LULA: [*Her voice takes on a different, more businesslike quality*] I've heard enough.

CLAY: [*Reaching for his books*] I bet you have. I guess I better collect my stuff and get off this train. Looks like we won't be acting out that little pageant you outlined before.

LULA: No. We won't. You're right about that, at least. [*She turns to look quickly around the rest of the car*] All right! [*The others respond*]

CLAY: [*Bending across the girl to retrieve his belongings*] Sorry, baby, I don't think we could make it. [*As he is bending over her, the girl brings up a small knife and plunges it into* CLAY*'s chest. Twice. He slumps across her knees, his mouth working stupidly*]

LULA: Sorry is right. [*Turning to the others in the car who have already gotten up from their seats*] Sorry is the rightest thing you've said. Get this man off me! Hurry, now! [*The others come and drag* CLAY*'s body down the aisle*] Open the door and throw his body out. [*They throw him off*] And all of you get off at the next stop. [LULA *busies herself straightening her things. Getting everything in order. She takes out a notebook and makes a quick scribbling note. Drops it in her bag. The train apparently stops and all the others get off, leaving her alone in the coach. Very soon a young Negro of about twenty comes into the coach, with a couple of books under his arm. He sits a few seats in back of* LULA. *When he is seated she turns and gives him a long slow look. He looks up from his book and drops the book on his lap. Then an old Negro conductor comes into the car, doing a sort of restrained soft shoe, and half mumbling the words of some song. He looks at the young man, briefly, with a quick greeting*]

CONDUCTOR: Hey, brother!

YOUNG MAN: Hey. [*The conductor continues down the aisle with his little dance and the mumbled song.* LULA *turns to stare at him and follows his movements down the aisle. The conductor tips his hat when he reaches her seat, and continues out the car*]

Curtain

1964

Amiri Baraka, "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature,'" from *Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. by William J. Harris. New York: Avalon Publishing Group, 2000. Copyright © by Amiri Baraka. Used by permission of SLL/Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc. Amiri Baraka, "Crow Jane," "For Crow Jane/Mama Death," "Crow Jane's Manner.," "Crow Jane in High Society.," "Crow Jane The Crook.," "The dead lady canonized.," "I Substitute for the Dead Lecturer," "Political Poem," from *Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. by William J. Harris. New York: Avalon Publishing Group, 2000. Copyright © by Amiri Baraka. Used by permission of SLL/Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc. LeRoi Jones, "Dutchman," from *Dutchman and the Slave*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1964. Used by permission of SLL/Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc.

Notes

Ralph Ellison (1914–1994)

Only after he came of age did Ralph Ellison learn that his father named him after Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American Renaissance icon and leading Transcendentalist, because he wanted his son to become a poet. Sadly, Lewis Alfred Ellison died when Ralph was only three. Neither he nor his wife, Ida Lewis Ellison, lived to see their son become an acclaimed African American novelist of the twentieth century. Coming to Harlem in the late 1930s as a social worker, cultural critic, and essayist, Ralph Ellison was steeped in the protest literature of such contemporaries as Chester Himes, Richard Wright, and Gwendolyn Brooks. When the political and cultural scene shifted in the following decade, he anticipated the literary implications by writing *Invisible Man* (1952), a novel that shunned the protest conventions he once championed. Unlike his friend and rival Wright, Ellison distanced himself from his own prior Marxist leanings while penning a novel that challenged the wisdom of African American alliance with political ideology, whether Communist or conservative, in the struggle for individual humanity.

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma City in 1914. His father was a small-business owner and construction foreman; his mother worked as a janitor at the local Avery Chapel Church after her husband's death. At the time, Oklahoma was less than a decade old, with the promise of a new frontier for southern African Americans in search of the economic opportunities denied them in the Old South. African American Congressman Edward P. McCabe had led the push for the former Indian Territory to become an all-black state as early as 1892, when he founded Langston, Oklahoma, one of several all-black towns in the area. Yet, by the time Ralph Ellison was a child, this dream had died. In 1921, angry whites ransacked Tulsa, home to one of the most prosperous African American communities in the country. Ellison, like many African Americans of his generation, grew up in the shadow of this racial violence.

Ellison also grew up within a tight-knit African American community where his mother was allowed to live, rent-free, in the church that she cleaned, affording Ralph and his brother Herbert with an extensive library and a sense of stability. Even though Ida Ellison continued to work as a domestic, her sons grew up exposed to all the cultural opportunities that interwar Oklahoma had to offer. Music was a constant source of community entertainment, and Ellison was taught how to play the alto horn by a neighbor. At Frederick Douglass High School, later renamed in Ellison's honor, he joined the band, but also read literature by Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, among others. In 1933, he was awarded a music scholarship to the Tuskegee Institute. He arrived at the school after traveling as a hobo with his uncle, an inspiration for his first published short story, "Hymie's Bull" (1937). His interest in Tuskegee was largely motivated by the presence of William L. Dawson, a renowned composer

and choir director. Perhaps a greater influence on Ellison was his English professor Morteza Sprague (to whom he later dedicated his 1964 essay collection *Shadow and Act*). At Tuskegee, Ellison devoured modernist literature, including T.S. Eliot's 1922 *The Waste Land*, which he cited as a major influence on his development, but he found Tuskegee unable to provide the type of liberal arts education he so craved. After spending the summer of 1936 working in New York City, he had neither the money nor the desire to return. Instead, he studied sculpture and photography, meeting fellow African American artists such as painter Romare Bearden and, of course, Richard Wright.

In 1938, Ellison worked on the Federal Writers' Project with Wright, with whom he would have a long and often complicated friendship. One of Ellison's tasks was to conduct interviews, collecting the folklore and data from African Americans that would happen to help shape the multiple forms and themes of *Invisible Man*. Over the next six years, Ellison – encouraged by his friendship with Wright and his immersion in the interracial leftist circles of Harlem and Greenwich Village – published over 20 book reviews, short stories, and articles for the magazines *New Challenge* and *New Masses*. He joined the League of American Writers, and published fiction in the League's journal, *Cross Section*. In 1941, he reviewed for *New Masses* the novel Wright published the previous year, *Native Son*, and praised the application of its racial consciousness to creating a new society. But Ellison's review of Wright's 1945 fictionalized autobiography *Black Boy* revolutionized how critics conceived of African American literature. "Richard Wright's Blues" sees the blues as an aesthetic that kept "the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness." Blues and literature were, for Ellison, intimately related forms of expression that allowed African Americans to transcend their economic, social, and racial-political reality. As such, he strongly resisted Wright's naturalist determinism, and emphasized instead the search for new literary forms and ideas.

Toward the end of World War II, Ellison joined the merchant marine to avoid being drafted into the segregated armed forces, and served as a cook until the war's end. He also began increasingly to denounce the Communist Party with which he had made ties in the 1930s. Ellison, like many African American leftists, saw the 1938 Nazi-Soviet pact (and the unwillingness of many American Communists to denounce it) as a profound betrayal of civil rights. In the wake of such disillusionment, Ellison began work on *Invisible Man*. Although the novel received widespread praise for its ambitious techniques and sweeping narrative, many leftist critics reacted negatively to its unflattering portrayal of the Communist Party and its rejection of social protest as the modus operandi of African American literature. Former Communist allies at the *Daily Worker* called it "a maze of corruption, brutality, anti-Communist slander, sex perversion, and the sundry humanities upon which a dying social system feeds." Be that as it may, *Invisible Man* won in 1953 the National Book Award, an honor rarely bestowed on a first novel. Moreover, Ellison's novel beat out the other acclaimed novels published that year, including Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. The triumph ushered Ellison

into the pantheon of American writers. After a three-year lecture tour of Europe, Ellison began teaching stints at Bard College, Rutgers University, Yale University, University of Chicago, and New York University, where he was the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities.

Even as Ellison became a preeminent scholar and man of letters, many fellow African American artists continued to criticize his disavowal of radical politics. In 1965, he famously refused to participate in a conference on African American writers at the New School for Social Research, inciting the wrath of many Black Arts writers and critics. In his own writing, *Invisible Man* proved a hard act to follow. He began working on a second novel in 1958, but a fire at his Plainfield, Massachusetts, home in 1967 destroyed over three hundred pages of the anticipated manuscript. He never fully recovered from the loss. Although he compiled his critical writings and essays as *Shadow and Act* and, later, *Going to the Territory* (1986), he never published another novel in his lifetime. Ellison died of cancer in 1994. Five years later, his literary executor John F. Callahan edited and released a compressed version of his unfinished manuscript, *Juneteenth*. A fuller version was published in 2010 under the title *Three Days Before the Shooting*.

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Extracts from Invisible Man

Prologue

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe;[1] nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms.[2] I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.

One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. He was a tall blond man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled. I pulled his chin down sharp upon the crown of my head, butting him as I had seen the West Indians do, and I felt his flesh tear and the blood gush out, and I yelled, "Apologize! Apologize!" But he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees, profusely bleeding. I kicked him

repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood. Oh yes, I kicked him! And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth – when it occurred to me that the man had not *seen* me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare! And I stopped the blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away, letting him fall back to the street. I stared at him hard as the lights of a car stabbed through the darkness. He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom. It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and ashamed. I was like a drunken man myself, wavering about on weakened legs. Then I was amused: Something in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him within an inch of his life. I began to laugh at this crazy discovery. Would he have awakened at the point of death? Would Death himself have freed him for wakeful living? But I didn't linger. I ran away into the dark, laughing so hard I feared I might rupture myself. The next day I saw his picture in the *Daily News*, beneath a caption stating that he had been "mugged." Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man!

Most of the time (although I do not choose as I once did to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it) I am not so overtly violent. I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. Sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers. I learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it. For instance, I have been carrying on a fight with Monopolated Light & Power for some time now. I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don't know it. Oh, they suspect that power is being drained off, but they don't know where. All they know is that according to the master meter back there in their power station a hell of a lot of free current is disappearing somewhere into the jungle of Harlem. The joke, of course, is that I don't live in Harlem but in a border area. Several years ago (before I discovered the advantages of being invisible) I went through the routine process of buying service and paying their outrageous rates. But no more. I gave up all that, along with my apartment, and my old way of life: That way based upon the fallacious assumption that I, like other men, was visible. Now, aware of my invisibility, I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century, which I discovered when I was trying to escape in the night from Ras the Destroyer. But that's getting too far ahead of the story, almost to the end, although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead.

The point now is that I found a home – or a hole in the ground, as you will. Now don't jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a "hole" it is damp and cold like a grave; there are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole. And remember, a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring; then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell. I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and

live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear,[3] for I am in a state of hibernation.

My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, *full* of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a photographer's dream night. But that is taking advantage of you. Those two spots are among the darkest of our whole civilization – pardon me, our whole *culture* (an important distinction, I've heard) – which might sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware of those who speak of the *spiral* of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.) I know; I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness of lightness. And I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I *am* invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. A beautiful girl once told me of a recurring nightmare in which she lay in the center of a large dark room and felt her face expand until it filled the whole room, becoming a formless mass while her eyes ran in bilious jelly up the chimney. And so it is with me. Without light *I* am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.

That is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light & Power. The deeper reason, I mean: It allows me to feel my vital aliveness. I also fight them for taking so much of my money before I learned to protect myself. In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I've wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it. And not with fluorescent bulbs, but with the older, more-expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type. An act of sabotage, you know. I've already begun to wire the wall. A junk man I know, a man of vision, has supplied me with wire and sockets. Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and brighter light. The truth is the light and light is the truth. When I finish all four walls, then I'll start on the floor. Just how that will go, I don't know. Yet when you have lived invisible as long as I have you develop a certain ingenuity. I'll solve the problem. And maybe I'll invent a gadget to place my coffee pot on the fire while I lie in bed, and even invent a gadget to warm my bed – like the fellow I saw in one of the picture magazines who made himself a gadget to warm his shoes! Though invisible, I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin.[4] Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a "thinker-tinker." Yes, I'll warm my shoes; they need it, they're usually full of holes. I'll do that and more.

Now I have one radio-phonograph;[5] I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong[6] playing and singing "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue" – all at the same time. Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. I pour the red liquid over the white mound,

watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound. Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he *is* invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. Once when I asked for a cigarette, some jokers gave me a reefer, which I lighted when I got home and sat listening to my phonograph. It was a strange evening. Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music.

Once I saw a prizefighter boxing a yokel.[7] The fighter was swift and amazingly scientific. His body was one violent flow of rapid rhythmic action. He hit the yokel a hundred times while the yokel held up his arms in stunned surprise. But suddenly the yokel, rolling about in the gale of boxing gloves, struck one blow and knocked science, speed and footwork as cold as a well-digger's posterior. The smart money hit the canvas. The long shot got the nod. The yokel had simply stepped inside of his opponent's sense of time. So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante,[8] into its depths. And *beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz*[9] *as flamenco,*[10] *and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout*:

"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'"

And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black ..."

"In the beginning ..."

"At the very start," they cried.

"... there was blackness ..."

"Preach it ..."

"... and the sun ..."

"The sun, Lawd ..."

"... was bloody red ..."

"Red ..."

"Now black is..." the preacher shouted.

"Bloody ..."

"I said black is ..."

"Preach it, brother ..."

"... an' black ain't ..."

"Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!"

"Amen, brother ..."

"Black will git you ..."

"Yes, it will ..."

"Yes, it will ..."

"... an' black won't ..."

"Now, it won't! "

"It do ..."

"It do, Lawd ..."

"... an' it don't."

"Halleluiah ..."

"... It'll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY."

"Preach it, dear brother ..."

".... an' make you tempt ..."

"Good God a-mighty!"

"Old Aunt Nelly!"

"Black will make you ..."

"Black ..."

"... or black will un-make you ..."

"Ain't it the truth, Lawd?"

And at that point a voice of trombone timbre screamed at me, "Git out of here, you fool! Is you ready to commit treason?"

And I tore myself away, hearing the old singer of spirituals moaning, "Go curse your God, boy, and die."

I stopped and questioned her, asked her what was wrong.

"I dearly loved my master, son," she said.

"You should have hated him," I said.

"He gave me several sons," she said, "and because I loved my sons I learned to love their father though I hated him too."

"I too have become acquainted with ambivalence," I said. "That's why I'm here."

"What's that?"

"Nothing, a word that doesn't explain it. Why do you moan?"

"I moan this way 'cause he's dead," she said.

"Then tell me, who is that laughing upstairs?"

"Them's my sons. They glad."

"Yes, I can understand that too," I said.

"I laughs too, but I moans too. He promised to set us free but he never could bring hisself to do it. Still I loved him ..."

"Loved him? You mean ... ?"

"Oh yes, but I loved something else even more."

"What more?"

"Freedom."

"Freedom," I said. "Maybe freedom lies in hating."

"Naw, son, it's in loving. I loved him and give him the poison and he withered away like a frost-bit apple. Them boys would a tore him to pieces with they homemade knives."

"A mistake was made somewhere," I said, "I'm confused." And I wished to say other things, but the laughter upstairs became too loud and moan-like for me and I tried to break out of it, but I couldn't. Just as I was leaving I felt an urgent desire to ask her what freedom was and went back. She sat with her head in her hands, moaning softly; her leather-brown face was filled with sadness.

"Old woman, what is this freedom you love so well?" I asked around a corner of my mind.

She looked surprised, then thoughtful, then baffled. "I

done forgot, son. It's all mixed up. First I think it's one thing, then I think it's another. It gits my head to spinning. I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head. But it's a hard job, son. Too much is done happen to me in too short a time. Hit's like I have a fever. Ever' time I starts to walk my head gits to swirling and I falls down. Or if it ain't that, it's the boys; they gits to laughing and wants to kill up the white folks. They's bitter, that's what they is ..."

"But what about freedom?"

"Leave me 'lone, boy; my head aches!"

I left her, feeling dizzy myself. I didn't get far.

Suddenly one of the sons, a big fellow six feet tall, appeared out of nowhere and struck me with his fist.

"What's the matter, man?" I cried.

"You made Ma cry!"

"But how?" I said, dodging a blow.

"Askin' her them questions, that's how. Git outa here and stay, and next time you got questions like that, ask yourself!"

He held me in a grip like cold stone, his fingers fastening upon my windpipe until I thought I would suffocate before he finally allowed me to go. I stumbled about dazed, the music beating hysterically in my ears. It was dark. My head cleared and I wandered down a dark narrow passage, thinking I heard his footsteps hurrying behind me. I was sore, and into my being had come a profound craving for tranquillity, for peace and quiet, a state I felt I could never achieve. For one thing, the trumpet was blaring and the rhythm was too hectic. A tom-tom beating like heart-thuds began drowning out the trumpet, filling my ears. I longed for water and I heard it rushing through the cold mains my fingers touched as I felt my way, but I couldn't stop to search because of the footsteps behind me.

"Hey, Ras," I called. "Is it you, Destroyer? Rinehart?"

No answer, only the rhythmic footsteps behind me. Once I tried crossing the road, but a speeding machine struck me, scraping the skin from my leg as it roared past.

Then somehow I came out of it, ascending hastily from this underworld of sound to hear Louis Armstrong innocently asking,

What did I do
To be so black
And blue?

At first I was afraid; this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act. Nevertheless, I know now that few really listen to this music. I sat on the chair's edge in a soaking sweat, as though each of my 1,369 bulbs had every one become a klieg light[11] in an individual setting for a third degree with Ras and Rinehart in charge. It was exhausting – as though I had held my breath continuously for an hour under the terrifying serenity that comes from days of intense hunger. And yet, it was a strangely satisfying experience for an invisible man to hear the silence of sound. I had discovered unrecognized compulsions of my being – even though I could not answer "yes" to their promptings. I haven't smoked a reefer since, however;

not because they're illegal, but because to *see* around corners is enough (that is not unusual when you are invisible). But to hear around them is too much; it inhibits action. And despite Brother Jack and all that sad, lost period of the Brotherhood,[12] I believe in nothing if not in action.

Please, a definition: A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action.

Besides, the drug destroys one's sense of time completely. If that happened, I might forget to dodge some bright morning and some cluck would run me down with an orange and yellow street car, or a bilious bus! Or I might forget to leave my hole when the moment for action presents itself.

Meanwhile I enjoy my life with the compliments of Monopolated Light & Power. Since you never recognize me even when in closest contact with me, and since, no doubt, you'll hardly believe that I exist, it won't matter if you know that I tapped a power line leading into the building and ran it into my hole in the ground. Before that I lived in the darkness into which I was chased, but now I see. I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility – and vice versa. And so I play the invisible music of my isolation. The last statement doesn't seem just right, does it? But it is; you hear this music simply because music is heard and seldom seen, except by musicians. Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility? But I am an orator, a rabble-rouser – Am? I *was*, and perhaps shall be again. Who knows? All sickness is not unto death, neither is invisibility.

I can hear you say, "What a horrible, irresponsible bastard!" And you're right. I leap to agree with you. I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? And wait until I reveal how truly irresponsible I am. Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement. Take the man whom I almost killed: Who was responsible for that near murder – I? I don't think so, and I refuse it. I won't buy it. You can't give it to me. *He* bumped *me, he* insulted *me*. Shouldn't he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my "danger potential"? He, let us say, was lost in a dream world. But didn't *he* control that dream world – which, alas, is only too real! – and didn't *he* rule me out of it? And if he had yelled for a policeman, wouldn't *I* have been taken for the offending one? Yes, yes, yes! Let me agree with you, I was the irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society. Some day that kind of foolishness will cause us tragic trouble. All dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all. But I shirked that responsibility; I became too snarled in the incompatible notions that buzzed within my brain. I was a coward ...

But what did *I* do to be so blue? Bear with me.

Chapter 1

It goes a long way back, some twenty years. All my life *I* had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in

contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man!

And yet I am no freak of nature, nor of history. I was in the cards, other things having been equal (or unequal) eighty-five years ago. I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed. About eighty-five years ago they were told that they were free, united with others of our country in everything pertaining to the common good, and, in everything social, separate like the fingers of the hand. And they believed it. They exulted in it. They stayed in their place, worked hard, and brought up my father to do the same. But my grandfather is the one. He was an odd old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him. It was he who caused the trouble. On his deathbed he called my father to him and said, "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction.[13] Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the meekest of men. The younger children were rushed from the room, the shades drawn and the flame of the lamp turned so low that it sputtered on the wick like the old man's breathing. "Learn it to the younguns," he whispered fiercely; then he died.

But my folks were more alarmed over his last words than over his dying. It was as though he had not died at all, his words caused so much anxiety. I was warned emphatically to forget what he had said and, indeed, this is the first time it has been mentioned outside the family circle. It had a tremendous effect upon me, however. I could never be sure of what he meant. Grandfather had been a quiet old man who never made any trouble, yet on his deathbed he had called himself a traitor and a spy, and he had spoken of his meekness as a dangerous activity. It became a constant puzzle which lay unanswered in the back of my mind. And whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable. It was as though I was carrying out his advice in spite of myself. And to make it worse, everyone loved me for it. I was praised by the most lily-white men of the town. I was considered an example of desirable conduct – just as my grandfather had been. And what puzzled me was that the old man had defined it as *treachery*. When I was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired me to act just the opposite, that I should have been sulky and mean, and that that really would have been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did. It made me afraid that some day they would look upon me as a traitor and I would be lost. Still I was

more afraid to act any other way because they didn't like that at all. The old man's words were like a curse. On my graduation day I delivered an oration in which I showed that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress. (Not that I believed this – how could I, remembering my grandfather? – I only believed that it worked.) It was a great success. Everyone praised me and I was invited to give the speech at a gathering of the town's leading white citizens. It was a triumph for our whole community.

It was in the main ballroom of the leading hotel. When I got there I discovered that it was on the occasion of a smoker,[14] and I was told that since I was to be there anyway I might as well take part in the battle royal to be fought by some of my schoolmates as part of the entertainment. The battle royal came first.

All of the town's big shots were there in their tuxedoes, wolfing down the buffet foods, drinking beer and whiskey and smoking black cigars. It was a large room with a high ceiling. Chairs were arranged in neat rows around three sides of a portable boxing ring. The fourth side was clear, revealing a gleaming space of polished floor. I had some misgivings over the battle royal, by the way. Not from a distaste for fighting, but because I didn't care too much for the other fellows who were to take part. They were tough guys who seemed to have no grandfather's curse worrying their minds. No one could mistake their toughness. And besides, I suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity of my speech. In those pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington.[15] But the other fellows didn't care too much for me either, and there were nine of them. I felt superior to them in my way, and I didn't like the manner in which we were all crowded together into the servants' elevator. Nor did they like my being there. In fact, as the warmly lighted floors flashed past the elevator we had words over the fact that I, by taking part in the fight, had knocked one of their friends out of a night's work.

We were led out of the elevator through a rococo[16] hall into an anteroom and told to get into our fighting togs. Each of us was issued a pair of boxing gloves and ushered out into the big mirrored hall, which we entered looking cautiously about us and whispering, lest we might accidentally be heard above the noise of the room. It was foggy with cigar smoke. And already the whiskey was taking effect. I was shocked to see some of the most important men of the town quite tipsy. They were all there – bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants. Even one of the more fashionable pastors. Something we could not see was going on up front. A clarinet was vibrating sensuously and the men were standing up and moving eagerly forward. We were a small tight group, clustered together, our bare upper bodies touching and shining with anticipatory sweat; while up front the big shots were becoming increasingly excited over something we still could not see. Suddenly I heard the school superintendent, who had told me to come, yell, "Bring up the shines, gentlemen! Bring up the little shines!"

We were rushed up to the front of the ballroom, where it smelled even more strongly of tobacco and whiskey. Then we were pushed into place. I almost wet my pants. A sea of faces, some hostile, some amused, ringed around us, and in the center, facing us, stood a

magnificent blonde – stark naked. There was dead silence. I felt a blast of cold air chill me. I tried to back away, but they were behind me and around me. Some of the boys stood with lowered heads, trembling. I felt a wave of irrational guilt and fear. My teeth chattered, my skin turned to goose flesh, my knees knocked. Yet I was strongly attracted and looked in spite of myself. Had the price of looking been blindness, I would have looked. The hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask, the eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon's butt. I felt a desire to spit upon her as my eyes brushed slowly over her body. Her breasts were firm and round as the domes of East Indian temples, and I stood so close as to see the fine skin texture and beads of pearly perspiration glistening like dew around the pink and erected buds of her nipples. I wanted at one and the same time to run from the room, to sink through the floor, or go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of the others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her thighs formed a capital V. I had a notion that of all in the room she saw only me with her impersonal eyes.

And then she began to dance, a slow sensuous movement; the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest of veils. She seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some gray and threatening sea. I was transported. Then I became aware of the clarinet playing and the big shots yelling at us. Some threatened us if we looked and others if we did not. On my right I saw one boy faint. And now a man grabbed a silver pitcher from a table and stepped close as he dashed ice water upon him and stood him up and forced two of us to support him as his head hung and moans issued from his thick bluish lips. Another boy began to plead to go home. He was the largest of the group, wearing dark red fighting trunks much too small to conceal the erection which projected from him as though in answer to the insinuating low-registered moaning of the clarinet. He tried to hide himself with his boxing gloves.

And all the while the blonde continued dancing, smiling faintly at the big shots who watched her with fascination, and faintly smiling at our fear. *I* noticed a certain merchant who followed her hungrily, his lips loose and drooling. He was a large man who wore diamond studs in a shirtfront which swelled with the ample paunch underneath, and each time the blonde swayed her undulating hips he ran his hand through the thin hair of his bald head and, with his arms upheld, his posture clumsy like that of an intoxicated panda, wound his belly in a slow and obscene grind. This creature was completely hypnotized. The music had quickened. As the dancer flung herself about with a detached expression on her face, the men began reaching out to touch her. I could see their beefy fingers sink into the soft flesh. Some of the others tried to stop them and she began to move around the floor in graceful circles, as they gave chase, slipping and sliding over the polished floor. It was mad. Chairs went crashing, drinks were spilt, as they ran laughing and howling after her. They caught her just as she reached a door, raised her from the floor, and tossed her as

college boys are tossed at a hazing, and above her red, fixed-smiling lips I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys. As I watched, they tossed her twice and her soft breasts seemed to flatten against the air and her legs flung wildly as she spun. Some of the more sober ones helped her to escape. And I started off the floor, heading for the anteroom with the rest of the boys.

Some were still crying and in hysteria. But as we tried to leave we were stopped and ordered to get into the ring. There was nothing to do but what we were told. All ten of us climbed under the ropes and allowed ourselves to be blindfolded with broad bands of white cloth. One of the men seemed to feel a bit sympathetic and tried to cheer us up as we stood with our backs against the ropes. Some of us tried to grin. "See that boy over there?" one of the men said. "I want you to run across at the bell and give it to him right in the belly. If you don't get him, I'm going to get you. I don't like his looks." Each of us was told the same. The blindfolds were put on. Yet even then I had been going over my speech. In my mind each word was as bright as flame. I felt the cloth pressed into place, and frowned so that it would be loosened when I relaxed.

But now I felt a sudden fit of blind terror. I was unused to darkness. It was as though I had suddenly found myself in a dark room filled with poisonous cottonmouths. I could hear the bleary voices yelling insistently for the battle royal to begin.

"Get going in there!"

"Let me at that big nigger!"

I strained to pick up the school superintendent's voice, as though to squeeze some security out of that slightly more familiar sound.

"Let me at those black sonsabitches!" someone yelled.

"No, Jackson, no!" another voice yelled. "Here, somebody, help me hold Jack."

"I want to get at that ginger-colored nigger. Tear him limb from limb," the first voice yelled.

I stood against the ropes trembling. For in those days I was what they called ginger-colored, and he sounded as though he might crunch me between his teeth like a crisp ginger cookie.

Quite a struggle was going on. Chairs were being kicked about and I could hear voices grunting as with a terrific effort. I wanted to see, to see more desperately than ever before. But the blindfold was tight as a thick skin-puckering scab and when I raised my gloved hands to push the layers of white aside a voice yelled, "Oh, no you don't, black bastard! Leave that alone!"

"Ring the bell before Jackson kills him a coon!"[17] someone boomed in the sudden silence. And I heard the bell clang and the sound of the feet scuffing forward.

