

Dreams from My Father

A Story of Race and Inheritance



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CHAPTER FOUR

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MAN, I'M NOT GOING TO any more of these bullshit Punahou parties."

"Yeah, that's what you said the last time."

Ray and I sat down at a table and unwrapped our hamburgers. He was two years older than me, a senior who, as a result of his father's army transfer, had arrived from Los Angeles the previous year. Despite the difference in age, we'd fallen into an easy friendship, due in no small part to the fact that together we made up almost half of Punahou's black high school population. I enjoyed his company; he had a warmth and brash humor that made up for his constant references to a former L.A. life—the retinue of women who supposedly still called him long-distance every night, his past football exploits, the celebrities he knew. Most of the things he told me I tended to discount, but not everything; it was true, for example, that he was one of the fastest sprinters in the islands, Olympic caliber some said, this despite an improbably large stomach that quivered under his sweat-soaked jersey whenever he ran and left coaches and opposing teams shaking their heads in disbelief. Through Ray I would find out about the black parties that were happening at the university or out on the army bases, counting on him to ease my passage through

unfamiliar terrain. In return, I gave him a sounding board for his frustrations.

"I mean it this time," he was saying to me now. "These girls are A-1, USDA-certified racists. All of 'em. White girls. Asian girls—shoot, these Asians worse than the whites. Think we got a disease or something."

"Maybe they're looking at that big butt of yours. Man, I thought you were in training."

"Get your hands out of my fries. You ain't my bitch, nigger . . . buy your own damn fries. Now what was I talking about?"

"Just 'cause a girl don't go out with you doesn't make her racist."

"Don't be thick, all right? I'm not just talking about one time. Look, I ask Monica out, she says no. I say okay . . . your shit's not so hot anyway." Ray stopped to check my reaction, then smiled. "All right, maybe I don't actually say all that. I just tell her okay, Monica, you know, we still tight. Next thing I know, she's hooked up with Steve 'No Neck' Yamaguchi, the two of 'em all holding hands and shit, like a couple of lovebirds. So fine—I figure there're more fish in the sea. I go ask Pamela out. She tells me she ain't going to the dance. I say cool. Get to the dance, guess who's standing there, got her arms around Rick Cook. 'Hi, Ray,' she says, like she don't know what's going down. Rick Cook! Now you know that guy ain't shit. Sorry-assed motherfucker got nothing on me, right? Nothing."

He stuffed a handful of fries into his mouth. "It ain't just me, by the way. I don't see you doing any better in the booty department."

Because I'm shy, I thought to myself; but I would never admit that to him. Ray pressed the advantage.

"So what happens when we go out to a party with some sisters, huh? What happens? I tell you what happens. Blam! They on us like there's no tomorrow. High school chicks, university chicks—it don't matter. They acting sweet, all smiles. 'Sure you can have my number, baby.' Bet."

“Well . . .”

“Well what? Listen, why don’t you get more playing time on the basketball team, huh? At least two guys ahead of you ain’t nothing, and you know it, and they know it. I seen you tear ’em up on the playground, no contest. Why wasn’t I starting on the football squad this season, no matter how many passes the other guy dropped? Tell me we wouldn’t be treated different if we was white. Or Japanese. Or Hawaiian. Or fucking Eskimo.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“So what are you saying?”

“All right, here’s what I’m saying. I’m saying, yeah, it’s harder to get dates because there aren’t any black girls around here. But that don’t make the girls that are here all racist. Maybe they just want somebody that looks like their daddy, or their brother, or whatever, and we ain’t it. I’m saying yeah, I might not get the breaks on the team that some guys get, but they play like white boys do, and that’s the style the coach likes to play, and they’re winning the way they play. I don’t play that way.

“As for your greasy-mouthed self,” I added, reaching for the last of his fries, “I’m saying the coaches may not like you ’cause you’re a smart-assed black man, but it might help if you stopped eating all them fries you eat, making you look six months pregnant. That’s what I’m saying.”

“Man, I don’t know why you making excuses for these folks.” Ray got up and crumpled his trash into a tight ball. “Let’s get out of here. Your shit’s getting way too complicated for me.”

