit on the porch and enjoy the calm, warm, peaceful weather. We didn't have a swing, so she sat on an old lawn chair with worn, tattered strands she found cheap at a junk sale. She bought one for me, but I rarely used it because I normally hung out at Sam's until dark.

This night I was staying in, to study for two big tests the next day in English and science. I was holding my own in school, but my grades were nothing like those I received in elementary school. My mother attributed the drop to the turmoil of our home life. As things calmed down, I'd do better. She didn't talk much about my father, except that he had gone back to work, which was a good sign. I didn't think as much about him, and when I did, only became confused. I was trying to get used to the idea that he was gone, and might not come back.

I agreed with my mother about the drop in my grades, even though I knew the main reason was because I wasn't working as hard. Listening to the older brothers at Sam's talk about their future also made me begin to wonder what good it would do for a black man to excel at school.

I was supposed to take a bath before I studied. Mother was going to help me later with the English. The test was

on literature, which always seemed to be guesswork to me, and required a great deal of short term memorization. The science I had a handle on. It operated by rules, which appealed to me more than I realized because of their certainty. Science was more like math, but I preferred it to math because it focused on living things. Delving into a world with identifiable parts and predictable outcomes was a pleasant experience.

I left the bathroom before bathing, covered only by a towel, because the shampoo bottle was empty, and I couldn't find another one. I walked into the front room, and was about to ask my mother through the window when I saw Smoke walking into our yard. I was delighted whenever I saw him, sharing his control and confidence vicariously. He approached the house in as cool a saunter as you can imagine, not exaggerated like a brash, cocky nigger, but so controlled and restrained it looked as natural as the Afro on his head, yet as studied as the movement of a dancer. Then I realized who the audience for this performance was, and my identification stopped abruptly.

"Shame a fine woman like you have to sit all by yourself on a nice evening like this," he said.

I thought he might be delivering a message from his mother, but when the meaning of his words hit me, and I saw the glint in his eye, I knew his intent. For a moment, I felt guilty, as if I had committed the most horrid act of my

life. Then I became so angry I nearly bolted out the door. My nakedness was the only thing that stopped me.

Fortunately, I didn't have to feel defenseless very long. Before Smoke got another word out, my mother snapped his coolness off like a dry twig.

"What the hell you think you doing? Coming down here talking trash to me, a woman old enough to be your mother?"

"Hold up. I ain't talking--"

"The hell you ain't! How much you bet them boys you'd come down here and score off the single nigger woman? You must think you something."

He hadn't taken another step since she started talking. "I don't know what you getting at? I just got bored with the brothers, thought I'd come down here and be neighborly. Make some conversation."

"You wouldn't know conversation from a hole in the roof. Come down here with that smooth walk and that cocky smile. That might charm the panties off them teenage girls, but I don't want none of it. And I can tell ya now, them high school girls see right through you too. If they give you any time, it's only cause you the best dog in the pound. Considering them dogs hang out at your place, that ain't saying much."

I had never heard my mother go off on someone like this. She argued with my father with equal force, but not in the same kind of voice. She had dressed Smoke down so

quickly and decisively, he looked like a little boy who left his Christmas toy out in the rain. He never held the same esteem in my mind after that day, which was as much my fault for trying to see so much in him. I wanted to say, "Go on, Mama!"

When he spoke again, his voice was different. "Maybe I do want to talk. Just have conversation."

"All right," Mother said, surprising me once more. She picked up the folded chair next to her, hurled it at his feet. He was still a good twenty-five feet away. "Sit. Then talk." He looked at her seriously for a moment before his face broke into that same wily, good-natured smile. "What I thought," Mother said. "You ain't got nothing to say, 'less it's a line."

"Don't start that shit again!" he said, his face now genuinely serious.

"I'm just getting started. You came in my yard, Junior. I'm only telling you what your mama's told ya a thousand times. But the only words you listen to from her are breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Maybe if you hear it from somewhere else you'll see she ain't lying. Your daddy's no good. Even if he was, you'd buck him too cause you so cool you ain't taking directions from nobody. Someone say right, you gonna go left, even if that way lead right to the Pen."

"God damn, all you old women think about is jail? I hear that every day of my life. Make a man want to go just

so he can say, 'Look, you old hags, you was right. We all in jail. Now shut up.'

"We say it cause that's where half the men we see end up. They got a place for cool daddies. Called Big Mac. Rooms available, no charge." Big Mac meant the state penitentiary in McAlester.

"And it's the white man turning the key." For the first time, Mama didn't say anything. "That's where they want us. Won't give us no jobs. Won't let us live on the same block. Think we should be happy with minimum wage, eat dirt, save our pennies. For what? 'So you can get ahead, like us,' they say. Well, it take a hundred pennies to make a dollar. You save a hundred a month, end of the year you have twelve dollars! Easy street, here we come!" My mother still didn't speak. "You thought I was a dumb nigger. You think all them brothers in Big Mac are dumb niggers. Sisters think just like the white man. But most of them niggers are down there cause they look at what they got and say, 'Shit, might as well have a good time while we can. Better than slaving the rest of my life for nothing. They throw me in jail, fuck it. Least the white man be paying for it. And he pay a hell of a lot more to keep you there than he ever pay to help you when you free.'"

"So he still got that chain around your neck, waiting to haul you in. You still a slave, what you saying."

"Maybe so."

"He may want it that way, but that ain't the way it's gotta be. You can't do nobody no good in jail. Look what your mama's doing. She carrying all ya'll on her back. It ain't much, but she doing it. You can't take care of yourself. Soon as you see it's a struggle, you ready to bail out."

"Bail out from what? This boat's already sunk. Where you see niggers working in this town? They take 'em at the mill, but you start at minimum wage and it take a long time to work up from there. And they got a waiting list now a mile long. There's the brick plant, but they still don't let niggers do nothing there but stack and sweep up. Then there's cooking or cleaning or working on a garbage truck. That's good work for a nigger in this place, and it's fuckin' 1977. We supposed to arrived, you listen to 'em on TV." He paused. "There's a few working for the city, like Charles Winrow, but not many. Whites see one or two, they think we all getting good jobs, think the town's integrated. But soon as we try, they cut it off, saying, 'Whoa, that's too many. Ya'll trying to take over.' So what do you want all these dumb niggers to do?"

"Go to college."

"Shit."

"What else can you do? There ain't a lot of opportunities, but there sure ain't none in jail. You get a degree, you'll get a job. You may have to knock on a

hundred doors, it may take you ten times as many tries as a white person to find someone who will hire a black. But when you do, even if you start at the very bottom, that bottom's gonna be better than minimum wage. You'll have something then, and you can help your struggling mama who's done so much for you. And when you have a family, you'll do better for them, then think of the chances your kids will have."

"You done mapped out the rest of my life."

"That's the real world, Dr. Cool. You can't have it the way you want it. You see just a few opportunities, and that ain't enough, so you want to throw them all away. But if you go to jail, you stop everything. You can't help nobody there. And those that come after you won't have it any better than you got it. The only way to make it better is find some way to get in. That's why my boy's not out tonight. He's in there studying. He's going to college. I told him the same things I'm telling you. It still ain't fair, it ain't equal, it ain't right, but it's the way it is. If I can help him find a door to get through, then his children will have a better time. But even if they don't, even if it takes another four hundred years to get things right, what choice we got? You go to the mill, you go to jail, or you go to college."

"If college such a good idea, why didn't you go? I know they was letting niggers in then. You ain't that old."

That stopped the conversation. It was obvious she didn't want to answer. "It ain't none of your business--"

"That's what I thought. You old folks all the same."

"But I'll tell you anyway. College was just a dream to us, a way-out dream. No one from this neighborhood went to college. When I decided I was going, most folks thought I was crazy, told me so, as if I was putting on airs or something just for trying. My folks thought the same thing. But I went, surprised 'em all. Did pretty well. Don't know how we paid for it. The next year my sister graduated. She wanted to go to college. She hadn't worked in high school like I had, but thought if I could do it, she could too. My folks and most other people in the neighborhood still thought I was trying to be superior by going. So they wanted to send Tamra too. Couldn't pay for us both, don't know they could pay another year for one. So I didn't go back. That was before the government gave you much help. They said they'd save so we could both go, but couldn't never save enough. My mama and daddy, bless their souls. They wanted us to do well, but be the same." She paused. "And now I got that job at Safeway, only black person in the store, and people now saying I'm white. Well, how else we gonna move up? That's where the jobs are. Juanita Thompson just got that job as operator at Southwestern Bell, only black there, and she hearing the same thing. Maybe we're just tokens, but I still don't see what choice we have.

I've got the best job I can find for my family, and when an opening comes up, I'm going to try to help people I know." She paused again. "Don't tell Aubrey none of this. Even about me and Tamra. I just told him we couldn't afford it."

"I'd be mad if I was you."

"They'll be a lot more in life than that to make you mad. Just wait. Life ain't nothing but a struggle, all the way through. And you got a chance. I know some college is gonna want you to play ball for them."

"Yeah," Smoke said, dejected.

"Why you say it like that?"

"I wanted to go big time. OU, OSU. Somewhere. But I know I ain't gonna get offers 'cept from small schools in this state."

"So."

"Just ain't the same. Long old bus rides to small towns just like the one you came from. Ain't got hardly any chance of going pro." He glanced at his house, as if he were divulging the family secrets. "What kicks me is I thought until last summer I would go to a big school. I done well in high school, outplayed everyone on the court. Wasn't any trouble for me to school the boys in town, so I thought I could do it to anyone. Then last summer I went up to the college and played pick-up with some of their players. They schooled me like a chump. First day, I bet I didn't get one shot of clean. And I was twenty feet from

the hole. They just played so much quicker than I was used to. It was like my mind could keep up, but my body wasn't used to it. After a while, I got the feel for it, but then when I'd get open, I was moving so much faster than normal I'd just throw up a brick. I was so mad I came home and beat up Roshon. I was ready to quit, just smoke dope the rest of my life." He stopped suddenly as if he admitted something mistakenly, then realized my mother was aware of his habits. "I went back in a couple of weeks, kept going back. By the end of the summer, I was doing better. But I still had a long way to go. And I knew it was too far to catch up with the brothers who go big time."

"So what, you don't play pro ball. You can get your schooling paid for. You understand what a chance that is."

"But I ain't no good in school. It's boring. I don't have the first idea what I'd do. I ain't no good in math or science or English. They might as well say they got job openings for people who build spaceships. If you can build one, we got all the jobs you want. If you can't, go get in line at the mill."

"You can learn. You can start right now. Bring your work down here, I'll help you."

"I can't catch up with that. They been passing me through since I was a sophomore, same way they pass everybody through so they don't have to look at you no more."

"What about coaching? You could go into that."

"You never quit, do ya?"

"No, and I ain't going to. And neither should you."

A car horn sounded, and Smoke glanced toward his house.

"I need to go up and see these boys." He folded the chair and laid it gently on the porch next to my mother. "I'm gonna tell them brothers I was a fool for coming down here. But you still one fine-looking woman. That white man leaving you just shows what fools white folks are."

Mother stood up and came back into the house. I sprinted toward the bathroom, and nearly panicked. I forgot to turn the faucet off, and the floor was full of water.