A glove smacked against my head. I pivoted, striking out stiffly as someone went past, and felt the jar ripple along the length of my arm to my shoulder. Then it seemed as though all nine of the boys had turned upon me at once. Blows pounded me from all sides while I struck out as best I could. So many blows landed upon me that I wondered if I were not the only blindfolded fighter in the ring, or if the man called Jackson hadn't succeeded in getting me after all.

Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions. I had no dignity. I stumbled about like a baby or a

drunken man. The smoke had become thicker and with each new blow it seemed to sear and further restrict my lungs. My saliva became like hot bitter glue. A glove connected with my head, filling my mouth with warm blood. It was everywhere. I could not tell if the moisture I felt upon my body was sweat or blood. A blow landed hard against the nape of my neck. I felt myself going over, my head hitting the floor. Streaks of blue light filled the black world behind the blindfold. I lay prone, pretending that I was knocked out, but felt myself seized by hands and yanked to my feet. "Get going, black boy! Mix it up!" My arms were like lead, my head smarting from blows. I managed to feel my way to the ropes and held on, trying to catch my breath. A glove landed in my mid-section and I went over again, feeling as though the smoke had become a knife jabbed into my guts. Pushed this way and that by the legs milling around me, I finally pulled erect and discovered that I could see the black, sweat-washed forms weaving in the smoky-blue atmosphere like drunken dancers weaving to the rapid drum-like thuds of blows.

Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked. Blows landed below the belt and in the kidney, with the gloves open as well as closed, and with my eye partly opened now there was not so much terror. I moved carefully, avoiding blows, although not too many to attract attention, fighting from group to group. The boys groped about like blind, cautious crabs crouching to protect their mid-sections, their heads pulled in short against their shoulders, their arms stretched nervously before them, with their fists testing the smoke-filled air like the knobbed feelers of hypersensitive snails. In one corner I glimpsed a boy violently punching the air and heard him scream in pain as he smashed his hand against a ring post. For a second I saw him bent over holding his hand, then going down as a blow caught his unprotected head. I played one group against the other, slipping in and throwing a punch then stepping out of range while pushing the others into the melee to take the blows blindly aimed at me. The smoke was agonizing and there were no rounds, no bells at three-minute intervals to relieve our exhaustion. The room spun round me, a swirl of lights, smoke, sweating bodies surrounded by tense white faces. I bled from both nose and mouth, the blood spattering upon my chest.

The men kept yelling, "Slug him, black boy! Knock his gets out!"

"Uppercut him! Kill him! Kill that big boy!"

Taking a fake fall, I saw a boy going down heavily beside me as though we were felled by a single blow, saw a sneaker-clad foot shoot into his groin as the two who had knocked him down stumbled upon him. I rolled out of range, feeling a twinge of nausea.

The harder we fought the more threatening the men became. And yet, I had begun to worry about my speech again. How would it go? Would they recognize my ability? What would they give me?

I was fighting automatically when suddenly I noticed that one after another of the boys was leaving the ring. I was surprised, filled with panic, as though I had been left alone with an unknown danger. Then I understood. The boys had arranged it among themselves. It was the

custom for the two men left in the ring to slug it out for the winner's prize. I discovered this too late. When the bell sounded two men in tuxedoes leaped into the ring and removed the blindfold. I found myself facing Tatlock, the biggest of the gang. I felt sick at my stomach. Hardly had the bell stopped ringing in my ears than it clanged again and I saw him moving swiftly toward me. Thinking of nothing else to do I hit him smash on the nose. He kept coming, bringing the rank sharp violence of stale sweat. His face was a black blank of a face, only his eyes alive – with hate of me and aglow with a feverish terror from what had happened to us all. I became anxious. I wanted to deliver my speech and he came at me as though he meant to beat it out of me. I smashed him again and again, taking his blows as they came. Then on a sudden impulse I struck him lightly and as we clinched, I whispered, "Fake like I knocked you out, you can have the prize."

"I'll break your behind," he whispered hoarsely.

"For *them*?"

"For *me*, sonofabitch!"

They were yelling for us to break it up and Tatlock spun me half around with a blow, and as a joggled camera sweeps in a reeling scene, I saw the howling red faces crouching tense beneath the cloud of blue-gray smoke. For a moment the world wavered, unraveled, flowed, then my head cleared and Tatlock bounced before me. That fluttering shadow before my eyes was his jabbing left hand. Then falling forward, my head against his damp shoulder, I whispered,

"I'll make it five dollars more."

"Go to hell!"

But his muscles relaxed a trifle beneath my pressure and I breathed, "Seven?"

"Give it to your ma," he said, ripping me beneath the heart.

And while I still held him I butted him and moved away. I felt myself bombarded with punches. I fought back with hopeless desperation. I wanted to deliver my speech more than anything else in the world, because I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability, and now this stupid clown was ruining my chances. |I began fighting carefully now, moving in to punch him and out again with my greater speed. A lucky blow to his chin and I had him going too – until I heard a loud voice yell, "I got my money on the big boy."

Hearing this, I almost dropped my guard. I was confused: Should I try to win against the voice out there? Would not this go against my speech, and was not this a moment for humility, for nonresistance? A blow to my head as I danced about sent my right eye popping like a jack-in-the-box and settled my dilemma. The room went red as I fell. It was a dream fall, my body languid and fastidious as to where to land, until the floor became impatient and smashed up to meet me. A moment later I came to. An hypnotic voice said FIVE emphatically. And I lay there, hazily watching a dark red spot of my own blood shaping itself into a butterfly, glistening and soaking into the soiled gray world of the canvas.

When the voice drawled TEN I was lifted up and dragged to a chair. I sat dazed. My eye pained and swelled with each throb of my pounding heart and I wondered if now I would be allowed to speak. I was wringing wet, my mouth still bleeding. We were

grouped along the wall now. The other boys ignored me as they congratulated Tatlock and speculated as to how much they would be paid. One boy whimpered over his smashed hand. Looking up front, I saw attendants in white jackets rolling the portable ring away and placing a small square rug in the vacant space surrounded by chairs. Perhaps, I thought, I will stand on the rug to deliver my speech.

Then the M.C. called to us, "Come on up here boys and get your money."

We ran forward to where the men laughed and talked in their chairs, waiting. Everyone seemed friendly now.

"There it is on the rug," the man said. I saw the rug covered with coins of all dimensions and a few crumpled bills. But what excited me, scattered here and there, were the gold pieces.

"Boys, it's all yours," the man said. "You get all you grab."

"That's right, Sambo,"[18] a blond man said, winking at me confidentially.

I trembled with excitement, forgetting my pain. I would get the gold and the bills, I thought. I would use both hands. I would throw my body against the boys nearest me to block them from the gold.

"Get down around the rug now," the man commanded, "and don't anyone touch it until I give the signal."

"This ought to be good," I heard.

As told, we got around the square rug on our knees. Slowly the man raised his freckled hand as we followed it upward with our eyes.

I heard, "These niggers look like they're about to pray!"

Then, "Ready," the man said. "Go!"

I lunged for a yellow coin lying on the blue design of the carpet, touching it and sending a surprised shriek to join those rising around me. I tried frantically to remove my hand but could not let go. A hot, violent force tore through my body, shaking me like a wet rat. The rug was electrified. The hair bristled up on my head as I shook myself free. My muscles jumped, my nerves jangled, writhed. But I saw that this was not stopping the other boys. Laughing in fear and embarrassment, some were holding back and scooping up the coins knocked off by the painful contortions of the others. The men roared above us as we struggled.

"Pick it up, goddamnit, pick it up!" someone called like a bass-voiced parrot. "Go on, get it!"

I crawled rapidly around the floor, picking up the coins, trying to avoid the coppers and to get greenbacks and the gold. Ignoring the shock by laughing, as I brushed the coins off quickly, I discovered that I could contain the electricity – a contradiction, but it works. Then the men began to push us onto the rug. Laughing embarrassedly, we struggled out of their hands and kept after the coins. We were all wet and slippery and hard to hold. Suddenly I saw a boy lifted into the air, glistening with sweat like a circus seal, and dropped, his wet back landing flush upon the charged rug, heard him yell and saw him literally dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies. When he finally rolled off, his face was gray and no one stopped him when he ran from the floor amid booming laughter.

"Get the money," the M.C. called. "That's good hard American cash!"

And we snatched and grabbed, snatched and grabbed. I was careful not to come too close to the rug now, and when I felt the hot whiskey breath descend upon me like a cloud of foul air I reached out and grabbed the leg of a chair. It was occupied and I held on desperately.

"Leggo, nigger! Leggo!"

The huge face wavered down to mine as he tried to push me free. But my body was slippery and he was too drunk. It was Mr. Colcord, who owned a chain of movie houses and "entertainment palaces." Each time he grabbed me I slipped out of his hands. It became a real struggle. I feared the rug more than I did the drunk, so I held on, surprising myself for a moment by trying to topple *him* upon the rug. It was such an enormous idea that I found myself actually carrying it out. I tried not to be obvious, yet when I grabbed his leg, trying to tumble him out of the chair, he raised up roaring with laughter, and, looking at me with soberness dead in the eye, kicked me viciously in the chest. The chair leg flew out of my hand and I felt myself going and rolled. It was as though I had rolled through a bed of hot coals. It seemed a whole century would pass before I would roll free, a century in which I was seared through the deepest levels of my body to the fearful breath within me and the breath seared and heated to the point of explosion. It'll all be over in a flash, I thought as I rolled clear. It'll all be over in a flash.

But not yet, the men on the other side were waiting, red faces swollen as though from apoplexy as they bent forward in their chairs. Seeing their fingers coming toward me I rolled away as a fumbled football rolls off the receiver's fingertips, back into the coals. That time I luckily sent the rug sliding out of place and heard the coins ringing against the floor and the boys scuffling to pick them up and the M.C. calling, "All right, boys, that's all. Go get dressed and get your money."

I was limp as a dish rag. My back felt as though it had been beaten with wires.

When we had dressed the M.C. came in and gave us each five dollars, except Tatlock, who got ten for being last in the ring. Then he told us to leave. I was not to get a chance to deliver my speech, I thought. I was going out into the dim alley in despair when I was stopped and told to go back. I returned to the ballroom, where the men were pushing back their chairs and gathering in groups to talk.

The M.C. knocked on a table for quiet. "Gentlemen," he said, "we almost forgot an important part of the program. A most serious part, gentlemen. This boy was brought here to deliver a speech which he made at his graduation yesterday ..."

"Bravo!"

"I'm told that he is the smartest boy we've got out there in Greenwood. I'm told that he knows more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary."

Much applause and laughter.

"So now, gentlemen, I want you to give him your attention."

There was still laughter as I faced them, my mouth dry, my eye throbbing. I began slowly, but evidently my throat was tense, because they began shouting, "Louder! Louder!"

"We of the younger generation extol the wisdom of that great leader and educator,"[19] I shouted, "who first spoke these flaming words of wisdom: 'A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal: "Water, water; we die of thirst!" The answer from the friendly vessel came back: "Cast down your bucket where you are." The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River.' And like him I say, and in his words, 'To those of my race who depend upon bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the southern white man, who is his next-door neighbor, I would say: "Cast down your bucket where you are" – cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded ...'"

I spoke automatically and with such fervor that I did not realize that the men were still talking and laughing until my dry mouth, filling up with blood from the cut, almost strangled me. I coughed, wanting to stop and go to one of the tall brass, sand-filled spittoons to relieve myself, but a few of the men, especially the superintendent, were listening and I was afraid. So I gulped it down, blood, saliva and all, and continued. (What powers of endurance I had during those days! What enthusiasm! What a belief in the rightness of things!) I spoke even louder in spite of the pain. But still they talked and still they laughed, as though deaf with cotton in dirty ears. So I spoke with greater emotional emphasis. I closed my ears and swallowed blood until I was nauseated. The speech seemed a hundred times as long as before, but I could not leave out a single word. All had to be said, each memorized nuance considered, rendered. Nor was that all. Whenever I uttered a word of three or more syllables a group of voices would yell for me to repeat it. I used the phrase "social responsibility" and they yelled:

"What's that word you say, boy?"

"Social responsibility," I said.

"What?"

"Social ..."

"Louder."

"... responsibility."

"More!"

"Respon – "

"Repeat!"

" – sibility."

The room filled with the uproar of laughter until, no doubt distracted by having to gulp down my blood, I made a mistake and yelled a phrase I had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private.

"Social ..."

"What?" they yelled.

"... equality – "

The laughter hung smokelike in the sudden stillness. I opened my eyes, puzzled. Sounds of displeasure filled the room. The M.C. rushed forward. They shouted hostile phrases at me. But I did not understand.

A small dry mustached man in the front row blared out, "Say that slowly, son!"

"What, sir?"

"What you just said!"

"Social responsibility, sir," I said.

"You weren't being smart, were you, boy?" he said, not unkindly.

"No, sir!"

"You sure that about 'equality' was a mistake?"

"Oh, yes, sir," I said. "I was swallowing blood."

"Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times. All right, now, go on with your speech."

I was afraid. I wanted to leave but I wanted also to speak and I was afraid they'd snatch me down.

"Thank you, sir," *I* said, beginning where I had left off, and having them ignore me as before.

Yet when I finished there *was* a thunderous applause. I was surprised to see the superintendent come forth with a package wrapped in white tissue paper, and, gesturing for quiet, address the men.

"Gentlemen, you see that I did not overpraise this boy. He makes a good speech and some day he'll lead his people in the proper paths. And I don't have to tell you that that is important in these days and times. This is a good, smart boy, and so to encourage him in the right direction, in the name of the Board of Education I wish to present him a prize in the form of this ..."

He paused, removing the tissue paper and revealing a gleaming calfskin brief case.

"... in the form of this first-class article from Shad Whitmore's shop."

"Boy," he said, addressing me, "take this prize and keep it well. Consider it a badge of office. Prize it. Keep developing as you are and some day it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people."

I was so moved that I could hardly express my thanks. A rope of bloody saliva forming a shape like an undiscovered continent drooled upon the leather and I wiped it quickly away. I felt an importance that I had never dreamed.

"Open it and see what's inside," I was told.

My fingers a-tremble, I complied, smelling the fresh leather and finding an official-looking document inside. It was a scholarship to the state college for Negroes. My eyes filled with tears and I ran awkwardly off the floor.

I was overjoyed; I did not even mind when I discovered that the gold pieces I had scrambled for were brass pocket tokens advertising a certain make of automobile.

When I reached home everyone was excited. Next day the neighbors came to congratulate me. I even felt safe from grandfather, whose deathbed curse usually spoiled my triumphs. I stood beneath his photograph with my brief case in hand and smiled triumphantly into his stolid black peasant's face. It was a face that fascinated me. The eyes seemed to follow everywhere I went.

That night I dreamed I was at a circus with him and that he refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did. Then later he told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. "Them's years," he said. "Now open that one." And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in

letters of gold. “Read it,” my grandfather said. “Out loud!”

“To Whom It May Concern,” I intoned. “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.”

I awoke with the old man’s laughter ringing in my ears.

(It was a dream I was to remember and dream again for many years after. But at that time I had no insight into its meaning. First I had to attend college.)

Chapter 2

It was a beautiful college. The buildings were old and covered with vines and the roads gracefully winding, lined with hedges and wild roses that dazzled the eyes in the summer sun. Honeysuckle and purple wisteria hung heavy from the trees and white magnolias mixed with their scents in the bee-humming air. I’ve recalled it often, here in my hole: How the grass turned green in the springtime and how the mocking birds fluttered their tails and sang, how the moon shone down on the buildings, how the bell in the chapel tower rang out the precious short-lived hours; how the girls in bright summer dresses promenaded the grassy lawn. Many times, here at night, I’ve closed my eyes and walked along the forbidden road that winds past the girls’ dormitories, past the hall with the clock in the tower, its windows warmly aglow, on down past the small white Home Economics practice cottage, whiter still in the moonlight, and on down the road with its sloping and turning, paralleling the black powerhouse with its engines droning earth-shaking rhythms in the dark, its windows red from the glow of the furnace, on to where the road became a bridge over a dry riverbed, tangled with brush and clinging vines; the bridge of rustic logs, made for trysting, but virginal and untested by lovers; on up the road, past the buildings, with the southern verandas half-a-city-block long, to the sudden forking, barren of buildings, birds, or grass, where the road turned off to the insane asylum.

I always come this far and open my eyes. The spell breaks and I try to re-see the rabbits, so tame through having never been hunted, that played in the hedges and along the road. And I see the purple and silver of thistle growing between the broken glass and sunheated stones, the ants moving nervously in single file, and I turn and retrace my steps and come back to the winding road past the hospital, where at night in certain wards the gay student nurses dispensed a far more precious thing than pills to lucky boys in the know; and I come to a stop at the chapel. And then it is suddenly winter, with the moon high above and the chimes in the steeple ringing and a sonorous choir of trombones rendering a Christmas carol; and over all is a quietness and an ache as though all the world were loneliness. And I stand and listen beneath the high-hung moon, hearing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,”[20] majestically mellow on four trombones, and then the organ. The sound floats over all, clear like the night, liquid, serene, and lonely. And I stand as for an answer and see in my mind’s eye the cabins surrounded by empty fields beyond red clay roads, and beyond a certain road a river, sluggish and covered with algae more yellow than green in its stagnant stillness; past more empty fields, to the sun-shrunk shacks at the railroad crossing where the disabled veterans visited

the whores, hobbling down the tracks on crutches and canes; sometimes pushing the legless, thighless one in a red wheelchair. And sometimes I listen to hear if music reaches that far, but recall only the drunken laughter of sad, sad whores. And I stand in the circle where three roads converge near the statue, where we drilled four-abreast down the smooth asphalt and pivoted and entered the chapel on Sundays, our uniforms pressed, shoes shined, minds laced up, eyes blind like those of robots to visitors and officials on the low, whitewashed reviewing stand.

It's so long ago and far away that here in my invisibility I wonder if it happened at all. Then in my mind's eye I see the bronze statue of the college Founder, the cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding. And as I gaze, there is a rustle of wings and I see a flock of starlings flighting before me and, when I look again, the bronze face, whose empty eyes look upon a world I have never seen, runs with liquid chalk – creating another ambiguity to puzzle my groping mind: Why is a bird-soiled statue more commanding than one that is clean?

Oh, long green stretch of campus, Oh, quiet songs at dusk, Oh, moon that kissed the steeple and flooded the perfumed nights, Oh, bugle that called in the morning, Oh, drum that marched us militarily at noon – what was real, what solid, what more than a pleasant, time-killing dream? For how could it have been real if now I am invisible? If real, why is it that I can recall in all that island of greenness no fountain but one that was broken, corroded and dry? And why does no rain fall through my recollections, sound through my memories, soak through the hard dry crust of the still so recent past? Why do I recall, instead of the odor of seed bursting in springtime, only the yellow contents of the cistern spread over the lawn's dead grass? Why? And how? How and why?

The grass did grow and the green leaves appeared on the trees and filled the avenues with shadow and shade as sure as the millionaires descended from the North on Founders' Day each spring. And how they arrived! Came smiling, inspecting, encouraging, conversing in whispers, speechmaking into the wide-open ears of our black and yellow faces – and each leaving a sizeable check as he departed. I'm convinced it was the product of a subtle magic, the alchemy of moonlight; the school a flower-studded wasteland, the rocks sunken, the dry winds hidden, the lost crickets chirping to yellow butterflies.

And oh, oh, oh, those multimillionaires!

They were all such a part of that other life that's dead that I can't remember them all. (Time was as I was, but neither that time nor that "I" are anymore.) But this one I remember: near the end of my junior year I drove for him during the week he was on the campus. A face pink like St. Nicholas', topped with a shock of silk white hair. An easy, informal manner, even with me. A Bostonian, smoker of cigars, teller of polite Negro stories, shrewd banker, skilled scientist, director, philanthropist, forty years a bearer of the white man's

burden, and for sixty a symbol of the Great Traditions.

We were driving, the powerful motor purring and filling me with pride and anxiety. The car smelled of mints and cigar smoke. Students looked up and smiled in recognition as we rolled slowly past. I had just come from dinner and in bending forward to suppress a belch, I accidentally pressed the button on the wheel and the belch became a loud and shattering blast of the horn. Folks on the road turned and stared.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir," I said, worried lest he report me to Dr. Bledsoe, the president, who would refuse to allow me to drive again.

"Perfectly all right. Perfectly."

"Where shall I drive you, sir?"

"Let me see ..."

Through the rear-view mirror I could see him studying a wafer-thin watch, replacing it in the pocket of his checked waistcoat. His shirt was soft silk, set off with a blue-and-white polka-dotted bow tie. His manner was aristocratic, his movements dapper and suave.

"It's early to go in for the next session," he said. "Suppose you just drive. Anywhere you like."

"Have you seen all the campus, sir?"

"Yes, I think so. I was one of the original founders, you know."

"Gee! I didn't know that, sir. Then I'll have to try some of the roads."

Of course I knew he was a founder, but I knew also that it was advantageous to flatter rich white folks. Perhaps he'd give me a large tip, or a suit, or a scholarship next year.

"Anywhere else you like. The campus is part of my life and I know my life rather well."

"Yes, sir."

He was still smiling.

In a moment the green campus with its vine-covered buildings was behind us. The car bounded over the road. How was the campus part of his life, I wondered. And how did one learn his life "rather well"?

"Young man, you're part of a wonderful institution. It is a great dream become reality ..."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I feel as lucky to be connected with it as you no doubt do yourself. I came here years ago, when all your beautiful campus was barren ground. There were no trees, no flowers, no fertile farmland. That was years ago before you were born ..."

I listened with fascination, my eyes glued to the white line dividing the highway as my thoughts attempted to sweep back to the times of which he spoke.

"Even your parents were young. Slavery was just recently past. Your people did not know in what direction to turn and, I must confess, many of mine didn't know in what direction they should turn either. But your great Founder did. He was my friend and I believed in his vision. So much so, that sometimes I don't know whether it was his vision or mine ..."

He chuckled softly, wrinkles forming at the corners of his eyes.

"But of course it was his; I only assisted. I came down with him to see the barren land and did what I could to render assistance. And it has been my pleasant fate to return each spring and observe the changes that the

years have wrought. That has been more pleasant and satisfying to me than my own work. It has been a pleasant fate, indeed."

His voice was mellow and loaded with more meaning than I could fathom. As I drove, faded and yellowed pictures of the school's early days displayed in the library flashed across the screen of my mind, coming fitfully and fragmentarily to life – photographs of men and women in wagons drawn by mule teams and oxen, dressed in black, dusty clothing, people who seemed almost without individuality, a black mob that seemed to be waiting, looking with blank faces, and among them the inevitable collection of white men and women in smiles, clear of features, striking, elegant and confident. Until now, and although I could recognize the Founder and Dr. Bledsoe among them, the figures in the photographs had never seemed actually to have been alive, but were more like signs or symbols one found on the last pages of the dictionary ... But now I felt that I was sharing in a great work and, with the car leaping leisurely beneath the pressure of my foot, I identified myself with the rich man reminiscing on the rear seat ...

"A pleasant fate," he repeated, "and I hope yours will be as pleasant."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," I said, pleased that he wished something pleasant for me.

But at the same time I was puzzled: How could anyone's fate be *pleasant?* I had always thought of it as something painful. No one I knew spoke of it as pleasant – not even Woodridge, who made us read Greek plays.

We were beyond the farthest extension of the school-owned lands now and I suddenly decided to turn off the highway, down a road that seemed unfamiliar. There were no trees and the air was brilliant. Far down the road the sun glared cruelly against a tin sign nailed to a barn. A lone figure bending over a hoe on the hillside raised up wearily and waved, more a shadow against the skyline than a man.

"How far have we come?" I heard over my shoulder.

"Just about a mile, sir."

"I don't remember this section," he said.

I didn't answer. I was thinking of the first person who'd mentioned anything like fate in my presence, my grandfather. There had been nothing pleasant about it and I had tried to forget it. Now, riding here in the powerful car with this white man who was so pleased with what he called his fate, I felt a sense of dread. My grandfather would have called this treachery and I could not understand in just what way it was. Suddenly I grew guilty at the realization that the white man might have thought so too. What would he have thought? Did he know that Negroes like my grandfather had been freed during those days just before the college had been founded?

As we came to a side road I saw a team of oxen hitched to a broken-down wagon, the ragged driver dozing on the seat beneath the shade of a clump of trees.

"Did you see that, sir?" I asked over my shoulder.

"What was it?"

"The ox team, sir."

"Oh! No, I can't see it for the trees," he said looking back. "It's good timber."

"I'm sorry, sir. Shall I turn back?"

"No, it isn't much," he said. "Go on."

I drove on, remembering the lean, hungry face of the sleeping man. He was the kind of white man I feared. The brown fields swept out to the horizon. A flock of birds dipped down, circled, swung up and out as though linked by invisible strings. Waves of heat danced above the engine hood. The tires sang over the highway. Finally I overcame my timidity and asked him:

"Sir, why did you become interested in the school?"

"I think," he said, thoughtfully, raising his voice, "it was because I felt even as a young man that your people were somehow closely connected with my destiny. Do you understand?"

"Not so clearly, sir," I said, ashamed to admit it.

"You have studied Emerson, haven't you?

"Emerson, sir?"

"Ralph Waldo Emerson."[21]

I was embarrassed because I hadn't. Not yet, sir. We haven't come to him yet."

"No?" he said with a note of surprise. "Well, never mind. I am a New Englander, like Emerson. You must learn about him, for he was important to your people. He had a hand in your destiny. Yes, perhaps that is what I mean. I had a feeling that your people were somehow connected with my destiny. That what happened to you was connected with what would happen to me ..."

I slowed the car, trying to understand. Through the glass I saw him gazing at the long ash of his cigar, holding it delicately in his slender, manicured fingers.

"Yes, you are my fate, young man. Only you can tell me what it really is. Do you understand?"

"I *think* I do, sir."

"I mean that upon you depends the outcome of the years I have spent in helping your school. That has been my real life's work, not my banking or my researches, but my first-hand organizing of human life."

I saw him now, leaning toward the front seat, speaking with an intensity which had not been there before. It was hard not to turn my eyes from the highway and face him.

"There is another reason, a reason more important, more passionate and yes, even more sacred than all the others," he said, no longer seeming to see me, but speaking to himself alone. "Yes, even more sacred than all the others. A girl, my daughter. She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. I could never believe her to be my own flesh and blood. Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again ... She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. A delicate flower that bloomed in the liquid light of the moon. A nature not of this world, a personality like that of some biblical maiden, gracious and queenly. I found it difficult to believe her my own ..."

Suddenly he fumbled in his vest pocket and thrust something over the back of the seat, surprising me.

"Here, young man, you owe much of your good fortune in attending such a school to her."

I looked upon the tinted miniature framed in engraved platinum. I almost dopped it. A young woman

of delicate, dreamy features looked up at me. She was very beautiful, I thought at the time, so beautiful that I did not know whether I should express admiration to the extent I felt it or merely act polite. And yet I seemed to remember her, or someone like her, in the past. I know now that it was the flowing costume of soft, flimsy material that made for the effect; today, dressed in one of the smart, well-tailored, angular, sterile, streamlined, engine-turned, air-conditioned modern outfits you see in the women's magazines, she would appear as ordinary as an expensive piece of machine-tooled jewelry and just as lifeless. Then, however, I shared something of his enthusiasm.

"She was too pure for life," he said sadly; "too pure and too good and too beautiful. We were sailing together, touring the world, just she and I, when she became ill in Italy. I thought little of it at the time and we continued across the Alps. When we reached Munich she was already fading away. While we were attending an embassy party she collapsed. The best medical science in the world could not save her. It was a lonely return, a bitter voyage. I have never recovered. I have never forgiven myself. Everything I've done since her passing has been a monument to her memory."

He became silent, looking with his blue eyes far beyond the field stretching away in the sun. I returned the miniature, wondering what in the world had made him open his heart to me. That was something I never did; it was dangerous. First, it was dangerous if you felt like that about anything, because then you'd never get it or something or someone would take it away from you; then it was dangerous because nobody would understand you and they'd only laugh and think you were crazy.

"So you see, young man, you are involved in my life quite intimately, even though you've never seen me before. You are bound to a great dream and to a beautiful monument. If you become a good farmer, a chef, a preacher, doctor, singer, mechanic – whatever you become, and even if you fail, you are my fate. And you must write me and tell me the outcome."