Ray was right; things had gotten complicated. It had been five years since my father’s visit, and on the surface, at least, it had been a placid time marked by the usual rites and rituals that America expects from its children—marginal report cards and calls to the principal’s office, part-time jobs at the burger chain, acne and driving tests and

turbulent desire. I’d made my share of friends at school, gone on the occasional awkward date; and if I sometimes puzzled over the mysterious realignments of status that took place among my classmates, as some rose and others fell depending on the whims of their bodies or the make of their cars, I took comfort in the knowledge that my own position had steadily improved. Rarely did I meet kids whose families had less than mine and might remind me of good fortune.

My mother did her best to remind me. She had separated from Lolo and returned to Hawaii to pursue a master’s degree in anthropology shortly after my own arrival. For three years I lived with her and Maya in a small apartment a block away from Punahou, my mother’s student grants supporting the three of us. Sometimes, when I brought friends home after school, my mother would overhear them remark about the lack of food in the fridge or the less-than-perfect housekeeping, and she would pull me aside and let me know that she was a single mother going to school again and raising two kids, so that baking cookies wasn’t exactly at the top of her priority list, and while she appreciated the fine education I was receiving at Punahou, she wasn’t planning on putting up with any snotty attitudes from me or anyone else, was that understood?

It was understood. Despite my frequent—and sometimes sullen—claims of independence, the two of us remained close, and I did my best to help her out where I could, shopping for groceries, doing the laundry, looking after the knowing, dark-eyed child that my sister had become. But when my mother was ready to return to Indonesia to do her field work, and suggested that I go back with her and Maya to attend the international school there, I immediately said no. I doubted what Indonesia now had to offer and wearied of being new all over again. More than that, I’d arrived at an unspoken pact with my grandparents: I could live with them and they’d leave me alone so long as I kept my trouble out of sight. The arrangement suited my purpose, a purpose that I could barely articulate to myself, much less

to them. Away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant.

My father's letters provided few clues. They would arrive sporadically, on a single blue page with gummed-down flaps that obscured any writing at the margins. He would report that everyone was fine, commend me on my progress in school, and insist that my mother, Maya, and I were all welcome to take our rightful place beside him whenever we so desired. From time to time he would include advice, usually in the form of aphorisms I didn't quite understand ("Like water finding its level, you will arrive at a career that suits you"). I would respond promptly on a wide-ruled page, and his letters would find their way into the closet, next to my mother's pictures of him.

Gramps had a number of black male friends, mostly poker and bridge partners, and before I got old enough not to care about hurting his feelings, I would let him drag me along to some of their games. They were old, neatly dressed men with hoarse voices and clothes that smelled of cigars, the kind of men for whom everything has its place and who figure they've seen enough not to have to waste a lot of time talking about it. Whenever they saw me they would give me a jovial slap on the back and ask how my mother was doing; but once it was time to play, they wouldn't say another word except to complain to their partner about a bid.

There was one exception, a poet named Frank who lived in a dilapidated house in a run-down section of Waikiki. He had enjoyed some modest notoriety once, was a contemporary of Richard Wright and Langston Hughes during his years in Chicago—Gramps once showed me some of his work anthologized in a book of black poetry. But by the time I met Frank he must have been pushing eighty, with a big, dewlapped face and an ill-kempt gray Afro that made him look like an old, shaggy-maned lion. He would read us his poetry when-

ever we stopped by his house, sharing whiskey with Gramps out of an emptied jelly jar. As the night wore on, the two of them would solicit my help in composing dirty limericks. Eventually, the conversation would turn to laments about women.

"They'll drive you to drink, boy," Frank would tell me soberly. "And if you let 'em, they'll drive you into your grave."

I was intrigued by old Frank, with his books and whiskey breath and the hint of hard-earned knowledge behind the hooded eyes. The visits to his house always left me feeling vaguely uncomfortable, though, as if I were witnessing some complicated, unspoken transaction between the two men, a transaction I couldn't fully understand. The same thing I felt whenever Gramps took me downtown to one of his favorite bars, in Honolulu's red-light district.

"Don't tell your grandmother," he would say with a wink, and we'd walk past hard-faced, soft-bodied streetwalkers into a small, dark bar with a jukebox and a couple of pool tables. Nobody seemed to mind that Gramps was the only white man in the place, or that I was the only eleven- or twelve-year-old. Some of the men leaning across the bar would wave at us, and the bartender, a big, light-skinned woman with bare, fleshy arms, would bring a Scotch for Gramps and a Coke for me. If nobody else was playing at the tables, Gramps would spot me a few balls and teach me the game, but usually I would sit at the bar, my legs dangling from the high stool, blowing bubbles into my drink and looking at the pornographic art on the walls—the phosphorescent women on animal skins, the Disney characters in compromising positions. If he was around, a man named Rodney with a wide-brimmed hat would stop by to say hello.