CHAPTER XIX

That summer, my mother left me under the jurisdiction of Aunt Tamra, but gave me freedom to stay home some days if I wished. I didn't see my father again until July. He came by one evening to see our place, and borrow some money. He was doing odd jobs for people through tips he received from a lumber yard. He wasn't making much, but it was better than what he was doing when we left.

Mama talked with him for some time in the kitchen. When he came out, he spoke to me briefly, patted my back, but then started to become emotional and left.

That night, after supper, Mama told me they were going to remain separated but weren't planning a divorce. Apparently, my father wanted to reunite, but admitted he had not worked out the problems that led to the separation. He still wanted to make a go of the place in the country, but Mama had no desire to return to that house, saw it as part of the problem. She thought he needed to sort through his thoughts and feelings, about everything, and said it would be better for him to live a while without us so he could see if he really wanted to be part of our lives. The separation would allow her to make the same assessment. She admitted to me she still loved him but was unsure about their future.

I know both of them must have been rethinking their

entire relationship, which for them meant reconsiderations of race. For the first time, I realized life does not go in a straight line, but in a circle, or maybe a series of circles. They had been married for 13 years, but to me it seemed like they were right back where they started, trying to decide if they wanted to spend their lives together. They were at the same place, but now seeing it with eyes tinged by the past, judgements weighted by experience.

It was a warm night, the air still laden with the day's heat and humidity. After my father left, we remained in the small front room, as if movement would disturb his presence, which we hadn't felt for a while. The fan in the corner pushed the air across our skin, its humming noise keeping the neighborhood chatter, which I preferred to the country's quiet, at some distance.

After Mama told me the status of her relationship with my father, she kept talking, and for a rare occasion allowed reflection to stir the reserves of sentiment deep within her. That night, for the first time, I heard the story of my parents' relationship.

The place was Tuckman's Cafe, a greasy-spoon on the west end of Main, still open, which served factory workers, oil field hands and retired men who needed a place to talk in the mornings and late afternoons. My mother began working there as a bus girl after school during her senior year to earn money for college. She would have started

sooner, she said, if she had known how much college cost. When her English teacher at Dunbar helped her acquire the local college's brochures and application forms, she was shocked to see the price of tuition. Seeing her parents' reaction made her feel like someone left a window open on a January night, and for the first time she felt the fear of the inevitable: a college education would remain an unrealized dream.

She worked as many hours as she could, and impressed her employers, who, like nearly every white in town, believed blacks were undisciplined and lazy. There was only one hope of advancement: to cook. She could not wait tables because blacks could not come into close contact with the white customers. Blacks could cook, many did in town, but in most places had to prove they were clean and capable before being allowed to prepare the food. Blacks could not eat in the restaurant, nor in any place in town that served white customers, but could pick up orders at the back door.

I was shocked by these details. I knew about segregation, Martin Luther King, and the Civil Rights Movement, but had never placed them in the context of my mother's life. She explained the Jim Crow laws to me, a term I often heard but never fully understood. For the first time, I realized how different the world of my childhood was from my mother's. She had a similar

realization, and was surprised by how much she assumed, by how much needed to be taught.

To her the world was not much different. The color line was officially removed, but past segregation hung on tenaciously and imperceptibly, like the roots of a dismantled oak tree. My younger eyes knew a changed world. The rigid demarcations were gone. Their absence had not yet spawned abundant opportunities, but forced integration removed the visible restraints that impeded my mother. She said at times she preferred the past because then you knew where the lines of resistance lay. But if you were fighting for greater freedom, the removal of those boundaries was a sign of progress, even if such a victory made the new lines more difficult to perceive.

Bud Tuckman was a sallow man with a drawn, wrinkled face, greasy hair and heavy eyes that sagged beneath his slanted thick-lensed glasses. A chain-smoker, he held a cigarette continuously between his thin, purplish lips or his arthritic fingers. He never seemed to light one out of desire for the smoke, Mother said, but out of a fearful dismay that he didn't have one. A wince accompanied the first drag, the same grimace that appeared each morning when he turned the closed sign to open.

Freedom was not a privilege Tuckman enjoyed. Mother did not know why such a man would start his own business, but he became a more devoted servant to it than he could to

most employers. He opened the cafe every day, and found an excuse each August to avoid the vacation his wife Carol, a beehived redhead with lips more purple than her husband's, was planning.

Tuckman accepted the idea of his race's superiority with the same fateful resignation with which he acknowledged the inevitability of sunrise. It was not an occurrence he particularly liked. He would have gladly changed it had he the power and the imagination, but there was nothing he could do about it. He exercised his humanity through the form of questions. He never told Mother to do anything, always asked, but would have reacted to her refusal with equal incredulity to news the Earth stopped turning.

He offered Mother the position of full-time cook the day after she graduated high school. She had only flipped a few hamburgers in emergencies to this point, but he was so impressed by her work habits he knew she would adjust to the new job quickly. He thought this quite an offer to a colored girl who just turned eighteen, and was surprised when she turned him down. She planned to attend college in the fall, and would not have time for a full-time day job. She did not even want to try it for the summer, even though it would have provided her with a little more money for school.

Tuckman thought it a shame she could not wait tables. Her figure, pretty smile, and pleasant personality would

have earned her a great deal more in tips than she could ever make behind the counter. And she would have attracted more business to the cafe, he figured, in spite of the increase in coffee refills supplied the men who would have lingered another thirty minutes.

Many white men thought my mother attractive, even though she did not think many whites fantasized about blacks--in the same way, she did not know many blacks who dreamed of whites. She told me the ancestors of Oklahomans were not slave owners, but white trash, to use the South's term, that was blown across the plains for any number of economic reasons. In fact, this made the term white trash rarely used by these people, who liked to think of themselves and their neighbors as equally common. Thus, they did not have past intimacy with blacks or yearnings for slavery's return to inspire their personal desires. As sharecroppers, they knew segregation from blacks, and wanted to keep things that way.

The white men at Tuckman's appreciated Mother's appearance because of her lighter brown color and straightened hair. If her skin was darker, they wouldn't have given her a second look. They had plenty of time to watch her because nearly every item of the cafe's operation, including the grill, resided behind the long counter, which had a gap in the middle for employee traffic, in open view of the customers. Only the dishwasher and one storage

freezer were hidden behind swinging doors at the back, and the men often struck up a conversation with my mother, the bus girl, many even sneaking her a cheap tip as a way of expressing their affection, a practice which inspired frequent hostility and complaints from the older, gum-smacking white waitresses.

These approaches never went past the form of mild flirtation. Mother was never touched or pinched, never received anything remotely resembling a compliment or suggestive offer. Any attention made her feel uncomfortable at first because she was unsure of the proper reaction. No response meant she might be extremely timid, but her good looks conveyed a natural confidence, which in turn made silence look like haughtiness. Responses that showed too much confidence were as big a problem. Avoiding these reactions dictated a humble approach which made the job a daily routine in mild but sustained debasement.

But she wanted the job, so she learned to find a blend between humility and confidence. Such training could have made her a successful actress, she said. She did not enjoy these concerns, but endured them, sustained by the hope they were short-term. Otherwise, she was sure she would have been fired within the first year.

After the second year, she became a full-time cook. She confided in me the story of her experience with college, the one I overheard her relate to Smoke some months back.

Her tone was bitter in this telling. Each remembrance of her parents' decision, of their insistence of fairness and their implied belief college was for white folks, made her both love and disrespect them more, she said. But she assumed her decisions would eventually have the same effect on me. I protested. She smiled, and went on.

Her dreams checked, hopes dismantled, she became more effusive than at any time in her life. This was not a calculated decision, but a defensive response to the dismay of her plans and the deadly dullness of her job. She needed something to survive, day after tedious day.

The men loved it. In relieving her boredom, she helped them alleviate their own. The counter stools were the first filled during lunch hour. She couldn't remember the nature of the conversations. She wasn't continually involved in them, but tried to spark them at the beginning, and pick them up when they hit a lull.

The characteristic that most baffled her about whites was their solitary nature. If some source didn't ignite the conversation, herself or a major political decision or a University of Oklahoma football victory, they would spend the entire hour mumbling to the person next to them. Only the most vociferous would speak to the entire group. Such a person was given attention, but regarded as odd and vain. Being demonstrative was an indication of self-centeredness to them.

In her neighborhood, a black man who could hold the attention of a group, better yet sustain it, was regarded with esteem. Her own family was quieter than most because of her parents' more restrained views and the presence of two girls. Boys, however, were encouraged to express themselves at a young age. I was probably too young to realize Uncle Charles continually supported Timmy's attempts to hold the family's attentions. More often than not this involved him contriving a story to explain his misbehavior.

Apparently, this bothered my father, who thought Charles was encouraging the boy to lie, and created a source of conflict between the men. Once, when I was quite young, I started an outrageous story in an attempt to compete with Timmy, an act Uncle Charles responded to with enthusiasm. Before I finished, my father suddenly remembered a reason to go home, and abruptly ended the story. This made Charles madder than my father knew, and lit one slow-burning fuse of tension that combined with others to explode the Sunday night of the All in the Family episode.

Mother did not try to explain the source of these differences. To her mind, no single explanation--be it race or environment or gender--ever successfully explained human behavior. A combination of factors was always at work. She did say whites, at least Oklahomans, seemed to recognize there was little that bound them together, which made them

suspicious of one another, and even more suspicious of other groups that possessed greater unity, including Jews, American Indians, and African-Americans. Whites seemed to desire such unity, yet were fearful of losing something-- their sense of identity perhaps-- if they became part of a group.

Whatever the explanation, the practice baffled and irritated my mother no end. From her point of view, the white customers at Tuckman's held immense freedom and privilege, yet all they did was complain about their lot, finding humor in terse, ironic statements that revealed their misfortunes. Maybe, she thought, they did this because they were aware of the freedom they possessed, and were haunted by the awareness that they were the products of their own decisions. Regardless, she could not stand to work day after day having their slow, drawled, pitiful grumblings drip and accumulate in her mind like fat from the grill, so she tried to accelerate the pace of the proceedings.

Looking back, she was not ashamed of her behavior, but could remember things, which she would not describe, that mildly embarrassed her now. She was careful to avoid becoming the stereotype of the yakking, emotional nigger woman. That wasn't much of a risk, though, because she was too young and attractive for them to associate her with that type. And, about once or twice a day, she used wit to

display the workings of an intelligent mind, one too quick and efficient for them to anticipate. Those who could keep up appreciated such wit, and encouraged it through a response or laughter. But she couldn't take this too far without provoking the wrath of a dull redneck, so she restrained herself and allowed her silence to suggest one razor-sharp response was all she could produce.

Dating was not a prominent activity for my mother at this point. It was conducted in a much different manner in 1960 than in 1977, and it was amazing to her how quickly things changed. People did not go on casual dates unless they established a serious relationship. Adults conducted supervised parties for teenagers, at a church or the Dunbar auditorium. Everyone was concerned with respectability; your reputation was your constant companion. The social lines that protected the respectable were not as rigid in my mother's neighborhood as they were in the white part of town. The size of the population had a lot to do with this, in her opinion. It was more difficult to form secluded social groups when people you wanted to exclude lived next door. As a result, everyone received a reputation, whether they wanted it or not, but nearly all were welcome at large social gatherings.