I was relieved to see him smiling through the mirror. My feelings were mixed. Was he kidding me? Was he talking to me like someone in a book just to see how I would take it? Or could it be, I was almost afraid to think, that this rich man was just the tiniest bit crazy? How could I tell him *his* fate? He raised his head and our eyes met for an instant in the glass, then I lowered mine to the blazing white line that divided the highway.

The trees along the road were thick and tall. We took a curve. Flocks of quail sailed up and over a field, brown, brown, sailing down, blending.

"Will you promise to tell me my fate?" I heard.

"Sir?"

"Will you?"

"Right *now*, sir?" I asked with embarrassment.

"It is up to you. Now, if you like."

I was silent. His voice was serious, demanding. I could think of no reply. The motor purred. An insect crushed itself against the windshield, leaving a yellow, mucous smear.

"I don't know now, sir. This is only my junior year ..."

"But you'll tell me when you know?"

"I'll try, sir."

"Good."

When I took a quick glance into the mirror he was smiling again. I wanted to ask him if being rich and famous and helping to direct the school to become what it was, wasn't enough; but I was afraid.

"What do you think of my idea, young man?" he said.

"I don't know, sir. I only think that you have what you're looking for. Because if I fail or leave school, it doesn't seem to me it would be your fault. Because you helped make the school what it is."

"And you think that enough?"

"Yes, sir. That's what the president tells us. You have yours, and you got it yourself, and we have to lift ourselves up the same way."

"But that's only part of it, young man. I have wealth and a reputation and prestige – all that is true. But your great Founder had more than that, he had tens of thousands of lives dependent upon his ideas and upon his actions. What he did affected your whole race. In a way, he had the power of a king, or in a sense, of a god. That, I've come to believe, is more important than my own work, because more depends upon you. *You* are important because if you fail *I* have failed by one individual, one defective cog; it didn't matter so much before, but now I'm growing old and it has become very important ..."

But you don't even know my name, I thought, wondering what it was all about.

"... I suppose it is difficult for you to understand how this concerns me. But as you develop you must remember that I am dependent upon you to learn my fate. Through you and your fellow students I become, let us say, three hundred teachers, seven hundred trained mechanics, eight hundred skilled farmers, and so on. That way I can observe in terms of living personalities to what extent my money, my time and my hopes have been fruitfully invested. I also construct a living memorial to my daughter. Understand? I can see the fruits produced by the land that your great Founder has transformed from barren clay to fertile soil."

His voice ceased and I saw the strands of pale blue smoke drifting across the mirror and heard the electric lighter snap back on its cable into place behind the back of the seat.

"I think I understand you better, now, sir," I said.

"Very good, my boy."

"Shall I continue in this direction, sir?"

"By all means," he said, looking out at the countryside. "I've never seen this section before. It's new territory for me."

Half-consciously I followed the white line as I drove, thinking about what he had said. Then as we took a hill we were swept by a wave of scorching air and it was as though we were approaching a desert. It almost took my breath away and I leaned over and switched on the fan, hearing its sudden whirr.

"Thank you," he said as a slight breeze filled the car.

We were passing a collection of shacks and log cabins now, bleached white and warped by the weather. Sun-tortured shingles lay on the roofs like decks of water-soaked cards spread out to dry. The houses consisted of two square rooms joined together by a common floor and roof with a porch in between. As we passed we could look through to the fields beyond. I stopped the

car at his excited command in front of a house set off from the rest.

"Is that a *log* cabin?"

It was an old cabin with its chinks filled with chalk-white clay, with bright new shingles patching its roof. Suddenly I was sorry that I had blundered down this road. I recognized the place as soon as I saw the group of children in stiff new overalls who played near a rickety fence.

"Yes, sir. It is a log cabin," I said.

It was the cabin of Jim Trueblood, a sharecropper who had brought disgrace upon the black community. Several months before he had caused quite a bit of outrage up at the school, and now his name was never mentioned above a whisper. Even before that he had seldom come near the campus but had been well liked as a hard worker who took good care of his family's needs, and as one who told the old stories with a sense of humor and a magic that made them come alive. He was also a good tenor singer, and sometimes when special white guests visited the school he was brought up along with the members of a country quartet to sing what the officials called "their primitive spirituals" when we assembled in the chapel on Sunday evenings. We were embarrassed by the earthy harmonies they sang, but since the visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet. That had all passed now with his disgrace, and what on the part of the school officials had been an attitude of contempt blunted by tolerance, had now become a contempt sharpened by hate. I didn't understand in those pre-invisible days that their hate, and mine too, was charged with fear. How all of us at the college hated the black-belt people, the "peasants," during those days! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down.

"It appears quite old," Mr. Norton said, looking across the bare, hard stretch of yard where two women dressed in new blue-and-white checked ginghams were washing clothes in an iron pot. The pot was soot-black and the feeble flames that licked its sides showed pale pink and bordered with black, like flames in mourning. Both women moved with the weary, full-fronted motions of far-gone pregnancy.

"It is, sir," I said. "That one and the other two like it were built during slavery times."

"You don't say! I would never have believed that they were so enduring. Since slavery times!"

"That's true, sir. And the white family that owned the land when it was a big plantation still lives in town."

"Yes," he said, "I know that many of the old families still survive. And individuals too, the human stock goes on, even though it degenerates. But these cabins!" He seemed surprised and confounded.

"Do you suppose those women know anything about the age and history of the place? The older one looks as though she might."

"I doubt it, sir. They – they don't seem very bright."

"Bright?" he said, removing his cigar. "You mean that they wouldn't talk with me?" he asked suspiciously.

"Yes, sir. That's it."

"Why not?"

I didn't want to explain. It made me feel ashamed, but he sensed that I knew something and pressed me.

"It's not very nice, sir. But I don't think those women would talk to us."

"We can explain that we're from the school. Surely they'll talk then. You may tell them who I am."

"Yes, sir," I said, "but they hate us up at the school. They never come there ..."

"What!"

"No, sir."

"And those children along the fence down there?"

"They don't either, sir."

"But why?"

"I don't really know, sir. Quite a few folks out this way don't, though. I guess they're too ignorant. They're not interested."

"But I can't believe it."

The children had stopped playing and now looked silently at the car, their arms behind their backs and their new oversized overalls pulled tight over their little pot bellies as though they too were pregnant.

"What about their men folk?"

I hesitated. Why did he find this so strange?

"He hates us, sir," I said.

"You say *he;* aren't both the women married?"

I caught my breath. I'd made a mistake. "The old one is, sir," I said reluctantly.

"What happened to the young woman's husband?"

"She doesn't have any – That is ... I – "

"What is it, young man? Do you know these people?"

"Only a little, sir. There was some talk about them up on the campus a while back."

"What talk?"

"Well, the young woman is the old woman's daughter ..."

"And?"

"Well, sir, they say ... you see ... I mean they say the daughter doesn't have a husband."

"Oh, I see. But that shouldn't be so strange. I understand that your people – Never mind! Is that all?"

"Well, sir ..."

"Yes, what else?"

"They say that her father did it."

"What!"

"Yes, sir ... that he gave her the baby."

I heard the sharp intake of breath, like a toy-balloon suddenly deflated. His face reddened. I was confused, feeling shame for the two women and fear that I had talked too much and offended his sensibilities.

"And did anyone from the school investigate this matter?" he asked at last.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"What was discovered?"

"That it was true – they say."

"But how does he explain his doing such a – a – such a monstrous thing?"

He sat back in the seat, his hands grasping his knees, his knuckles bloodless. I looked away, down the heat-dazzling concrete of the highway. I wished we were back on the other side of the white line, heading back to the quiet green stretch of the campus.

"It is said that the man took both his wife and his daughter?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that he is the father of *both* their children?"

"Yes, sir."

"No, no, no!"

He sounded as though he were in great pain. I looked at him anxiously. What had happened? What had I said?

"Not that! No ..." he said, with something like horror.

I saw the sun blaze upon the new blue overalls as the man appeared around the cabin. His shoes were tan and new and he moved easily over the hot earth. He was a small man and he covered the yard with a familiarity that would have allowed him to walk in the blackest darkness with the same certainty. He came and said something to the woman as he fanned himself with a blue bandanna handkerchief. But they appeared to regard him sullenly, barely speaking, and hardly looking in his direction.

"Would that be the man?" Mr. Norton asked.

"Yes, sir. I think so."

"Get out!" he cried. "I must talk with him."

I was unable to move. I felt surprise and a dread and resentment of what he might say to Trueblood and his women, the questions he might ask. Why couldn't he leave them alone!

"Hurry!"

I climbed from the car and opened the rear door. He clambered out and almost ran across the road to the yard, as though compelled by some pressing urgency which I could not understand. Then suddenly I saw the two women turn and run frantically behind the house, their movements heavy and flatfooted. I hurried behind him, seeing him stop when he reached the man and the children. They became silent, their faces clouding over, their features becoming soft and negative, their eyes bland and deceptive. They were crouching behind their eyes waiting for him to speak – just as I recognized that I was trembling behind my own. Up close I saw what I had not seen from the car: The man had a scar on his right cheek, as though he had been hit in the face with a sledge.[22] The wound was raw and moist and from time to time he lifted his handkerchief to fan away the gnats.

"I, I – " Mr. Norton stammered, "I must talk with you!"

"All right, suh," Jim Trueblood said without surprise and waited.

"Is it true ... I mean did you?"

"Suh?" Trueblood asked, as I looked away.

"You have survived," he blurted. "But is it true ... ?"

"*Suh?*" the farmer said, his brow wrinkling with bewilderment.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, "but I don't think he understands you."

He ignored me, staring into Trueblood's face as though reading a message there which I could not perceive.

"You did and are unharmed!" he shouted, his blue eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation. Trueblood looked helplessly at me. I looked away. I understood no more than he.

"You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!"

"No suh! I feels all right."

"You do? You feel no inner turmoil, no need to cast out the offending eye?"[23]

"*Suh*?"

"Answer me!"

"I'm all right, suh," Trueblood said uneasily. "My eyes is all right too. And when I feels po'ly in my gut I takes a little soda and it goes away."

"No, no, no! Let us go where there is shade," he said, looking about excitedly and going swiftly to where the porch cast a swath of shade. We followed him. The farmer placed his hand on my shoulder, but I shook it off, knowing that I could explain nothing. We sat on the porch in a semi-circle in camp chairs, me between the sharecropper and the millionaire. The earth around the porch was hard and white from where wash water had long been thrown.

"How are you faring now?" Mr. Norton asked. "Perhaps I could help."

"We ain't doing so bad, suh. 'Fore they heard 'bout what happen to us out here I couldn't git no help from nobody. Now lotta folks is curious and goes outta they way to help. Even the biggity school folks up on the hill, only there was a catch to it! They offered to send us clean outta the country, pay our way and everything and give me a hundred dollars to git settled with. But we likes it here so I told 'em No. Then they sent a fellow out here, a big fellow too, and he said if I didn't leave they was going to turn the white folks loose on me. It made me mad and it made me scared. Them folks up there to the school is in strong with the white folks and that scared me. But I thought when they first come out here that they was different from when I went up there a long time ago looking for some book learning and some points on how to handle my crops. That was when I had my own place. I thought they was trying to he'p me, on accounta I got two women due to birth 'bout the same time.

"But I got mad when I found they was tryin' to git rid of us 'cause they said we was a disgrace. Yessuh, I got real mad. So I went down to see Mr. Buchanan, the boss man, and I tole him 'bout it and he give me a note to the sheriff and tole me to take it to him. I did that, jus' like he tole me. I went to the jailhouse and give Sheriff Barbour the note and he ask me to tell him what happen, and I tole him and he called in some more men and they made me tell it again. They wanted to hear about the gal lots of times and they gimme somethin' to eat and drink and some tobacco. Surprised me, 'cause I was scared and spectin' somethin' different. Why, I guess there ain't a colored man in the county who ever got to take so much of the white folkses' time as I did. So finally they tell me not to worry, that they was going to send word up to the school that I was to stay right where I am. Them big nigguhs didn't bother me, neither. It just goes to show yuh that no matter how biggity a nigguh gits, the white folks can always cut him down. The white folks took up for me. And the white folks took to coming out here to see us and talk with us. Some of 'em was big white folks, too, from the big school way cross the State. Asked me lots 'bout what I thought 'bout things, and 'bout my folks and the kids, and wrote it all down in a book. But best of all, suh, I got more work now than I ever did have before ..."

He talked willingly now, with a kind of satisfaction and no trace of hesitancy or shame. The old man listened with a puzzled expression as he held an unlit cigar in his delicate fingers.

"Things is pretty good now," the farmer said. "Ever time I think of how cold it was and what a hard time we was having I gits the shakes."

I saw him bite into a plug of chewing tobacco. Something tinkled against the porch and I picked it up, gazing at it from time to time. It was a hard red apple stamped out of tin.

"You see, suh, it was cold and us didn't have much fire. Nothin' but wood, no coal. I tried to git help but wouldn't nobody help us and I couldn't find no work or nothin'. It was so cold all of us had to sleep together; me, the ole lady and the gal. That's how it started, suh."

He cleared his throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many, many times. Flies and fine white gnats swarmed about his wound.

"That's the way it was," he said. "Me on one side and the ole lady on the other and the gal in the middle. It was dark, plum black. Black as the middle of a bucket of tar. The kids was sleeping all together in they bed over in the corner. I must have been the last one to go to sleep, 'cause I was thinking 'bout how to git some grub for the next day and 'bout the gal and the young boy what was startin' to hang 'round her. I didn't like him and he kept comin' through my thoughts and I made up my mind to warn him away from the gal. It was black dark and I heard one of the kids whimper in his sleep and the last few sticks of kindlin' crackin' and settlin' in the stove and the smell of the fat meat seemed to git cold and still in the air just like meat grease when it gits set in a cold plate of molasses. And I was thinkin' 'bout the gal and this boy and feelin' her arms besides me and hearing the ole lady snorin' with a kinda moanin' and a-groanin' on the other side. I was worryin' 'bout my family, how they was goin' to eat and all, and I thought 'bout when the gal was little like the younguns sleepin' over in the corner and how I was her favorite over the ole lady. There we was, breathin' together in the dark. Only I could see 'em in my mind, knowin' 'em like I do. In my mind I looked at all of 'em, one by one. The gal looks just like the ole lady did when she was young and I first met her, only better lookin'. You know, we gittin' to be a better-lookin' race of people ...

"Anyway, I could hear 'em breathin' and though I hadn't been it made me sleepy. Then I heard the gal say, 'Daddy,' soft and low in her sleep and I looked, tryin' to see if she was still awake. But all I can do is smell her and feel her breath on my hand when I go to touch her. She said it so soft I couldn't be sure I had heard anything, so I just laid there listenin'. Seems like I heard a whippoorwill[24] callin', and I thought to myself, Go on away from here, we'll whip ole Will when we find him. Then I heard the clock up there at the school strikin' four times, lonesome like.

"Then I got to thinkin' 'bout way back when I left the farm and went to live in Mobile and 'bout a gal I had me then. I was young then – like this young fellow here. Us lived in a two-story house 'longside the river, and at night in the summertime we used to lay in bed and talk, and after she'd gone off to sleep I'd be awake lookin' out at the lights comin' up from the water and listenin' to the sounds of the boats movin' along. They used to have musicianers on them boats, and sometimes I used to wake her up to hear the music when they come up the river. I'd be layin' there and it would be quiet and I

could hear it comin' from way, way off. Like when you quail huntin' and it's getting dark and you can hear the boss bird whistlin' tryin' to get the covey[25] together again, and he's coming towards you slow and whistlin' soft, 'cause he knows you somewhere around with your gun. Still he got to round them up, so he keeps on comin'. Them boss quails is like a good man, what he got to do he *do*.

"Well, that's the way the boats used to sound. Comin' close to you from far away. First one would be comin' to you when you almost sleep and it sounded like somebody hittin' at you slow with a big shiny pick. You see the pick-point comin' straight at you, comin' slow too, and you can't dodge; only when it goes to hit you it ain't no pick a'tall but somebody far away breakin' little bottles of all kindsa colored glass. It's still comin' at you though. Still comin'. Then you hear it close up, like when you up in the second-story window and look down on a wagonful of watermelons, and you see one of them young juicy melons split wide open a-layin' all spread out and cool and sweet on top of all the striped green ones like it's waitin' just for you, so you can see how red and ripe and juicy it is and all the shiny black seeds it's got and all. And you could hear the sidewheels splashin' like they don't want to wake nobody up; and us, me and the gal, would lay there feelin' like we was rich folks and them boys on the boats would be playin' sweet as good peach brandy wine. Then the boats would be past and the lights would be gone from the window and the music would be goin' too. Kinda like when you watch a gal in a red dress and a wide straw hat goin' past you down a lane with the trees on both sides, and she's plump and juicy and kinda switchin' her tail 'cause she knows you watchin' and you *know* she know, and you just stands there and watches 'til you can't see nothin' but the top of her red hat and then that goes and you know she done dropped behind a hill – I seen me a gal like that once. All I could hear then would be that Mobile gal – name of Margaret – she be breathin' beside me, and maybe 'bout that time she'd say, 'Daddy, you still 'wake?' and then I'd grunt, 'Uhhuh' and drop on off – Gent'mens," Jim Trueblood said, "I likes to recall them Mobile days.

"Well, it was like that when I heard Matty Lou say, 'Daddy,' and I knowed she musta been dreamin' 'bout somebody from the way she said it and I gits mad wonderin' if it's that boy. I listen to her mumblin' for a while tryin' to hear if she calls his name, but she don't, and I remember that they say if you put the hand of a person who's talkin' in his sleep in warm water he'll say it all, but the water is too cold and I wouldn't have done it anyway. But I'm realizin' that she's a woman now, when I feels her turn and squirm against me and throw her arm across my neck, up where the cover didn't reach and I was cold. She said somethin' I couldn't understand, like a woman says when she wants to tease and please a man. I knowed then she was grown and I wondered how many times it'd done happened and was it that doggone boy. I moved her arm and it was soft, but it didn't wake her, so I called her, but that didn't wake her neither. Then I turned my back and tried to move away, though there wasn't much room and I could still feel her touchin' me, movin' close to me. Then I musta dropped into the dream. I have to tell you 'bout that dream."

I looked at Mr. Norton and stood up, thinking that

now was a good time to leave; but he was listening to Trueblood so intensely he didn't see me, and I sat down again, cursing the farmer silently. To hell with his dream!

"I don't quite remember it all, but I remember that I was lookin' for some fat meat. I went to the white folks downtown and they said go see Mr. Broadnax, that he'd give it to me. Well, he lives up on a hill and I was climbin' up there to see him. Seems like that was the highest hill in the world. The more I climbed the farther away Mr. Broadnax's house see ms to git. But finally I do reach there. And I'm so tired and restless to git to the man, I goes through the front door! I knows it's wrong, but I can't help it. I goes in and I'm standin' in a big room full of lighted candles and shiny furniture and pictures on the walls, and soft stuff on the floor. But I don't see a livin' soul. So I calls his name, but still don't nobody come and don't nobody answer. So I sees a door and goes through that door and I'm in a big white bedroom, like I seen one time when I was a little ole boy and went to the big house with my Ma. Everything in the room was white and I'm standin' there knowin' I got no business in there, but there anyhow. It's a woman's room too. I tries to git out, but I don't find the door; and all around me I can smell woman, can smell it gittin' stronger all the time. Then I looks over in a corner and sees one of them tall grandfather clocks and I hears it strikin' and the glass door is openin' and a white lady is steppin' out of it. She got on a nightgown of soft white silky stuff and nothin' else, and she looks straight at me. I don't know what to do. I wants to run, but the only door I see is the one in the clock she's standin' in – and anyway, I can't move and this here clock is keepin' up a heapa racket. It's gittin' faster and faster all the time. I tries to say somethin', but I caint. Then she starts to screamin' and I thinks I done gone deef, 'cause though I can see her mouth working, I don't *hear* nothin'. Yit I can still hear the clock and I tries to tell her I'm just lookin' for Mr. Broadnax but she don't hear me. Instead she runs up and grabs me around the neck and holds tight, tryin' to keep me out of the clock. I don't know what to do then, sho 'nough. I tries to talk to her, and I tries to git away. But she's holdin' me and I'm scared to touch her 'cause she's white. Then I gits so scared that I throws her on the bed and tries to break her holt. That woman just seemed to sink outta sight, that there bed was so soft. It's sinkin' down so far I think it's going to smother both of us. Then swoosh! all of a sudden a flock of little white geese flies out of the bed like they say you see when you go to dig for buried money. Lawd! they hadn't no more'n disappeared than I heard a door open and Mr. Broadnax's voice said, 'They just nigguhs, leave 'em do it.'"

How can he tell this to white men, I thought, when he knows they'll say that all Negroes do such things? I looked at the floor, a red mist of anguish before my eyes.

"And I caint stop – although I got a feelin' somethin' is wrong. I git aloose from the woman now and I'm runnin' for the clock. At first I couldn't git the door open, it had some kinda crinkly stuff like steel wool on the facing. But I gits it open and gits inside and it's hot and dark in there. I goes up a dark tunnel, up near where the machinery is making all that noise and heat. It's like the power plant they got up to the school. It's burnin' hot as iffen the house was caught on fire, and I

starts to runnin', tryin' to git out. I runs and runs till I should be tired but ain't tired but feelin' more rested as I runs, and runnin' so good it's like flyin' and I'm flyin' and sailin' and floatin' right up over the town. Only I'm still in the *tunnel*. Then way up ahead I sees a bright light like a jack-o-lantern over a graveyard. It gits brighter and brighter and I know I got to catch up with it or else. Then all at once I was right up with it and it burst like a great big electric light in my eyes and scalded me all over. Only it wasn't a scald, but like I was drownin' in a lake where the water was hot on the top and had cold numbin' currents down under it. Then all at once I'm through it and I'm relieved to be out and in the cool daylight agin.

"I wakes up intendin' to tell the ole lady 'bout my crazy dream. Morning done come, and it's gettin' almost light. And there I am, lookin' straight in Matty Lou's face and she's beatin' me and scratchin' and tremblin' and shakin' and cryin' all at the same time like she's havin' a fit. I'm too surprised to move. She's cryin', 'Daddy, Daddy, oh Daddy,' just like that. And all at once I remember the ole lady. She's right beside us snorin' and I can't move 'cause I figgers if I moved it would be a sin. And I figgers too, that if I don't move it maybe ain't no sin, 'cause it happened when I was asleep – although maybe sometimes a man can look at a little ole pigtail gal and see him a whore – you'all know that? Anyway, I realizes that if I don't move the ole lady will see me. I don't want that to happen. That would be *worse* than sin. I'm whisperin' to Matty Lou, tryin' to keep her quiet and I'm figurin' how to git myself out of the fix I'm in without sinnin'. I almost chokes her.

"But once a man gits hisself in a tight spot like that there ain't much he can do. It ain't up to him no longer. There I was, tryin' to git away with all my might, yet having to move *without* movin'. I flew in but I had to walk out. I had to move without movin'. I done thought 'bout it since a heap, and when you think right hard you see that that's the way things is always been with me. That's just about been my life. There was only one way I can figger that I could git out: that was with a knife. But I didn't have no knife, and if you'all ever seen them geld them young boar pigs in the fall, you know I knowed that that was too much to pay to keep from sinnin'. Everything was happenin' inside of me like a fight was goin' on. Then just the very thought of the fix I'm in puts the iron back in me.

"Then if that ain' bad enough, Matty Lou can't hold out no longer and gits to movin' herself. First she was tryin' to push me away and I'm tryin' to hold her down to keep from sinnin'. Then I'm pullin' away and shushin' her to be quiet so's not to wake her Ma, when she grabs holt to me and holds tight. She didn't want me to go then – and to tell the honest- to-God truth I found out that I didn't want to go neither. I guess I felt then, at that time – and although I been sorry since – just 'bout like that fellow did down in Birmingham. That one what locked hisself in his house and shot at them police until they set fire to the house and burned him up. I was lost. The more wringlin' and twistin' we done tryin' to git away, the more we wanted to stay. So like that fellow, I stayed, I had to fight it on out to the end. He mighta died, but I suspects now that he got a heapa satisfaction before he went. I *know* there ain't nothin' like what I went through, I caint tell how it was. It's like

when a real drinkin' man gits drunk, or like when a real sanctified religious woman gits so worked up she jumps outta her clothes, or when a real gamblin' man keeps on gamblin' when he's losin'. You got holt to it and you caint let go even though you want to."

"Mr. Norton, sir," I said in a choked voice, "it's time we were getting back to the campus. You'll miss your appointments ..."

He didn't even look at me. "Please," he said, waving his hand in annoyance.

Trueblood seemed to smile at me behind his eyes as he looked from the white man to me and continued.

"I couldn't even let go when I heard Kate scream. It was a scream to make your blood run cold. It sounds like a woman who was watchin' a team of wild horses run down her baby chile and she caint move. Kate's hair is standin' up like she done seen a ghost, her gown is hanging open and the veins in her neck is 'bout to bust. And her eyes! Lawd, them eyes. I'm lookin' up at her from where I'm layin' on the pallet with Matty Lou, and I'm too weak to move. She screams and starts to pickin' up the first thing that comes to her hand and throwin' it. Some of them misses me and some of them hits me. Little things and big things. Somethin' cold and strong-stinkin' hits me and wets me and bangs against my head. Somethin' hits the wall – boom-a-loom-a-loom! – like a cannon ball, and I tries to cover up my head. Kate's talkin' the unknown tongue, like a wild woman.

"'Wait a minit, Kate,' I says. 'Stop it!'

"Then I hears her stop a second and I hears her runnin' across the floor, and I twists and looks and Lawd, she done got my double-barrel shotgun!

"And while she's foamin' at the mouth and cockin' the gun, she gits her speech.

"'Git up! Git up!' she says.

"'HEY! NAW! KATE!' I says.

"'Goddam yo' soul to hell! Git up off a my chile!'

"'But woman, Kate, lissen ...'

"'Don't talk, MOVE!'

"'Down that thing, Kate!'

"'No down, UP!'

"'That there's buckshot, woman, BUCKshot!'

"'Yes, it is!'

"'Down it, I say!'

"'I'm gon blast your soul to hell!'

"'You gon hit Matty Lou!'

"'Not Matty Lou – YOU!'

"'It spreads, Kate. Matty Lou!'

"She moves around, aimin' at me.

"'I done warn you, Jim ...'

"'Kate, it was a dream. Lissen to me ...'

"'You the one who lissen – UP FROM THERE!'

"She jerks the gun and I shuts my eyes. But insteada thunder and lightin' bustin' me, I hears Matty Lou scream in my ear,

"'Mamma! Oooooo MAMA!'

"I rolls almost over then and Kate hesitates. She looks at the gun, and she looks at us, and she shivers a minit like she got the fever. Then all at once she drops the gun, and ZIP! quick as a cat, she turns and grabs somethin' off the stove. It catches me like somebody diggin' into my side with a sharp spade. I caint breathe. She's throwin' and talkin' all at the same time.

"And when I looks up, Maan, Maaan! she's got a iron in her hand!

"I hollers, 'No blood, Kate. Don't spill no blood!'

"'You low-down dog,' she says, 'it's better to spill than to foul!'

"'Naw, Kate. Things ain't what they 'pear! Don't make no blood-sin on accounta no dream-sin!'

"'Shut up, nigguh. You done *fouled*!'

"But I sees there ain't no use reasonin' with her then. I makes up my mind that I'm goin' to take whatever she gimme. It seems to me that all I can do is take my punishment. I tell myself, Maybe if you suffer for it, it will be best. Maybe you owe it to Kate to let her beat you. You ain't guilty, but she thinks you is. You don't want her to beat you, but she thinks she got to beat you. You want to git up, but you too weak to move.

"I was too. I was frozen to where I was like a youngun what done stuck his lip to a pump handle in the wintertime. I was just like a jaybird that the yellow jackets done stung 'til he's paralyzed – but still alive in his eyes and he's watchin' 'em sting his body to death.