"How's school coming, captain?"

"All right."

"You getting them A's, ain't you?"

"Some."

"That's good. Sally, buy my man here another 'Coke," Rodney

would say, peeling a twenty off a thick stack he had pulled from his pocket before he fell back into the shadows.

I can still remember the excitement I felt during those evening trips, the enticement of darkness and the click of the cue ball, and the jukebox flashing its red and green lights, and the weary laughter that ran around the room. Yet even then, as young as I was, I had already begun to sense that most of the people in the bar weren't there out of choice, that what my grandfather sought there was the company of people who could help him forget his own troubles, people who he believed would not judge him. Maybe the bar really did help him forget, but I knew with the unerring instincts of a child that he was wrong about not being judged. Our presence there felt forced, and by the time I had reached junior high school I had learned to beg off from Gramps's invitations, knowing that whatever it was I was after, whatever it was that I needed, would have to come from some other source.

TV, movies, the radio; those were the places to start. Pop culture was color-coded, after all, an arcade of images from which you could cop a walk, a talk, a step, a style. I couldn't croon like Marvin Gaye, but I could learn to dance all the *Soul Train* steps. I couldn't pack a gun like Shaft or Superfly, but I could sure enough curse like Richard Pryor.

And I could play basketball, with a consuming passion that would always exceed my limited talent. My father's Christmas gift had come at a time when the University of Hawaii basketball team had slipped into the national rankings on the strength of an all-black starting five that the school had shipped in from the mainland. That same spring, Gramps had taken me to one of their games, and I had watched the players in warm-ups, still boys themselves but to me poised and confident warriors, chuckling to each other about some inside joke, glancing over the heads of fawning fans to wink at the girls on the sidelines, casually flipping layups or tossing high-arcing jumpers until the whistle blew and the centers jumped and the players joined in furious battle.

I decided to become part of that world, and began going down to

a playground near my grandparents' apartment after school. From her bedroom window, ten stories up, Toot would watch me on the court until well after dark as I threw the ball with two hands at first, then developed an awkward jump shot, a crossover dribble, absorbed in the same solitary moves hour after hour. By the time I reached high school, I was playing on Punahou's teams, and could take my game to the university courts, where a handful of black men, mostly gym rats and has-beens, would teach me an attitude that didn't just have to do with the sport. That respect came from what you did and not who your daddy was. That you could talk stuff to rattle an opponent, but that you should shut the hell up if you couldn't back it up. That you didn't let anyone sneak up behind you to see emotions—like hurt or fear—you didn't want them to see.

And something else, too, something nobody talked about: a way of being together when the game was tight and the sweat broke and the best players stopped worrying about their points and the worst players got swept up in the moment and the score only mattered because that's how you sustained the trance. In the middle of which you might make a move or a pass that surprised even you, so that even the guy guarding you had to smile, as if to say, "Damn . . ."

My wife will roll her eyes right about now. She grew up with a basketball star for a brother, and when she wants to wind either of us up she will insist that she'd rather see her son play the cello. She's right, of course; I was living out a caricature of black male adolescence, itself a caricature of swaggering American manhood. Yet at a time when boys aren't supposed to want to follow their fathers' tired footsteps, when the imperatives of harvest or work in the factory aren't supposed to dictate identity, so that how to live is bought off the rack or found in magazines, the principal difference between me and most of the man-boys around me—the surfers, the football players, the would-be rock-and-roll guitarists—resided in the limited number of options at my disposal. Each of us chose a costume, armor against

uncertainty. At least on the basketball court I could find a community of sorts, with an inner life all its own. It was there that I would make my closest white friends, on turf where blackness couldn't be a disadvantage. And it was there that I would meet Ray and the other blacks close to my age who had begun to trickle into the islands, teenagers whose confusion and anger would help shape my own.