In most cases, a boy had to obtain the parents' permission to date a girl, and the date, especially the early ones, were more often excursions to public places

during the daylight hours. Private dates at night did not occur until the couple established something of a serious interest. The lack of automobiles contributed to this practice a great deal. Few families, much less young men, owned cars. Things had not changed considerably, but there were more available now, in the family or the neighborhood.

Teenagers frequently got around these customs by sneaking off at large social gatherings, or claiming to spend a night with a friend who would cover if the other's parents asked, or holding secret parties in an empty house or in the woods north of town. But the rules remained, and for the most part, were followed.

My mother did not become seriously interested in dating until after her college dreams dissolved. In high school, she went to parties and entertained boys at her home, but did not want to establish a serious relationship until she finished college. The only black women she knew who attended college were her Dunbar teachers, who often taught combined first, second, and maybe third grade classes. I think half of them were single, and mother could see that in those days marriage defined a role for most women she was not yet ready to fulfill. After she worked two years as Tuckman's cook, she saw little reason to put off a relationship because of the future.

Mother believed there were fewer black men in Otto then than in 1977. After the Jim Crow laws were removed and the mill began hiring blacks, a few more opportunities existed for black men, which encouraged some families to move to Otto from other towns. A lot of teenage men came alone to live with relatives who could feed another mouth and shelter another body.

As mother grew up, there seemed to be an equal number of girls and boys when she was young, but that changed by the time she reached sixteen. Some boys tired of the small town's social restraints and job prospects, including her brother Julius, and left home. Others who stayed developed reputations that prevented them from forming relationships with many girls until they were beyond their parents' control.

That left a handful of available men, who were respected because they appeared ready to accept the severe limitations of their world. Yet there was a subconscious feeling in the neighborhood, palpable but rarely articulated, that by accepting this world, by doing the most decent and respectable thing, they failed, because as men they should have changed it. It made one think the men who fled or socially resisted these restraints were the real leaders, the ones capable of redeeming the world, of liberating the oppressed.

This was one terrible predicament of black life. They could only create change through destruction of the walls around them. And since they could not knock them all down, their efforts caused as much destruction of themselves, their families and friends as they did the fortified restraints that contained them. The walls were mended, by police, store owners, public officials, but the people were imprisoned or buried.

One man named Robert Hardeman attracted my mother's interest. He was two years older--she said you didn't think of boys your own age in those days--and dated a girl named Tonya Buckner for two years. Mother said he was the best-looking man in school: tall, well-built, dark, neatly-groomed, strong but pleasant, tender. Most men who looked like him were gone before they hit twenty-one. He was a good athlete, but few colleges in the region had integrated teams.

After he and Tonya broke up, Mother expressed an interest and went out with him a few times. She was living with her parents, but her job provided her some freedom. Robert was also working full-time, as a butcher's helper in a white grocery store. He had a car, an old Chevrolet he had to repair every two weeks.

There wasn't much they could do; have dinner at Jackie's Barbecue, and hang out with the other brothers and sisters in the parking lot of Tootie's store, or cruise the

streets slowly and park out by Red Hill, south of town. They went parking after they had been out a few times. Mother did not mind telling me she was falling for Robert in a big way. She didn't know if it was love, but she was ready to make him the recipient of her various, repressed desires.

But he remained distant and distracted. Then he told her he joined the army. He could not bear to spend any more of his life working as a butcher's helper. He was doing nearly all the work, he said, but it was incredulous to them that he could ever bear the responsibility of being the butcher. He had thought of trying Langston University, Oklahoma's black college, but didn't have much financial support from his family, and didn't know what his interests were. He hadn't had a chance to find out, he said, tapping the steering wheel with the palms of his hands. Joining the army would probably be a great mistake, but if they saw how good a soldier he was, he might earn some respect, dignity, and greater opportunity.

Mother felt the weight of her life sink heavily upon her that night. Later, she lay on the living room sofa, instead of going to the bedroom she shared with Tamra, and cried. Her neighborhood seemed like the entire world when she was young, then like a country, separated but connected to others. But now she saw it as an island, without the resources to support its people and cut off from other

places by an ocean of whites, its people left to journey into these turbulent waters or struggle to their death.

Robert Hardeman was gone within a week. He served in Vietnam, was wounded twice, and made the military his career, as a drill sergeant. This man, this beautiful man, a drill sergeant, Mother said. She never saw him again, and was glad. But she never forgot him.

The job at Tuckman's became a torment. Listening to the idle chatter, the tedious complaints, the petulant discomfords made her want to scream and throw hot grease on everyone. She relieved her frustration with cigarettes for the first time. When Tuckman asked her to wipe the counter, she told him to wipe it himself.

Then one day, she sat down on a stool at the counter, an act that changed her life. She did it from fatigue. The busboy quit the day before, and Tuckman hadn't found a replacement. The waitresses wouldn't clean the tables as long as there was a nigger working in the cafe, so mother had to pull double duty, as cook and bus girl. When the orders became too numerous for mother to leave the grill, Tuckman made the waitresses help. But as soon as the orders slowed, Mother resumed the cleaning duties. Normally a strong woman, the stress and uncertainty she felt at this time in her life weakened her. She didn't think she was going to make it through the lunch hour, when business was heaviest. The men at the counter were unusually perky--a

local high school girls basketball team had won the state championship two days before--and they were put off by mother's quiet demeanor.

As the lunch crowd thinned, Mother went to work clearing the plates and glasses from the tables and booths. When she finished a table near the counter, she saw an elderly couple in the last occupied booth preparing to leave. She stood waiting, as they talked. They examined the check, then the woman began digging through her purse. Mother sat down on the stool behind her.

Few men remained at the counter. Mother felt so weak and oblivious to her surroundings, she didn't realize one of them was speaking to her, until he raised his voice and repeated his statement. This time he added nigger to the end: "You don't sit here!"

Mother looked at him. He was a red-headed man with a pale, freckled face, covered by a neatly-trimmed red beard. He appeared to have a harelip, but it didn't affect his speech. As he spoke again, Mother stared at his mouth, wondering what caused its odd formation.

She did not know him. He had been in a few times in recent weeks. He was no office man, but wasn't a worker either. He dressed like a supervisor, or perhaps a small, independent oil man: he wore ostrich-skin boots, new stiffly-pressed jeans, and collared shirts. Mother had seen him enough to know he liked to be the center of things. He

directed the conversation among those around him, asserted his opinion first. He had not said a word to Mother, prior to these commands, and looked at those who had suspiciously. A nigger cook did not join the conversation of white men having lunch.

Her quiet stare made him balk before issuing a third command. Two should have been more than enough for any nigger woman. He glanced around the cafe quickly before determining his next move, assessing the size of the audience and the presence of the owner, without twitching a muscle. Mother knew this was the kind of white man she had reason to fear, but she could not make herself respond quickly to anything in her current condition, and wasn't about to hop up at the insistence of a new customer. "Finish your lunch," she said. "Don't worry. I'm not about to eat with you. I'll get up in a second."

One customer, accustomed to mother's interaction with them, chuckled. The red-headed man did not. When he stood, Mother did not move, but sensed the sudden attention of the only man on the other side of her.

She knew this man. His name was Lewis. He had been coming to the cafe nearly every day for six months. There was something odd but interesting about him. He was one of the mumblers, but didn't complain. On the rare occasion he did speak to more than one person, it was to undercut the man who held center stage, to show he didn't know as much as

he thought, or didn't have it nearly as bad as he imagined.

Lewis sat with the other men, but usually at one end of the counter. He didn't like to be in the middle. His habit was to have lunch, then wait until the other men cleared out, and begin a conversation with Mother.

He didn't want to be entertained; he wanted serious discussion. It was his way of flirting, Mother thought, but since he was white, she wasn't greatly concerned. It was certainly a different kind of flirtation than she experienced with the others, though, which made his intentions puzzling.

The subjects he picked were often difficult for them to discuss because he liked to talk about the faults of whites. Their overriding concern with respectability and conformity greatly irritated him. Mother could tell from his voice he was not just making general complaints. They had personal meaning, but he never disclosed specifics about his home life. Most whites were church-going hypocrites, in his view, more concerned with their financial statements than their souls, and oblivious to the immoral things their ancestors had done to others.

Despite his awareness, he seemed naive about one thing: the status of blacks. He couldn't help know they were treated as inferiors through segregation, but each day he seemed to expect mother to offer her views of whites. He

interpreted her silence as a rejection of his ideas until she finally leaned close to him one day while she wiped the counter, and said, "Get your head out of the clouds, mister. I work here because I have no choice. If I complain, they'll close my mouth. For you, truth is a well-considered idea. For us, it's a fist upside the head."

The red-headed man stood next to Mother. "Get off that stool, nigger," he said evenly, as if he were doing her a favor by giving her one last chance to make the right decision. "No place for coloreds. Whites only."

"Leave her alone, redneck." It was Lewis. He never knew how to disagree calmly, Mother said, but the situation did not allow for reasonable argument. She liked to believe he could have won support from the others with words and backed this man down, but it was doubtful. The colored point of view was not worthy of debate. And Lewis's last word showed he was prepared to do more than talk. Redneck wasn't as derogatory to whites as nigger was to blacks, but it made the conflict more confrontational. "She's working two jobs. Just sat down to rest. She ain't gonna ask you to cook her lunch."

"You're a real smart ass, boy." The red-headed man was at least ten years older than Lewis, and for the first time, Mother became frightened. She thought of stepping down, not for herself, but for Lewis. Before she could, the red-headed man said, "Tuckman, you gonna let this nigger sit

here? Do business with nigger lovers? What kinda place you runnin'?"

Tuckman, who had suddenly become very interested in the arrangement of the candy beneath the cash register, poked his head up quickly and said, "Angela, what are you doing? Get down from there and go to work."

Two other men, friends of the red-headed man, were listening intently, enjoying the conflict. A third man, who knew my mother, had his eyes buried in the ice at the bottom of his near-empty iced tea glass. The elderly couple had slid deeper into their booth, and were examining the check.

The red-headed man looked at Mother, motioned with his head for her to get up. When she started to move, Lewis stepped between them. "Leave her alone. You don't have the right to tell anyone what to do."

"You are one messed up boy. Your mama not teach you the difference between niggers and whites?"

"My mama taught me plenty. I'd tell her the same thing I'm telling you. Now get the hell out."

"Sure, I'll go outside. But you're going with me."

"Glad to."

The red-headed man turned and started for the door. Mother watched him, saw the other two men smile in response to something the red-headed man did, then felt a hand on her arm. It was Lewis, motioning for her to keep her seat. But

Mother was no longer thinking about that. She couldn't believe Lewis had taken his eyes off the man, even for a second.

Before the red-headed man took another step, he spun and nailed Lewis in the face with a right hand. It was a hard, ugly blow that dropped him to his knees and brought blood from his nose. The red-headed man drilled him again, then grabbed his ankles and dragged him toward the front door. "Come on, boys," he said. "Let's beat some sense into this nigger lover."

Grabbing his arms, the two men helped guide Lewis out the front door. Mother stood, amazed no one was offering help. Tuckman was still bent behind the counter, the other man staring at his empty glass. "Aren't you going to help him?!" she asked, slapping the man's shoulder.