"It made me seem to go way back a distance in my head, behind my eyes, like I was standin' behind a windbreak[26] durin' a storm. I looks out and sees Kate runnin' toward me draggin' something behind her. I tries to see what it is 'cause I'm curious 'bout it and sees her gown catch on the stove and her hand comin' in sight with somethin' in it. I thinks to myself, It's a handle. What she got the handle to? Then I sees her right up on me, big. She's swingin' her arms like a man swingin' a ten-pound sledge and I sees the knuckles of her hand is bruised and bleedin', and I sees it catch in her gown and I sees her gown go up so I can see her thighs and I sees how rusty and gray the cold done made her skin, and I sees her bend and straightenin' up and I hears her grunt and I sees her swing and I smells her sweat and I knows by the shape of the shinin' wood what she's got to put on me. Lawd, yes! I sees it catch on a quilt this time and raise that quilt up and drop it on the floor. Then I sees that ax come free! It's shinin', shinin' from the sharpenin' I'd give it a few days before, and man, way back in myself, behind that windbreak, I says,

"'NAAW! KATE – Lawd, Kate, NAW!!!'"

Suddenly his voice was so strident that I looked up startled. Trueblood seemed to look straight through Mr. Norton, his eyes glassy. The children paused guiltily at their play, looking toward their father.

"I might as well been pleadin' with a switch engine," he went on. "I sees it comin' down. I sees the light catchin' on it, I sees Kate's face all mean and I tightens my shoulders and stiffens my neck and I waits – ten million back-breakin' years, it seems to me like I waits. I waits so long I remembers all the wrong things I ever done; I waits so long I opens my eyes and closes 'em and opens my eyes agin, and I sees it fallin'. It's fallin' fast as flops from a six-foot ox, and while I'm waitin' I feels somethin' wind up inside of me and turn to water. I sees it, Lawd, yes! I sees it and seein' it I twists my head aside. Couldn't help it; Kate has a good aim, but for that. I moves. Though I meant to keep still, I moves! Anybody but Jesus Christ hisself woulda moved. I feel like the whole side of my face is smashed clear off. It hits me like hot lead so hot that insteada burnin' me it numbs me. I'm layin' there on the floor, but inside me

I'm runnin round in circles like a dog with his back broke, and back into that numbness with my tail tucked between my legs. I feels like I don't have no skin on my face no more, only the naked bone. But this is the part I don't understand: more'n the pain and numbness I feels relief. Yes, and to git some more of that relief I seems to run out from behind the windbreak again and up to where Kate's standin' with the ax, and I opens my eyes and waits. That's the truth. I wants some more and I waits. I sees her swing it, lookin' down on me, and I sees it in the air and I holds my breath, then all of a sudden I sees it stop like somebody done reached down through the roof and caught it, and I sees her face have a spasm and I sees the ax fall, back of her this time, and hit the floor, and Kate spews out some puke and I close my eyes and waits. I can hear her moanin' and stumblin' out of the door and failin' off the porch into the yard. Then I hears her pukin' like all her guts is coming up by the roots. Then I looks down and seen blood runnin' all over Matty Lou. It's my blood, my face is bleedin'. That gits me to movin'. I gits up and stumbles out to find Kate, and there she is under the cottonwood tree out there, on her knees, and she's moanin'.

"'What have I done, Lawd! What have I done!'

"She's droolin' green stuff and gits to pukin' agin, and when I goes to touch her it gits worse. I stands there holdin' my face and tryin' to keep the blood from flowin' and wonders what on earth is gonna happen. I looks up at the mornin' sun and expects somehow for it to thunder. But it's already bright and clear and the sun comin' up and the birds is chirpin' and I gits more afraid then than if a bolt of lightnin' had struck me. I yells, 'Have mercy, Lawd! Lawd, have mercy!' and waits. And there's nothin' but the clear bright mornin' sun.

"But don' nothin' happen and I knows then that somethin' worse than anything I ever heard 'bout is in store for me. I musta stood there stark stone still for half an hour. I was still standin' there when Kate got off her knees and went back into the house. The blood was runnin' all over my clothes and the flies was after me, and I went back inside to try and stop it.

"When I see Matty Lou stretched out there I think she's dead. Ain't no color in her face and she ain't hardly breathin'. She gray in the face. I tries to help her but I can't do no good and Kate won't speak to me nor look at me even; and I thinks maybe she plans to try to kill me agin, but she don't. I'm in such a daze I just sits there the whole time while she bundles up the younguns and takes 'em down the road to Will Nichols'. I can see but I caint do nothin'.

"And I'm still settin' there when she comes back with some women to see 'bout Matty Lou. Won't nobody speak to me, though they looks at me like I'm some new kinda cotton- pickin' machine. I feels bad. I tells them how it happened in a dream, but they scorns me. I gits plum out of the house then. I goes to see the preacher and even he don't believe me. He tells me to git out of his house, that I'm the most wicked man he's ever seen and that I better go confess my sin and make my peace with God. I leaves tryin' to pray, but I caint. I thinks and thinks, until I thinks my brain go'n bust, 'bout how I'm guilty and how I ain't guilty. I don't eat nothin' and I don't drink nothin' and caint sleep at night. Finally, one night, way early in the mornin', I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singin'. I don't mean to, I didn't

think 'bout it, just start singin'. I don't know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I *ends up* singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen. I made up my mind that I was goin' back home and face Kate; yeah, and face Matty Lou too.

"When I gits here everybody thinks I done run off. There's a heap of women here with Kate and I runs 'em out. And when I runs 'em out I sends the younguns out to play and locks the door and tells Kate and Matty Lou 'bout the dream and how I'm sorry but that what done happen is done happen.

"'How come you don't go on 'way and leave us?' is the first words Kate says to me. 'Ain't you done enough to me and this chile?'

"'I caint leave you' I says. 'I'm a man and man don't leave his family.'

"She says, 'Naw you ain't no man. No man'd do what you did.'

"'I'm still a man,' I says.

"'But what you gon do after it happens? says Kate.

"'After *what* happens?' I says.

"'When yo black 'bomination is birthed to bawl yo wicked sin befo the eyes of God!' (She musta learned them words from the preacher.)

"'Birth?' I says. '*Who* birth?'

Both of us. Me birth and Matty Lou birth. Both of us birth, you dirty lowdown wicked dog!'

"That liketa killed me. I can understand then why Matty Lou won't look at me and won't speak a word to nobody.

"'If you stay I'm goin' over an' git Aunt Cloe for both of us, Kate says. She says, 'I don't aim to birth no sin for folks to look at all the rest of my life, and I don't aim for Matty Lou to neither.'

"You see, Aunt Cloe is a midwife, and even weak as I am from this news I knows I don't want her foolin' with my womenfolks. That woulda been pilin' sin up on toppa sin.[27] So I told Kate, naw, that if Aunt Cloe come near this house I'd kill her, old as she is. I'da done it too. That settles it. I walks out of the house and leaves 'em here to cry it out between 'em. I wanted to go off by myself agin, but it don't do no good tryin' to run off from somethin' like that. It follows you wherever you go. Besides, to git right down to the facts, there wasn't nowhere I could go. I didn't have a cryin' dime!

"Things got to happenin' right off. The nigguhs up at the school come down to chase me off and that made me mad. I went to see the white folks then and they gave me help. That's what I don't understand. I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin' me out of the country, they gimme more help than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a nigguh he was. Except that my wife an' daughter won't speak to me, I'm better off than I ever been before. And even if Kate won't speak to me she took the new clothes I brought her from up in town and now she's gettin' some eyeglasses made what she been needin' for so long. But what I don't understand is how I done the worse thing a man can do in his own family and 'stead of things gittin' bad, they got better: The nigguhs up at the school don't like me, but the

white folks treats me fine."

He was some farmer. As I listened I had been so torn between humiliation and fascination that to lessen my sense of shame I had kept my attention riveted upon his intense face. That way I did not have to look at Mr. Norton. But now as the voice ended I sat looking down at Mr. Norton's feet. Out in the yard a woman's hoarse contralto intoned a hymn. Children's voices were raised in playful chatter. I sat bent over, smelling the sharp dry odor of wood burning in the hot sunlight. I stared at the two pairs of shoes[28] before me. Mr. Norton's were white, trimmed with black. They were custom made and there beside the cheap tan brogues of the farmer they had the elegantly slender well-bred appearance of fine gloves. Finally someone cleared his throat and I looked up to see Mr. Norton staring silently into Jim Trueblood's eyes. I was startled. His face had drained of color. With his bright eyes burning into Trueblood's black face, he looked ghostly. Trueblood looked at me questioningly.

"Lissen to the younguns," he said in embarrassment. "Playin' 'London Bridge's Fallin' Down.'"

Something was going on which I didn't get. I had to get Mr. Norton away.

"Are you all right, sir?" I asked.

He looked at me with unseeing eyes. "All right?" he said.

"Yes, sir. I mean that I think it's time for the afternoon session," I hurried on.

He stared at me blankly.

I went to him. "Are you sure you're all right, sir?"

"Maybe it's the heat," Trueblood said. "You got to be born down here to stand this kind of heat."

"Perhaps," Mr. Norton said, "it is the heat. We'd better go."

He stood shakily, still staring intently at Trueblood. Then I saw him removing a red Moroccan-leather wallet from his coat pocket. The platinum-framed miniature came with it, but he did not look at it this time.

"Here," he said, extending a banknote. "Please take this and buy the children some toys for me."

Trueblood's mouth fell agape, his eyes widened and filled with moisture as he took the bill between trembling fingers. It was a hundred-dollar bill.

"I'm ready, young man," Mr. Norton said, his voice a whisper.

I went before him to the car and opened the door. He stumbled a bit climbing in and I gave him my arm. His face was still chalk white.

"Drive me away from here," he said in a sudden frenzy. "Away!"

"Yes, sir."

I saw Jim Trueblood wave as I threw the car into gear. "You bastard," I said under my breath. "You no-good bastard! You get a hundred-dollar bill!"

When I had turned the car and started back I saw him still standing in the same place.

Suddenly Mr. Norton touched me on the shoulder. "I must have a stimulant, young man. A little whiskey."

"Yes, sir. Are you all right, sir?"

"A little faint, but a stimulant ..."

His voice trailed off. Something cold formed within my chest. If anything happened to him Dr. Bledsoe

would blame me. I stepped on the gas, wondering where I could get him some whiskey. Not in the town, that would take too long. There was only one place, the Golden Day.

"I'll have you some in a few minutes, sir," I said.

"As soon as you can," he said.

Chapter 3

I saw them as we approached the short stretch that lay between the railroad tracks and the Golden Day. At first I failed to recognize them. They straggled down the highway in a loose body, blocking the way from the white line to the frazzled weeds that bordered the sun-heated concrete slab. I cursed them silently. They were blocking the road and Mr. Norton was gasping for breath. Ahead of the radiator's gleaming curve they looked like a chain gang on its way to make a road. But a chain gang marches single file and I saw no guards on horseback. As I drew nearer I recognized the loose gray shirts and pants worn by the veterans. Damn! They were heading for the Golden Day.

"A little stimulant," I heard behind me.

"In a few minutes, sir."

Up ahead I saw the one who thought he was a drum major strutting in front, giving orders as he moved energetically in long, hip-swinging strides, a cane held above his head, rising and falling as though in time to music. I slowed the car as I saw him turn to face the men, his cane held at chest level as he shortened the pace. The men continued to ignore him, walking along in a mass, some talking in groups and others talking and gesticulating to themselves.

Suddenly, the drum major saw the car and shook his cane-baton at me. I blew the horn, seeing the men move over to the side as I nosed the car slowly forward. He held his ground, his legs braced, hands on hips, and to keep from hitting him I slammed on the brakes.

The drum major rushed past the men toward the car, and I heard the cane bang down upon the hood as he rushed toward me.

"Who the hell you think you are, running down the army? Give the countersign. Who's in command of this outfit? You trucking bastards was always too big for your britches. Countersign me!"

"This is General Pershing's car, sir," I said, remembering hearing that he responded to the name of his wartime Commander-in-Chief. Suddenly the wild look changed in his eyes and he stepped back and saluted with stiff precision. Then looking suspiciously into the back seat, he barked,

"Where's the General?"

"There," I said, turning and seeing Mr. Norton raising himself, weak and white-faced, from the seat.

"What is it? Why have we stopped?"

"The sergeant stopped us, sir ..."

"Sergeant? What sergeant?" He sat up.

"Is that you, General?" the vet said, saluting. "I didn't know you were inspecting the front lines today. I'm very sorry, sir."

"What ... ?" Mr. Norton said.

"The General's in a hurry," I said quickly.

"Sure is," the vet said. "He's got a lot to see. Discipline is bad. Artillery's shot to hell." Then he called to the men walking up the road, "Get the hell out of the

General's road. General Pershing's coming through. Make way for General Pershing!"

He stepped aside and I shot the car across the line to avoid the men and stayed there on the wrong side as I headed for the Golden Day.

"Who was that man?" Mr. Norton gasped from the back seat.

"A former soldier, sir. A vet. They're all vets, a little shellshocked."

"But where is the attendant?"

"I don't see one, sir. They're harmless though."

"Nevertheless, they should have an attendant."

I had to get him there and away before they arrived. This was their day to visit the girls, and the Golden Day would be pretty rowdy. I wondered where the rest of them were. There should have been about fifty. Well, I would rush in and get the whiskey and leave. What was wrong with Mr. Norton anyway, why should he get that upset over Trueblood? I had felt ashamed and several times I had wanted to laugh, but it had made him sick. Maybe he needed a doctor. Hell, he didn't ask for any doctor. Damn that bastard Trueblood.

I would run in, get a pint, and run out again, I thought. Then he wouldn't see the Golden Day. I seldom went there myself except with some of the fellows when word got out that a new bunch of girls had arrived from New Orleans. The school had tried to make the Golden Day respectable, but the local white folks had a hand in it somehow and they got nowhere. The best the school could do was to make it hot for any student caught going there.

He lay like a man asleep as I left the car and ran into the Golden Day. I wanted to ask him for money but decided to use my own. At the door I paused; the place was already full, jammed with vets in loose gray shirts and trousers and women in short, tight-fitting, stiffly starched gingham aprons. The stale beer smell struck like a club through the noise of voices and the juke box. Just as I got inside the door a stolid-faced man gripped me by the arm and looked stonily into my eyes.

"It will occur at 5:30," he said, looking straight through me.

"What?"

"The great all-embracing, absolute Armistice,[29] the end of the world!" he said.

Before I could answer, a small plump woman smiled into my face and pulled him away.

"It's your turn, Doc," she said. "Don't let it happen till after me and you done been upstairs. How come I always have to come get you?"

"No, it is true," he said. "They wirelessed me from Paris this morning."

"Then, baby, me an' you better hurry. There's lots of money I got to make in here before that thing happens. You hold it back a while, will you?"

She winked at me as she pulled him through the crowd toward the stairs. I elbowed my way nervously toward the bar.

Many of the men had been doctors, lawyers, teachers, Civil Service workers; there were several cooks, a preacher, a politician, and an artist. One very nutty one had been a psychiatrist. Whenever I saw them I felt uncomfortable. They were supposed to be members of the professions toward which at various times I vaguely

aspired myself, and even though they never seemed to see me I could never believe that they were really patients. Sometimes it appeared as though they played some vast and complicated game with me and the rest of the school folk, a game whose goal was laughter and whose rules and subtleties I could never grasp.

Two men stood directly in front of me, one speaking with intense earnestness. "... and Johnson hit Jeffries at an angle of 45 degrees from his lower left lateral incisor, producing an instantaneous blocking of his entire thalamic rine, frosting it over like the freezing unit of a refrigerator, thus shattering his autonomous nervous system and rocking the big brick-laying creampuff with extreme hyperspasmic muscular tremors which dropped him dead on the extreme tip of his coccyx, which, in turn, produced a sharp traumatic reaction in his sphincter nerve and muscle, and then, my dear colleague, they swept him up, sprinkled him with quicklime and rolled him away in a barrow. Naturally, there was no other therapy possible."[30]

"Excuse me," I said, pushing past.

Big Halley was behind the bar, his dark skin showing through his sweat-wet shirt.

"Whatcha saying, school-boy?"

"I want a double whiskey, Halley. Put it in something deep so I can get it out of here without spilling it. It's for somebody outside."

His mouth shot out, "Hell, naw!"

"Why?" I asked, surprised at the anger in his thyroid eyes.

"You still up at the school, ain't you?"

"Sure."

"Well, those bastards is trying to close me up again, that's why. You can drink till you blue in the face in here, but I wouldn't sell you enough to spit through your teeth to take outside."

"But I've got a sick man out in the car."

"What car? You never had no car."

"The white man's car. I'm driving for him."

"Ain't you in school?"

"He's *from* the school."

"Well, who's sick?"

"He is."

"He too good to come in? Tell him we don't Jimcrow[31] nobody."

"But he's sick."

"He can die!"

"He's important, Halley, a trustee. He's rich and sick and if anything happens to him, they'll have me packed and on my way home."

"Can't help it, school-boy. Bring him inside and he can buy enough to swim in. He can drink outta my own private bottle."

He sliced the white heads off a couple of beers with an ivory paddle and passed them up the bar. I felt sick inside. Mr. Norton wouldn't want to come in here. He was too sick. And besides I didn't want him to see the patients and the girls. Things were getting wilder as I made my way out. Supercargo, the white-uniformed attendant who usually kept the men quiet, was nowhere to be seen. I didn't like it, for when he was upstairs they had absolutely no inhibitions. I made my way out to the car. What could I tell Mr. Norton? He was lying very still when I opened the door.

"Mr. Norton, sir. They refuse to sell me whiskey to bring out."

He lay very still.

"Mr. Norton."

He lay like a figure of chalk. I shook him gently, feeling dread within me. He barely breathed. I shook him violently, seeing his head wobble grotesquely. His lips parted, bluish, revealing a row of long, slender, amazingly animal-like teeth.

"SIR!"

In a panic I ran back into the Golden Day, bursting through the noise as through an invisible wall.

"Halley! Help me, he's dying!"

I tried to get through but no one seemed to have heard me. I was blocked on both sides. They were jammed together.

"Halley!"

Two patients turned and looked at me in the face, their eyes two inches from my nose.

"What is wrong with this gentleman, Sylvester?" the tall one said.

"A man's dying outside!" I said.

"Someone is always dying," the other one said.

"Yes, and it's good to die beneath God's great tent of sky."

"He's got to have some whiskey!"

"Oh, that's different," one of them said and they began pushing a path to the bar. "A last bright drink to keep the anguish down. Step aside, please!"

"School-boy, you back already?" Halley said.

"Give me some whiskey. He's dying!"

"I done told you, school-boy, you better bring him in here. He can die, but I still got to pay my bills."

"Please, they'll put me in jail."

"You going to college, figure it out," he said.

"You'd better bring the gentleman inside," the one called Sylvester said. "Come, let us assist you."

We fought our way out of the crowd. He was just as I left him.

"Look, Sylvester, it's Thomas Jefferson!"

"I was just about to say, I've long wanted to discourse with him."

I looked at them speechlessly; they were both crazy. Or were they joking?

"Give me a hand," I said.

"Gladly."

I shook him. "Mr. Norton!"

"We'd better hurry if he's to enjoy his drink," one of them said thoughtfully.

We picked him up. He swung between us like a sack of old clothes.

"Hurry!"

As we carried him toward the Golden Day one of the men stopped suddenly and Mr. Norton's head hung down, his white hair dragging in the dust.

"Gentlemen, this man is my grandfather!"

"But he's *white*, his name's Norton."

"I should know my own grandfather! He's Thomas Jefferson and I'm his grandson – on the 'field-nigger' side,"[32] the tall man said.

"Sylvester, I do believe that you're right. I certainly do," he said, staring at Mr. Norton. "Look at those

features. Exactly like yours – from the identical mold. Are you sure he didn't spit you upon the earth, fully clothed?"[33]

"No, no, that was my father," the man said earnestly.

And he began to curse his father violently as we moved for the door. Halley was there waiting. Somehow he'd gotten the crowd to quieten down and a space was cleared in the center of the room. The men came close to look at Mr. Norton.

"Somebody bring a chair."

"Yeah, let Mister Eddy sit down."

"That ain't no Mister Eddy, man, that's John D. Rockefeller," someone said.

"Here's a chair for the Messiah."

"Stand back y'all." Halley ordered. "Give him some room."

Burnside, who had been a doctor, rushed forward and felt for Mr. Norton's pulse.

"It's solid! This man has a *solid* pulse! Instead of beating, it *vibrates*. That's very unusual. Very."

Someone pulled him away. Halley reappeared with a bottle and a glass. "Here, some of y'all tilt his head back."

And before I could move, a short, pock-marked man appeared and took Mr. Norton's head between his hands, tilting it at arm's length and then, pinching the chin gently like a barber about to apply a razor, gave a sharp, swift movement.

"Pow!"

Mr. Norton's head jerked like a jabbed punching bag. Five pale red lines bloomed on the white cheek, glowing like fire beneath translucent stone. I could not believe my eyes. I wanted to run. A woman tittered. I saw several men rush for the door.

"Cut it out, you damn fool!"

"A case of hysteria," the pock-marked man said quietly.

"Git the hell out of the way," Halley said. "Somebody git that stool-pigeon attendant from upstairs. Git him down here, quick!"

"A mere mild case of hysteria," the pock-marked man said as they pushed him away.

"Hurry with the drink, Halley!"

"Heah, school-boy, you hold the glass. This here's brandy I been saving for myself."

Someone whispered tonelessly into my ear, "You see, I told you that it would occur at 5:30. Already the Creator has come." It was the stolid-faced man.

I saw Halley tilt the bottle and the oily amber of brandy sloshing into the glass. Then tilting Mr. Norton's head back, I put the glass to his lips and poured. A fine brown stream ran from the corner of his mouth, down his delicate chin. The room was suddenly quiet. I felt a slight movement against my hand, like a child's breast when it whimpers at the end of a spell of crying. The fine-veined eyelids flickered. He coughed. I saw a slow red flush creep, then spurt, up his neck, spreading over his face.

"Hold it under his nose, school-boy. Let 'im smell it."

I waved the glass beneath Mr. Norton's nose. He opened his pale blue eyes. They seemed watery now in the red flush that bathed his face. He tried to sit up, his right hand fluttering to his chin. His eyes widened, moved quickly from face to face. Then coming to mine,

the moist eyes focused with recognition.

"You were unconscious, sir," I said.

"Where am I, young man?" he asked wearily.

"This is the Golden Day, sir."

"What?"

"The Golden Day. It's a kind of sporting-and-gambling house," I added reluctantly.

"Now give him another drinka brandy," Halley said.

I poured a drink and handed it to him. He sniffed it, closed his eyes as in puzzlement, then drank; his cheeks filled out like small bellows; he was rinsing his mouth.

"Thank you," he said, a little stronger now. "What is this place?"

"The Golden Day", said several patients in unison.

He looked slowly around him, up to the balcony, with its scrolled and carved wood. A large flag hung lank above the floor. He frowned.

"What was this building used for in the past?" he said.

"It was a church, then a bank, then it was a restaurant and a fancy gambling house, and now we got it," Halley explained. "I think somebody said it used to be a jailhouse too."

"They let us come here once a week to raise a little hell," someone said.

"I couldn't buy a drink to take out, sir, so I had to bring you inside," I explained in dread.

He looked about him. I followed his eyes and was amazed to see the varied expressions on the patients' faces as they silently returned his gaze. Some were hostile, some cringing, some horrified; some, who when among themselves were most violent, now appeared as submissive as children. And some seemed strangely amused.

"Are all of you patients?" Mr. Norton asked.

"Me, I just runs the joint," Halley said. "These here other fellows ..."

"We're patients sent here as therapy," a short, fat, very intelligent-looking man said. "But," he smiled, "they send along an attendant, a kind of censor, to see that the therapy fails."

"You're nuts. I'm a dynamo of energy. I come to charge my batteries," one of the vets insisted.

"I'm a student of history, sir," another interrupted with dramatic gestures. "The world moves in a circle like a roulette wheel. In the beginning, black is on top, in the middle epochs, white holds the odds, but soon Ethiopia shall stretch forth her noble wings! Then place your money on the black!" His voice throbbed with emotion. "Until then, the sun holds no heat, there's ice in the heart of the earth. Two years from now and I'll be old enough to give my mulatto mother a bath, the half-white bitch!" he added, beginning to leap up and down in an explosion of glassy-eyed fury.

Mr. Norton blinked his eyes and straightened up.

"I'm a physician, may I take your pulse?" Burnside said, seizing Mr. Norton's wrist.

"Don't pay him no mind, mister. He ain't been no doctor in ten years. They caught him trying to change some blood into money."

"I did too!" the man screamed. "I discovered it and John D. Rockefeller[34] stole the formula from me."

"Mr. Rockefeller did you say?" Mr. Norton said. "I'm sure you must be mistaken."

"WHAT'S GOING ON DOWN THERE?" a voice shouted from the balcony. Everyone turned. I saw a huge black giant of a man, dressed only in white shorts, swaying on the stairs. It was Supercargo, the attendant. I hardly recognized him without his hard-starched white uniform. Usually he walked around threatening the men with a strait jacket which he always carried over his am, and usually they were quiet and submissive in his presence. But now they seemed not to recognize him and began shouting curses.

"How you gon keep order in the place if you gon git drunk?" Halley shouted. "Charlene! Charlene!"

"Yeah?" a woman's voice, startling in its carrying power, answered sulkily from a room off the balcony.

"I want you to git that stool-pigeoning, joy-killing, nut-crushing bum back in there with you and sober him up. Then git him in his white suit and down here to keep order. We got white folks in the house."

A woman appeared on the balcony, drawing a woolly pink robe about her. "Now you lissen here, Halley," she drawled, "I'm a woman. If you want him dressed, you can do it yourself. I don't put on but one man's clothes and he's in N'Orleans."

"Never mind all that. Git that stool pigeon sober!"

"I want order down there," Supercargo boomed, "and if there's white folks down there, I wan's double order."

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Notes

INVISIBLE MAN

[1] Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), American writer famed for his gothic horror stories.

[2] *ectoplasms* materialization of spiritual energy especially in séances (generally regarded as fraudulent).

[3] *Jack-the-Bear* the title of a song by African American jazz musician Duke Ellington (1899–1974).

[4] *Ford, Edison, and Franklin* Henry Ford (1863–1947), Thomas Edison (1847–1931), and Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) – all notable inventors.

[5] *radio-phonograph* record player.

[6] Louis Armstrong (1901–1971), African American jazz singer and trumpeter.

[7] *yokel* unsophisticated rural person.

[8] *Dante* Dante Alighieri, the protagonist and author of the *Inferno* (1265–1321).

[9] *Weltschmerz* (German) world weariness.

[10] *flamenco* exuberant Spanish dance style.

[11] *klieg light* powerful light used in filmmaking.

[12] *Brother Jack ... the Brotherhood* Brother Jack is a white man who encounters the protagonist at an eviction of Harlem residents; hears him intervene in the proceeding; and eventually recruits him to be the spokesman of the Brotherhood, a political organization, comprising both blacks and whites, combating social oppression.

[13] *Reconstruction* period of reunification and readjustment (1865–1877) after the Civil War.

[14] *smoker* a casual social gathering for men.

[15] Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), prominent African American orator, leader, and founder of Tuskegee Institute.

[16] *rococo* elaborate eighteenth-century French style.

[17] *coon* derogatory term for an African American.

[18] *Sambo* stereotypical name of an African American male.

[19] *that great leader and educator* refers to Booker T. Washington. This speech alludes to Washington's famous Atlanta Exposition speech of 1895.

[20] "*A Mighty Fortress is Our God*" hymn by Martin Luther (1483–1546).

[21] Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), Transcendentalist essayist and philosopher.

[22] *sledge* sledgehammer.

[23] "*cast out the offending eye*" Mark 9:47.

[24] *whippoorwill* nocturnal bird known for its soft call.

[25] *covey* flock.

[26] *windbreak* a hedge or row of trees planted to provide shelter from the wind.

[27] *pilin' sin up on toppa sin* abortion in addition to incest.

[28] *Original reads*: shoe [ed.].

[29] *Armistice* the end of World War I.

[30] *thalamic rine ... therapy possible* this passage is a parody of medical jargon.

[31] *Jimcrow* to segregate.

[32] *on the 'field-nigger' side* Jefferson had six unacknowledged children with his slave, Sally Hemings.

[33] *spit you upon the earth, fully clothed* the Greek goddess Athena was said to have been born, fully grown and clothed, from the forehead of her father, Zeus.

[34] John D. Rockefeller (1839–1937), American industrialist and founder of Standard Oil.

Suddenly there was an angry roar from the men back near the bar and I saw them rush the stairs.