"That's just how white folks will do you," one of them might say when we were alone. Everybody would chuckle and shake their heads, and my mind would run down a ledger of slights: the first boy, in seventh grade, who called me a coon; his tears of surprise—"Why'dya do that?"—when I gave him a bloody nose. The tennis pro who told me during a tournament that I shouldn't touch the schedule of matches pinned up to the bulletin board because my color might rub off; his thin-lipped, red-faced smile—"Can't you take a joke?"—when I threatened to report him. The older woman in my grandparents' apartment building who became agitated when I got on the elevator behind her and ran out to tell the manager that I was following her; her refusal to apologize when she was told that I lived in the building. Our assistant basketball coach, a young, wiry man from New York with a nice jumper, who, after a pick-up game with some talkative black men, had muttered within earshot of me and three of my teammates that we shouldn't have lost to a bunch of niggers; and who, when I told him—with a fury that surprised even me—to shut up, had calmly explained the apparently obvious fact that "there are black people, and there are niggers. Those guys were niggers."

That's just how white folks will do you. It wasn't merely the cruelty involved; I was learning that black people could be mean and then some. It was a particular brand of arrogance, an obtuseness in otherwise sane people that brought forth our bitter laughter. It was as if whites didn't know they were being cruel in the first place. Or at least thought you deserving of their scorn.

White folks. The term itself was uncomfortable in my mouth at

first; I felt like a non-native speaker tripping over a difficult phrase. Sometimes I would find myself talking to Ray about *white folks* this or *white folks* that, and I would suddenly remember my mother's smile, and the words that I spoke would seem awkward and false. Or I would be helping Gramps dry the dishes after dinner and Toot would come in to say she was going to sleep, and those same words—*white folks*—would flash in my head like a bright neon sign, and I would suddenly grow quiet, as if I had secrets to keep.

Later, when I was alone, I would try to untangle these difficult thoughts. It was obvious that certain whites could be exempted from the general category of our distrust: Ray was always telling me how cool my grandparents were. The term *white* was simply a shorthand for him, I decided, a tag for what my mother would call a bigot. And although I recognized the risks in his terminology—how easy it was to fall into the same sloppy thinking that my basketball coach had displayed ("There are white folks, and then there are ignorant motherfuckers like you," I had finally told the coach before walking off the court that day)—Ray assured me that we would never talk about whites as whites in front of whites without knowing exactly what we were doing. Without knowing that there might be a price to pay.

But was that right? Was there still a price to pay? That was the complicated part, the thing that Ray and I never could seem to agree on. There were times when I would listen to him tell some blond girl he'd just met about life on L.A.'s mean streets, or hear him explain the scars of racism to some eager young teacher, and I could swear that just beneath the sober expression Ray was winking at me, letting me in on the score. Our rage at the white world needed no object, he seemed to be telling me, no independent confirmation; it could be switched on and off at our pleasure. Sometimes, after one of his performances, I would question his judgment, if not his sincerity. We weren't living in the Jim Crow South, I would remind him. We weren't consigned to some heatless housing project in Harlem or the

Bronx. We were in goddamned Hawaii. We said what we pleased, ate where we pleased; we sat at the front of the proverbial bus. None of our white friends, guys like Jeff or Scott from the basketball team, treated us any differently than they treated each other. They loved us, and we loved them back. Shit, seemed like half of 'em wanted to be black themselves—or at least Doctor J.

Well, that's true, Ray would admit.

Maybe we could afford to give the bad-assed nigger pose a rest. Save it for when we really needed it.

And Ray would shake his head. A pose, huh? Speak for your own self.

And I would know that Ray had flashed his trump card, one that, to his credit, he rarely played. I was different, after all, potentially suspect; I had no idea who my own self was. Unwilling to risk exposure, I would quickly retreat to safer ground.

Perhaps if we had been living in New York or L.A., I would have been quicker to pick up the rules of the high-stake game we were playing. As it was, I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere. Still, the feeling that something wasn't quite right stayed with me, a warning that sounded whenever a white girl mentioned in the middle of conversation how much she liked Stevie Wonder; or when a woman in the supermarket asked me if I played basketball; or when the school principal told me I was cool. I did like Stevie Wonder, I did love basketball, and I tried my best to be cool at all times. So why did such comments always set me on edge? There was a trick there somewhere, although what the trick was, who was doing the tricking, and who was being tricked, eluded my conscious grasp.

One day in early spring Ray and I met up after class and began walking in the direction of the stone bench that circled a big banyan tree on

Punahou's campus. It was called the Senior Bench, but it served mainly as a gathering place for the high school's popular crowd, the jocks and cheerleaders and partygoing set, with their jesters, attendants, and ladies-in-waiting jostling for position up and down the circular steps. One of the seniors, a stout defensive tackle named Kurt, was there, and he shouted loudly as soon as he saw us.

