

Dreams from My Father

A Story of Race and Inheritance



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CHAPTER FIVE

THREE O'CLOCK IN THE morning. The moon-washed streets empty, the growl of a car picking up speed down a distant road. The revelers would be tucked away by now, paired off or alone, in deep, beer-heavy sleep, Hasan at his new lady's place—don't stay up, he had said with a wink. And now just the two of us to wait for the sunrise, me and Billie Holiday, her voice warbling through the darkened room, reaching toward me like a lover.

I'm a fool . . . to want you.

Such a fool . . . to want you.

I poured myself a drink and let my eyes skip across the room: bowls of pretzel crumbs, overflowing ashtrays, empty bottles like a skyline against the wall. Great party. That's what everybody had said: Count on Barry and Hasan to rock the house. Everybody except Regina. Regina hadn't enjoyed herself. What was it that she'd said before she left? *You always think it's about you.* And then that stuff about her grandmother. Like I was somehow responsible for the fate of the entire black race. As if it was me who had kept her grandma on her knees all her life. To hell with Regina. To hell with her high-

horse, holier-than-thou, you-let-me-down look in her eyes. She didn't know me. She didn't understand where I was coming from.

I fell back on the couch and lit a cigarette, watching the match burn down until it tickled my fingertips, then feeling the prick on the skin as I pinched the flame dead. *What's the trick?* the man asks. *The trick is not caring that it hurts.* I tried to remember where I'd heard the line, but it was lost to me now, like a forgotten face. No matter. Billie knew the same trick; it was in that torn-up, trembling voice of hers. And I had learned it, too; that's what my last two years in high school had been about, after Ray went off to junior college somewhere and I had set the books aside; after I had stopped writing to my father and he'd stopped writing back. I had grown tired of trying to untangle a mess that wasn't of my making.

I had learned not to care.

I blew a few smoke rings, remembering those years. Pot had helped, and booze; maybe a little blow when you could afford it. Not smack, though—Micky, my potential initiator, had been just a little too eager for me to go through with that. Said he could do it blindfolded, but he was shaking like a faulty engine when he said it. Maybe he was just cold; we were standing in a meat freezer in the back of the deli where he worked, and it couldn't have been more than twenty degrees in there. But he didn't look like he was shaking from the cold. Looked more like he was sweating, his face shiny and tight. He had pulled out the needle and the tubing, and I'd looked at him standing there, surrounded by big slabs of salami and roast beef, and right then an image popped into my head of an air bubble, shiny and round like a pearl, rolling quietly through a vein and stopping my heart. . . .

Junkie. Pothead. That's where I'd been headed: the final, fatal role of the young would-be black man. Except the highs hadn't been about that, me trying to prove what a down brother I was. Not by then, anyway. I got high for just the opposite effect, something that could push questions of who I was out of my mind, something that

could flatten out the landscape of my heart, blur the edges of my memory. I had discovered that it didn't make any difference whether you smoked reefer in the white classmate's sparkling new van, or in the dorm room of some brother you'd met down at the gym, or on the beach with a couple of Hawaiian kids who had dropped out of school and now spent most of their time looking for an excuse to brawl. Nobody asked you whether your father was a fat-cat executive who cheated on his wife or some laid-off joe who slapped you around whenever he bothered to come home. You might just be bored, or alone. Everybody was welcome into the club of disaffection. And if the high didn't solve whatever it was that was getting you down, it could at least help you laugh at the world's ongoing folly and see through all the hypocrisy and bullshit and cheap moralism.

That's how it had seemed to me then, anyway. It had taken a couple of years before I saw how fates were beginning to play themselves out, the difference that color and money made after all, in who survived, how soft or hard the landing when you finally fell. Of course, either way, you needed some luck. That's what Pablo had lacked, mostly, not having his driver's license that day, a cop with nothing better to do than to check the trunk of his car. Or Bruce, not finding his way back from too many bad acid trips and winding up in a funny farm. Or Duke, not walking away from the car wreck. . . .

I had tried to explain some of this to my mother once, the role of luck in the world, the spin of the wheel. It was at the start of my senior year in high school; she was back in Hawaii, her field work completed, and one day she had marched into my room, wanting to know the details of Pablo's arrest. I had given her a reassuring smile and patted her hand and told her not to worry, I wouldn't do anything stupid. It was usually an effective tactic, another one of those tricks I had learned: People were satisfied so long as you were courteous and smiled and made no sudden moves. They were more than satisfied;

they were relieved—such a pleasant surprise to find a well-mannered young black man who didn't seem angry all the time.