"Get him!"

"Let's give him some order!"

"Out of my way."

Five men charged the stairs. I saw the giant bend and clutch the posts at the top of the stairs with both hands, bracing himself, his body gleaming bare in his white shorts. The little man who had slapped Mr. Norton was in front, and, as he sprang up the long flight, I saw the attendant set himself and kick, catching the little man just as he reached the top, hard in the chest, sending him backwards in a curving dive into the midst of the men behind him. Supercargo got set to swing his leg again. It was a narrow stair and only one man could get up at a time. As fast as they rushed up, the giant kicked them back. He swung his leg, kicking them down like a fungo-hitter[35] batting out flies. Watching him, I forgot Mr. Norton. The Golden Day was in an uproar. Half-dressed women appeared from the rooms off the balcony. Men hooted and yelled as at a football game.

"I WANT ORDER!" the giant shouted as he sent a man flying down the flight of stairs.

"THEY THROWING BOTTLES OF LIQUOR!" a woman screamed. "REAL LIQUOR!"

"That's a order he don't want," someone said.

A shower of bottles and glasses splashing whiskey crashed against the balcony. I saw Supercargo snap suddenly erect and grab his forehead, his face bathed in whiskey. "Eeeee!" he cried, "Eeeee!" Then I saw him wave, rigid from his ankles upward. For a moment the men on the stairs were motionless, watching him. Then they sprang forward.

Supercargo grabbed wildly at the balustrade as they snatched his feet from beneath him and started down. His head bounced against the steps making a sound like a series of gunshots as they ran dragging him by his ankles, like volunteer firemen running with a hose. The crowd surged forward. Halley yelled near my ear. I saw the man being dragged toward the center of the room.

"Give the bastard some order!"

"Here I'm forty-five and he's been acting like he's my old man!"

"So you like to kick, huh?" a tall man said, aiming a shoe at the attendant's head. The flesh above his right eye jumped out as though it had been inflated.

Then I heard Mr. Norton beside me shouting, "No, no! Not when he's down!"

"Lissen at the white folks," someone said.

"He's the white folks' man!"

Men were jumping upon Supercargo with both feet now and I felt such an excitement that I wanted to join them. Even the girls were yelling, "Give it to him good!" "He never pays me!" "Kill him!"

"Please, y'all, not in here! Not in my place!"

"You can't speak your mind when he's on duty!"

"Hell, no!"

Somehow I got pushed away from Mr. Norton and found myself beside the man called Sylvester.

"Watch this, school-boy," he said. "See there, where his ribs are bleeding?"

I nodded my head.

"Now don't move your eyes."

I watched the spot as though compelled, just beneath

the lower rib and above the hip-bone, as Sylvester measured carefully with his toe and kicked as though he were punting a football. Supercargo let out a groan like an injured horse.

"Try it, school-boy, it feels so good. It gives you relief," Sylvester said. "Sometimes I get so afraid of him I feel that he's inside my head. There!" he said, giving Supercargo another kick.

As I watched, a man sprang on Supercargo's chest with both feet and he lost consciousness. They began throwing cold beer on him, reviving him, only to kick him unconscious again. Soon he was drenched in blood and beer.

"The bastard's out cold."

"Throw him out."

"Naw, wait a minute. Give me a hand somebody."

They threw him upon the bar, stretching him out with his arms folded across his chest like a corpse.

"Now, let's have a drink!"

Halley was slow in getting behind the bar and they cursed him.

"Get back there and serve us, you big sack of fat!"

"Gimme a rye!"

"Up here, funk-buster!"

"Shake them sloppy hips!"

"Okay, okay, take it easy," Halley said, rushing to pour them drinks. "Just put y'all's money where your mouth is."

With Supercargo lying helpless upon the bar, the men whirled about like maniacs. The excitement seemed to have tilted some of the more delicately balanced ones too far. Some made hostile speeches at the top of their voices against the hospital, the state and the universe. The one who called himself a composer was banging away the one wild piece he seemed to know on the out-of-tune piano, striking the keyboard with fists and elbows and filling in other effects in a bass voice that moaned like a bear in agony. One of the most educated ones touched my arm. He was a former chemist who was never seen without his shining Phi Beta Kappa[36] key.

"The men have lost control," he said through the uproar. "I think you'd better leave."

"I'm trying to," I said, "as soon as I can get over to Mr. Norton."

Mr. Norton was gone from where I had left him. I rushed here and there through the noisy men, calling his name.

When I found him he was under the stairs. Somehow he had been pushed there by the scuffling, reeling men and he lay sprawled in the chair like an aged doll. In the dim light his features were sharp and white and his closed eyes well-defined lines in a well-tooled face. I shouted his name above the roar of the men, and got no answer. He was out again. I shook him, gently, then roughly, but still no flicker of his wrinkled lids. Then some of the milling men pushed me up against him and suddenly a mass of whiteness was looming two inches from my eyes; it was only his face but I felt a shudder of nameless horror. I had never been so close to a white person before. In a panic I struggled to get away. With his eyes closed he seemed more threatening than with them open. He was like a formless white death, suddenly appeared before me, a death which had been there all the time and which had now revealed itself in

the madness of the Golden Day.

"Stop screaming!" a voice commanded, and I felt myself pulled away. It was the short fat man.

I clamped my mouth shut, aware for the first time that the shrill sound was coming from my own throat. I saw the man's face relax as he gave me a wry smile.

"That's better," he shouted into my ear. "He's only a man. Remember that. He's only a man!"

I wanted to tell him that Mr. Norton was much more than that, that he was a rich white man and in my charge; but the very idea that I was responsible for him was too much for me to put into words.

"Let us take him to the balcony," the man said, pushing me toward Mr. Norton's feet. I moved automatically, grasping the thin ankles as he raised the white man by the armpits and backed from beneath the stairs. Mr. Norton's head lolled upon his chest as though he were drunk or dead.

The vet started up the steps still smiling, climbing backwards a step at a time. I had begun to worry about him, whether he was drunk like the rest, when I saw three of the girls who had been leaning over the balustrade watching the brawl come down to help us carry Mr. Norton up.

"Looks like pops couldn't take it," one of them shouted.

"He's high as a Georgia pine."

"Yeah, I tell you this stuff Halley got out here is too strong for white folks to drink."

"Not drunk, ill!" the fat man said. "Go find a bed that's not being used so he can stretch out awhile."

"Sho, daddy. Is there any other little favors I can do for you?"

"That'll be enough," he said.

One of the girls ran up ahead. "Mine's just been changed. Bring him down here," she said.

In a few minutes Mr. Norton was lying upon a three-quarter bed, faintly breathing. I watched the fat man bend over him very professionally and feel for his pulse.

"You a doctor?" a girl asked.

"Not now, I'm a patient. But I have a certain knowledge."

Another one, I thought, pushing him quickly aside. He'll be all right. Let him come to so I can get him out of here."

"You needn't worry, I'm not like those down there, young fellow," he said. "I really was a doctor. I won't hurt him. He's had a mild shock of some kind."

We watched him bend over Mr. Norton again, feeling his pulse, pulling back his eyelid.

'It's a mild shock," he repeated.

"This here Golden Day is enough to shock anybody," a girl said, smoothing her apron over the smooth sensuous roll of her stomach.

Another brushed Mr. Norton's white hair away from his forehead and stroked it, smiling vacantly. "He's kinda cute," she said. "Just like a little white baby."

"What kinda ole baby?" the small skinny girl asked.

"That's the kind, an *ole* baby."

"You just like white men, Edna. That's all," the skinny one said.

Edna shook her head and smiled as though amused at herself. "I sho do. I just love 'em. Now this one, old as he is, he could put his shoes under my bed any night."

"Shucks, me I'd kill an old man like that."

"Kill him nothing," Edna said. "Girl, don't you know that all these rich ole white men got monkey glands and billy goat balls? These old bastards don't never git enough. They want to have the whole world."

The doctor looked at me and smiled. "See, now you're learning all about endocrinology," he said. "I was wrong when I told you that he was only a man; it seems now that he's either part goat or part ape. Maybe he's both."

"It's the truth," Edna said. "I used to have me one in Chicago – "

"Now you ain't never been to no Chicago, gal," the other one interrupted.

"How you know I ain't? Two years ago ... Shucks, you don't know nothing. That ole white man right there might have him a coupla jackass balls!"

The fat man raised up with a quick grin. "As a scientist and a physician I'm forced to discount that," he said. "That is one operation that has yet to be performed." Then he managed to get the girls out of the room.

"If he should come around and hear that conversation," the vet said, "it would be enough to send him off again. Besides, their scientific curiosity might lead them to investigate whether he really does have a monkey gland. And that, I'm afraid, would be a bit obscene."

"I've got to get him back to the school," I said.

"All right," he said, "I'll do what I can to help you. Go see if you can find some ice. And don't worry."

I went out on the balcony, seeing the tops of their heads. They were still milling around, the juke box baying, the piano thumping, and over at the end of the room, drenched with beer, Supercargo lay like a spent horse upon the bar.

Starting down, I noticed a large piece of ice glinting in the remains of an abandoned drink and seized its coldness in my hot hand and hurried back to the room.

The vet sat staring at Mr. Norton, who now breathed with a slightly irregular sound.

"You were quick," the man said, as he stood and reached for the ice. "Swift with the speed of anxiety," he added, as if to himself. "Hand me that clean towel – there, from beside the basin."

I handed him one, seeing him fold the ice inside it and apply it to Mr. Norton's face.

"Is he all right?" I said.

"He will be in a few minutes. What happened to him?"

"I took him for a drive," I said.

"Did you have an accident or something?"

"No," I said. "He just talked to a farmer and the heat knocked him out ... Then we got caught in the mob downstairs."

"How old is he?"

"I don't know, but he's one of the trustees ..."

"One of the very first, no doubt," he said, dabbing at the blue-veined eyes. "A trustee of consciousness."

"What was that?" I asked.

"Nothing ... There now, he's coming out of it."

I had an impulse to run out of the room. I feared what Mr. Norton would say to me, the expression that might come into his eyes. And yet, I was afraid to leave. My eyes could not leave the face with its flickering lids. The

head moved from side to side in the pale glow of the light bulb, as though denying some insistent voice which I could not hear. Then the lids opened, revealing pale pools of blue vagueness that finally solidified into points that froze upon the vet, who looked down unsmilingly.

Men like us did not look at a man like Mr. Norton in that manner, and I stepped hurriedly forward.

"He's a real doctor sir," I said.

"I'll explain," the vet said. "Get a glass of water."

I hesitated. He looked at me firmly. "Get the water," he said, turning to help Mr. Norton to sit up.

Outside I asked Edna for a glass of water and she led me down the hall to a small kitchen, drawing it for me from a green old-fashioned cooler.

"I got some good liquor, baby, if you want to give him a drink," she said.

"This will do," I said. My hands trembled so that the water spilled. When I returned, Mr. Norton was sitting up unaided, carrying on a conversation with the vet.

"Here's some water, sir," I said, extending the glass.

He took it. "Thank you," he said.

"Not too much," the vet cautioned.

"Your diagnosis is exactly that of my specialist," Mr. Norton said, "and I went to several fine physicians before one could diagnose it. How did you know?"

"I too was a specialist," the vet said.

"But how? Only a few men in the whole country possess the knowledge – "

"Then one of them is an inmate of a semi-madhouse," the vet said. "But there's nothing mysterious about it. I escaped for awhile – I went to France with the Army Medical Corps and remained there after the Armistice to study and practice."

"Oh yes, and how long were you in France?" Mr. Norton asked.

"Long enough," he said. "Long enough to forget some fundamentals which I should never have forgotten."

"What fundamentals?" Mr. Norton said. "What do you mean?"

The vet smiled and cocked his head. "Things about life. Such things as most peasants and folk peoples almost always know through experience, though seldom through conscious thought ..."

"Pardon me, sir," I said to Mr. Norton, "but now that you feel better, shouldn't we go?"

"Not just yet," he said. Then to the doctor, "I'm very interested. What happened to you?" A drop of water caught in one of his eyebrows glittered like a chip of active diamond. I went over and sat on a chair. Damn this vet to hell!

"Are you sure you would like to hear?" the vet asked.

"Why, of course."

"Then perhaps the young fellow should go downstairs and wait ..."

The sound of shouting and destruction welled up from below as I opened the door.

"No, perhaps you should stay," the fat man said. "Perhaps had I overheard some of what I'm about to tell you when I was a student up there on the hill, I wouldn't be the casualty that I am."

"Sit down, young man," Mr. Norton ordered. "So you were a student at the college," he said to the vet.

I sat down again, worrying about Dr. Bledsoe as the

fat man told Mr. Norton of his attending college, then becoming a physician and going to France during the World War.

"Were you a successful physician?" Mr. Norton said.

"Fairly so. I performed a few brain surgeries that won me some small attention."

"Then why did you return?"

"Nostalgia," the vet said.

"Then what on earth are you doing here in this ... ?" Mr. Norton said, "With your ability ..."

"Ulcers," the fat man said.

"That's terribly unfortunate, but why should ulcers stop your career?"

"Not really, but I learned along with the ulcers that my work could bring me no dignity," the vet said.

"Now you sound bitter," Mr. Norton said, just as the door flew open.

A brown-skinned woman with red hair looked in. "How's white-folks making out?" she said, staggering inside. "White-folks, baby, you done come to. You want a drink?"

"Not now, Hester," the vet said. "He's still a little weak."

"He sho looks it. That's how come he needs a drink. Put some iron in his blood."

"Now, now, Hester."

"Okay, okay ... But what y'all doing looking like you at a funeral? Don't you know this is the Golden Day?" She staggered toward me, belching elegantly and reeling, "Just look at y'all. Here school-boy looks like he's scared to death. And white-folks here, is acting like y'all two strange poodles. Be happy y'all! I'm going down and get Halley to send you up some drinks." She patted Mr. Norton's cheek as she went past and I saw him turn a glowing red. "Be happy, white-folks."

"Ah, hah!" the vet laughed, "you're blushing, which means that you're better. Don't be embarrassed. Hester is a great humanitarian, a therapist of generous nature and great skill, and the possessor of a healing touch. Her catharsis is absolutely tremendous – ha, ha!"

"You do look better, sir," I said, anxious to get out of the place. I could understand the vet's words but not what they conveyed, and Mr. Norton looked as uncomfortable as I felt. The one thing which I did know was that the vet was acting toward the white man with a freedom which could only bring on trouble. I wanted to tell Mr. Norton that the man was crazy and yet I received a fearful satisfaction from hearing him talk as he had to a white man. With the girl it was different. A woman usually got away with things a man never could.

I was wet with anxiety, but the vet talked on, ignoring the interruption.

"Rest, rest," he said, fixing Mr. Norton with his eyes. "The clocks are all set back and the forces of destruction are rampant down below. They might suddenly realize that you are what you are, and then your life wouldn't be worth a piece of bankrupt stock. You would be canceled, perforated, voided, become the recognized magnet attracting loose screws. Then what would you do? Such men are beyond money, and with Supercargo down, out like a felled ox, they know nothing of value. To some, you are the great white father, to others the lyncher of souls, but for all, you are confusion come even into the Golden Day."

"What are you talking about?" I said, thinking:

Lyncher? He was getting wilder than the men downstairs. I didn't dare look at Mr. Norton, who made a sound of protest.

The vet frowned. "It is an issue which I can confront only by evading it. An utterly stupid proposition, and these hands so lovingly trained to master a scalpel yearn to caress a trigger. I returned to save life and I was refused," he said. "Ten men in masks drove me out from the city at midnight and beat me with whips for saving a human life. And I was forced to the utmost degradation because I possessed skilled hands and the belief that my knowledge could bring me dignity – not wealth, only dignity – and other men health!"

Then suddenly he fixed me with his eyes. "And now, do you understand?"

"What?" I said.

"What you've heard!"

"I don't know."

"Why?"

I said, "I really think it's time we left."

"You see," he said turning to Mr. Norton, "he has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. *Understand*. Understand? It's worse than that. He registers with his senses but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it. Already he is – well, bless my soul! Behold! a walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!"

Mr. Norton looked amazed.

"Tell me," the vet said, suddenly calm. "Why have you been interested in the school, Mr. Norton?"

"Out of a sense of my destined role," Mr. Norton said shakily. "I felt, and I still feel, that your people are in some important manner tied to my destiny."

"What do you mean, destiny?" the vet said.

"Why, the success of my work, of course."

"I see. And would you recognize it if you saw it?"

"Why, of course I would," Mr. Norton said indignantly. "I've watched it grow each year I've returned to the campus."

"Campus? Why the campus?"

"It is there that my destiny is being made."

The vet exploded with laughter. "The campus, what a destiny!" He stood and walked around the narrow room, laughing. Then he stopped as suddenly as he had begun.

"You will hardly recognize it, but it is very fitting that you came to the Golden Day with the young fellow," he said.

"I came out of illness – or rather, he brought me," Mr. Norton said.

"Of course, but you came, and it was fitting."

What do you mean?" Mr. Norton said with irritation.

"A little child shall lead them,"[37] the vet said with a smile. "But seriously, because you both fail to understand what is happening to you. You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see – and you, looking for destiny! It's classic! And the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of the region and he sees far less than you. Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the

scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less – a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force – "

Mr. Norton stood abruptly. "Let us go, young man," he said angrily.

"No, listen. He believes in you as he believes in the beat of his heart. He believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right. I can tell you *his* destiny. He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset. He's your man, friend. Your man and your destiny. Now the two of you descend the stairs into chaos and get the hell out of here. I'm sick of both of you pitiful obscenities! Get out before I do you both the favor of bashing in your heads!"

I saw his motion toward the big white pitcher on the washstand and stepped between him and Mr. Norton, guiding Mr. Norton swiftly through the doorway. Looking back, I saw him leaning against the wall making a sound that was a blending of laughter and tears.

"Hurry, the man is as insane as the rest," Mr. Norton said.

"Yes, sir," I said, noticing a new note in his voice.

The balcony was now as noisy as the floor below. The girls and drunken vets were stumbling about with drinks in their hands. Just as we went past an open door Edna saw us and grabbed my arm.

"Where you taking white-folks?" she demanded.

"Back to school," I said, shaking her off.

"You don't want to go up there, white-folks, baby," she said. I tried to push past her. "I ain't lying," she said. "I'm the best little home-maker in the business."

"Okay, but please let us alone," I pleaded. "You'll get me into trouble."

We were going down the stairs into the milling men now and she started to scream, "Pay me then! If he's too good for me, let him pay!"

And before I could stop her she had pushed Mr. Norton, and both of us were stumbling swiftly down the stairs. I landed against a man who looked up with the anonymous familiarity of a drunk and shoved me hard away. I saw Mr. Norton spin past as I sank farther into the crowd. Somewhere I could hear the girl screaming and Halley's voice yelling, "Hey! Hey! Hey, now!" Then I was aware of fresh air and saw that I was near the door and pushed my way free and stood panting and preparing to plunge back for Mr. Norton – when I heard Halley calling, "Make way y'all!" and saw him piloting Mr. Norton to the door.

"Whew!" he said, releasing the white man and shaking his huge head.

"Thanks, Halley – " I said and got no further.

I saw Mr. Norton, his face pale again, his white suit rumpled, topple and fall, his head scraping against the screen of the door.

"Hey!"

I opened the door and raised him up.

"Goddamit, out agin," Halley said. "How come you bring this white man here, school-boy?"

"Is he dead?"

"DEAD!" he said, stepping back indignantly. "He *caint* die!"

"What'll I do, Halley?"

"Not in my place, he caint die," he said, kneeling.

Mr. Norton looked up. "No one is dead or dying," he said acidly. "Remove your hands!"

Halley fell away, surprised. "I sho am glad. You sho you all right? I thought sho you was dead this time."

"For God's sake, be quiet!" I exploded nervously. "You should be glad that he's all right."

Mr. Norton was visibly angry now, a raw place showing on his forehead, and I hurried ahead of him to the car. He climbed in unaided, and I got under the wheel, smelling the heated odor of mints and cigar smoke. He was silent as I drove away.

Chapter 4

The wheel felt like an alien thing in my hands as I followed the white line of the highway. Heat rays from the late afternoon sun arose from the gray concrete, shimmering like the weary tones of a distant bugle blown upon still midnight air. In the mirror I could see Mr. Norton staring out vacantly upon the empty fields, his mouth stern, his white forehead livid where it had scraped the screen. And seeing him I felt the fear balled coldly within me unfold. What would happen now? What would the school officials say? In my mind I visualized Dr. Bledsoe's face when he saw Mr. Norton. I thought of the glee certain folks at home would feel if I were expelled. Tatlock's grinning face danced through my mind. What would the white folks think who'd sent me to college? Was Mr. Norton angry at *me*? In the Golden Day he had seemed more curious than anything else – until the vet had started talking wild. Damn Trueblood. It was his fault. If we hadn't sat in the sun so long Mr. Norton would not have needed whiskey and I wouldn't have gone to the Golden Day. And why would the vets act that way with a white man in the house?

I headed the car through the red-brick campus gateposts with a sense of cold apprehension. Now even the rows of neat dormitories seemed to threaten me, the rolling lawns appearing as hostile as the gray highway with its white dividing line. As of its own compulsion, the car slowed as we passed the chapel with its low, sweeping eaves. The sun shone coolly through the avenue of trees, dappling the curving drive. Students strolled through the shade, down a hill of tender grass toward the brick-red stretch of tennis courts. Far beyond, players in whites showed sharp against the red of the courts surrounded by grass, a gay vista washed by the sun. In the brief interval I heard a cheer arise. My predicament struck me like a stab. I had a sense of losing control of the car and slammed on the brakes in the middle of the road, then apologized and drove on. Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it. In this brief moment of passage I became aware of the connection between these lawns and buildings and my hopes and dreams. I wanted to stop the car and talk with Mr. Norton, to beg his pardon for what he had seen; to plead and show him tears, unashamed tears like those of a child before his parent; to denounce all we'd seen and heard; to assure him that far from being like any of the people we had seen, I *hated* them, that I believed in the principles of the Founder with all my heart and soul, and that I believed in his own goodness and kindness in extending the

hand of his benevolence to helping us poor, ignorant people out of the mire and darkness. I would do his bidding and teach others to rise up as he wished them to, teach them to be thrifty, decent, upright citizens, contributing to the welfare of all, shunning all but the straight and narrow path that he and the Founder had stretched before us. If only he were not angry with me! If only he would give me another chance!

Tears filled my eyes, and the walks and buildings flowed and froze for a moment in mist, glittering as in winter when rain froze on the grass and foliage and turned the campus into a world of whiteness, weighting and bending both trees and bushes with fruit of crystal. Then in the twinkling of my eyes, it was gone, and the here and now of heat and greenness returned. If only I could make Mr. Norton understand what the school meant to me.

"Shall I stop at your rooms, sir?" I said. "Or shall I take you to the administration building? Dr. Bledsoe might be worried."

"To my rooms, then bring Dr. Bledsoe to me," he answered tersely.

"Yes, sir."

In the mirror I saw him dabbing gingerly at his forehead with a crinkled handkerchief. "You'd better send the school physician to me also," he said.

I stopped the car in front of a small building with white pillars like those of an old plantation manor house, got out and opened the door.

"Mr. Norton, please, sir ... I'm sorry ... I – "

He looked at me sternly, his eyes narrowed, saying nothing.

"I didn't know ... please ..."

"Send Dr. Bledsoe to me," he said, turning away and swinging up the graveled path to the building.

I got back into the car and drove slowly to the administration building. A girl waved gaily as I passed, a bunch of violets in her hand. Two teachers in dark suits talked decorously beside a broken fountain.

The building was quiet. Going upstairs I visualized Dr. Bledsoe, with his broad globular face that seemed to take its form from the fat pressing from the inside, which, as air pressing against the membrane of a balloon, gave it shape and buoyancy. "Old Bucket-head," some of the fellows called him. I never had. He had been kind to me from the first, perhaps because of the letters which the school superintendent had sent to him when I arrived. But more than that, he was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but *two* Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife. What was more, while black and bald and everything white folks poked fun at, he had achieved power and authority; had, while black and wrinkle-headed, made himself of more importance in the world than most Southern white men. They could laugh at him but they couldn't ignore him ...

"He's been looking all over for you," the girl at the desk said.

When I walked in he looked up from the telephone and said, "Never mind, he's here now," and hung up. "Where's Mr. Norton?" he demanded excitedly. "Is he all right?"

"Yes, sir. I left him at his rooms and came to drive you down. He wishes to see you."

"Is anything wrong?" he said, getting up hurriedly and coming around the desk.

I hesitated.

"Well, is there!"

The panicky beating of my heart seemed to blur my vision.

"Not now, sir."

"*Now*? What do you mean?"

"Well, sir, he had some kind of fainting spell."

"Aw, my God! I knew something was wrong. Why didn't you get in touch with me?" He grabbed his black homburg,[38] starting for the door. "Come on!"

I followed him, trying to explain. "He's all over it now, sir, and we were too far away for me to phone ..."

"Why did you take him so far?" he said, moving with great bustling energy.

"But I drove him where he wanted to go, sir."

"Where was that?"

"Back of the slave-quarter section," I said with dread.

"The quarters! Boy, are you a fool? Didn't you know better than to take a trustee out there?"

"He asked me to, sir."

We were going down the walk now, through the spring air, and he stopped to look at me with exasperation, as though I'd suddenly told him black was white.

"Damn what *he* wants," he said, climbing in the front seat beside me. "Haven't you the sense God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see. Don't you know that? I thought you had some sense."

Reaching Rabb Hall I stopped the car, weak with bewilderment.

"Don't sit there," he said. "Come with me!"

Just inside the building I got another shock. As we approached a mirror Dr. Bledsoe stopped and composed his angry face like a sculptor, making it a bland mask, leaving only the sparkle of his eyes to betray the emotion that I had seen only a moment before. He looked steadily at himself for a moment; then we moved quietly down the silent hall and up the stairs.

A co-ed sat at a graceful table stacked with magazines. Before a great window stood a large aquarium containing colored stones and a small replica of a feudal castle surrounded by goldfish that seemed to remain motionless despite the fluttering of their lacy fins, a momentary motionful suspension of time.

"Is Mr. Norton in his room?" he said to the girl.

"Yes sir, Dr. Bledsoe, sir," she said. "He said to tell you to come in when you got here."

Pausing at the door I heard him clear his throat, then rap softly upon the panel with his fist.

"Mr. Norton?" he said, his lips already a smile. And at the answer I followed him inside.

It was a large light room. Mr. Norton sat in a huge wing chair with his jacket off. A change of clothing lay on the cool bedspread. Above a spacious fireplace an oil portrait of the Founder looked down at me remotely, benign, sad, and in that hot instant, profoundly disillusioned. Then a veil seemed to fall.

"I've been worried about you, sir," Dr. Bledsoe said. "We expected you at the afternoon session ..."

Now it's beginning, I thought. Now –

And suddenly he rushed forward. "Mr. Norton, your head" he cried, a strange grandmotherly concern in his voice. "What happened, sir?"

"It's nothing." Mr. Norton's face was immobile "A mere scratch."

Dr. Bledsoe whirled around, his face outraged. "Get the doctor over here," he said. "Why didn't you tell me that Mr. Norton had been injured?"

"Mr. Norton, *Mister Norton!* I'm sorry," he crooned "I thought I had sent you a boy who was careful, a sensible young man! Why we've never had an accident before. Never, not in seventy-five years. I assure you, sir, that he shall be disciplined, severely disciplined!"

"But there was no automobile accident," Mr. Norton said kindly, "nor was the boy responsible. You may send him away, we won't need him now."

My eyes suddenly filled. I felt a wave of gratitude at his words.

"Don't be kind, sir," Dr. Bledsoe said. "You can't be soft with these people. We mustn't pamper them. An accident to a guest of this college while he is in the charge of a student is without question the student's fault. That's one of our strictest rules!" Then to me: "Return to your dormitory and remain there until further notice!"

"But it was out of my control, sir," I said, "just as Mr. Norton said ..."

"I'll explain, young man," Mr. Norton said with a half-smile. "Everything will be explained."

"Thank you, sir," I said, seeing Dr. Bledsoe looking at me with no change of expression.

"On second thought," he said, "I want you to be in chapel this evening, understand me, sir?"

"Yes, sir."