"Hey, Ray! Mah main man! Wha's happenin'!"

Ray went up and slapped Kurt's outstretched palm. But when Kurt repeated the gesture to me, I waved him off.

"What's his problem?" I overheard Kurt say to Ray as I walked away. A few minutes later, Ray caught up with me and asked me what was wrong.

"Man, those folks are just making fun of us," I said.

"What're you talking about?"

"All that 'Yo baby, give me five' bullshit."

"So who's mister sensitive all of a sudden? Kurt don't mean nothing by it."

"If that's what you think, then hey—"

Ray's face suddenly glistened with anger. "Look," he said, "I'm just getting along, all right? Just like I see you getting along, talking your game with the teachers when you need them to do you a favor. All that stuff about 'Yes, Miss Snooty Bitch, I just find this novel so engaging, if I can just have one more day for that paper, I'll kiss your white ass.' It's their world, all right? They own it, and we in it. So just get the fuck outta my face."

By the following day, the heat of our argument had dissipated, and Ray suggested that I invite our friends Jeff and Scott to a party Ray was throwing out at his house that weekend. I hesitated for a moment—we had never brought white friends along to a black party—but Ray insisted, and I couldn't find a good reason to object. Neither could Jeff or Scott; they both agreed to come so long as I was willing to drive. And so that Saturday night, after one of our games, the three of us

piled into Gramps's old Ford Granada and rattled our way out to Schofield Barracks, maybe thirty miles out of town.

When we arrived the party was well on its way, and we steered ourselves toward the refreshments. The presence of Jeff and Scott seemed to make no waves; Ray introduced them around the room, they made some small talk, they took a couple of the girls out on the dance floor. But I could see right away that the scene had taken my white friends by surprise. They kept smiling a lot. They huddled together in a corner. They nodded self-consciously to the beat of the music and said "Excuse me" every few minutes. After maybe an hour, they asked me if I'd be willing to take them home.

"What's the matter?" Ray shouted over the music when I went to let him know we were leaving. "Things just starting to heat up."

"They're not into it, I guess."

Our eyes met, and for a long stretch we just stood there, the noise and laughter pulsing around us. There were no traces of satisfaction in Ray's eyes, no hints of disappointment; just a steady gaze, as unblinking as a snake's. Finally he put out his hand, and I grabbed hold of it, our eyes still fixed on each other. "Later, then," he said, his hand slipping free from mine, and I watched him walk away through the crowd, asking about the girl he'd been talking to just a few minutes before.

Outside the air had turned cool. The street was absolutely empty, quiet except for the fading tremor of Ray's stereo, the blue lights flickering in the windows of bungalows that ran up and down the tidy lane, the shadows of trees stretching across a baseball field. In the car, Jeff put an arm on my shoulder, looking at once contrite and relieved. "You know, man," he said, "that really taught me something. I mean, I can see how it must be tough for you and Ray sometimes, at school parties . . . being the only black guys and all."

I snorted. "Yeah. Right." A part of me wanted to punch him right there. We started down the road toward town, and in the silence, my mind began to rework Ray's words that day with Kurt, all the discus-

sions we had had before that, the events of that night. And by the time I had dropped my friends off, I had begun to see a new map of the world, one that was frightening in its simplicity, suffocating in its implications. We were always playing on the white man's court, Ray had told me, by the white man's rules. If the principal, or the coach, or a teacher, or Kurt, wanted to spit in your face, he could, because he had power and you didn't. If he decided not to, if he treated you like a man or came to your defense, it was because he knew that the words you spoke, the clothes you wore, the books you read, your ambitions and desires, were already his. Whatever he decided to do, it was his decision to make, not yours, and because of that fundamental power he held over you, because it preceded and would outlast his individual motives and inclinations, any distinction between good and bad whites held negligible meaning. In fact, you couldn't even be sure that everything you had assumed to be an expression of your black, unfettered self—the humor, the song, the behind-the-back pass—had been freely chosen by you. At best, these things were a refuge; at worst, a trap. Following this maddening logic, the only thing you could choose as your own was withdrawal into a smaller and smaller coil of rage, until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat. And the final irony: Should you refuse this defeat and lash out at your captors, they would have a name for that, too, a name that could cage you just as good. Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger.