Except my mother hadn't looked satisfied. She had just sat there, studying my eyes, her face as grim as a hearse.

"Don't you think you're being a little casual about your future?" she said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. One of your friends was just arrested for drug possession. Your grades are slipping. You haven't even started on your college applications. Whenever I try to talk to you about it you act like I'm just this great big bother."

I didn't need to hear all this. It wasn't like I was flunking out. I started to tell her how I'd been thinking about maybe not going away for college, how I could stay in Hawaii and take some classes and work part-time. She cut me off before I could finish. I could get into any school in the country, she said, if I just put in a little effort. "Remember what that's like? Effort? Damn it, Bar, you can't just sit around like some good-time Charlie, waiting for luck to see you through."

"A good-time what?"

"A good-time Charlie. A loafer."

I looked at her sitting there, so earnest, so certain of her son's destiny. The idea that my survival depended on luck remained a heresy to her; she insisted on assigning responsibility somewhere—to herself, to Gramps and Toot, to me. I suddenly felt like puncturing that certainty of hers, letting her know that her experiment with me had failed. Instead of shouting, I laughed. "A good-time Charlie, huh? Well, why not? Maybe that's what I want out of life. I mean, look at Gramps. He didn't even go to college."

The comparison caught my mother by surprise. Her face went slack, her eyes wavered. It suddenly dawned on me, her greatest fear. "Is that what you're worried about?" I asked. "That I'll end up like Gramps?"

She shook her head quickly. "You're already much better educated than your grandfather," she said. But the certainty had finally drained from her voice. Instead of pushing the point, I stood up and left the room.

Billie had stopped singing. The silence felt oppressive, and I suddenly felt very sober. I rose from the couch, flipped the record, drank what was left in my glass, poured myself another. Upstairs, I could hear someone flushing a toilet, walking across a room. Another insomniac, probably, listening to his life tick away. That was the problem with booze and drugs, wasn't it? At some point they couldn't stop that ticking sound, the sound of certain emptiness. And that, I suppose, is what I'd been trying to tell my mother that day: that her faith in justice and rationality was misplaced, that we couldn't overcome after all, that all the education and good intentions in the world couldn't help plug up the holes in the universe or give you the power to change its blind, mindless course.

Still, I'd felt bad after that particular episode; it was the one trick my mother always had up her sleeve, that way she had of making me feel guilty. She made no bones about it, either. "You can't help it," she told me once. "Slipped it into your baby food. Don't worry, though," she added, smiling like the Cheshire cat. "A healthy dose of guilt never hurt anybody. It's what civilization was built on, guilt. A highly underrated emotion."

We could joke about it by then, for her worst fears hadn't come to pass. I had graduated without mishap, was accepted into several respectable schools, and settled on Occidental College in Los Angeles mainly because I'd met a girl from Brentwood while she was vacationing in Hawaii with her family. But I was still just going through the motions, as indifferent toward college as toward most everything else. Even Frank thought I had a bad attitude, although he was less than clear about how I should change it.

What had Frank called college? *An advanced degree in compromise.* I thought back to the last time I had seen the old poet, a few days before I left Hawaii. We had made small talk for a while; he complained about his feet, the corns and bone spurs that he insisted were a direct result of trying to force African feet into European shoes. Finally he had asked me what it was that I expected to get out of college. I told him I didn't know. He shook his big, hoary head.

"Well," he said, "that's the problem, isn't it? You *don't know*. You're just like the rest of these young cats out here. All you know is that college is the next thing you're supposed to do. And the people who are old enough to know better, who fought all those years for your right to go to college—they're just so happy to see you in there that they won't tell you the truth. The real price of admission."

"And what's that?"

"Leaving your race at the door," he said. "Leaving your people behind." He studied me over the top of his reading glasses. "Understand something, boy. You're not going to college to get educated. You're going there to get *trained*. They'll train you to want what you don't need. They'll train you to manipulate words so they don't mean anything anymore. They'll train you to forget what it is that you already know. They'll train you so good, you'll start believing what they tell you about equal opportunity and the American way and all that shit. They'll give you a corner office and invite you to fancy dinners, and tell you you're a credit to your race. Until you want to actually start running things, and then they'll yank on your chain and let you know that you may be a well-trained, well-paid nigger, but you're a nigger just the same."

"So what is it you're telling me—that I shouldn't be going to college?"

Frank's shoulders slumped, and he fell back in his chair with a sigh. "No. I didn't say that. You've got to go. I'm just telling you to keep your eyes open. Stay awake."