I opened the door with a cold hand, bumping into the girl who had been at the table when we went inside.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Look like you have old Bucket-head kind of mad."

I said nothing as she walked beside me expectantly. A red sun cast its light upon the campus as I started for my dormitory.

"Will you take a message to my boyfriend for me?" she said.

"Who is he?" I said, trying hard to conceal my tension and fear.

"Jack Maston," she said.

"Okay, he's in the room next to mine."

"That's swell," she said with a big smile. "The dean put me on duty so I missed him this afternoon. Just tell him that I said the grass is green ..."

"What?"

"The grass is green. It's our secret code, he'll understand."

"The grass is green," I said.

"That's it. Thank you, lover," she said.

I felt like cursing as I watched her hurrying back into the building, hearing her flat-heeled shoes crunching the graveled walk. Here she was playing with some silly secret code at the very minute my fate for the rest of my life was being decided. The grass was green and they'd meet and she'd be sent home pregnant, but even so, in

less disgrace than I ... If only I knew what they were saying about me ... Suddenly I had an idea and ran after her, into the building and up the stairs.

In the hall, fine dust played in a shaft of sunlight, stirred by her hurried passing. But she had disappeared. I had thought to ask her to listen at the door and tell me what was said. I gave it up; if she were discovered, I'd have that on my conscience too. Besides, I was ashamed for anyone to know of my predicament, it was too stupid to be believed. Down the long length of the wide hall I heard someone unseen skipping down the stairs singing. A girl's sweet, hopeful voice. I left quietly and hurried to my dorm.

I lay in my room with my eyes closed, trying to think. The tension gripped my insides. Then I heard someone coming up the hall and stiffened. Had they sent for me already? Nearby a door opened and closed, leaving me as tense as ever. To whom could I turn for help? I could think of no one. No one to whom I could even explain what had happened at the Golden Day. Everything was upset inside me. And Dr. Bledsoe's attitude toward Mr. Norton was the most confusing of all. I dared not repeat what he'd said, for fear that it would lessen my chances of remaining in school. It just wasn't true, I had misunderstood. He *couldn't* have said what I thought he had said. Hadn't I seen him approach white visitors too often with his hat in hand, bowing humbly and respectfully? Hadn't he refused to eat in the dining hall with white guests of the school, entering only after they had finished and then refusing to sit down, but remaining standing, his hat in his hand, while he addressed them eloquently, then leaving with a humble bow? Hadn't he, *hadn't* he? I had seen him too often as I peeped through the door between the dining room and the kitchen, I myself. And wasn't his favorite spiritual "Live-a-Humble"? And in the chapel on Sunday evenings upon the platform, hadn't he always taught us to live content in our place in a thousand unambiguous words? He had and I had believed him. I had believed without question his illustrations of the good which came of following the Founder's path. It was my affirmation of life and they couldn't send me away for something I didn't do. They simply couldn't. But that vet! He was so crazy that he corrupted sane men. He had tried to turn the world inside out, goddamn him! He had made Mr. Norton angry. He had no right to talk to a white man as he had, not with me to take the punishment ...

Someone shook me and I recoiled, my legs moist and trembling. It was my roommate.

"What the hell, roomy," he said. "Let's go to chow."

I looked at his confident mug; *he* was going to be a farmer.

"I don't have an appetite," I said with a sigh.

"Okay now," he said, "you can try to kid me but don't say I didn't wake you."

"No," I said.

"Who're you expecting, a broad-butt gal with ball-bearing hips?"

"No," I said.

"You'd better stop that, roomy," he grinned. "It'll ruin your health, make you a moron. You ought to take you a gal and show her how the moon rises over all that green grass on the Founder's grave, man ..."

"Go to hell," I said.

He left laughing, opening the door to the sound of many footsteps from the hall: supper time. The sound of departing voices. Something of my life seemed to retreat with them into a gray distance, moiling. Then a knock sounded at the door and I sprang up, my heart tense.

A small student wearing a freshman's cap stuck his head in the door, shouting, "Dr. Bledsoe said he wants to see you down at Rabb Hall." And then he was gone before I could question him, his footsteps thundering down the hall as he raced to dinner before the last bell sounded.

At Mr. Norton's door I stopped with my hand on the knob, mumbling a prayer.

"Come in, young man," he said to my knock. He was dressed in fresh linen, the light falling upon his white hair as upon silk floss. A small piece of gauze was plastered to his forehead. He was alone.

"I'm sorry, sir," I apologized, "but I was told that Dr. Bledsoe wanted to see me here ..."

"That's correct," he said, "but Dr. Bledsoe had to leave. You'll find him in his office after chapel."

"Thank you, sir," I said and turned to go. He cleared his throat behind me. "Young man ..."

I turned hopefully.

"Young man, I have explained to Dr. Bledsoe that you were not at fault. I believe he understands."

I was so relieved that at first I could only look at him, a small silken-haired, white-suited St. Nicholas, seen through misty eyes.

"I certainly do thank you, sir," I managed finally.

He studied me silently, his eyes slightly narrowed.

"Will you need me this evening, sir?" I asked.

"No, I won't be needing the machine. Business is taking me away sooner than I expected. I leave late tonight."

"I could drive you to the station, sir," I said hopefully.

"Thank you, but Dr. Bledsoe has already arranged it."

"Oh," I said with disappointment. I had hoped that by serving him the rest of the week I could win back his esteem. Now I would not have the opportunity.

"Well, I hope you have a pleasant trip, sir," I said.

"Thank you," he said, suddenly smiling.

"And maybe next time you come I'll be able to answer some of the questions you asked me this afternoon."

"Questions?" His eyes narrowed.

"Yes, sir, about ... about your fate," I said.

"Ah, yes, yes," he said.

"And I intend to read Emerson, too ..."

"Very good. Self-reliance is a most worthy virtue. I shall look forward with the greatest of interest to learning your contribution to my fate." He motioned me toward the door. "And don't forget to see Dr. Bledsoe."

I left somewhat reassured, but not completely. I still had to face Dr. Bledsoe. And I had to attend chapel.

Chapter 6

Down the sloping lawn below me the male students moved toward their dormitories, seeming far away from me now, remote, and each shadowy form vastly superior to me, who had by some shortcoming cast myself into the darkness away from all that was

worthwhile and inspiring. I listened to one group harmonize quietly as they passed. The smell of fresh bread being prepared in the bakery drifted to me. The good white bread of breakfast; the rolls dripping with yellow butter that I had slipped into my pocket so often to be munched later in my room with wild blackberry jam from home.

Lights began to appear in the girls' dormitories, like the bursting of luminous seeds flung broadside by an invisible hand. Several cars rolled by. I saw a group of old women who lived in the town approaching. One used a cane which from time to time she tapped hollowly upon the walk like a blind man. Snatches of their conversation fluttered to me as they discussed Barbee's talk with enthusiasm, recalled the times of the Founder, their quavering voices weaving and embroidering his story. Then down the long avenue of trees I saw the familiar Cadillac approaching and started inside the building, suddenly filled with panic. I hadn't gone two steps before I turned and hurried out into the night again. I couldn't stand to face Dr. Bledsoe immediately. I was fairly shivering as I fell in behind a group of boys going up the drive. They were arguing some point heatedly, but I was too agitated to listen and simply followed in their shadows, noticing the dull gleam of their polished shoe-leather in the rays of the street lamps. I kept trying to formulate what I would say to Dr. Bledsoe, and the boys must have turned into their building, for suddenly finding myself outside the gates of the campus and heading down the highway, I turned and ran back to the building.

When I went in he was wiping his neck with a blue-bordered handkerchief. The shaded lamp catching the lenses of his glasses left half of his broad face in the shadow as his clenched fists stretched full forth in the light before him. I stood, hesitating in the door, aware suddenly of the old heavy furnishings, the relics from the times of the Founder, the framed portrait photographs and relief plaques of presidents and industrialists, men of power – fixed like trophies or heraldic emblems upon the walls.

"Come in," he said from the half-shadow; then I saw him move and his head coming forward, his eyes burning.

He began mildly, as if quietly joking, throwing me off balance.

"Boy," he said, "I understand that you not only carried Mr. Norton out to the Quarters but that you wound up at that sinkhole, that Golden Day."

It was a statement, not a question. I said nothing and he looked at me with the same mild gaze. Had Barbee helped Mr. Norton soften him?

"No," he said, "it wasn't enough to take him to the Quarters, you had to make the complete tour, to give him the full treatment. Was that it?"

"No, sir ... I mean that he was ill, sir," I said. "He had to have some whiskey ..."

"And that was the only place you knew to go," he said. "So you went there because you were taking care of him ..."

"Yes, sir ..."

"And not only that," he said in a voice that both mocked and marveled, "you took him out and sat him down on the gallery, veranda – piazza – whatever they call it now'days – and introduced him to the quality!"

"Quality?" I frowned. "Oh – but he insisted that I stop, sir. There was nothing I could do ..."

"Of course," he said, "Of course."

"He was interested in the cabins, sir. He was surprised that there were any left."

"So naturally you stopped," he said, bowing his head again.

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, and I suppose the cabin opened up and told him its life history and all the choice gossip?"

I started to explain.

"Boy!" he exploded. "Are you serious? Why were you out on the road in the first place? Weren't you behind the wheel?"

"Yes, sir ..."

"Then haven't we bowed and scraped and begged and lied enough decent homes and drives for you to show him? Did you think that white man had to come a thousand miles – all the way from New York and Boston and Philadelphia just for you to show him a slum? Don't just stand there, say something!"

"But I was only driving him, sir. I only stopped there after he ordered me to ..."

"Ordered you?" he said. "He *ordered* you. Dammit, white folk are always giving orders, it's a habit with them. "Why didn't you make an excuse? Couldn't you say they had sickness – smallpox – or picked another cabin? Why that Trueblood shack? My God, boy! You're black and living in the South – did you forget how to lie?"

"Lie, sir? Lie to him, lie to a trustee, sir? Me?"

He shook his head with a kind of anguish. "And me I thinking I'd picked a boy with brain," he said. "Didn't you know you were endangering the school?"

"But I was only trying to please him ..."

"*Please* him? And here you are a junior in college! Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are you getting around here? Who really told you to take him out there?" he said.

"He did, sir. No one else."

"Don't lie to me!"

"That's the truth, sir."

"I warn you now, who suggested it?"

"I swear, sir. No one told me."

"Nigger, this isn't the time to lie. I'm no white man. Tell me the truth!"

"It was as though he'd struck me. I stared across the desk thinking, He called me *that* ...

"Answer me, boy!"

That, I thought, noticing the throbbing of a vein that rose between his eyes, thinking, *He called me that*.

"I wouldn't lie, sir," I said.

"Then who was that patient you were talking with?"

"I never saw him before, sir."

"What was he saying?"

"I can't recall it all," I muttered. "The man was raving."

"Speak up. What did he say?"

"He thinks that he lived in France and that he's a great doctor ..."

"Continue."

"He said that I believed that white was right," I said.

"What?" Suddenly his face twitched and cracked like the surface of dark water. "And you do, don't you?" Dr. Bledsoe said, suppressing a nasty laugh. "Well, don't you?"

I did not answer, thinking, *You, you* ...

"Who was he, did you ever see him before?"

"No, sir, I hadn't."

"Was he northern or southern?"

"I don't know, sir."

He struck his desk. "College for Negroes! Boy, what do you know other than how to ruin an institution in half an hour that it took over half a hundred years to build? Did he *talk* northern or southern?'

"He talked like a white man," I said, "except that his voice sounded southern, like one of ours ...?"

"I'll have to investigate him," he said. "A Negro like that should be under lock and key."

Across the campus a clock struck the quarter hour and something inside me seemed to muffle its sound. I turned to him desperately. "Dr. Bledsoe, I'm awfully sorry. I had no intention of going there but things just got out of hand. Mr. Norton understands how it happened ..."

"Listen to me, boy," he said loudly. "Norton is one man and I'm another, and while he might think he's satisfied, I know that he isn't! Your poor judgment has caused this school incalculable damage. Instead of uplifting the race, you've torn it down."

He looked at me as though I had committed the worst crime imaginable. "Don't you know we can't tolerate such a thing? I gave you an opportunity to serve one of our best white friends, a man who could make your fortune. But in return you dragged the entire race into the slime!"

Suddenly he reached for something beneath a pile of papers, an old leg shackle from slavery which he proudly called a "symbol of our progress."

"You've got to be disciplined, boy," he said. "There's no if's and and's about it."

"But you gave Mr. Norton your word ..."

"Don't stand there and tell me what I already know. Regardless of what I said, as the leader of this institution I can't possibly let this pass. Boy, I'm getting rid of you!"

It must have happened when the metal struck the desk, for suddenly I was leaning toward him, shouting with outrage.

"I'll tell him," I said. "I'll go to Mr. Norton and tell him. You've lied to both of us ..."

"What!" he said. "You have the nerve to threaten me ... in my own office?"

"I'll tell him," I screamed. "I'll tell everybody. I'll fight you. I swear it, I'll fight!"

"Well," he said, sitting back, "well, I'll be damn!"

For a moment he looked me up and down and I saw his head go back into the shadow, hearing a high, thin sound like a cry of rage; then his face came forward and I saw his laughter. For an instant I stared; then I wheeled and started for the door, hearing him sputter, "Wait, wait," behind me.

I turned. He gasped for breath, propping his huge head up with his hands as tears streamed down his face.

"Come on, come," he said, removing his glasses and wiping his eyes. "Come on, son," his voice amused and conciliatory. It was as though I were being put through a fraternity initiation and found myself going back. He looked at me, still laughing with agony. My eyes burned.

"Boy, you *are* a fool," he said. "Your white folk didn't teach you anything and your mother-wit has left you cold. What has happened to you young Negroes? I thought you had caught on to how things are done down here. But you don't even know the difference between the way things are and the way they're supposed to be. My God," he gasped, "what is the race coming to? Why, boy, you can tell anyone you like – sit down there ... Sit down, sir, I say!"

Reluctantly I sat, torn between anger and fascination, hating myself for obeying.

"Tell anyone you like," he said. "I don't care. I wouldn't raise my little finger to stop you. Because I don't owe anyone a thing, son. Who, Negroes? Negroes don't control this school or much of anything else – haven't you learned even that? No, sir, they don't control this school, nor white folk either. True they *support* it, but I control it. I's big and black and I say 'Yes, suh' as loudly as any burrhead when it's convenient, but I'm still the king down here. I don't care how much it appears otherwise. Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it. Let the Negroes snicker and the crackers laugh! Those are the facts, son. The only ones I even pretend to please are *big* white folk, and even those I control more than they control me. This is a power set-up, son, and I'm at the controls. You think about that. When you buck against me, you're bucking against power, rich white folk's power, the nation's power – which means government power!"

He paused to let it sink in and I waited, feeling a numb, violent outrage.

"And I'll tell you something your sociology teachers are afraid to tell you," he said. "If there weren't men like me running schools like this, there'd be no South. Nor North, either. No, and there'd be no country – not as it is today. You think about that, son." He laughed. "With all your speech-making and studying I thought you understood something. But you ... All right, go ahead. See Norton. You'll find that *he* wants you disciplined; he might not know it, but he does. Because he knows that I know what is best for his interests. You're a black educated fool, son. These white folk have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokesmen to get their ideas across. If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth; and if I tell them that you're lying, they'll tell the world even if you prove you're telling the truth. Because it's the kind of lie they want to hear ..."

I heard the high thin laugh again. "You're nobody, son. You don't exist – can't you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think – except men like me. I tell *them*; that's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know about. Shocks you, doesn't it? Well, that's the way it is. It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. But you listen to me: I didn't make it, and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying

where I am."

He was looking me in the eye now, his voice charged and sincere, as though uttering a confession, a fantastic revelation which I could neither believe nor deny. Cold drops of sweat moved at a glacier's pace down my spine ...

"I mean it, son," he said. "I had to be strong and purposeful to get where I am. I had to wait and plan and lick around ... Yes, I had to act the nigger!" he said, adding another fiery, "Yes!"

"I don't even insist that it was worth it, but now I'm here and I mean to stay – after you win the game, you take the prize and you keep it, protect it; there's nothing else to do." He shrugged. "A man gets old winning his place, son. So you go ahead, go tell your story; match your truth against my truth, because what I've said is truth, the broader truth. Test it, try it out ... When I started out I was a young fellow ..."

But I no longer listened, nor saw more than the play of light upon the metallic disks of his glasses, which now seemed to float within the disgusting sea of his words. Truth, truth, what was truth? Nobody I knew, not even my own mother, would believe me if I tried to tell them. Nor would I tomorrow, I thought, nor would I ... I gazed helplessly at the grain of the desk, then past his head to the case of loving cups behind his chair. Above the case a portrait of the Founder looked noncommittally down.

"Hee, hee!" Bledsoe laughed. "Your arms are too short to box with me, son. And I haven't had to really clip a young Negro in years. No," he said getting up, "they haven't been so cocky as they used to."

This time I could barely move, my stomach was knotted and my kidneys ached. My legs were rubbery. For three years I had thought of myself as a man and here with a few words he'd made me as helpless as an infant. I pulled myself up ...

"Wait, hold on a second," he said, looking at me like a man about to flip a coin. "I like your spirit, son. You're a fighter, and I like that; you just lack judgment, though lack of judgment can ruin you. That's why I have to penalize you, son. I know how you feel, too. You don't want to go home to be humiliated, I understand that, because you have some vague notions about dignity. In spite of me, such notions seep in along with the gimcrack[39] teachers and northern-trained idealists. Yes, and you have some white folk backing you and you don't want to face them because nothing is worse for a black man than to be humiliated by white folk. I know all about that too; ole doc's been 'buked and scorned and all of that. I don't just *sing* about it in chapel, I *know* about it. But you'll get over it; it's foolish and expensive and a lot of dead weight. You let the white folk worry about pride and dignity – you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people – then stay in the dark and use it!"

How long will I stand here and let him laugh at me, I thought, holding on to the back of the chair, how long?

"You're a nervy little fighter, son," he said, "and the race needs good, smart, disillusioned fighters. Therefore I'm going to give you a hand – maybe you'll feel that I'm giving you my left hand after I've[40] struck you with my right – if you think I'm the kind of man who'd lead with his right, which I'm most certainly not.

But that's all right too, take it or leave it. I want you to go to New York for the summer and save your pride – and your money. You go there and earn your next year's fees, understand?"

I nodded, unable to speak, whirling about furiously within myself, trying to deal with him, to fit what he was saying to what he had said ...

"I'll give you letters to some of the school's friends to see that you get work," he said. "But this time, use your judgment, keep your eyes open, get in the swing of things! Then, if you make good, perhaps ... well, perhaps ... It's up to you."

His voice stopped as he stood, tall and black and disk-eyed, huge.

"That's all, young man," he said, his tone abrupt, official. "You have two days in which to close your affairs."

"Two days?"

"Two days!" he said.

I went down the steps and up the walk in the dark, making it out of the building just before it bent me double beneath the wisteria that hung from the trees on ropelike vines. Almost a total disembowelment and when it paused I looked up through the trees arched high and cool above me to see a whirling, double-imaged moon. My eyes were out of focus. I started toward my room, covering one eye with my hand to avoid crashing into trees and lampposts projected into my path. I went on, tasting bile and thankful that it was night with no one to witness my condition. My stomach felt raw. From somewhere across the quiet of the campus the sound of an old guitar-blues plucked from an out-of-tune piano drifted toward me like a lazy, shimmering wave, like the echoed whistle of a lonely train, and my head went over again, against a tree this time, and I could hear it splattering the flowering vines.

When I could move, my head started to whirl in a circle. The day's events flowed past. Trueblood, Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe and the Golden Day swept around my mind in a mad surreal whirl. I stood in the path holding my eye and trying to push back the day, but each time I floundered upon Dr. Bledsoe's decision. It still echoed in my mind and it was real and it was final. Whatever my responsibility was for what had occurred, I knew that I would pay for it, knew that I would be expelled, and the very idea stabbed my insides again. I stood there on the moonlit walk, trying to think ahead to its effects, imagining the satisfaction of those who envied my success, the shame and disappointment of my parents. I would never live down my disgrace. My white friends would be disgusted and I recalled the fear that hung over all those who had no protection from powerful whites.

How had I come to this? I had kept unswervingly to the path placed before me, had tried to be exactly what I was expected to be, had done exactly what I was expected to do – yet, instead of winning the expected reward, here I was stumbling along, holding on desperately to one of my eyes in order to keep from bursting out my brain against some familiar object swerved into my path by my distorted vision. And now to drive me wild I felt suddenly that my grandfather was hovering over me, grinning triumphantly out of the dark. I simply could not endure it. For, despite my anguish and anger, I knew of no other way of living, nor

other forms of success available to such as me. I was so completely a part of that existence that in the end I had to make my peace. It was either that or admit that my grandfather had made sense. Which was impossible, for though I still believed myself innocent, I saw that the only alternative to permanently facing the world of Trueblood and the Golden Day was to accept the responsibility for what had happened. Somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment. Dr. Bledsoe is right, I told myself, he's right; the school and what it stands for have to be protected. There was no other way, and no matter how much I suffered I would pay my debt as quickly as possible and return to building my career ...

Back in my room I counted my savings, some fifty dollars, and decided to get to New York as quickly as possible. If Dr. Bledsoe didn't change his mind about helping me get a job, it would be enough to pay my room and board at Men's House, about which I had learned from fellows who lived there during their summer vacations. I would leave in the morning.

So while my roommate grinned and mumbled unaware in his sleep I packed my bags.

Next morning I was up before the bugle sounded and already on a bench in Dr. Bledsoe's outer office when he appeared. The jacket of his blue serge suit was open, revealing a heavy gold chain linked between his vest pockets as he moved toward me with a noiseless tread. He passed without seeming to see me. Then as he reached his office door he said, "I haven't changed my mind about you, boy. And I don't intend to!"

"Oh, I didn't come for that, sir," I said, seeing him turn quickly, looking down upon me, his eyes quizzical.

"Very well, as long as you understand that. Come in and state your business. I have work to do."

I waited before the desk, watching him place his homburg on an old brass hall-tree. Then he sat before me, making a cage of his fingers and nodding for me to begin.

My eyes burned and my voice sounded unreal. "I'd like to leave this morning, sir," I said.

His eyes retreated. "Why this morning?" he said. "I gave you until tomorrow. Why the hurry?"

"It isn't hurry, sir. But since I have to leave I'd like to get going. Staying until tomorrow won't change matters ..."

"No, it won't," he said. "That's good sense and you have my permission. And what else?"

"That's all, sir, except that I want to say that I'm sorry for what I did and that I hold no hard feelings. What I did was unintentional, but I'm in agreement with my punishment."

He touched his fingertips together, the thick fingers meeting delicately, his face without expression. "That's the proper attitude," he said. "In other words, you don't intend to become bitter, is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, I can see that you're beginning to learn. That's good. Two things our people must do is accept responsibility for their acts and avoid becoming bitter." His voice rose with the conviction of his chapel speeches. "Son, if you don't become bitter, nothing can stop you from success. Remember that."

"I shall, sir," I said. Then my throat thickened and I

hoped he would bring up the matter of a job himself.

Instead, he looked at me impatiently and said, "Well? I have work to do. My permission is granted."

"Well, sir, I'd like to ask a favor of you ..."

"Favor," he said shrewdly. "Now that's another matter. What kind of favor?"

"It isn't much, sir. You suggested that you would put me in touch with some of the trustees who would give me a job. I'm willing to do anything."

"Oh, yes," he said, "yes, of course."

He seemed to think for a moment, his eyes studying the objects on his desk. Then touching the shackle gently with his index finger, he said, "Very well. When do you intend to leave?"

"By the first bus, if possible, sir."

"Are you packed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Go get your bags and return here in thirty minutes. My secretary will give you some letters addressed to several friends of the school. One of them will do something for you."

"Thanks, sir. Thank you very much," I said as he stood.

"That's all right," he said. "The school tries to look out for its own. Only one thing more. These letters will be sealed; don't open them if you want help. White folk are strict about such things. The letters will introduce you and request them to help you with a job. I'll do my best for you and it isn't necessary for you to open them, understand?"

"Oh, I wouldn't think of opening them, sir," I said.

"Very well, the young lady will have them for you when you return. What about your parents, have you informed them?"

"No, sir, it might make them feel too bad if I told them I was expelled, so I plan to write them after I get there and get a job ..."

"I see. Perhaps that is best."

"Well, good-bye, sir," I said, extending my hand.

Good-bye, he said. His hand was large and strangely limp.

He pressed a buzzer as I turned to leave. His secretary brushed past me as I went through the door.

The letters were waiting when I returned, seven of them, addressed to men with impressive names. I looked for Mr. Norton's but his was not among them. Placing them carefully in my inside pocket, I grabbed my bags and hurried for the bus.

Chapter 9

It was a clear, bright day[41] when I went out, and the sun burned warm upon my eyes. Only a few flecks of snowy cloud hung high in the morning-blue sky, and already a woman was hanging wash on a roof. I felt better walking along. A feeling of confidence grew. Far down the island the skyscrapers rose tall and mysterious in the thin, pastel haze. A milk truck went past. I thought of the school. What were they doing now on the campus? Had the moon sunk low and the sun climbed clear? Had the breakfast bugle blown? Did the bellow of the big seed bull awaken the girls in the dorms this morning as on most spring mornings when I was there – sounding clear and full above bells and

bugles and early workaday sounds? I hurried along, encouraged by the memories, and suddenly I was seized with a certainty that today was the day. Something would happen. I patted my brief case, thinking of the letter inside. The last had been first – a good sign.

Close to the curb ahead I saw a man pushing a cart piled high with rolls of blue paper and heard him singing in a clear ringing voice. It was a blues, and I walked along behind him remembering the times that I had heard such singing at home. It seemed that here some memories slipped around my life at the campus and went far back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind. There was no escaping such reminders.

"She's got feet like a monkey
Legs like a frog – Lawd, Lawd!
But when she starts to loving me
I holler Whoooo, God-dog!
Cause I loves my baabay,
Better than I do myself..."

And as I drew alongside I was startled to hear him call to me:

"Looka-year, buddy ..."

"Yes," I said, pausing to look into his reddish eyes.

"Tell me just one thing this very fine morning – Hey! Wait a minute, daddy-o, I'm going your way!"

"What is it?" I said.

"What I want to know is," he said, "is you got the *dog?*"

"Dog? What dog?"

"Sho," he said, stopping his cart and resting it on its support. "That's it. *Who – "* he halted to crouch with one foot on the curb like a country preacher about to pound his Bible – "*got ... the ... dog*," his head snapping with each word like an angry rooster's.

I laughed nervously and stepped back. He watched me out of shrewd eyes. "Oh goddog, daddy-o," he said with a sudden bluster, "who got the damn dog? Now I know you from down home, how come you trying to act like you never heard that before! Hell, ain't nobody out here this morning but us colored – Why you trying to deny me?"

Suddenly I was embarrassed and angry. "Deny you? What do you mean?"

"Just answer the question. Is you got him, or ain't you?"

"*A dog?*"

"Yeah, *the* dog."

I was exasperated. "No, not this morning," I said and saw a grin spread over his face.

"Wait a minute, daddy. Now don't go get mad. Damn, man! I thought sho *you* had him," he said, pretending to disbelieve me. I started away and he pushed the cart beside me. And suddenly I felt uncomfortable. Somehow he was like one of the vets from the Golden Day ...

"Well, maybe it's the other way round," he said. "Maybe he got holt to you."

"Maybe," I said.

"If he is, you lucky it's just a dog – 'cause, man, I tell you I believe it's a bear that's got holt to me ..."

"A bear?"

"Hell, yes! *The* bear. Caint you see these patches where he's been clawing at my behind?"

Pulling the seat of his Charlie Chaplin pants to the

side, he broke into deep laughter.

"Man, this Harlem ain't nothing but a bear's den. But I tell you one thing," he said with swiftly sobering face, "it's the best place in the world for you and me, and if times don't get better soon I'm going to grab that bear and turn him every way but loose!"

"Don't let him get you down," I said.

"No, daddy-o, I'm going to start with one my own size!"

I tried to think of some saying about bears to reply, but remembered only Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear ... who were both long forgotten and now brought a wave of homesickness.

I wanted to leave him, and yet I found a certain comfort in walking along beside him, as though we'd walked this way before through other mornings, in other places ...

"What is all that you have there?" I said, pointing to the rolls of blue paper stacked in the cart.