"Not my fight. His own fault."

"Call the police, Tuckman!" she yelled, sprinting behind the counter. "Tuckman!"

"Get back to your work," he said. She raced toward the phone next to the cash register, but he pulled it away from her. "Either get back to work or get out."

Mother ran out the door, found the men in back of the cafe. She started toward them, then stopped. They were kicking Lewis, who lay on the ground, and she realized what they might do to her, an uppity nigger woman, if she tried to help.

It was the worst moment of her life. She was helpless, ashamed of thinking of her own concern at such a time, but aware that she could not stop them, and would not help things by getting raped.

Lewis was bloody and limp when they picked him up. "Let's go dump him in nigger town where he belongs," one said. When another started toward the corner of the building, Mother ran back into the cafe, waited to see him start his pickup, then raced out the door in the other direction.

She located Reverend Leatherman, who had a car, at the church, and together they found Lewis, lying in the middle of a street two down from where we now lived. A crowd of people approached him, warily.

"They run out of niggers to beat?" one man asked.

"White men done it," a woman said. "Better leave him alone. Police come, they'll grab the closest one handy, say he done it."

"Ain't no police gonna come down here," Reverend Leatherman said. "You men help me get him in the car."

Barely conscious, Lewis kept touching his front teeth, which remarkably were intact. Mother said it wasn't hard to make him bleed, but nearly impossible to knock him out, a tendency that later won him a lot of fights against men who thought they had him beaten.

They took him to Dr. Ralph Lester, the black physician. He stitched his cuts, discovered a broken nose and several broken and severely bruised ribs. Since Lewis was quite groggy, Dr. Lester thought someone should keep him conscious to avoid complications.

They returned to the church, where mother attended him until nightfall. At that point a decision had to be made. Lewis was conscious but very weak. He lived alone, but did not want to go to his parents' home. He thought he could care for himself. Mother thought he could, but did not think he should have to. So she took him to her house.

Upset by their arrival, my grandmother was even more displeased when she heard the story. She long feared this kind of behavior from Angela, and was convinced her one year of college was responsible. No matter how much you learned, you couldn't change white folks' minds. Any person who tried was a fool. Life wasn't so bad if you didn't think about it.

She went on and on. Mother finally interrupted her to say this man was white, and his mind was changed. Grandmother said one drop of water don't fill the well, and when they looked back down at the white drop lying on their couch, they discovered he was asleep.

Mother awoke early the next morning. She wanted Lewis to see a recognizable face when he opened his eyes, knowing

his sleep would be heavy, his awakening perplexing, no matter whose bed he lay on.

Grandfather went to work, grandmother stayed in the kitchen, and Aunt Tamra stared at the sleeping man with unabashed curiosity. She had been going steady with someone since she was 13, moving to a new boy as soon as the old relationship broke up, eventually going with some boys more than once by her junior year in high school. Yet she never had one fight over her like this. Mother explained Lewis was not fighting over her, and Tamra said no man, especially a white, would get his nose broken over equal rights.

"You think he's good-looking?" Tamra whispered, so Grandmother wouldn't hear.

"What does that matter?" Mother said. Tamra waited for a reply. "He ain't the best looking white man I ever saw," Mother offered, "but he ain't the worst."

"They so ugly when you think about going with one of them. So pale they look sick."

"He is sick, Tamra."

"You know what I mean. After you look at them a while, it ain't so bad. You get used to it."

"You want me to wake him so you can propose?"

"Don't you try. Darrel would go crazy. He sure wouldn't take no beating like that for me."

When Lewis woke up, Mother realized Tamra was right. Seeing my mother's face first, he reached out to her, then

as more details of the world impressed themselves upon him, dropped his hand. Pain returned, and closing his eyes, he winced weakly, feeling the throbbing weight of his nose. When he tried to sit up, he yelled loudly enough to startle Tamra into the kitchen.

Mother dipped a washrag into a pitcher of water on the coffee table and placed it on his forehead. "You know where you are?"

"Yeah. Wasn't sure at first."

"How you feeling?"

"Bad."

"Mama's fixing breakfast. See if you can eat a little, then you can take the pain relievers the doctor gave us."

"When did I see a doctor?"

"Yesterday. After. . ."

"How did I get here?"

"They dumped you in the middle of the road."

"Oh, yeah. Do my parents know?"

"No."

With that, Mother thought he was a young white man with liberal sympathies that had now been beaten out of him. They ate their breakfast quietly, alone. Lewis had an appetite, but it hurt to chew and swallow.

After breakfast, he wanted to go home. Mother couldn't reach Reverend Leatherman by phone, and the family didn't own another car. Tamra said she would run down to Darrel's

and find someone with a car, but Lewis said he didn't want to put anyone out. He could walk it. Mother said if he was proud enough to fight over a Negro, he should be able to wait for a ride home from one.

A yellow Ford pulled up a half hour later. Darrel was driving his uncle's car, Tamra next to him. Lewis got in the back; Mother paused before she got in. She could feel her mother's eyes, but she thought it foolish for three to ride in the front.

"We get out of Black Town, you better lie down," Darrel said to Lewis. "We might all get lynched they see you in the car."

"Just drop me off on Main," Lewis said. "My car's at Tuckman's."

"You're not going back there," Mother said.

"I gotta get my car. Like to stick my head in and say good morning to Tuckman."

"You are a fool."

"That's what whites say about Martin Luther King."

"You ain't no Martin Luther King."

"I ain't a racist redneck either."

"Whoever you are," Darrel said, "Main's one block away, and I'm stopping long enough for you to jump out."

"Want to come with me?" Lewis asked my mother.

"What?"

"We'll say hello to Tuckman, and drive off. Then I'll take you home."

Mother said she wasn't even considering the idea until the car slowed and Lewis opened the door. The force that pulled the latch on the car door was the immediate anger she felt seeing Tuckman's Cafe. Tamra was so shocked she didn't speak. "Tell Mama I went to the college library," Mother said. "Checking into other schools."

She walked beside Lewis, unsure what to expect. She felt fear of beatings and rape, but went on. Lewis opened the cafe door, and waited for Mother to come in. "What you say, Tuckman?" he said, loud enough for every customer to hear. When Tuckman looked up, his surprise came out in the form of a puffy breath from his purpled, angular mouth that sent a flutter of cigarette ash into the slanted, sunlit air. "When I get well, I'm coming back. I'll be bringing others with me."

Lewis had enough good sense to exit the cafe. He and Mother were in his car before Tuckman could exhale again.

On the way home, they laughed about Tuckman, and talked. Lewis asked about the college library excuse, and Mother told him her story. She wasn't finished when they reached her house, so he kept driving.

They drove the streets of Black Town, and before long, Lewis became distracted. "I can't believe what I'm seeing," he explained, after a long silence. "As a white, you know

the world is segregated. At least our world. But you don't know it like this."

"What's that mean?" Mother asked defensively.

"It's not the poverty, though that's bad. A few houses here are nicer than some whites live in. But after you forget about being white, you feel like you're in a pot with a lid on it. That the way you feel?"

"Not when I was young. But I do now. When you first start feeling it, you try to deny it. Everyone does. Through acting tough or getting drunk or being crazy. Or believing that if you do well in school and keep quiet, you'll find a way out. You can't believe they really mean white is white, colored colored. But they do. You hear someone say you can't go there, and you think, that's racism. That's what my folks told me about, but you still can't believe it."

"They don't know what's going on, most of them. They believe in segregation, but they think since Negroes have their own schools and businesses, they're doing all right. If they don't, it's their own fault."

"We don't have our own government. Soon as we get too prosperous, they start changing rules to keep us from getting too close. Did you know there used to be a lot of prosperous Negro towns in Oklahoma? Boley, Langston, Taft. But when they got big enough to send a representative to the legislature, whites got scared Negroes were going to take

over, or whatever whites think, and started redistricting voting zones. There were a lot of Negro farmers then, and whites started buying up their land. If they wouldn't sell, whites threatened them with lynchings or got the district judge to rule in their favor. That took the base of the economy away from those towns, and now they look like this."

"How do you know all this?"

"One of my high school teachers told me. He gets a Negro newspaper from Oklahoma City called The Black Dispatch which examined the problems. They're trying to fight for desegregation now."

"I've read about the sit-ins in Oklahoma City."

"They're working too. They now allow Negroes at three lunch counters, maybe more. Some place called the Forum Cafeteria just changed its policy."

"Why couldn't we do the same thing down here?"

"Most places that have changed are part of a national chain. They get pressure from people outside the state, I guess in the North. A lot of local restaurants are still the same. If we tried it here, they'd either lock us up or beat us or both. The paper wouldn't report it, and no one would know. If it weren't for The Black Dispatch no one would know about Oklahoma City. They have spread the news so far, now even the white paper reports the sit-ins."

Mother said they talked like this until the car was nearly out of gas. Tired of driving, Lewis suggested they

go to his place. He lived in the upstairs apartment of an old two-story house, located in a poor part of town. He was sure she could sneak upstairs unnoticed. Once there, he left to get lunch, joking that he ought to get a take-out order at Tuckman's.

They talked the rest of the afternoon. Lewis spent some time describing his relationship with his parents. His father, Harold Rowe, a hard, stern man and deacon in the large First Baptist Church, owned a successful Carrier heating and air conditioning service. Once a sheet metal worker, he began the business soon after World War II and made nearly three times what his father, a farmer, had.

Success required its own price, however. He worked six days a week, sometimes 10 to 12 hour days. When the family vacationed, Harold called the office three times a day. As Carrier became a top-of-the-line product, Harold began to serve a more lucrative clientele, which brought him greater profits but also an immense stress level he refused to recognize. He felt socially inferior to his upper-middle-class clients. He wanted their approval as badly as their payment, and would do anything to please them. He was hard to work for, berating employees who upset the client, even when the employee was innocent. Good wages were all that kept his work force intact. As a result, he became a highly-respected member of the local business community.

At sixteen, Lewis went to work for him during the summer. As a boy, he possessed a lot of mechanical skills and aptitude. With little assistance, he learned basic carpentry skills, and wished his father were a home builder. He thought he might some day build houses in which his father would install a Carrier system. It was a naive dream, but the kind that allows a young mind to imagine a place in an open, intimidating world. My mother was astounded a boy of sixteen would even think in those terms.

By July, Lewis no longer imagined his father as part of his future plans. To prove his son did not deserve preferential treatment, Harold yelled at him more than the other employees combined, chiding and scolding him for the smallest mistakes. Lewis knew his father did not act out of hate. He didn't want his son to be a worm, the term for green, inexperienced workers. Harold wanted him to prove himself immediately through his attentiveness, skill, and endurance, as if he believed by virtue of being his son, Lewis should genetically possess the knowledge his father gained from years of experience.

But he punished Lewis for mistakes instead of teaching him to avoid them. This habit made Lewis fearful of approaching the simplest of new tasks. If he put the task off, he would still get chewed out, but he preferred being called lazy than stupid. By the end of his first month, the

other employees were assisting him instead of initiating him with pranks the way they did other worms.