Over the next few months, I looked to corroborate this nightmare vision. I gathered up books from the library—Baldwin, Ellison, Hughes, Wright, DuBois. At night I would close the door to my room, telling my grandparents I had homework to do, and there I would sit and wrestle with words, locked in suddenly desperate argument, trying to reconcile the world as I'd found it with the terms of my birth. But there was no escape to be had. In every page of every

book, in *Bigger* Thomas and invisible men, I kept finding the same anguish, the same doubt; a self-contempt that neither irony nor intellect seemed able to deflect. Even DuBois's learning and Baldwin's love and Langston's humor eventually succumbed to its corrosive force, each man finally forced to doubt art's redemptive power, each man finally forced to withdraw, one to Africa, one to Europe, one deeper into the bowels of Harlem, but all of them in the same weary flight, all of them exhausted, bitter men, the devil at their heels.

Only Malcolm X's autobiography seemed to offer something different. His repeated acts of self-creation spoke to me; the blunt poetry of his words, his unadorned insistence on respect, promised a new and uncompromising order, martial in its discipline, forged through sheer force of will. All the other stuff, the talk of blue-eyed devils and apocalypse, was incidental to that program, I decided, religious baggage that Malcolm himself seemed to have safely abandoned toward the end of his life. And yet, even as I imagined myself following Malcolm's call, one line in the book stayed me. He spoke of a wish he'd once had, the wish that the white blood that ran through him, there by an act of violence, might somehow be expunged. I knew that, for Malcolm, that wish would never be incidental. I knew as well that traveling down the road to self-respect my own white blood would never recede into mere abstraction. I was left to wonder what else I would be severing if and when I left my mother and my grandparents at some uncharted border.

And, too: If Malcolm's discovery toward the end of his life, that some whites might live beside him as brothers in Islam, seemed to offer some hope of eventual reconciliation, that hope appeared in a distant future, in a far-off land. In the meantime, I looked to see where the people would come from who were willing to work toward this future and populate this new world. After a basketball game at the university gym one day, Ray and I happened to strike up a conversation with a tall, gaunt man named Malik who played with us

now and again. Malik mentioned that he was a follower of the Nation of Islam but that since Malcolm had died and he had moved to Hawaii he no longer went to mosque or political meetings, although he still sought comfort in solitary prayer. One of the guys sitting nearby must have overheard us, for he leaned over with a sagacious expression on his face.

"You all talking about Malcolm, huh? Malcolm tells it like it is, no doubt about it."

"Yeah," another guy said. "But I tell you what—you won't see me moving to no African jungle anytime soon. Or some goddamned desert somewhere, sitting on a carpet with a bunch of Arabs. No sir. And you won't see me stop eating no ribs."

"Gotta have them ribs."

"And pussy, too. Don't Malcolm talk about no pussy? Now you know that ain't gonna work."

I noticed Ray laughing and looked at him sternly. "What are you laughing at?" I said to him. "You've never read Malcolm. You don't even know what he says."

Ray grabbed the basketball out of my hand and headed for the opposite rim. "I don't need no books to tell me how to be black," he shouted over his head. I started to answer, then turned to Malik, expecting some words of support. But the Muslim said nothing, his bony face set in a faraway smile.

I decided to keep my own counsel after that, learning to disguise my feverish mood. A few weeks later, though, I awoke to the sound of an argument in the kitchen—my grandmother's voice barely audible, followed by my grandfather's deep growl. I opened my door to see Toot entering their bedroom to get dressed for work. I asked her what was wrong.

"Nothing. Your grandfather just doesn't want to drive me to work this morning, that's all."

When I entered the kitchen, Gramps was muttering under his breath. He poured himself a cup of coffee as I told him that I would be willing to give Toot a ride to work if he was tired. It was a bold offer, for I didn't like to wake up early. He scowled at my suggestion.

"That's not the point. She just wants me to feel bad."

"I'm sure that's not it, Gramps."

"Of course it is." He sipped from his coffee. "She's been catching the bus ever since she started at the bank. She said it was more convenient. And now, just because she gets pestered a little, she wants to change everything."

Toot's diminutive figure hovered in the hall, peering at us from behind her bifocals.

"That's not true, Stanley."

I took her into the other room and asked her what had happened.

"A man asked me for money yesterday. While I was waiting for the bus."

"That's all?"

Her lips pursed with irritation. "He was very aggressive, Barry. Very aggressive. I gave him a dollar and he kept asking. If the bus hadn't come, I think he might have hit me over the head."