"Blueprints, man. Here I got 'bout a hundred pounds of blueprints and I couldn't build nothing!"

"What are they blueprints for?" I said.

"Damn if I know – everything. Cities, towns, country clubs. Some just buildings and houses. I got damn near enough to build me a house if I could live in a paper house like they do in Japan. I guess somebody done changed their plans," he added with a laugh. "I asked the man why they getting rid of all this stuff and he said they get in the way so every once in a while they have to throw 'em out to make place for the new plans. Plenty of these ain't never been used, you know."

"You have quite a lot," I said.

"Yeah, this ain't all neither. I got a coupla loads. There's a day's work right here in this stuff. Folks is always making plans and changing 'em."

"Yes, that's right," I said, thinking of my letters, "but that's a mistake. You have to stick to the plan."

He looked at me, suddenly grave. "You kinda young, daddy-o," he said.

I did not answer. We came to a corner at the top of a hill.

"Well, daddy-o, it's been good talking with a youngster from the old country but I got to leave you now. This here's one of them good ole downhill streets. I can coast a while and won't be worn out at the end of the day. Damn if I'm-a let 'em run *me* into my grave. I be seeing you again sometime – And you know something?"

"What's that?"

"I thought you was trying to deny me at first, but now I be pretty glad to see you ..."

"I hope so," I said. "And you take it easy."

"Oh, I'll do that. All it takes to get along in this here man's town is a little shit, grit and mother-wit. And man, I was bawn with all three. In fact, I'maseventhsonofa-seventhsonbawnwithacauloverboth eyesandraisedonblackcatboneshighjohn-theconquerorandgreasygreens – " he spieled with twinkling eyes, his lips working rapidly. "You dig me, daddy?"

"You're going too fast," I said, beginning to laugh.

"Okay, I'm slowing down. I'll verse you but I won't curse you – My name is Peter Wheatstraw,[42] I'm the Devil's only son-in-law, so roll 'em! You a southern boy,

ain't you?" he said, his head to one side like a bear's.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, git with it! My name's Blue and I'm coming at you with a pitchfork. Fe Fi Fo Fum.[43] Who wants to shoot the Devil one, Lord God Stingeroy!"

He had me grinning despite myself. I liked his words though I didn't know the answer. I'd known the stuff from childhood, but had forgotten it; had learned it back of school ...

"You digging me, daddy?" he laughed. "Haw, but look me up sometimes, I'm a piano player and a rounder,[44] a whiskey drinker and a pavement pounder. I'll teach you some good bad habits. You'll need 'em. Good luck," he said.

"So long," I said and watched him going. I watched him push around the comer to the top of the hill, leaning sharp against the cart handle, and heard his voice arise, muffled now, as he started down.

She's got feet like a monkeeee
Legs
Legs, Legs like a maaad
Bulldog ...

What does it mean, I thought. I'd heard it all my life but suddenly the strangeness of it came through to me. Was it about a woman or about some strange sphinxlike animal? Certainty his woman, *no* woman, fitted that description. And why describe anyone in such contradictory words? Was it a sphinx? Did old Chaplin-pants, old dusty-butt, love her or hate her; or was he merely singing? What kind of woman could love a dirty fellow like that, anyway? And how could even *he* love her if she were as repulsive as the song described? I moved ahead. Perhaps everyone loved someone; I didn't know, I couldn't give much thought to love; in order to travel far you had to be detached, and I had the long road back to the campus before me. I strode along, hearing the cartman's song become a lonesome, broad-toned whistle now that flowered at the end of each phrase into a tremulous, blue-toned chord. And in its flutter and swoop I heard the sound of a railroad train highballing it, lonely across the lonely night. He was the Devil's son-in-law, all right, and he was a man who could whistle a three-toned chord ... God damn, I thought, they're a hell of a people! And I didn't know whether it was pride or disgust that suddenly flashed over me.

At the corner I turned into a drugstore and took a seat at the counter. Several men were bent over plates of food. Glass globes of coffee simmered above blue flames. I could feel the odor of frying bacon reach deep into my stomach as I watched the counterman open the doors of the grill and turn the lean strips over and bang the doors shut again. Above, facing the counter, a blonde, sunburned college girl smiled down, inviting all and sundry to drink a coke. The counterman came over.

"I've got something good for you," he said, placing a glass of water before me. "How about the special?"

"What's the special?"

"Pork chops, grits, one egg, hot biscuits and coffee!" He leaned over the counter with a look that seemed to say, There, that ought to excite you, boy. Could everyone see that I was southern?

"I'll have orange juice, toast and coffee," I said coldly.

He shook his head. "You fooled me," he said, slamming two pieces of bread into the toaster. "I would

have sworn you were a pork chop man. Is that juice large or small?"

"Make it large," I said.

I looked silently at the back of his head as he sliced an orange, thinking, I should order the special and get up and walk out. Who does he think he is?

A seed floated in the thick layer of pulp that formed at the top of the glass. I fished it out with a spoon and then downed the acid drink, proud to have resisted the pork chop and grits. It was an act of discipline, a sign of the change that was coming over me and which would return me to college a more experienced man. I would be basically the same, I thought, stirring my coffee, yet so subtly changed as to intrigue those who had never been North. It always helped at the college to be a little different, especially if you wished to play a leading role. It made the folks talk about you, try to figure you out. I had to be careful though, not to speak too much like a northern Negro; they wouldn't like that. The thing to do, I thought with a smile, was to give them hints that whatever you did or said was weighted with broad and mysterious meanings that lay just beneath the surface. They'd love that. And the vaguer you told things, the better. You had to keep them guessing – just as they guessed about Dr. Bledsoe: Did Dr. Bledsoe stop at an expensive white hotel when he visited New York? Did he go on parties with the trustees? And how did he act?

"*Man, I bet he has him a fine time. They tell me when Ole Doc gets to New York he don't stop for the red lights. Say he drinks his good red whiskey and smokes his good black cigars and forgets all about you ole know-nothing-Negroes down here on the campus. Say when he gets up North he makes everybody call him* Mister *Doctor Bledsoe*."

I smiled as the conversation came back to my mind. I felt good. Perhaps it was all to the best that I had been sent away. I had learned more. Heretofore all the campus gossip had seemed merely malicious and disrespectful; now I could see the advantage for Dr. Bledsoe. Whether we liked him or not, he was never out of our minds. That was a secret of leadership. Strange I should think of it now, for although I'd never given it any thought before, I seemed to have known it all along. Only here the distance from the campus seemed to make it clear and hard, and I thought it without fear. Here it came to hand just as easily as the coin which I now placed on the counter for my breakfast. It was fifteen cents and as I felt for a nickel I took out another dime, thinking, Is it an insult when one of us tips one of them?

I looked for the counterman, seeing him serving a plate of pork chops and grits to a man with a pale blond mustache, and stared; then I slapped the dime on the counter and left, annoyed that the dime did not ring as loud as a fifty-cent piece.

When I reached the door of Mr. Emerson's office it occurred to me that perhaps I should have waited until the business of the day was under way, but I disregarded the idea and went ahead. My being early would be, I hoped, an indication of both how badly I wanted work, and how promptly I would perform any assignment given me. Besides, wasn't there a saying that the first person of the day to enter a business would get a bargain? Or was that said only of Jewish business? I removed the letter from my brief case. Was Emerson a Christian or a Jewish name?

Beyond the door it was like a museum. I had entered a large reception room decorated with cool tropical colors. One wall was almost covered by a huge colored map, from which narrow red silk ribbons stretched tautly from each division of the map to a series of ebony pedestals, upon which sat glass specimen jars containing natural products of the various countries. It was an importing firm. I looked around the room, amazed. There were paintings, bronzes, tapestries, all beautifully arranged. I was dazzled and so taken aback that I almost dropped my brief case when I heard a voice say, "And what would your business be?"

I saw the figure out of a collar ad: ruddy face with blond hair faultlessly in place, a tropical weave suit draped handsomely from his broad shoulders, his eyes gray and nervous behind clear-framed glasses.

I explained my appointment. "Oh, yes," he said. "May I see the letter, please?"

I handed it over, noticing the gold links in the soft white cuffs as he extended his hand. Glancing at the envelope he looked back at me with a strange interest in his eyes and said, "Have a seat, please. I'll be with you in a moment."

I watched him leave noiselessly, moving with a long hip-swinging stride that caused me to frown. I went over and took a teakwood chair with cushions of emerald-green silk, sitting stiffly with my brief case across my knees. He must have been sitting there when I came in, for on a table that held a beautiful dwarf tree I saw smoke rising from a cigarette in a jade ash tray. An open book, something called *Totem and Taboo*,[45] lay beside it. I looked across to a lighted case of Chinese design which held delicate-looking statues of horses and birds, small vases and bowls, each set upon a carved wooden base. The room was quiet as a tomb – until suddenly there was a savage beating of wings and I looked toward the window to see an eruption of color, as though a gale had whipped up a bundle of brightly colored rags. It was an aviary of tropical birds set near one of the broad windows, through which, as the clapping of wings settled down, I could see two ships plying far out upon the greenish bay below. A large bird began a song, drawing my eyes to the throbbing of its bright blue, red and yellow throat. It was startling and I watched the surge and flutter of the birds as their colors flared for an instant like an unfurled oriental fan. I wanted to go and stand near the cage for a better view, but decided against it. It might seem unbusinesslike. I observed the room from the chair.

These folks are the Kings of the Earth! I thought, hearing the bird make an ugly noise. There was nothing like this at the college museum – or anywhere else that I had ever been. I recalled only a few cracked relics from slavery times: an iron pot, an ancient bell, a set of ankle-irons and links of chain, a primitive loom, a spinning wheel, a gourd for drinking, an ugly ebony African god that seemed to sneer (presented to the school by some traveling millionaire), a leather whip with copper brads, a branding iron with the double letter MM ... Though I had seen them very seldom, they were vivid in my mind. They had not been pleasant and whenever I had visited the room I avoided the glass case in which they rested, preferring instead to look at photographs of the early days after the Civil War, the times close to those blind Barbee had described. And I had not looked even at these too often.

I tried to relax; the chair was beautiful but hard. Where had the man gone? Had he shown any antagonism when he saw me? I was annoyed that I had failed to see him first. One had to watch such details. Suddenly there came a harsh cry from the cage, and once more I saw a mad flashing as though the birds had burst into spontaneous flame, fluttering and beating their wings maliciously against the bamboo bars, only to settle down just as suddenly when the door opened and the blond man stood beckoning, his hand upon the knob. I went over, tense inside me. Had I been accepted or rejected?

There was a question in his eyes. "Come in, please," he said.

"Thank you," I said, waiting to follow him.

"*Please*," he said with a slight smile.

I moved ahead of him, sounding the tone of his words for a sign.

"I want to ask you a few questions," he said, waving my letter at two chairs.

"Yes, sir?" I said.

"Tell me, what is it that you're trying to accomplish?" he said.

"I want a job, sir, so that I can earn enough money to return to college in the fall."

"To your old school?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see." For a moment he studied me silently. "When do you expect to graduate?"

"Next year, sir. I've completed my junior classes ..."

"Oh, you have? That's very good. And how old are you?"

"Almost twenty, sir."

"A junior at nineteen? You *are* a good student."

"Thank you, sir," I said, beginning to enjoy the interview.

"Were you an athlete?" he asked.

"No, sir ..."

"You have the build," he said, looking me up and down. "You'd probably make an excellent runner, a sprinter."

"I've never tried, sir."

"And I suppose it's silly even to ask what you think of your Alma Mater?" he said.

"I think it's one of the best in the world," I said, hearing my voice surge with deep feeling.

"I know, I know," he said, with a swift displeasure that surprised me.

I became alert again as he mumbled something incomprehensible about "nostalgia for Harvard yard."

"But what if you were offered an opportunity to finish your work at some other college?" he said, his eyes widening behind his glasses. His smile had returned.

"*Another* college?" I asked, my mind beginning to whirl.

"Why, yes, say some school in New England ..."

I looked at him speechlessly. Did he mean Harvard? Was this good or bad? Where was it leading? "I don't know, sir," I said cautiously. "I've never thought about it. I've only a year more, and, well, I know everyone at my old school and they know me ..."

I came to a confused halt, seeing him look at me with a sigh of resignation. What was on his mind? Perhaps I had been too frank about returning to the college,

maybe he was against our having a higher education ... But hell, he's only a secretary ... *Or is* he?

"I understand," he said calmly. "It was presumptuous of me to even suggest another school. I guess one's college is really a kind of mother and father ... a sacred matter."

"Yes, sir. That's it," I said in hurried agreement.

His eyes narrowed. "But now I must ask you an embarrassing question. Do you mind?"

"Why, no, sir," I said nervously.

"I don't like to ask this, but it's quite necessary ..." He leaned forward with a pained frown. "Tell me, did you *read* the letter which you brought to Mr. Emerson? This," he said, taking the letter from the table.

"Why, no, sir! It wasn't addressed to me, so naturally I wouldn't think of opening it ..."

"Of course not, I know you wouldn't," he said, fluttering his hand and sitting erect. "I'm sorry and you must dismiss it, like one of those annoying personal questions you find so often nowadays on supposedly impersonal forms."

I didn't believe him. "But was it opened, sir? Someone might have gone into my things ..."

"Oh, no, nothing like that. Please forget the question ... And tell me, please, what are your plans after graduation?"

"I'm not sure, sir, I'd like to be asked to remain at the college as a teacher, or as a member of the administrative staff. And ... Well ..."

"Yes? And what else?"

"Well – er, I guess I'd really like to become Dr. Bledsoe's assistant ..."

"Oh, I see," he said, sitting back and forming his mouth into a thin-lipped circle. "You're very ambitious."

"I guess I am, sir. But I'm willing to work hard."

"Ambition is a wonderful force," he said, "but sometimes it can be blinding ... On the other hand, it can make you successful – like my father ..." A new edge came into his voice and he frowned and looked down at his hands, which were trembling. "The only trouble with ambition is that it sometimes blinds one to realties ... Tell me, how many of these letters do you have?"

"I had about seven, sir." I replied, confused by his new turn. "They're – "

"*Seven!*" He was suddenly angry.

Yes, sir, that was all he gave me ..."

"And how many of these gentlemen have you succeeded in seeing, may I ask?"

A sinking feeling came over me. "I haven't seen any of them personally, sir."

"And this is your last letter?"

"Yes, sir, it is, but I expect to hear from the others ... They said – "

"Of course you will, and from all seven. They're all loyal Americans."

There was unmistakable irony in his voice now, and I didn't know what to say.

"Seven," he repeated mysteriously. "Oh, don't let me upset you," he said with an elegant gesture of self-disgust. "I had a difficult session with my analyst last evening and the slightest thing is apt to set me off. Like an alarm clock without control – Say!" he said, slapping

his palms against his thighs. “What on earth does that mean?” Suddenly he was in a state. One side of his face had begun to twitch and swell.

I watched him light a cigarette, thinking, What on earth is this all about?

“Some things are just too unjust for words,” he said, expelling a plume of smoke, “and too ambiguous for either speech or ideas. By the way, have you ever been to the Club Calamus?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it, sir,” I said.

“You haven’t? It’s very well known. Many of my Harlem friends go there. It’s a rendezvous for writers, artists and all kinds of celebrities. There’s nothing like it in the city, and by some strange twist it has a truly continental flavor.”

“I’ve never been to a night club, sir. I’ll have to go there to see what it’s like after I’ve started earning some money,” I said, hoping to bring the conversation back to the problem of jobs.

He looked at me with a jerk of his head, his face beginning to twitch again.

“I suppose I’ve been evading the issue again – as always. Look,” he burst out impulsively. “Do you believe that two people, two strangers who have never seen one another before can speak with utter frankness and sincerity?”

“Sir?”

“Oh, damn! What I mean is, do you believe it possible for us, the two of us, to throw off the mask of custom and manners that insulate man from man, and converse in naked honesty and frankness?”

“I don’t know what you mean exactly, sir,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“I ...”

“Of course, of course. If I could only speak plainly! I’m confusing you. Such frankness just isn’t possible because all our motives are impure. Forget what I just said. I’ll try to put it this way – and remember this, please ...”

My head spun. He was addressing me, leaning forward confidentially, as though he’d known me for years, and I remembered something my grandfather had said long ago: *Don’t let no white man tell you his business, ’cause after he tells you he’s liable to git shame be tole it to you and then he’ll hate you. Fact is, he was bating you all the time ...*

“... I want to try to reveal a part of reality that is most important to you – but I warn you, it’s going to hurt. No, let me finish,” he said, touching my knee lightly and quickly removing his hand as I shifted my position.

“What I want to do is done very seldom, and, to be honest, it wouldn’t happen now if I hadn’t sustained a series of impossible frustrations. You see – well, I’m a thwarted ... Oh, damn, there I go again, thinking only of myself ... We’re both frustrated, understand? Both of us, and I want to help you ...”

“You mean you’ll let me see Mr. Emerson?”

He frowned. “Please don’t seem so happy about it, and don’t leap to conclusions. I want to help, but there is a tyranny involved ...”

“A *tyranny?*” My lungs tightened.

“Yes. That’s a way of putting it. Because to help you I must disillusion you ...”

“Oh, I don’t think I mind, sir. Once I see Mr.

Emerson, it'll be up to me. All I want to do is speak to him."

"*Speak* to him," he said, getting quickly to his feet and mashing his cigarette into the tray with shaking fingers. "No one speaks to him. *He* does the speaking – " Suddenly he broke off. "On second thought, perhaps you'd better leave me your address and I'll mail you Mr. Emerson's reply in the morning. He's really a very busy man."

His whole manner had changed.

"But you said ..." I stood up, completely confused. Was he having fun with me? "Couldn't you let me talk to him for just five minutes?" I pleaded. "I'm sure I can convince him that I'm worthy of a job. And if there's someone who has tampered with my letter, I'll prove my identity ... Dr. Bledsoe would – "

"Identity! My God! Who has any identity anymore anyway? It isn't so perfectly simple. Look," he said with an anguished gesture. "Will you trust me?"

"Why, yes, sir, I trust you."

He leaned forward. "Look," he said, his face working violently, "I was trying to tell you that I know many things about you – not you personally, but fellows like you. Not much, either, but still more than the average. With us it's still Jim and Huck Finn.[46] A number of my friends are jazz musicians, and I've been around. I know the conditions under which you live – Why go back, fellow? There is so much you could do here where there is more freedom. You won't find what you're looking for when you return anyway; because so much is involved that you can't possibly know. Please don't misunderstand me; I don't say all this to impress you. Or to give myself some kind of sadistic catharsis. Truly, I don't. But I do know this world you're trying to contact – all its virtues and all its unspeakables – Ha, yes, unspeakables. I'm afraid my father considers *me* one of the unspeakables ... I'm Huckleberry, you see ..."

He laughed drily as I tried to make sense of his ramblings. *Huckleberry?* Why did he keep talking about that kid's story? I was puzzled and annoyed that he could talk to me this way because he stood between me and a job, the campus ...

"But I only want a job, sir," I said. "I only want to make enough money to return to my studies."

"Of course, but surely you suspect there is more to it than that. Aren't you curious about what lies behind the face of things?"

"Yes, sir, but I'm mainly interested in a job."

"Of course," he said, "but life isn't that simple ..."

"But I'm not bothered about all the other things, whatever they are, sir. They're not for me to interfere with and I'll be satisfied to go back to college and remain there as long as they'll allow me to."

"But I want to help you do what is best," he said. "What's *best*, mind you. Do you wish to do what's best for yourself?"

"Why, yes, sir. I suppose I do ..."

"Then forget about returning to the college. Go somewhere else ..."

"You mean leave?"

"Yes, forget it ..."

"But you said that you would help me!"

"I did and I am – "

"But what about seeing Mr. Emerson?"

"Oh, God! Don't you see that it's best that you do *not* see him?"

Suddenly I could not breathe. Then I was standing gripping my brief case. "What have you got against me?" I blurted. "What did I ever do to you? You never intended to let me see him. Even though I presented *my* letter of introduction. Why? Why? I'd never endanger *your* job – "

"No, no, no! Of course not," he cried, getting to his feet. "You've misunderstood me. You mustn't do that! God, there's too much misunderstanding. Please don't think I'm trying to prevent you from seeing my – from seeing Mr. Emerson out of prejudice ..."

"Yes, sir, I do," I said angrily. "I was sent here by a friend of his. You read the letter, but still refuse to let me see him, and now you're trying to get me to leave college. What kind of man are you, anyway? What have you got against me? You, a northern white man!"

He looked pained. "I've done it badly," he said, "but you must believe that I am trying to advise you what is best for you." He snatched off his glasses.

"But *I* know what's best for me," I said. "Or at least Dr. Bledsoe does, and if I can't see Mr. Emerson today, just tell me when I can and I'll be here ..."

He bit his lips and shut his eyes, shaking his head from side to side as though fighting back a scream. "I'm sorry, really sorry that I started all of this," he said, suddenly calm. "It was foolish of me to try to advise you, but please, you mustn't believe that I'm against you ... or your race. I'm your friend. Some of the finest people I know are Neg – Well, you see, Mr. Emerson is my father."

"Your father!"

"My father, yes, though I would have preferred it otherwise. But he is, and I could arrange for you to see him. But to be utterly frank, I'm incapable of such cynicism. It would do you no good."

"But I'd like to take my chances, Mr. Emerson, sir. ... This is very important to me. My whole career depends upon it."

"But you *have* no chance," he said.

"But Dr. Bledsoe sent me here," I said, growing more excited. "I *must* have a chance ..."

"Dr. Bledsoe," he said with distaste. "He's like my ... he ought to be horsewhipped! Here," he said, sweeping up the letter and thrusting it crackling toward me. I took it, looking into his eyes that burned back at me.

"Go on, read it," he cried excitedly. "Go on!"

"But I wasn't asking for this," I said.

"Read it!"

My dear Mr. Emerson:
The bearer of this letter is a former student of ours (I say *former* because he shall never, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student here again) who has been expelled for a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment.

Due, however, to circumstances the nature of which I shall explain to you in person on the occasion of the next meeting of the board, it is to the best interests of the college that this young man have no knowledge of the finality of his expulsion. For it is indeed his hope to return here to his classes in the fall. However, it is to the best interests of the great work which we are

dedicated to perform, that he continue undisturbed in these vain hopes while remaining as far as possible from our midst.

This case represents, my dear Mr. Emerson, one of the rare, delicate instances in which one for whom we held great expectations has gone grievously astray, and who in his fall threatens to upset certain delicate relationships between certain interested individuals and the school. Thus, while the bearer is no longer a member of our scholastic family, it is highly important that his severance with the college be executed as painlessly as possible. I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler.

Respectfully, I am your
humble servant,
A. Hebert Bledsoe

I raised my head. Twenty-five years seemed to have lapsed between his handing me the letter and my grasping its message. I could not believe it, tried to read it again. I could not believe it, yet I had a feeling that it all had happened before. I rubbed my eyes, and they felt sandy as though all the fluids had suddenly dried.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm terribly sorry."

"What did I do? I always tried to do the right thing ..."

"*That* you must tell me," he said. "To what does he refer?"

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

"But you must have done *something*."

"I took a man for a drive, showed him into the Golden Day to help him when he became ill ... I don't know ..."

I told him falteringly of the visit to Trueblood's and the trip to the Golden Day and of my expulsion, watching his mobile face reflecting his reaction to each detail.

"It's little enough," he said when I had finished. "I don't understand the man. He is very complicated."

"I only wanted to return and help," I said.

"You'll never return. You can't return now," he said. "Don't you see? I'm terribly sorry and yet I'm glad that I gave in to the impulse to speak to you. Forget it; though that's advice which I've been unable to accept myself, it's still good advice. There is no point in blinding yourself to the truth. Don't blind yourself ..."

I got up, dazed, and started toward the door. He came behind me into the reception room where the birds flamed in the cage, their squawks like screams in a nightmare.

He stammered guiltily, "Please, I must ask you never to mention this conversation to anyone."

"No," I said.

"I wouldn't mind, but my father would consider my revelation the most extreme treason ... You're free of him now. I'm still his prisoner. You have been freed, don't you understand? I've still my battle." He seemed near tears.

"I won't," I said. "No one would believe me. I can't myself. There must be some mistake. There must be ..."

I opened the door.

"Look, fellow," he said. "This evening I'm having a party at the Calamus. Would you like to join my guests?

It might help you – ”

“No, thank you, sir. I’ll be all right.”

“Perhaps you’d like to be my valet?”

I looked at him. “No, thank you, sir,” I said.

“Please,” he said. “I really want to help. Look, I happen to know of a possible job at Liberty Paints. My father has sent several fellows there ... You should try – ”

I shut the door.

The elevator dropped me like a shot and I went out and walked along the street. The sun was very bright now and the people along the walk seemed far away. I stopped before a gray wall where high above me the headstones of a church graveyard arose like the tops of buildings. Across the street in the shade of an awning a shoeshine boy was dancing for pennies. I went on to the corner and got on a bus and went automatically to the rear. In the seat in front of me a dark man in a panama hat kept whistling a tune between his teeth. My mind flew in circles, to Bledsoe, Emerson and back again. There was no sense to be made of it. It was a joke. Hell, it couldn’t be a joke. Yes, it is a joke ... Suddenly the bus jerked to a stop and I heard myself humming the same tune that the man ahead was whistling, and the words came back:

O well they picked poor Robin clean
O well they picked poor Robin clean
Well they tied poor Robin to a stump
Lawd, they picked all the feathers round
from Robin’s rump
Well they picked poor Robin clean.

Then I was on my feet, hurrying to the door, hearing the thin, tissue-paper-against-the-teeth-of-a-comb whistle following me outside at the next stop. I stood trembling at the curb, watching and half expecting to see the man leap from the door to follow me, whistling the old forgotten jingle about a bare-rumped robin. My mind seized upon the tune. I took the subway and it still droned through my mind after I had reached my room at Men’s House and lay across the bed. What was the who-what-when-why-where of poor old Robin? What had he done and who had tied him and why had they plucked him and why had we sung of his fate? It was for a laugh, for a laugh, all the kids had laughed and laughed, and the droll tuba player of the old Elk’s band had rendered it solo on his helical horn; with comical flourishes and doleful phrasing, “*Boo boo boo booooo*, Poor Robin clean” – a mock funeral dirge ... But who was Robin and for what had he been hurt and humiliated?

Suddenly I lay shaking with anger. It was no good. I thought of young Emerson. What if he’d lied out of some ulterior motive of his own? Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan. What was young Emerson’s plan – and why should it have included me? Who was I anyway? I tossed fitfully. Perhaps it was a test of my good will and faith – But that’s a lie, I thought. It’s a lie and you know it’s a lie. I had seen the letter and it had practically ordered me killed. By slow degrees ...

“My dear Mr. Emerson,” I said aloud. “The Robin bearing this letter is a former student. Please hope him to death, and keep him running. Your most humble and obedient servant, A. H. Bledsoe ...”

Sure, that’s the way it was, I thought, a short, concise

verbal *coup de grâce*,[47] straight to the nape of the neck. And Emerson would write in reply? Sure: "Dear Bled, have met Robin and shaved tail. Signed, Emerson."

I sat on the bed and laughed. They'd sent me to the rookery, all right. I laughed and felt numb and weak, knowing that soon the pain would come and that no matter what happened to me I'd never be the same. I felt numb and I was laughing. When I stopped, gasping for breath, I decided that I would go back and kill Bledsoe. Yes, I thought, I owe it to the race and to myself. I'll kill him.

And the boldness of the idea and the anger behind it made me move with decision. I had to have a job and I took what I hoped was the quickest means. I called the plant young Emerson had mentioned, and it worked. I was told to report the following morning. It happened so quickly and with such ease that for a moment I felt turned around. Had they planned it this way? But no, they wouldn't catch me again. This time *I* had made the move.

I could hardly get to sleep for dreaming of revenge.

1952

Extract from Shadow and Act

Hidden Name and Complex Fate
A Writer's Experience in the United States[1]

In *Green Hills of Africa*, Ernest Hemingway[2] reminds us that both Tolstoy[3] and Stendhal[4] had seen war, that Flaubert[5] had seen a revolution and the Commune,[6] that Dostoievsky[7] had been sent to Siberia and that such experiences were important in shaping the art of these great masters. And he goes on to observe that "writers are forged in injustice as a sword is forged." He declined to describe the many personal forms which injustice may take in this chaotic world – who would be so mad as to try? – nor does he go into the personal wounds which each of these writers sustained. Now, however, thanks to his brother and sister, we do know something of the injustice in which he himself was forged, and this knowledge has been added to what we have long known of Hemingway's artistic temper.