This experience, combined with observations of other businessmen and their attitudes toward their workers, made Lewis resentful and suspicious of the adult world. At church, the minister offered sermons about holiness and righteousness, about gluttony and lust, about respect for one's country and the sin of disobedience, but only mentioned generosity and compassion during the Christmas sermon, and never mentioned the pitfalls of wealth and greed. On Monday, many men ventured out, their sins washed on Sunday by the ideals of Christian sacrifice, to turn as many dollars as they could find, driving themselves and their workers as hard as they could.

When he graduated high school, Lewis made an announcement that should have been no surprise to his parents, but was one they received with great shock. He did not want to work full-time for his father; instead, he was going on his own to find work as a carpenter. He felt further justified in his decision when he saw their reaction. They were not saddened, but deeply angered.

It was his mother, Martha, who expressed her outrage immediately, seeing his actions as a sign of the worst kind of disrespect and ingratitude imaginable. After all they did for him, leaving to become a construction bum was his way of expressing thanks. Since they had caught him

drinking a month before, Martha was also convinced he wanted to leave so he could get drunk every night. Lewis said he made a grand, departing statement, claiming they were slaves who were simply upset because he would not become one.

That was five years ago, and he had been on his own ever since. He saw his family on holidays, but only for an hour or two. His brother Kevin, two years younger, accepted the role offered to Lewis, and would eventually inherit the business. His relationship with their father was much different from Lewis's. Harold learned from his mistakes and loosened his grip, fearing if he didn't, both sons would slip through his fingers. Ironically, Kevin, who was much more practical than Lewis, probably would have suffered the demands their father made on Lewis silently, recognizing the long-term rewards of inheriting the business. Lewis did not regret the developments. He wouldn't have been able to serve the same clientele long without offending them, so it was just as well, as he saw it. He preferred existing in a sort of make-shift way, finding work when he needed it. Mother told me no white man then ever thought a job would be hard to find.

Mother admitted she often saw the white world as carefree and easy, and was surprised to hear white fathers and sons battled over some of the same things that divided black families. But she added that few black families had business decisions come between them. They seemed like nice

problems to have, from her point of view. Having a business or a good job obviously created problems, but not as many as having no job and few opportunities.

After he asked, she explained why she was working at Tuckman's, and told him the story of her frustrated college plans. Her predicament had a noticeable effect on him, but his first reaction was to inquire about her new plans. When she told him it would take years to save for one year of college with the kind of jobs available to her, he realized the great difference that existed between them. For the first time that day, he was at a loss for something to say.

As the time approached five o'clock, Mother knew she needed to go home, hoping Tamra would keep quiet about her whereabouts. She told me she didn't feel anything like love, or romantic love, for Lewis, but did feel care and concern for him, and knew he felt it for her. She felt like she had just made a good friend, but as she thought of going home, she realized this friendship was about to end as quickly as it had begun.

It would have ended, Mother assured me, if she had not felt so trapped, and he had not been so willing to see her. Prior to this week, she would not have possessed the desire to resist the circumstances that kept them apart. But she felt as if her life had reached the entrance to a long, narrow tunnel, whose end could not be seen. Because he was white, seeing him made her feel as if she were in touch with

other possibilities. Her alternative was to get another job, cooking or cleaning.

She told him they could talk again, but he had to come to her house and pick her up at eleven o'clock. She would not sneak up to his apartment again. They would drive to a place of her choosing: her Baptist church or, perhaps, Jackie's Barbecue. Then, looking at him, she remembered his body was broken in several places.

"You need to heal," she said. "Maybe I could come back tomorrow. For a while."

"No, I need to get out. I might not be able to sit for a long time, but if we go to the church I can lie down on the floor when I get tired."

"I don't think Reverend Leatherman would mind you using a pew. We need to thank him for helping yesterday."

"What are your parents going to think?"

"I don't know."

"Something, isn't it? We can't find a place to talk. If I wasn't in such bad shape, we could go back to Tuckman's."

"You need to give that idea some rest."

My grandmother was even more displeased to see this white man a second time, but Mother said it made her realize she was no longer a girl, but a woman, who was at an important point in her life. They drove to the church and

expressed their gratitude to Reverend Leatherman, who told them to sit and talk as long as they liked.

Mother was not sure where to begin, and wondered if this meeting would quickly reveal they had exhausted all the points of interest between them. But Lewis didn't hesitate. He wanted to discuss the possibilities of getting her back into college. It didn't take them long to discover the only element holding any of his plans together was his optimism. He even suggested pretending he was enrolled to get funding from his parents, then passing it to her. But they would know it was a ruse from the beginning since he had done so poorly in school.

His best idea involved pooling their money. With a construction job, he could make far more money than he needed to survive, and she could get a part-time job. Or she could work full-time, and when their combined savings were sufficient, she could quit and go to school.

Mother bluntly asked him why he felt so generous and how long he expected to be so self-sacrificing. He said he didn't know why and asked her, based on the appearance of his apartment, what else she thought he would do with his money.

"Guess if I did accept your money, you'd be helping an unfortunate darky," she said. "Easy way to relieve guilt, isn't it?"

This caught him by surprise, and Mother told me she wasn't sure why she picked this moment to say it. She admitted that even though she kept thinking it was true, she didn't believe either one of them could ever know for sure. "Lot easier than getting your nose broken," Lewis said bitterly. "Course you'd have to pay me back each week. Secret meetings at my place where I'm the master and you're the slave."

"You can't blame me for wondering."

He paused. "You may be right. But I didn't draw the line. I just crossed it."

She wished him well before she got out of the car. She told me she felt as if no matter what she said or did with this man, her actions were determined by forces she couldn't control. It was worse than her last days at Tuckman's. There she was trapped but she could find the ceiling. In this case, it seemed like water, coming in waves from different directions, eluding you whenever you tried to touch it.

Word of her encounter at Tuckman's was all over the neighborhood, but she didn't discover until the following Sunday at church that Lewis had been showing up at Jackie's every day for lunch. On Monday, she found him there. It was a small place, still is, with tables and chairs, and a short counter where the customers place their orders and pick up their food. Mother made eye contact with him

upon entering, but went to the counter first. Jackie--an old nappy-haired, gap-toothed woman, who made a spicy sauce heavy on the vinegar and chili powder that everyone in the neighborhood thought they could outdo but never opened a place to prove it--told her he walked in last week, came to the counter, then said to the whole place, "I'm a white man coming to get lunch because I don't like the food they serve on Main Street. Anyone objects to my being here, just say so and I'll gladly go."

"Hell," Jackie said, "he stood there serious as Abraham Lincoln. Wasn't nothing but old folks in at the time. Half of 'em didn't hear what he said, the other half weren't strong enough to throw an empty plate through the door. I told him, 'You got some greenbacks, I'll fix ya a plate.'"

I don't want to make this part of the story seem as light-hearted as it sounds. Mother assured me there were plenty of people in the neighborhood upset by the presence of a white man at a black establishment, and despite their concerns for the white police force, might have made him leave. But they were less suspicious and gave a little rein to this one, since he made his first appearance in Black Town as a half-conscious bloody pulp.

Good feelings emanated from him, and Mother said they both smiled as she sat down, feeling as if the world's reactions were out of reach. "Heard you found a new lunch stop," she said.

"Wouldn't let me back in Tuckman's," he said, grinning. "Fact, I bet they wouldn't let me in a lot of places on Main now. That's called looking after business interests."

"How you feeling?"

"Better. Ribs still hurt, but nose feels all right. Swelling's down, and I'm starting to look handsome again, don't you think?"

"You got a ways to go there. Taken a liking to barbecue, huh? Surprised your skin's not changing."

"You know," he said, leaning close, "first bite I had of this stuff I thought was awful. Didn't think I was going to be able to finish it. You know what whites think about blacks and barbecue. Most of Otto thinks this is probably the best barbecue in the state, but they're too scared to come down and get some."

"How'd you get it down?"

"Drank a lot of iced tea at first. And I'm still not sure I like it, but after I finish a bite, my mouth wants another one. It's got a zip to it I kind of like."

"That's the possum gizzards she puts in it."

She got in his car after lunch, and they went back to his apartment, walking up the stairs without worrying about detection. Once there, Lewis admitted he hadn't thought of anyone but her since he last saw her, and that he had a new plan. She could pick any spot on the map she wanted to go, and he would take her there. They would get separate

places, find jobs, and save money until she was on her feet. Then he would return to Otto. His reasoning was that there were bound to be better job opportunities for her in a bigger city. The news would obviously shock her family, but after they saw the results, they would understand her decision.

Mother said it was the only decision she ever made without giving it considerable thought. She agreed, convinced by his sincerity and the reality of the narrow possibilities that existed for her in Otto. He offered to wait a month if she preferred so they could save money for the trip, but she wanted to go as soon as possible before she backed out. If it didn't work, she could always come home. Their combined savings were enough to sustain them for a while, so they left Friday morning, my father's ribs-- and it is at this point in the story that I begin to think of him as my father--sore but mending.

Mother told her parents she was going, but lied to them about the mode of transportation. She told them Lewis agreed to take her to the bus station in Oklahoma City. A bus line went through Otto, but she said he was helping her save money. I'm sure my grandparents could see through her story, but they didn't try to stop her.

As she told the lie, Mother decided she wanted to go north to Kansas City. She wanted to leave Oklahoma, and south was out of the question. So they headed north in my

father's 1961 Chevy Impala. By the time they got to Kansas, mother realized she was falling in love with him, and would have already expressed it had he been black.

They obtained separate apartments--hers in a black neighborhood, his in a white--but before long were spending most of their time at her place. She found a job in a white-owned grocery store on 12th street; he on a construction crew. They received some negative comments in her neighborhood, but no violent threats. Occasionally, they noticed a mixed couple, nearly always a black man and white woman.

Kansas City was much less segregated than Otto. They had removed color barriers at public schools, restaurants, and theaters. But in housing she noticed little difference. Kansas City had a Negro district, just like Otto. No blacks lived north of the Missouri River, which runs through the heart of the city. The black section began just off the downtown's Freeway Loop and extended southeast. Obviously, it was a much larger district than Otto's Union Heights--one-fourth of the city's population was black--and the housing was, on the whole, in better condition. Kansas City did not have the ghettos my mother read about in Chicago and Detroit.

There were many more places to go and things to see, but Mother said she felt no desire to do anything the first six months. The simple act of living made her feel as if

she were lounging in a haven of freedom. Her parents did not know of Lewis's presence, but she decided to inform them after he moved into her apartment. Two months later, they married, discovering that such an act between a negro and caucasian was a crime in many states, including Oklahoma where it carried a maximum penalty of five years in jail and a \$500 fine. Since it was also illegal in Missouri, they crossed the line to Kansas to perform the act. Once done, states that restricted such marriages could not prosecute them or deny them entry.

As they drove home, Lewis called them Bonnie and Clyde, and Mother said they felt like they just made a big heist, hurrying to sanctuary in a place that would not extradite them. Reactions they received had long since lost their effects on her, and for some time afterward, she felt as if they had conquered all of the serious problems they would ever encounter.

CHAPTER XX

I was born nineteen months later. My mother received the support of her neighbors, and quit work. Many people in her building formed an extended family, which helped spread money and advice to those in need. My father told her, every day it seemed, how utterly different life was in this neighborhood from middle-class whites' conceptions of it.