It made me smile, thinking back on Frank and his old Black Power, dashiki self. In some ways he was as incurable as my mother, as certain in his faith, living in the same sixties time warp that Hawaii had created. Keep your eyes open, he had warned. It wasn't as easy as it sounded. Not in sunny L.A. Not as you strolled through Occidental's campus, a few miles from Pasadena, tree-lined and Spanish-tiled. The students were friendly, the teachers encouraging. In the fall of 1979, Carter, gas lines, and breast-beating were all on their way out. Reagan was on his way in, morning in America. When you left campus, you drove on the freeway to Venice Beach or over to Westwood, passing East L.A. or South Central without even knowing it, just more palm trees peeking out like dandelions over the high concrete walls. L.A. wasn't all that different from Hawaii, not the part you saw. Just bigger, and easier to find a barber who knew how to cut your hair.

Anyway, most of the other black students at Oxy didn't seem all that worried about compromise. There were enough of us on campus to constitute a tribe, and when it came to hanging out many of us chose to function like a tribe, staying close together, traveling in packs. Freshman year, when I was still living in the dorms, there'd be the same sort of bull sessions that I'd had with Ray and other blacks back in Hawaii, the same grumblings, the same list of complaints. Otherwise, our worries seemed indistinguishable from those of the white kids around us. Surviving classes. Finding a well-paying gig after graduation. Trying to get laid. I had stumbled upon one of the well-kept secrets about black people: that most of us weren't interested in revolt; that most of us were tired of thinking about race all the time; that if we preferred to keep to ourselves it was mainly because that was the easiest way to stop thinking about it, easier than spending all your time mad or trying to guess whatever it was that white folks were thinking about you.

So why couldn't I let it go?

I don't know. I didn't have the luxury, I suppose, the certainty of

the tribe. Grow up in Compton and survival becomes a revolutionary act. You get to college and your family is still back there rooting for you. They're happy to see you escape; there's no question of betrayal. But I hadn't grown up in Compton, or Watts. I had nothing to escape from except my own inner doubt. I was more like the black students who had grown up in the suburbs, kids whose parents had already paid the price of escape. You could spot them right away by the way they talked, the people they sat with in the cafeteria. When pressed, they would sputter and explain that they refused to be categorized. They weren't defined by the color of their skin, they would tell you. They were individuals.

That's how Joyce liked to talk. She was a good-looking woman, Joyce was, with her green eyes and honey skin and pouty lips. We lived in the same dorm my freshman year, and all the brothers were after her. One day I asked her if she was going to the Black Students' Association meeting. She looked at me funny, then started shaking her head like a baby who doesn't want what it sees on the spoon.

"I'm not black," Joyce said. "I'm *multiracial*." Then she started telling me about her father, who *happened* to be Italian and was the sweetest man in the world; and her mother, who *happened* to be part African and part French and part Native American and part something else. "Why should I have to choose between them?" she asked me. Her voice cracked, and I thought she was going to cry. "It's not white people who are making me choose. Maybe it used to be that way, but now they're willing to treat me like a person. No—it's *black people* who always have to make everything racial. *They're* the ones making me choose. *They're* the ones who are telling me that I can't be who I am. . . ."

They, they, they. That was the problem with people like Joyce. They talked about the richness of their multicultural heritage and it sounded real good, until you noticed that they avoided black people. It wasn't a matter of conscious choice, necessarily, just a matter of gravitational pull, the way integration always worked, a one-way

street. The minority assimilated into the dominant culture, not the other way around. Only white culture could be neutral and objective. Only white culture could be nonracial, willing to adopt the occasional exotic into its ranks. Only white culture had individuals. And we, the half-breeds and the college-degreed, take a survey of the situation and think to ourselves, Why should we get lumped in with the losers if we don't have to? We become only so grateful to lose ourselves in the crowd, America's happy, faceless marketplace; and we're never so outraged as when a cabbie drives past us or the woman in the elevator clutches her purse, not so much because we're bothered by the fact that such indignities are what less fortunate coloreds have to put up with every single day of their lives—although that's what we tell ourselves—but because we're wearing a Brooks Brothers suit and speak impeccable English and yet have somehow been mistaken for an ordinary nigger.

Don't you know who I am? I'm an *individual!*

I sat up, lit another cigarette, emptied the bottle into my glass. I knew I was being too hard on poor Joyce. The truth was that I understood her, her and all the other black kids who felt the way she did. In their mannerisms, their speech, their mixed-up hearts, I kept recognizing pieces of myself. And that's exactly what scared me. Their confusion made me question my own racial credentials all over again, Ray's trump card still lurking in the back of my mind. I needed to put distance between them and myself, to convince myself that I wasn't compromised—that I was indeed still awake.