In the end, however, it is the quality of his art which is primary. It is the art which allows the wars and revolutions which he knew, and the personal and social injustice which he suffered, to lay claims upon our attention; for it was through his art that they achieved their most enduring meaning. It is a matter of outrageous irony, perhaps, but in literature the great social clashes of history no less than the painful experience of the individual are secondary to the meaning which they take on through the skill, the talent, the imagination and personal vision of the writer who transforms them into art. Here they are reduced to more manageable proportions; here they are imbued with humane values; here, injustice and catastrophe become less important in themselves than what the writer makes of them. This is *not* true, however, of the writer's struggle with that recalcitrant

angel called Art; and it was through this specific struggle that Ernest Hemingway became *Hemingway* (now refined to a total body of transcendent work, after forty years of being endlessly dismembered and resurrected, as it continues to be, in the styles, the themes, the sense of life and literature of countless other writers). And it was through this struggle with form that he became the master, the culture hero, whom we have come to know and admire.

It was suggested that it might be of interest if I discussed here this evening some of my notions of the writer's experience in the United States, hence I have evoked the name of Hemingway, not by way of inviting far-fetched comparisons but in order to establish a perspective, a set of assumptions from which I may speak, and in an attempt to avoid boring you by emphasizing those details of racial hardship which for some forty years now have been evoked whenever writers of my own cultural background have essayed their experience in public.

I do this *not* by way of denying totally the validity of these by now stylized recitals, for I have shared and still share many of their detailed injustices – what Negro can escape them? – but by way of suggesting that they are, at least in a discussion of a writer's experience, as *writer*, as artist, somewhat beside the point.

For we select neither our parents, our race nor our nation; these occur to us out of the love, the hate, the circumstances, the fate, of others. But we *do* become writers out of an act of will, out of an act of choice; a dim, confused and ofttimes regrettable choice, perhaps, but choice nevertheless. And what happens thereafter causes all those experiences which occurred before we began to function as writers to take on a special quality of uniqueness. If this does not happen then as far as writing goes, the experiences have been misused. If we do not make of them a value, if we do not transform them into forms and images of meaning which they did not possess before, then we have failed as artists.

Thus for a writer to insist that his personal suffering is of special interest in itself, or simply because he belongs to a particular racial or religious group, is to advance a claim for special privileges which members of his group who are not writers would be ashamed to demand. The kindest judgment one can make of this point of view is that it reveals a sad misunderstanding of the relationship between suffering and art. Thomas Mann[8] and André Gide[9] have told us much of this and there are critics, like Edmund Wilson,[10] who have told of the connection between the wound and the bow.

As I see it, it is through the process of making artistic forms – plays, poems, novels – out of one's experience that one becomes a writer, and it is through this process, this struggle, this the writer helps give meaning to the experience of the group. And it is the process of mastering the discipline, the techniques, the fortitude, the culture, through which this is made possible that constitutes the writer's real experience as *writer*, as artist. If this sounds like an argument for the artist's withdrawal from social struggles, I would recall to you W. H. Auden's[11] comment to the effect that:

> In our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act. So long as artists exist, making what they please, and think they ought to make, even if it is not terribly good, even if it appeals to only a

handful of people, they remind the Management of something managers need to be reminded of, namely, that the managed are people with faces, not anonymous members, that *Homo Laborans*[12] is also *Homo Ludens*.[13]

Without doubt, even the most *engagé*[14] writer – and I refer to true artists, not to artists *manqués*[15] – begin their careers in play and puzzlement, in dreaming over the details of the world in which they become conscious of themselves.

Let Tar Baby,[16] that enigmatic figure from Negro folklore, stand for the world. He leans, black and gleaming, against the wall of life utterly noncommittal under our scrutiny, our questioning, starkly unmoving before our naive attempts at intimidation. Then we touch him playfully and before we can say *Sonny Liston*! we find ourselves stuck. Our playful investigations become a labor, a fearful struggle, an *agon*.[17] Slowly we perceive that our task is to learn the proper way of freeing ourselves to develop, in other words, technique.

Sensing this, we give him our sharpest attention, we question him carefully, we struggle with more subtlety; while he, in his silent way, holds on, demanding that we perceive the necessity of calling him by his true name as the price of our freedom. It is unfortunate that he has so many, many "true names" – all spelling chaos; and in order to discover even one of these we must first come into the possession of our own names. For it is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own.

Once while listening to the play of a two-year-old girl who did not know she was under observation, I heard her saying over and over again, at first with questioning and then with sounds of growing satisfaction, "I am Mimi Livisay? ... I am Mimi Livisay. I *am* Mimi Livisay ... I am *Mimi* Li-vi-say! I am Mimi ..."

And in deed and in fact she was – or became so soon thereafter, by working playfully to establish the unity between herself and her name.

For many of us this is far from easy. We must learn to wear our names within all the noise and confusion of the environment in which we find ourselves; make them the center of all of our associations with the world, with man and with nature. We must charge them with all our emotions, our hopes, hates, loves, aspirations. They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past.

And when we are reminded so constantly that we bear, as Negroes, names originally possessed by those who owned our enslaved grandparents, we are apt, especially if we are potential writers, to be more than ordinarily concerned with the veiled and mysterious events, the fusions of blood, the furtive couplings, the business transactions, the violations of faith and loyalty, the assaults; yes, and the unrecognized and unrecognizable loves through which our names were handed down unto us.

So charged with emotion does this concern become for some of us, that we have, earlier, the example of the followers of Father Divine[18] and, now, the Black

Muslims,[19] discarding their original names in rejection of the bloodstained, the brutal, the sinful images of the past. Thus they would declare new identities, would clarify a new program of intention and destroy the verbal evidence of a willed and ritualized discontinuity of blood and human intercourse.

Not all of us, actually only a few, seek to deal with our names in this manner. We take what we have and make of them what we can. And there are even those who know where the old broken connections lie, who recognize their relatives across the chasm of historical denial and the artificial barriers of society, and who see themselves as bearers of many of the qualities which were admirable in the original sources of their common line (Faulkner[20] has made much of this); and I speak here not of mere forgiveness, nor of obsequious insensitivity to the outrages symbolized by the denial and the division, but of the conscious acceptance of the harsh realities of the human condition, of the ambiguities and hypocrisies of human history as they have played themselves out in the United States.

Perhaps, taken in aggregate, these European names which (sometimes with irony, sometimes with pride, but always with personal investment) represent a certain triumph of the spirit, speaking to us of those who rallied, reassembled and transformed themselves and who under dismembering pressures refused to die. "Brothers and sisters," I once heard a Negro preacher exhort, "let us make up our faces before the world, and our names shall sound throughout the land with honor! For we ourselves are our *true* names, not their epithets! So let us, I say, Make Up Our Faces and Our Minds!"

Perhaps my preacher had read T. S. Eliot,[21] although I doubt it. And in actuality, it was unnecessary that he do so, for a concern with names and naming was very much a part of that special area of American culture from which I come, and it is precisely for this reason that this example should come to mind in a discussion of my own experience as writer.

Undoubtedly, writers begin their *conditioning* as manipulators of words long before they become aware of literature – certain Freudians[22] would say at the breast. Perhaps. But if so, that is far too early to be of use at this moment. Of this, though, I am certain: that despite the misconceptions of those educators who trace the reading difficulties experienced by large numbers of Negro children in Northern schools to their Southern background, these children are, in *their* familiar South, facile manipulators of words. I know, too, that the Negro community is deadly in its ability to create nicknames and to spot all that is ludicrous in an unlikely name or that which is incongruous in conduct. Names are not qualities; nor are words, in this particular sense, actions. To assume that they are could cost one his life many times a day. Language skills depend to a large extent upon a knowledge of the details, the manners, the objects, the folkways, the psychological patterns, of a given environment. Humor and wit depend upon much the same awareness, and so does the suggestive power of names.

"A small brown bowlegged Negro with the name 'Franklin D. Roosevelt[23] Jones' might sound like a clown to someone who looks at him from the outside" said my friend Albert Murray, "but on the other hand

he just might turn out to be a hell of a fireside operator. He might just lie back in all of that comic juxtaposition of names and manipulate you deaf, dumb and blind – and you not even suspecting it, because you're thrown out of stance by his name! There you are, so dazzled by the F.D.R. image – which you *know* you can't see – and so delighted with your own superior position that you don't realize that its *Jones* who must be confronted."

Well, as you must suspect, all of this speculation on the matter of names has a purpose, and now, because it is tied up so ironically with my own experience as a writer, I must turn to my own name.

For in the dim beginnings, before I ever thought consciously of writing, there was my own name, and there was, doubtless, a certain magic in it. From the start I was uncomfortable with it, and in my earliest years it caused me much puzzlement. Neither could I understand what a poet was, nor why, exactly, my father had chosen to name me after one. Perhaps I could have understood it perfectly well had he named me after his own father, but that name had been given to an older brother who died and thus was out of the question. But why hadn't he named me after a hero, such as Jack Johnson,[24] or a soldier like Colonel Charles Young,[25] or a great seaman like Admiral Dewey,[26] or an educator like Booker T. Washington,[27] or a great orator and abolitionist like Frederick Douglass?[28] Or again, why hadn't he named me (as so many Negro parents had done) after President Teddy Roosevelt?[29]

Instead, he named me after someone called Ralph Waldo Emerson,[30] and then, when I was three, he died. It was too early for me to have understood his choice, although I'm sure he must have explained it many times, and it was also too soon for me to have made the connection between my name and my father's love for reading. Much later, after I began to write and work with words, I came to suspect that he was aware of the suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming.

I recall an odd conversation with my mother during my early teens in which she mentioned their interest in, of all things, prenatal culture! But for a long time I actually knew only that my father read a lot, and that he admired this remote Mr. Emerson, who was something called a "poet and philosopher" – so much so that he named his second son after him.

I knew, also, that whatever his motives, the combination of names he'd given me caused me no end of trouble from the moment when I could talk well enough to respond to the ritualized question which grownups put to very young children. Emerson's name was quite familiar to Negroes in Oklahoma during those days when World War I was brewing, and adults, eager to show off their knowledge of literary figures, and obviously amused by the joke implicit in such a small brown nubbin of a boy carrying around such a heavy moniker, would invariably repeat my first two names and then to my great annoyance, they'd add "Emerson."

And I, in my confusion, would reply, "No, *no, I'm* not Emerson; he's the little boy who lives next door." Which only made them laugh all the louder. "Oh no," they'd say, "*you're* Ralph Waldo Emerson," while I had fantasies of blue murder.

Library

June Jordan (1936–2002)

In June Jordan's young adult novel published in 1971, *His Own Where*, the 16-year-old Buddy Rivers and 14-year-old Angela Figueroa move into a deserted cemetery toolshed, a place for Buddy to create "[h]is own where, own place for loving made for making love." Ideas of place, identity, and belonging inform Jordan's work, motifs no doubt honed during her collaboration with Buckminster Fuller in his architectural redesign of Harlem in the late 1960s. Although *His Own Where* was her most celebrated work – it made the *New York Times* list of the Most Outstanding Books of 1971, was nominated for a National Book Award, and was listed as one of the year's best books by the American Library Association – June Jordan's extraordinarily prolific body of work includes poetry, short stories, lectures, essays, plays, and anthologies spanning the last decades of the twentieth century.

June Millicent Jordan was born in Harlem to Jamaican immigrants Granville Ivanhoe Jordan and Mildred Maud (Fisher) Jordan. Although she was raised in the Bedford–Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York City, as a teenager, her parents sent her first to the nearby all-white Mildwood High School for a year, and then to the all-girls' Northfield School in Massachusetts. Both institutions left her feeling racially and culturally isolated; a lack of belonging that she later incorporated into much of her work. Her educational path led in 1953 to Barnard College, where she met Michael Meyer, a white Columbia University student. The two married in 1955 and moved to Chicago. He completed graduate study in anthropology while she finished her undergraduate coursework at the University of Chicago. The couple had a child, Christopher David Meyer, in 1958, but they divorced in 1965. Jordan assumed full responsibility for her son while writing and working as a film assistant in Harlem. Under her married name of June Meyer, she published pieces in *Esquire*, *Evergreen Review*, *The Nation*, *Partisan Review*, *Black World*, and *The New York Times*. In 1969 she published her first volume of poetry, *Who Look at Me*, dialogic poems aimed at young readers in which she addressed paintings of African Americans. In 1970 she edited *Soulscript: Afro-American Poetry*, a magazine that featured poetry both by established African American writers and by young adults aged 12 to 18.

Like Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni, Jordan rooted her poetic sensibility in an ardent belief in the power of Black English and a strong sense of activism. Antiracism, feminism, and political liberation fueled her political support of oppressed people in Palestine, Nicaragua, and South Africa. She was also an outspoken advocate for gay and lesbian rights. Prior to the success of *His Own Where*, she taught English at the City University of New York and at Connecticut College. In 1968 she became an instructor of English at Sarah Lawrence College (1968–1974), and subsequently spent time at Yale University, City College of New York, and State University of New York at Stony Brook, where

activism of the era through her bold experimentation with form, style, and theme. *Homecoming* (1969) and *We a BaddDDD People* (1970) use idioms like rap, jazz, and the blues to show the rebirth of a black consciousness that rejected white values. Her play *The Bronx Is Next* (1968) explores the political uses of violent revolution, while *Sister Son/ji* (1969), another play, traces the evolution of racial identity.

The 1970s were a cosmopolitan time for Sanchez. She traveled the globe, visiting China, the Caribbean, and Cuba. She was briefly a member of the Nation of Islam (1972–1975), leaving on account of its views on women. Still, its black nationalism informed her critically acclaimed spiritual autobiography *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1974). Sanchez led the Afro-American Studies Program at Amherst College and taught at numerous colleges and universities, including the University of Pennsylvania. In 1977 she became Temple University's first Presidential Fellow, and taught English literature there until her retirement in 1999, after which she became Professor Emerita.

In addition to the American Book Award, Sanchez has received significant recognition for her artistry and her social activism. She has won a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1978–1979), the Paul Robeson Social Justice Award (1989), a Pew Fellowship in the Arts (1993), the Langston Hughes Poetry Award (1999), and the Poetry Society of America's Robert Frost Medal (2001). In 2012, she was named the first Poet Laureate of Philadelphia.

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Extract from A Blues Book for a Blue Black Magic Woman

Library

Part One: Introduction (Queens of the Universe)[1]

We Black/woooomen have been called many
things: foxes, matriarchs, whores,
bougies, sweet mommas, gals,
sapphires, sisters and recently Queens.
i would say that Black/woooomen have been
a combination of all these words because
if we examine our past/history, at
one time or another we've had to be like
those words be saying.
        but today, in spite
of much vulgarity splattering us, there are
many roles we can discard.
        there are many we
must discard for our own survival for our
own sanity for the contributions we must
make to our emerging Black nation.
        and what/how
we must mooooOOOVE to as the only QUEENS
OF THE UNIVERSE to sustain/keep our sanity
in this insane messed up/diet/conscious/
pill taking/faggotty/masochistic/miss anne/
orientated/society has got to be dealt with
because that's us. You hear me? US.
        Black/woooomen.
the only QUEENS OF THE UNIVERSE, even though
we be stepping unqueenly sometimes. like it ain't
easy being a queen in this unrighteous world
full of miss annes and mr. annes.
but we steady trying.

        for the thing that
Black/woooomen of today must understand
is that loooove/
    peace/
        contentment will never
be ours for this crackerized country has dealt
on us and colonized us body and soul and
the job of Black/woooomen is to deal with this
under the direction of Black men. we mussssST
absorb/mooovVVE on pass the waylaying whiteness
of our minds while never letting it keep us
from our men, children, naturrrals, long dresses,
morals and our humanity.
        for Black/woooomen
are the key. and our reward will be
seeing our warrior sons and beautiful young
sisters moving in human/nationalistic/
revolutionary/ways toward each other. &
the enemy.
    Black/woooomen must embrace
Blackness as a religion/husband. Blackness
mussssST sustain us through all these coming
hard years for sisters they are coming. & we
have to be strooong, strooonNGER
        than our
yesteryears. our
        tomorrows. we must be prepared for all:
gaming. rhetoric. poverty. empty beds.
death. sisters calling in the nite screeeeamen
    an arethasong.
        save me. somebody saaaAVVE
me. yeh. we be crying together from coast to
coast saying

somebody savvvvVVVE me.
yeh, save us.
savvvVVVE us all.
did you hear us?
yeh. us. sisters.
your sisters. we be steady
calling each other and Black/woooomen
must organize/reorganize their groups to meet
answer these needs/screeeeeams of living.
i mean. sisters must be prepared to go out
to sisters homes to keep them out of bars,
off of quick relationships that will
eventually destroy them and their families.
& our nation.
we must preserve. prolong our
lives. we have to stop eating unhealthy foods/
smoking/drinking/leaning over bars elbowing
away our lives because we blue over some
maaaAANN.
sisters. we beautifully Black. not blue.
ain't no time for tears shed for one/single
maaaAAN.
yeh. life's somethingelse. but our
children's lives can't
won't/mussSN'T be like
ours. & their lives will be like ours if we don't
mooooVVVE awaaaAAY from slave actions.
slave mentalities. the only tears to be shed
must be for our nation as we fight a
lonnng fight for freedom. sisters. some
of us Black woooomen who have to move in
the nation without men can have looooOOVE.
it can be the love of/for freedom. we can get
high off the knowledge that one day our
children will moooVVE like free
menNNN/woooomen.
can't you see them, sisters? there they be.
walking. moving in freedom. strutting a
high/walk of freedom. runnnNNING in their
Black air. holding their free/land/nation
up with their laughter. listen to em.
watch em. yeh. do it young brothers.
sisters. doooooooo it.
we Black/wooomen
are the first teachers.
nurses, givers of life. teachers of all
human things.
we must be about building
a strong nation since we are a nation.
loooven. teaching our children. looooven.
teaching our brothers. sisters. loooven.
teaching them so they will be able to
looovve/livvvVVE when their time comes
generations removed from whiteness. we
have to be the guerilla/
fighters for our
children's minds. we musssSSST begin
basement schools in our homes or support
existing Black schools.
white schools teach
Black children to hate themselves, each other
and their parents.
white schools teach our
children tomish ways.
white schools bring
our children in contact with unholy people

who contaminate not only their minds but
their bodies as well.
& if we are committed &
not jiving then our children's minds must be
upmost in OUR minds. are we brothers. sisters
gonna change the world then later on find
out because we didn't educate our children
in our ideology that we have children who are
only part/time/Black children. or would
be hippies? we need young Black minds.
and public schools/catholic schools do
not turn out what we need. & those of us
moving in a warrior's
strength must support.
loooVVVE our warrior/Kings/Gods.
mussSST bear children.
musssSST teach them
their fathers are warriors
among white
faggotry. that we are his core his base
for him to move out against the white men
who plot & connive our destruction each &
every day.
for we must return to Black men
his children full of our women/love/tenderness/
sweet/Blackness full of pride/so they can
shape the male children into young warriors
who will stand alongside them.
so that young
sisters will know the strength. majesty of
Black fathers and smile.
feel warmed by this
strength and mooooVVE
on to their husbands
with these feelings. it has to be done.
sisters. because Black men and Black
wooomen have a history of alienation in
this country. the devil has superimposed
on our minds myths about ourselves.
we are busy calling each other matriarchs
or no good bums
because the devil has
identified us as such. listen, sisters. i'm not
saying that some of that might not be. we know
it exists. & requires work. new ideas. new thoughts
but it's an easy way out too.
i mean there are
reasons for brothers not able to support their
families. like no gigs. There are reasons for
ago brothers living their lives in bars.
or riding majestic/white
horses in a machine
age. they couldn't see a win nohow.
or there are reasons
for wooomen being the head of families.
like brothers cutting out because this
was the cooooollLLL thing to do or because
the sisters made more money than the
brothers and put them out.
we must looook
at our past. not be angered at it. nor upset.
nor reinstigating a hate/name/calling/contest.
we must loooOK.
learnNNN.
moove on passSST. because
waiting for us all if we begin to deal

honestly with each other.
in love ways. in trust.
there's waiting for us.
a Nation. a place for our
BLACKNESS.
if we are about freedom then we must
start talking. moving. towards
an organization
that will sustain us & mooooVVE us
awaaay from white values & a hollywood/
directed/revolutionary change.
if we are about
just rapping/jiving/gaming
then our life
styles will continue as they are now.
& that means our destruction.
a continuation
of our slave/culture.
sisters.
like that song
be saying. it ain't easy.
it won't be easy a-tall.
because since we are the moral keepers/
teachers/nurses/civilizers/
we must move always in loving ways
toward each other & our brothers.
there must be no
competition between us. no hatred.
& that will
be hard because some sisters are still
moving in negative.
peculiar ways toward
themselves and others. they still believe
what the devil has told them about
themselves.
so we must, those who are wise
enough to belong to an organization
MOOOVVE toward
these sisters and run down their white ways
that define them, make them move as
whores and not as QUEENS.
that's what they are if they could only see
their beauty.
& know that Black/mennNNN
must be left alone to TCB for the nation
for our children for our people.
but after
many talks if they don't listen
then they must be expelled
from the nation/builders
& turned loose
to runNNNN with all the other white/cavish
whores running/polluting the land.
because we are about
keeping to our morals
about building an everlasting nation.
we are about educating our children.
moving in non/competitive/ways.
loving each
other.
we are about WORK. CONSTANT. TCBING
the kind of movement that is in
the NATION OF ISLAM.
i have seen
Warrior/Gods. moving. TCBing.
i have seen sister Queens moving in

sun wrapped beauty
and for those of us who do not move in an
organization yet. know that you will.
if you are serious about building a nation.
you'll move to ELIJAH MUHAMMAD.
where Black/MennNNN are steady moving.
where Black/Woooomen are loooVVVING/
teaching Blackness. wherever the desire for
freedom is.
until you reclaim your own,
perhaps this oath/poem to be said everyday
will help you sisters:
i am a Black/woooOOOOMAN
my face.
my brown
bamboo/colored
black/berry/face

will spread itself over
this western hemisphere and
be remembered.
be sunnnNNGG.
for i will be called
QUEEN. &
walk/move in
black/queenly/ways
and the world
shaken by
my Blackness
will channnNNGGEE
colors. & be
reborn.
BLACK. Again.

1970, 1974

From Sonia Sanchez, *A Blues Book for a Blue Black Magic Woman*. pp. 11–20. Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1974.

Notes

[1] "Part One" first published in *Black Scholar* (January/February 1970).

Toni Cade Bambara (1939–1995)

Before she was a widely anthologized short-story writer, Toni Cade Bambara edited a groundbreaking anthology of her own, *The Black Woman* (1970), featuring writing by Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker, among others. Bringing together the aesthetics of both the Black Arts Movement and feminism, *The Black Woman* was the first collection written by and for African American women, many of whom, like Bambara, were frustrated with the dearth of opportunities for them to publish their literary work. As editor of the project, Bambara displayed her passion for political activism, feminism, and art. Her subsequent works reflect the ideals behind *The Black Woman* – artistic collaboration, political engagement, and pride in the unique historical legacy of African American women.

Miltona Mirkin Cade was born in 1939 in New York City. Raised along with one brother by her mother Helen Henderson Cade in New York and New Jersey, she was from an early age influenced by Harlem. She attended performances at the Apollo Theatre with her father, and heard various socialist, unionist, and black nationalist rabble-rousers at the Speakers' Corner. A diligent explorer of the New York Public Library, she was especially inspired by the poetry of Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks. She likewise credited African American music of the 1940s and 1950s with enhancing her "voice and pace and pitch," later reflected in the lively rhythms and jazz improvisations of her prose. In 1959, she graduated from Queens College with a degree in theater arts and English literature. That same year, her first short story, "Sweet Town," appeared in *Vendome Magazine*. In her writing she adopted the West African surname Bambara (legally changing it in 1970) as her own upon discovering that it likewise belonged to her grandmother.

As for many artists of the era, Bambara's art was closely aligned with political and social activism. After graduation she spent two years as a caseworker for the New York Department of Welfare, working with families and youths. While working as program director of the Colony Settlement House in Brooklyn from 1962 to 1965, she completed an MA in American Studies from the City College of New York. Until 1969, Bambara taught English and theater in the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) program at City College while writing short stories and articles for various magazines, including *The Massachusetts Review*, *Essence*, *Redbook*, *Negro Digest*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Phylon*. As an assistant professor of English at Rutgers University, she was immersed in publishing an anthology, *Tales and Stories for Black Folk* (1971), and her first short-story collection, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), followed by her winning an award from local residents for her community service in 1974. Around this time, Bambara also drew inspiration from international travel. In 1973, she visited Cuba and Vietnam, and learned about racial and sexual

oppression on a global scale. Her subsequent story collection, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977), used Southeast Asia as the setting for stories about communal and spiritual interconnections.

In 1980, Bambara published *The Salt Eaters*, a futuristic novel in which a suicidal community organizer named Velma Henry, along with members of her surrounding community, strives for healing in a fictional Georgia city. Remarkable for its myriad narrators and non-linear plot, *The Salt Eaters* exhibits lyrical prose and portrays strong, independent African American women, features that earned it the American Book Award and a National Endowment for the Arts Award in 1981. After serving as visiting professor in Afro-American Studies at Emory University and as Writer-in-Residence at Spelman College (1978–1979), Bambara began work as a documentary filmmaker and teacher of script writing at the Scribe Video Center in Philadelphia, where she remained until her death. She collaborated with Louis Massiah on the Academy Award-winning documentary *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1986), which also won Bambara her second American Book Award. Throughout the 1980s, she edited, narrated, wrote, and performed in various documentaries about African American icons, including W.E.B. Du Bois, John Coltrane, and Malcolm X.

In 1999, Bambara died of colon cancer, and was survived by one daughter, Karma Bene Bambara. A final novel, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999), was edited by Toni Morrison and published posthumously.

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Extract from Gorilla, My Love

My Man Bovanne[1]

Blind people got a hummin jones if you notice. Which is understandable completely once you been around one and notice what no eyes will force you into to see people, and you get past the first time, which seems to come out of nowhere, and it's like you in church again with fat-chest ladies and old gents gruntin a hum low in the throat to whatever the preacher be saying. Shakey Bee bottom lip all swole up with Sweet Peach and me explainin how come the sweet-potato bread was a dollar-quarter this time stead of dollar regular and he say uh hunh he understand, then he break into this *thizzin* kind of hum which is quiet, but fiercesome just the same, if you ain't ready for it. Which I wasn't. But I got used to it and the onliest time I had to say somethin bout it was when he was playin checkers on the stoop one time and he commenst to hummin quite churchy seem to me. So I says, "Look here Shakey Bee, I can't beat you and Jesus too." He stop.

So that's how come I asked My Man Bovanne to dance. He ain't my man mind you, just a nice ole gent from the block that we all know cause he fixes things and the kids like him. Or used to fore Black Power got hold their minds and mess em around till they can't be civil to ole folks. So we at this benefit for my niece's cousin who's runnin for somethin with this Black party somethin or other behind her. And I press up close to dance with Bovanne who blind and I'm hummin and he hummin, chest to chest like talkin. Not jammin my breasts into the man. Wasn't bout tits. Was bout vibrations. And he dug it and asked me what color dress I had on and how my hair was fixed and how I was doin without a man, not nosy but nice-like, and who was at this affair and was the canapés dainty-stingy or healthy enough to get hold of proper. Comfy and cheery is what I'm tryin to get across. Touch talkin like the heel of the hand on the tambourine or on a drum.

But right away Joe Lee come up on us and frown for dancin so close to the man. My own son who knows what kind of warm I am about; and don't grown men call me long distance and in the middle of the night for a little Mama comfort? But he frown. Which ain't right since Bovanne can't see and defend himself. Just a nice old man who fixes toasters and busted irons and bicycles and things and changes the lock on my door when my men friends get messy. Nice man. Which is not why they invited him. Grass roots you see. Me and Sister Taylor and the woman who does heads at Mamies and the man from the barber shop, we all there on account of we grass roots. And I ain't never been