Mother knew her family was shocked by the turns in her life, even more so by this new development. The distance helped. The anger and frustration they felt had to be diminished by the fact they had not seen her for nearly two years.

They experienced many other changes during this time, which might have helped them adjust to the strange direction of my mother's life. Tamra married Charles not long after my mother left, and gave birth to Timmy a year later. Then, a few months before my birth, Julius left home.

He was a high-strung kid, Mother told me, with energy to burn and little patience. He gave my grandparents trouble before he left, ignoring their demands for responsibilities and curfews. By 16, he was drinking regularly. He always had more spending money than his sisters, and hung out with guys who had already dropped out of school. If he had more job opportunities, Mother said,

he may have bounced around for several years, like numerous white boys, burning up his energy drinking and whoring, as we put it, then settled down. But he was not about to follow his father's footsteps to the mill, or spend forty hours a week at the brick plant.

When he left, he went with some friends to Ardmore, then moved south to Dallas. Mother assumed he was staying alive by stealing or selling dope. The last anyone heard from him was on Christmas Day, 1970. We were back in Otto by then. He called collect, sounded drunk but happy, said he was working on a construction crew.

Many black men, most it seemed to Mother, left Otto, especially before the mill expanded its promotion and hiring practices, but most remained in contact with their families, and returned home occasionally. Mother hoped Julius would do the same, but feared he became a drug addict. He could not survive a monotonous job, and had a deep thirst he was going to have trouble quenching, she said, a thirst liquor was not going to satisfy.

My parents' years in Kansas City were enjoyable, but they tired of city life. Mother told me neither one of them completely adjusted to the rush and congestion. The presence of so much brick, concrete and iron made her feel as if her teeth were being worn down by a file and gave my father headaches. There were a lot of things to do, but after I was born, they didn't have the money, energy, or

desire to go out. Mother said she realized she was too much of a hick to even enjoy the good blues bands that played every night. The cure to her blues was a good meal and a warm bed.

In June of 1967, the Supreme Court ruled state laws prohibiting interracial marriages were discriminatory and could no longer be enforced. This ruling overturned the laws of eighteen states, including Oklahoma. Since they were married, my parents could have returned to Otto before 1967, but the Supreme Court's ruling gave them greater assurance: at least the law, if not the people, was on their side.

By this time, Mother's parents, especially her father, were anxious to see her and the baby. Mother spent six months considering the move. She knew life would be more difficult in many ways. In Kansas City, they were an unusual sight, but nameless to most people, which gave them privacy. They would lose their anonymity in Otto, where no mixed couples lived. They might also suffer if the black community refused to accept them, because they knew whites would not. Mother was convinced she could find some kind of work, but did not know how people would respond to my father.

He actually became enthused about the idea, an indication to my mother that he could not imagine in complete detail the reception they would receive. She knew

he loved her. She knew he was not a racist. But at times, she wondered if he married her to make a point to whites, if he wanted to return to his hometown for the same reason. She also wondered about her own motivations--if she married him because of the escape he offered from her confined life.

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated. The news was devastating. It felt like the entire African-American race died with him. All of the hard-earned victories, the sense of progress, the hope, the kindling of dreams seemed to collapse with the assault and fall of his body. Whites had once again found a violent way to enslave blacks. Only a people who suffered severe, sustained, and brutal oppression could believe their newfound liberties could be so easily and quickly eliminated, and only a people who maintained such hatred and control could have difficulty understanding their sorrow.

But that was the response. On the day of King's funeral, the city refused to close public schools so the students could honor his death. A large group of high school students protested the decision by marching on City Hall. The police stopped their march with tear gas.

Two days of revolt followed. The first day, police helped expand the disorder by gassing Lincoln High School and a church basement where students had been invited by a black priest to dance instead of demonstrate. Conflicts with police resulted in the shooting deaths of six blacks.

When the revolt finally quieted, letters flooded City Hall expressing approval of police actions.

Destruction and looting occurred during the revolt, but the protestors did not engage in indiscriminate, widespread vandalism. White-owned establishments were targeted. My mother heard from a friend that the grocery store where she once worked had been hit the first day. On the second, the owner replaced the shattered front window with a piece of plywood which had Soul Brother painted on it. Mother's friend laughed, but didn't know if a brother did it as a joke, or the owner as an attempt to stop the looting.

Before it was over, many people were arrested and held on \$50,000 bail for vandalism. Whites would not let us live, nor let us grieve, said my mother. As usual, absurdity was added to their sorrow. The sheriff's office did not possess enough jail uniforms for the newly-arrested and had to purchase old bowling shirts to clothe the prisoners.

On their block, my father was in no danger. But he didn't venture outside it. The neighborhood's anger and hostility was as easily felt as the steam from boiling water. Expressing these pent-up feelings on my father would not be fair or just, but could easily occur until the anger dissipated. Mother told me my father had a dream after the revolt in which he was beaten to death. The odd thing about

the dream to him was he did not put up a fight. Just before he died, he looked at his hands; they were black.

Mother knew the hostility would go away, but she was frightened, and for one of the few times in her life, she overreacted. She wanted out of the city. Before the week was over, they packed the car and headed south for Otto.

My grandparents were surprised and thrilled to see us, which immediately convinced my mother she made the right decision. She could tell my grandfather had experienced a genuine change of heart toward her husband and child, but it took my grandmother much longer to adjust. The first time she saw me, a pale brown thing with loosely-curved hair, her face nearly dropped off the front of her head. Her arms were the only thing holding me on our first embrace.

We stayed with them for two weeks before moving into a small rental house. The second day, my father called his parents, so they would not hear the news of his family secondhand. He hadn't communicated with them since he moved to Kansas City.

His mother was abrupt. When Lewis told them he married a black woman, his mother said she assumed as much. News of the incident at Tuckman's spread across town, as did rumors from someone who saw Lewis and that nigger woman in the same car, leaving town. My grandmother was appalled by her son's actions, infuriated by his deprivation, but shocked beyond

belief that he moved back to town. She said some ugly things, begged him to leave town--as the last decent thing he did in his life--and warned him to never call again, or show up at their house. According to Mother, this permanent break from his parents did not upset my father. He had already mentally and emotionally distanced himself from them in a way she found hard to understand, even though their racism was the cause of the problems.

However, he was not prepared for the reaction he received from other whites. He knew most of them would be hostile, but he expected a few of his former friends to be sympathetic. They were not. Acknowledging blacks were equal was one thing; marrying them another. These people did not act appalled like many whites, but their disapproval was evident. They would not speak to my father long in public or dare socialize with him for fear of damaging their own reputations. For the first time, my father understood why many blacks preferred the white bigot to the liberal.

My parents received a better reception in the black community than they imagined. To some, they were a symbol of the country's new tolerance. In fact, my mother believed in many ways things were easier for them than they would be for mixed couples now in our neighborhood. At that time, she said feelings of hope and pride still existed in the community. King's assassination damaged that hope, but some believed his death would not stop the wheels of progress he

put into motion, and saw his murder as a futile effort on the part of the dying, deranged bigots left in the country to reverse an unstoppable chain of events.

But many others, including Uncle Charles, were more skeptical. They saw King's murder as a symbol of white fear of integration, and argued the assassination of Malcolm X, three years prior, was the death we should lament. We could not integrate with a people who did not want us. With such people we would never be equal, no matter how many laws were changed. As long as whites held the purse strings, they would find ways to avoid us. People such as my mother and father were only making our struggle more difficult. They looked at my father as a member of the enemy.

Things were difficult for my father the first few years. My mother could find work, as a maid, but he could not. Most businesses were locally owned, knew his history, and would not hire him. He did odd carpentry jobs for people in the neighborhood, some gratis, but even that backfired once. He made so many repairs to a small, dilapidated house on our block, the white owner evicted the old woman who lived there, who was raising four grandchildren, and raised the rent.

After a year, he commuted to McAlester and worked construction. My mother wondered if they should return to Kansas City.

Then in the early 70's things improved as Otto's economy expanded. More manufacturers came into town who didn't know my father's history and weren't as easily swayed by local concerns. He worked at the glass plant for a while, before hiring out at one of the new lumber yards.

"But things change, people change," Mother said to me. It was dark now, unusually quiet. "I hate to tell you your parents' lives may have run their course, but it might be true. I still love him, but it feels like we've come all the way back to point one, and have to deal with the same concerns all over again. Only now we both have less patience and endurance. When you're young, you think you can conquer anything. I'm not saying we won't get back together, but I won't lie to you and say it's a sure thing we will. I just don't know. I see now why some people like stable lives. They have their moments of conflict early on, then spend the rest of their time reflecting, sorting it out. Things keep spinning so much for your father and me, I can't get hold of them."

CHAPTER XXI

I was standing in Sam's yard the first time I heard Richard Pryor. I had heard of him from Sam, knew he was supposed to be funny, but still experienced a moment of rare delight the first time, discovering my expectations were paper doll shadows compared to the power and intensity of the figures his imagination cast into our quiet, subdued yards. His stories commanded the attention of restless young men who would never acknowledge the power of stories. He was our priest, counselor, oracle, our signifier. When his voice spoke from the eight-track player in the Rushings' car, no one dared interfere, except with laughter, and even that was controlled. It was like hearing the truth, displayed in all its wonderfully glorious, grotesque, and infinite forms. When the tape was over, you realized with disappointment that your feet were still on the ground.

Everyone could do Richard, or would do him, except Smoke and me. Sam, still considered the funniest guy my age, mimicked him well, and Sugarbear--nickname for Jason Blevins, the smart ass with the big natural and the cigarette behind his ear--and Kevin Banks--Stanky Banks, Roshon called him, who liked the parts about fucking because that's all he wanted to talk about--were good on some voices too.

But no one could top Roshon. He didn't imitate Richard; he became him. Two trips through the tape, he had the entire thing memorized. Inevitably, though, when he was hot and doing Richard well, he would leave the script and improvise, forming his own narratives. But the spell broke immediately, even when we were in good humor and tried to sustain him with our laughter.

I never once heard Smoke try to imitate Richard nor use one of his expressions as his own, even though I could tell he derived as much pleasure from the stories as anyone. His self-control amazed me. He listened to the story, smiled at the wit and insights, but never believed he was Richard, or was even with him, on the streets of Chicago. He remained Smoke Rushing, able and intent, yet standing in a dusty yard in Otto, Oklahoma, unable to see his future.

I never tried to imitate Richard either, but not for the same reason. His stories did take me far away from the place and time that held me. At night, lying in bed, I often became Richard on stage, speaking to a captive audience of strangers and friends. But I never did this in front of people because I could never hear my voice well enough to know how it sounded. How did you know if you had it right? It made me wonder how singers ever knew when their voices sounded good, how they even knew if they could sing.

My favorite stories concerned the wino who knew it all. He directed traffic on Sundays, had an encounter with Dracula, and counseled a junkie, telling him in the end, "You got to know how to read the white man. That's how I got where I am today." These stories made me feel at home, but they also made me aware of my isolation as an individual. How, I am still not sure. I think they made me aware of my own vague but stirring ambitions, made me want to jump at the sun. Walking home, I often felt alone and sad, but inspired to do something. At times, I felt like I was on an island. Richard's stories became the ocean that surrounded me, connecting me to the distant human society of power and privilege that lay beyond the horizon on unseen shores. And I felt then my challenge in life: to assemble, out of the materials provided me, a way to reach that distant world.