I returned to the kitchen. Gramps was rinsing his cup, his back turned to me. "Listen," I said, "why don't you just let me give her a ride. She seems pretty upset."

"By a panhandler?"

"Yeah, I know—but it's probably a little scary for her, seeing some big man block her way. It's really no big deal."

He turned around and I saw now that he was shaking. "It is a big deal. It's a big deal to me. She's been bothered by men before. You know why she's so scared this time? I'll tell you why. Before you came in, she told me the fella was *black*." He whispered the word. "That's the real reason why she's bothered. And I just don't think that's right."

The words were like a fist in my stomach, and I wobbled to regain

my composure. In my steadiest voice, I told him that such an attitude bothered me, too, but assured him that Toot's fears would pass and that we should give her a ride in the meantime. Gramps slumped into a chair in the living room and said he was sorry he had told me. Before my eyes, he grew small and old and very sad. I put my hand on his shoulder and told him that it was all right, I understood.

We remained like that for several minutes, in painful silence. Finally he insisted that he drive Toot after all, and struggled up from his seat to get dressed. After they left, I sat on the edge of my bed and thought about my grandparents. They had sacrificed again and again for me. They had poured all their lingering hopes into my success. Never had they given me reason to doubt their love; I doubted if they ever would. And yet I knew that men who might easily have been my brothers could still inspire their rawest fears.

That night, I drove into Waikiki, past the bright-lit hotels and down toward the Ala-Wai Canal. It took me a while to recognize the house, with its wobbly porch and low-pitched roof. Inside, the light was on, and I could see Frank sitting in his overstuffed chair, a book of poetry in his lap, his reading glasses slipping down his nose. I sat in the car, watching him for a time, then finally got out and tapped on the door. The old man barely looked up as he rose to undo the latch. It had been three years since I'd seen him.

"Want a drink?" he asked me. I nodded and watched him pull down a bottle of whiskey and two plastic cups from the kitchen cupboard. He looked the same, his mustache a little whiter, dangling like dead ivy over his heavy upper lip, his cut-off jeans with a few more holes and tied at the waist with a length of rope.

"How's your grandpa?"

"He's all right."

"So what are you doing here?"

I wasn't sure. I told Frank some of what had happened. He nodded

and poured us each a shot. "Funny cat, your grandfather," he said. "You know we grew up maybe fifty miles apart?"

I shook my head.

"We sure did. Both of us lived near Wichita. We didn't know each other, of course. I was long gone by the time he was old enough to remember anything. I might have seen some of his people, though. Might've passed 'em on the street. If I did, I would've had to step off the sidewalk to give 'em room. Your grandpa ever tell you about things like that?"

I threw the whiskey down my throat, shaking my head again.

"Naw," Frank said, "I don't suppose he would have. Stan doesn't like to talk about that part of Kansas much. Makes him uncomfortable. He told me once about a black girl they hired to look after your mother. A preacher's daughter, I think it was. Told me how she became a regular part of the family. That's how he remembers it, you understand—this girl coming in to look after somebody else's children, her mother coming to do somebody else's laundry. A regular part of the family."

I reached for the bottle, this time pouring my own. Frank wasn't watching me; his eyes were closed now, his head leaning against the back of his chair, his big wrinkled face like a carving of stone. "You can't blame Stan for what he is," Frank said quietly. "He's basically a good man. But he doesn't *know* me. Any more than he knew that girl that looked after your mother. He *can't* know me, not the way I know him. Maybe some of these Hawaiians can, or the Indians on the reservation. They've seen their fathers humiliated. Their mothers desecrated. But your grandfather will never know what that feels like. That's why he can come over here and drink my whiskey and fall asleep in that chair you're sitting in right now. Sleep like a baby. See, that's something I can never do in his house. *Never*. Doesn't matter how tired I get, I still have to watch myself. I have to be vigilant, for my own survival."

Frank opened his eyes. "What I'm trying to tell you is, your

grandma's right to be scared. She's at least as right as Stanley is. She understands that black people have a reason to hate. That's just how it is. For your sake, I wish it were otherwise. But it's not. So you might as well get used to it."

Frank closed his eyes again. His breathing slowed until he seemed to be asleep. I thought about waking him, then decided against it and walked back to the car. The earth shook under my feet, ready to crack open at any moment. I stopped, trying to steady myself, and knew for the first time that I was utterly alone.