

Getting Above Your Raising

My momma did not lecture much, but when she did it was about false pride. My daddy had it. It was what made him sit for hours and shine his shoes or sharpen his knife, and forget to care about things that were really important, like whether his wife had money for groceries. She said, now and then, that I had my daddy's pride. I **2** cared too much about appearances, about the facade that faced the rest of the world. I would have paid more attention to her if I had not known for some time that it was precisely that same kind of pride that kept her a prisoner in that little house. But I guess being a momma has little to do with logic.

The really sad thing is that I let that false pride—that pride, and a fourteen-year-old girl—make me ashamed of who I was. Worse, I let it make me ashamed of who my momma was.

It was the summer before I started high school, and even though I had long since discovered the differences in my family and others, no one had ever put it into words, until her.

1 I was, in my own mind, a dashing figure. I had played on the basketball and baseball teams and I owned a motorcycle, a white-and-red Honda. The chain was prone to come off at high speed, locking up the rear wheel at sixty miles per hour, but it was still a motorcycle, paid for with money I earned working for my uncle Ed.

The girl was my first steady one. She was tall, taller than most of the boys, with wavy brown hair, a vision in cut-off blue jeans and a T-shirt tied in a knot around her waist. She was a cheerleader, made all A's, went to church every Sunday and liked to talk about going to college.

She was the daughter of a respected family in the small community where I went to school, which was not—by luck—the one where I lived. She did not know **2**

anything about me, beyond what I told her. I did not invent a life, did not concoct a more respectable history. I would not have sunk that low. Instead, I told her nothing about my background. We sat in a swing in her backyard and talked and talked about everything except me, and I thought I was safe.

Then one day there was a knock on my door. It was her, flanked by a covey of her girlfriends. They had gone to the nearby Germania Springs for a picnic, and came to see if I wanted to go.

I will never forget the look on their faces as they took in the tiny living room with its ripped Naugahyde couch and the worn-out rug and the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling.

1 And I saw the way they looked at my momma, in her flip-flops and old pants cut off at the knee. I told them I had to work.

A few days later she told me that we had to break up. She said we were too different. I asked her what she meant and she said it was because I was poor and she was not. It never would work, she said. She made it seem like we were grownups, instead of fourteen. She made it sound like she was the lady of the manor lamenting her romance with the garbage man.

I should have told her to go to hell. Instead, I just said, "You might be right," and rode away on my motorcycle, noble.

2 I knew then there was no use in pretending, in hiding. I was still ashamed, but from that moment on I wore my poverty like a suit of mail. I brought my girlfriends home, and if I saw that look, that horror in their eyes, I took them back to their house and never came back. It, the look, was almost always there. It never even occurred to me that I was destined to lose. The only girls I had any interest in were the ones who represented the world I wanted to be a part of, the ones above my station, and in my part of the world class is damn near as strong

as color. Luckily, a few of them liked slumming. They liked being on back of that motorcycle, being free of respectability, for a while. That was enough, then. Someone else could take them to the big dance. I didn't mind. I didn't mind.

My momma just kept trying, just kept pulling.

My favorite Bible story is of the widow's mite, of the poor woman who gave two small coins to the Temple. Rich merchants gave much more in tribute, but God saw her gift as greater because it was everything she had. So God blessed her.

An Initial Response

Write your initial reaction to this story in your Reader's Notebook. Some questions to consider: Could you picture the characters? How do you feel about them?

Vocabulary and the Uses of Language

Explain the meanings of the words in **bold** type. First try to guess the meanings by looking at how the words are used. Then look each word up in a dictionary.

1. I cared too much about appearance, about the **facade** that faced the rest of the world.
2. I did not invent a life, did not **concoct** a more respectable history.
3. It was her, flanked by a **covey** of her girlfriends.
4. She made it sound like she was the lady of the manor **lamenting** her romance with the garbage man.

Facts from the Reading

1. How did the 14-year-old Rick Bragg acquire his own motorcycle?
2. Why does Bragg say it was lucky that he lived in a community different from the one where his school was located?