These were the days before cable television reached Otto. Of course, we couldn't afford it when it did arrive, but once here, awareness of the world, especially among the young, expanded. By the early eighties, white middle-class kids were watching Bette Midler's bawdy stage shows on HBO. The R-rated movies that proliferated in this decade were now wired into air-conditioned living rooms. The coolest kids had access to such entertainment, which gave them a knowledge of things they didn't know what to do with except use to enhance their coolness. Fundamentalists in our town

were outraged by this development, and later, by petition, kept MTV off our cable system for two years.

Now, it seems every two-bit comic who can find an agent is on television. But then, hearing Richard's voice emerge from the tinny speakers of the Rushings' car made us feel like we were being reached by a distant prophet. He made it to our neighborhood simply by word of mouth. Of the many uncelebrated others, we had no awareness.

During this time, through my late junior high and early high school years, I became a thief. The connection between hearing Richard Pryor and ripping off convenience stores may seem absurd, but it is true nonetheless. (Richard Pryor made me the crook I am today!) Listening to his stories intensified a desire in me I had only vaguely known as restless energy. I sought a challenge. No approved behavior offered such rewards. I was not into sports, and schoolwork still seemed like mindless chores. When I found out, late that summer, that Timmy and Nathan made periodic treks, on foot, to rip off white stores, I became their comrade.

Timmy stole to satisfy his continuous and intensifying need for adventure, Nathan, who ironically displayed more strategy and caution than us, for something to do. They realized the possibilities, they later told me, near the end of the school year after Nathan got into a fight with Jimmy Gastow, a prominent white thug, 14 going on 25. Surprised

by Nathan's wit and the power of his punches, Jimmy suggested they go get some beer after they beat on one another a while. Nathan and Timmy followed Jimmy and his group warily, thinking they might be led into a downtown alley and attacked.

Instead, they walked to a 7-11 several blocks from school. Nathan and Timmy went in with two guys, ahead of the others. The white kids began filling fountain drinks when one of them dropped his and cussed the machine. While the cashier investigated, two kids grabbed a twelve-pack each and walked calmly out the door. Jimmy approached the cashier, blocking his view of the two thieves, then berated his friend for being so clumsy, stupid, and loud. Relieved that Jimmy was on his side, the cashier gave them a free coke to boot.

By August, Timmy and I would take off early in the morning, promising to go to Red Hill, a shady, clustered knob of ground at the southern edge of town. Some kids played in the woods during the day. In one clearing, guys played basketball on a goal nailed to an oak tree. At night, the hill was a gathering point for young adults, a place white cops wouldn't appear.

This was the poorest section of town. Nathan lived with his grandmother, four brothers and sisters, and occasionally his mother in a shingled hovel not much bigger than the one my mother and I occupied. He slept on a

mattress in a small room he shared with his two older brothers, who beat on him when bored. We never wanted to go all the way to his house to get him, since we had to turn around and go north to the stores. But Nathan usually slept late, and we didn't feel safe without him.

I didn't like going to his place. Tension lived in the Rushings' home, but you could feel a warmth, generated by Mrs. Rushing, which united everyone that entered. You weren't special but at least recognized in her house.

I didn't feel that at Nathan's. I sensed little connection between anyone in the house, and knew when they did make contact, a fight was the result. Every step through the creaking doorway was your own. No assurance of protection or care guided your movements. It was the epitome of self-reliance, and made me see how brutal and vicious such a view could be.

Nathan's mother, Roberta, was a tall, lanky, dark-skinned woman--so thin she looked anorexic--with buggy eyes, a quick tongue, and a hairstyle like one of the Supremes. The way she looked at the ceiling, eyes glazed from wine and reflection, made me think she liked to picture herself in some dazzling, neon world. She left Otto many times in search of it, spending Nathan's early years in St. Louis. But she never found it.

She brought as many strange men into the house as she did wine bottles, hoping one of them would carry her off.

Often, I heard one of these men, snoring or bitching in the back of the house.

They didn't scare me as much as Nathan's brother Randy. He loved drugs and would have been a junkie had there been a steady supply in Black Town. I never saw him asleep, and looking at him, thought it an impossibility. He glared at everything, even when he laughed, as if he were bleeding from an internal wound and looking for someone to hit to relieve the pain. I remember wishing he would get caught and sent to jail, just so I wouldn't be the one he attacked.

Nathan was impervious to it all. He was the only one who found pleasure in living. Asleep in his room, he looked as peaceful as any protected child in a middle-class home. It often took us a half hour to get him out of bed. When he did stir, his breath stunk, his hair was knotted, and his eyelids were caked with matter.

"Damn, ya'll's ugly," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Shame a person gotta see you first thing of a morning." He would put on the clothes lying next to his mattress, or if there were a pile of clean ones in the corner, dig through it for a shirt and jeans.

With Nathan along, I knew we would not get caught. He survived his home life with such dignity I believed no white store owner could bring him down.

He did have one uncontrollable fear: the cat lady. She was an old, stoop-shouldered, shock-haired woman who lived

alone in a thin frame house in the middle of Nathan's block. Other kids called her Candy Lady. Since the stores were so far away and the ice cream vendor never came this far south, she bought candy wholesale, sold it at her front door. Nathan was not one of her customers.

She had more cats than there were people on the block. They were all over her yard and porch, spilling out of her house like toes from a worn shoe. Their presence convinced Nathan she was a witch who could throw a curse on you in the time it took to walk by her house. It wasn't the cats that bugged him so much--although he hated them--but her choosing to live with them.

No one knew how she fed them. Nathan said you didn't need money when you were a witch, you just made food appear. When I asked him why she didn't live in a better place, he said it was all the same when you were a witch. You could make it look any way you wanted. Plus, she didn't want to blow her cover.

We never walked past the cat lady's house. Once, I mentioned her as we were heading north, and Nathan refused to go any further, insisting I jinxed the trip. We went to the Boys' Club instead, and Timmy and I spent two hours trying to convince him my comment wouldn't have any effect.

He finally agreed to go with us, but wouldn't step foot in the stores. To make our point, Timmy and I went into

Wynona's Mini-Mart, stealing the easiest item--candy. As we were walking home, chiding Nathan for being so simple, Timmy spilled an entire pack of M&Ms trying to open it, and I got a Marathon bar with tiny ants crawling on it. Nathan said we were lucky; the cat lady could have poisoned us.

Our most reliable target was a grungy E-Z Mart on the corner of Constant and 16th, five blocks from Main Street, an hour's walk from my house. It had been so stained by the feel of drifters, truckers, and factory workers, the store's big ugly yellow and black sign looked like it had been parked on by an Oldsmobile with an oil leak. The store was a dingy, rectangular building with tinted front glass and a flat roof that leaked near the cooler when it rained. The place had no gas pumps, which reduced the flow of customers and helped doom the business. Since E-Z Mart pulled out, the building has housed a number of ill-conceived and poorly-financed ideas like Dan the Man's Donuts, Belcher's Scuba and Aquamarine Surplus, and Ginger's Curio Cabinet.

A white woman named Wanda worked the seven to three shift. She had frosted hair, a husky cigarette voice, and long fingernails that continuously tapped the formica counter. The job bored her, but she liked us. She talked about adult things to keep our interest: relationships, sex, bars, local gossip. In return, we stole her blind.

She'd been abandoned by two men, and was raising three children, two of whom were teenage boys who had long hair,

smoked dope, listened to crazy music, and did who knew what else. She couldn't understand why they turned out the way they did, as if she believed her children's personalities were shaped the moment they emerged from the womb, and parental guidance had little effect.

In one sense, she was right. They were beyond her control by the time we knew her, and she was helpless to do anything but yell at them. She spent hours considering reasons for their decline with me as her audience, while Timmy and Nathan stuffed their pockets, socks, and underwear. She drew the same conclusion after every story: what could you expect considering their fathers?

Ripping Wanda off became so boring we branched out to find new challenges. We hit convenience stores with more alert and suspicious clerks. We walked Main Street, looking for new stores, and got excited passing Tanner's Sporting Goods. We made a list of things we needed: basketball, football, shoes, socks, shorts, shirts. For some reason, Nathan also wanted a tennis racquet.

Distraction was my job; I was the only one who could think up new ideas. I hated the hits we made with a worn scheme. On this maneuver I was planning to twist my ankle walking in a new pair of shoes.

I felt doomed the moment we walked into Tanner's. It was as if our black skin made the neat racks and expensive

items scream in alarm. I went ahead with the plan, but the clerk threw me a curve.

He was a young brash high school punk, probably a jock trying to demonstrate adult courage. He refused to bring out a new pair of shoes for a fit, informing me politely the brand of my request was quite expensive. He asked if I knew how much they cost, as if I couldn't count to ten. I told him I knew what \$52.95 meant, and asked if they were too proud to take a nigger's money. He eyed me a minute, wondering if I was lying. Then his face flush, but only for a second. He asked to see the money before he retrieved the shoes.

I started yelling, attracting the attention of everyone in the store, thinking this diversion would work much better than the twisted ankle. But it didn't help. The other clerks kept their poise better than riot police. Two of them watched Nathan and Timmy the entire time, unfazed by my complaints. I stopped yelling when I heard one of the clerks say, "Stop there, you! Hey! Don't go out the door!"

She was speaking to Nathan, who kept strolling toward the door as if he were deaf. His calmness startled the clerk. She could have caught him had she raced toward him. But Nathan's assured walk made her doubt her eyes long enough for him to get out the door.

Outside, he still didn't panic. Through the big glass storefront, we watched him stroll down the sidewalk. The

clerk was so dismantled by his control, she ran to the door, called to him, then looked back at her colleagues in disbelief. Nathan never once ran.

I saw Timmy put a pair of maroon University of Oklahoma gym shorts back on a rack, and saunter toward the door. A male clerk intercepted him, leading him to the back of the store by the arm as if he were a dog, as if he never considered using language to form his request. He managed to get Timmy to the back, but not by the arm. Timmy jerked free, then feinted at him. The man was so afraid of blacks he flinched even though he was twice Timmy's size.

My clerk gave me the same instructions, but didn't grab me. I resisted for a moment, then conceded, realizing they couldn't do anything to us. They tried to intimidate us, but we denied knowing Nathan. They threatened to call our parents.

"I'll call for you," Timmy said. "Gimme the phone. Wake my old man up, see what he do." If they called, we were dead. But their suspicions were confirmed. It was our parents' fault.

They frisked us before letting us go. Timmy called the guy a faggot, claimed he should pay for feeling him up. The guy pushed Timmy, so Timmy kicked him in the shin. I kicked the guy next to me in the knee, and raced out the door. We found Nathan three blocks away in the alley, wearing his

hard-earned prize: a pair of red, white, and blue wrist bands.

We stayed off Main for a few weeks. Otto is small enough for three black kids to become suspects the cruising police would notice and be proud to threaten or detain. When we returned, we discovered a less-monitored store: Wall's Bargain Center.

As Nathan said, this place was pickings. It was so easy to rip off, we wouldn't even hide the merchandise--just wear it out as if we walked in with it on. We stole hats, jackets, shirts, tennis shoes, a basketball, Monopoly game, cheap gold chains, and numerous 8-track tapes we rarely listened to. We got so accustomed to stealing, it became like sex, which I still knew little about. We had to try new things to keep it interesting. Once, Nathan walked right through the checkout stand carrying a purple frisbee. The clerk stopped him, but Nathan claimed he brought it in, had witnesses to prove it. For some reason, it was disappointing when he got away with it.

Nathan never got his tennis racquet, but he did walk out one day with a severe limp, a Tom Watson putter tucked down his pants leg. It became his prize possession. He strolled around his unmown yard, twirling the club, claiming he was atop the leader board at the Masters' as the new bad-ass of golf, the Black Bear. Thievery was my pleasure and ambition for two years. Then the desire left as quickly

as it came, the sight of the merchandise offending me as if the stolen items were jeering kids. Wanda at the E-Z Mart was duped into selling beer to a long-haired regular who drove a Kawasaki 500 but was underage. He conned her as part of a police deal to lower DUI charges against him. The fat-ass cops charged her with selling alcohol to a minor, the store lost its liquor license for six months--it didn't remain in business past the third--and Wanda lost her job.

We heard this from the new clerk, a greasy-headed goof with thick glasses named Steve. He liked his job, arrived at six-thirty for his seven o'clock shift, thought he would move up in the company some day. He works at the 7-11 near the junior high now. I never ripped the E-Z Mart off or saw Wanda again.

Then, my sophomore year in high school, Smoke got busted. Three years prior, he went to the local university on a scholarship, but left school before finishing one term. He hung out, sold dope, left town, returned, got bored, saw that life didn't give a damn about his dreams, and went back to school.

He struggled the first year. He didn't play much, but when he did, showed signs of promise. I don't know how he passed his classes; he never went. I think the name Smoke even scared some of his professors. By his sophomore year, he was the second or third man off the bench, and was passing required courses.

Smoking dope never caused him problems, so he maintained the habit. He said he played better on it most of the time. It made him more active and alert, numbing his body enough so he could push it harder, and allowing him to focus more intensely. He said he realized the trick to success was accepting the boredom of doing one thing day after day.

I tried pot several times, but it made me feel dull and sluggish. The smoke felt like it became a glove that wrapped my brain. It made me feel warm and cozy, but too removed from the world to respond. All I could do was laugh and nod, and wonder how I could sneak away for a nap.

Selling dope was a different story for Smoke. He stopped when he returned to school. But after one term, he became a popular man on campus. Selling pot spread his popularity and his pocket money. He got a new car, a navy blue '78 Camaro with mag wheels, and a lot of new clothes. He became such a well-known figure his popularity protected him.

The team made the playoffs that year, lost in the district's semifinals to Oral Roberts University, the eventual national NAIA runner-up. Smoke was playing so well, he was always on the floor at critical times. In the last game of the season, his team trailing by five, he stepped into a passing lane, took the ball the length of the floor, split two defenders in the lane with a sweet

crossover move, scored, and was fouled. But he also stepped on a defender's foot as he released the ball and tore ligaments in his ankle.

That was the beginning of the end for Smoke. On crutches for a couple of months, he never accepted the severity of the injury. I don't think he had ever been hurt before, never been in a situation his natural ability couldn't overcome. When the doctor removed the cast, Smoke believed the ankle would be strong and limber as ever. Discovering it was weak, stiff, and tender, he gave it time, thinking it would return to normal on its own, believing rehab was for people who lacked natural talent.

He was never the same. Even though his mind wouldn't accept it, his body knew the ankle was weaker. He didn't have the same quick burst to the hole, and when he did penetrate, he didn't finish the move with the same determination. He was as aware of the other players' feet as he was the basket.

His playing time decreased his junior year. A white farm-town freshman named Tommy Qualls, who wanted to be a preacher and played as if every opponent were Beelzebub, stole Smoke's starting guard spot. On the floor together, Smoke's tentativeness became more apparent next to Quall's unrelieved aggressiveness. He harassed one opponent into such frustration the guy chunked the ball in his face after double dribbling for the third time. While the referee was

whistling a T on the player, Qualls retrieved the ball and, smiling, returned it to the guy, who was tossed from the game after he chunked it a second time.

Humiliated by this turn of events, Smoke's play deteriorated to the point he never left the bench. In November, he got into a fight with the coach and quit the team. On campus, he remained popular and must have felt the same privileged protection he received while a player.

But his protection was gone. In December, Jerald Barker, the son of a vice president at a local Savings and Loan, ran a red light. The cops discovered he was drunk, and found a quarter-ounce bag of marijuana. The next night, he pulled his car into Smoke's driveway--he always bought the stuff on campus before--with \$100 and a wiretap.

Watching the cop cars descend on the Rushings' home made me think of descriptions of the Apocalypse in Revelations. In many ways, it was the end for Smoke, the end for those who knew him, and for the first time I understood how revolts could so easily be ignited in Watts, Kansas City, Detroit, Los Angeles. Seeing lives end so quickly and repeatedly made you recognize the fear of your own demise, as if there were a German Shepherd with a silver collar and clean coat lying in wait behind the corner. And it was not death the dog offered. This was worse than death. Smoke's life had just ended, for him, his family, and friends. But he had to go on living it.

The night of the arrest I was walking toward the Rushings' house when two navy blue cop cars appeared, speeding as if in pursuit of an escaped felon, sliding recklessly to a stop in front of the house. The setting sun was behind me, casting a somber, golden hue on the neighborhood. Shadows stretched out in front of me, long and awkward, surreal stick figures whose forms seemed to reveal a deeper, more grotesque reality than the surface features would admit.

Four men emerged from the automobiles: three in uniform, one in brown slacks and coat, boots, plaid shirt, and a knit tie that stopped at his navel. All were fat, their butts wide from sitting hour after hour. They hurried toward the front door in a pace just shy of a run, looking like they were being pulled as much as pushed by their duty. Each man was conscious of his movements, as if he had to show he wanted to arrive first at the door. There was an awkward pause when they arrived while they waited for the designated officer to step up. When he did, he looked at the others, received a nod, then knocked twice, opening the door on the second with such force he pushed it into the wall, causing a momentary jam of men in the doorway.

As I later learned, they had Smoke dead to rights. He tried to get out a bedroom window, but failed. An open brawl between the Rushings and the four men would have

produced an interesting and unpredictable outcome, but it didn't occur.

They led him out, hands cuffed behind, wearing only jeans and tennis shoes. The family spilled out the door behind him in anger and disbelief. Yolanda cursed the cops--this was the only time I saw them on our block-- and Roshon made promises of revenge. Sam was expressionless, his mind devastated by this image. His mother was behind him, weeping from the sorrow she had foreseen, holding the frightened younger children next to her protective body.

Seeing Smoke in cuffs was like witnessing my own death. It was impossible to believe his fine, graceful body could be chained and bound. But it could, easily, with simple, blunt, official force. White men may not be able to bind a black man's spirit or dreams. But they could still chain his body, bend his head and shove him into the back seat of a car. And one thing is certain: Smoke's spirit and dreams had to follow his body.

I then committed an act I regret more than any in my life. I turned around and walked home. I didn't want to invade the family's sorrow, as if I thought my presence so unique it would significantly distract them from their pain. In reality, I could have helped alleviate their sorrow, but only in a small way, as another pair of hands among many trying to support a falling wall.

At times, I see this decision made by the white half of me, the half that values the isolation of the individual. I went to my room--my mother napping on the couch, having worked twenty hours of overtime the past weekend--and thought about the effects of this event on Smoke and his family, but also on me. And for good or bad, Smoke's misfortune touched me the way a tingling jolt of an electrical current will guide your hand away from an exposed wire. The path of defiance led to a jail cell, at least in Otto, Oklahoma. It was a dead-end street. The only means by which a person could grow and prosper, and in turn help his neighborhood, was to find the scattered, confusing barbed wires of the white man's law and keep your feet away from them. They were deceptively strong and resistant. To do so, even to my young imagination, felt like abject accommodation. It did not seem like a man's way. But it was, to my mind, the only way.

I knew this to be the truth the next day when I saw Leon Rushing, Smoke's father, for the first time. He was a short, stout man in his fifties with a receding hairline marked by two spots of gray, like flat horns, above his temples. The skin on his broad forehead was loose and wrinkled. He looked worn, but still had wit and energy. "Selling to a white punk driving a new Camaro," he said, as much to himself as to the rest of us in the living room. "Boy must have thought himself untouchable."

I got mad listening to him. He spoke of his oldest son and to the other children as if he lived with them. I was used to families with absent men, including my own, but I wondered if Smoke's life would have turned out differently if his father had been there to help him. But I didn't say anything, because I knew deep down one man couldn't control all the forces that affected Smoke's life anymore than he could hold a gallon of water in his cupped hands.

Mr. Rushing knew this too. He responded to his children with warm familiarity, but was a fatalist about their future. A parent could show the child the difference between right and wrong, but inevitably, the child made his own decisions. Out of a meager choice of paths through the woods, Smoke picked a risky one, and would now live with the consequences. Mr. Rushing didn't moralize to the others; if they couldn't see the danger in Smoke's life, then they would have to discover for themselves the pitfalls on this path, a route parental words couldn't discourage them from.

He stayed about six months and was gone. I knew he couldn't do as much as I hoped for his family, but, like his children, I missed his presence. By the time he left, my resentment toward him, and my own absent father, had passed. While he was here, the unspoken desire, dead weight on the tongues of everyone present, reverberated through the house with its heavy silence: the man should do something. He

should act to change this turn of events, rally his family and neighbors, somehow, some way, to aid Smoke's suffering, to shield the others from such pain, to ensure a future free from such dehumanizing restraints.

But there was nothing he could do. Mrs. Rushing allowed the family to endure through her endless capacities for love. But Mr. Rushing could not abide this form of endurance: he wanted to succeed, yet no hope, no choice, allowed that. If he remained, he had to suffer and endure, and because he was the man, live with the blame.

For the first time in my life I tried to envision myself as a man. I couldn't do it. I couldn't identify any work I wanted to perform, couldn't envision actions that would define me. I understood why so many people, especially young men, remained careless for so long. Because they couldn't see themselves as men, they wanted to preserve their youth as long as possible. Once their boyhood visions died, they died.

So I hit the books, not because I was sure of the path I wanted to take, but because school seemed to be the only viable, even if vague, alternative. My mother noticed the change, and fueled it with praise and rewards, as she did when I was a child. She insisted education was the ticket to a better life, which for me meant a route to manhood. I believed her and performed the tasks, through high school and college, the way many people conduct their religious

lives: attending to duties, marking time, finding occasional enlightenment, enduring the tedium of repetition, sustained through it all by the hope of a distant reward.

EPILOGUE

I haven't found Aubrey Rowe, but I no longer feel the same insistent desire because I know there is no such single, tangible thing. If I want certainty, I tap my chest. My body is what I am. The who is a continuous, fluid, indefinite thing, defined by my actions as I go. I am more black than white, more street punk than scholar, more brother than redneck. But all these elements live in me, emerge from my mouth in differing dialects, united by my experience, actions, and desires. Now I have seen; may they serve me well.

VITA ²

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