To avoid being mistaken for a sellout, I chose my friends carefully. The more politically active black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets. We smoked cigarettes and wore leather jackets. At night, in the dorms, we discussed neocolonialism, Franz Fanon, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy. When we ground out our cigarettes in

the hallway carpet or set our stereos so loud that the walls began to shake, we were resisting bourgeois society's stifling constraints. We weren't indifferent or careless or insecure. We were alienated.

But this strategy alone couldn't provide the distance I wanted, from Joyce or my past. After all, there were thousands of so-called campus radicals, most of them white and tenured and happily tolerated. No, it remained necessary to prove which side you were on, to show your loyalty to the black masses, to strike out and name names.

I thought back to that time when I was still living in the dorms, the three of us in Reggie's room—Reggie, Marcus, and myself—the patter of rain against the windowpane. We were drinking a few beers and Marcus was telling us about his run-in with the L.A.P.D. "They had no reason to stop me," he was saying. "No reason 'cept I was walking in a white neighborhood. Made me spread-eagle against the car. One of 'em pulled out his piece. I didn't let 'em scare me, though. That's what gets these storm troopers off, seeing fear in a black man. . . ."

I watched Marcus as he spoke, lean and dark and straight-backed, his long legs braced apart, comfortable in a white T-shirt and blue denim overalls. Marcus was the most conscious of brothers. He could tell you about his grandfather the Garveyite; about his mother in St. Louis who had raised her kids alone while working as a nurse; about his older sister who had been a founding member of the local Panther party; about his friends in the joint. His lineage was pure, his loyalties clear, and for that reason he always made me feel a little off-balance, like a younger brother who, no matter what he does, will always be one step behind. And that's just how I was feeling at that moment, listening to Marcus pronounce on his authentic black experience, when Tim walked into the room.

"Hey, guys," Tim had said, waving cheerfully. He turned to me. "Listen, Barry—do you have that assignment for Econ.?"

Tim was not a conscious brother. Tim wore argyle sweaters and pressed jeans and talked like Beaver Cleaver. He planned to major in

business. His white girlfriend was probably waiting for him up in his room, listening to country music. He was happy as a clam, and I wanted nothing more than for him to go away. I got up, walked with him down the hall to my room, gave him the assignment he needed. As soon as I got back to Reggie's room, I somehow felt obliged to explain.

"Tim's a trip, ain't he," I said, shaking my head. "Should change his name from Tim to Tom."

Reggie laughed, but Marcus didn't. Marcus said, "Why you say that, man?"

The question caught me by surprise. "I don't know. The dude's just goofy, that's all."

Marcus took a sip of his beer and looked me straight in the eye. "Tim seems all right to me," he said. "He's going about his business. Don't bother nobody. Seems to me we should be worrying about whether our own stuff's together instead of passing judgment on how other folks are supposed to act."

A year later, and I still burned with the memory, the anger and resentment I'd felt at that moment, Marcus calling me out in front of Reggie like that. But he'd been right to do it, hadn't he? He had caught me in a lie. Two lies, really—the lie I had told about Tim and the lie I was telling about myself. In fact, that whole first year seemed like one long lie, me spending all my energy running around in circles, trying to cover my tracks.

Except with Regina. That's probably what had drawn me to Regina, the way she made me feel like I didn't have to lie. Even that first time we met, the day she walked into the coffee shop and found Marcus giving me grief about my choice of reading material. Marcus had waved her over to our table, rising slightly to pull out a chair.

"Sister Regina," Marcus said. "You know Barack, don't you? I'm trying to tell Brother Barack here about this racist tract he's reading." He held up a copy of *Heart of Darkness*, evidence for the court. I reached over to snatch it out of his hands.

"Man, stop waving that thing around."

"See there," Marcus said. "Makes you embarrassed, don't it—just being seen with a book like this. I'm telling you, man, this stuff will poison your mind." He looked at his watch. "Damn, I'm late for class." He leaned over and pecked Regina on the cheek. "Talk to this brother, will you? I think he can still be saved."

Regina smiled and shook her head as we watched Marcus stride out the door. "Marcus is in one of his preaching moods, I see."

I tossed the book into my backpack. "Actually, he's right," I said. "It is a racist book. The way Conrad sees it, Africa's the cesspool of the world, black folks are savages, and any contact with them breeds infection."

Regina blew on her coffee. "So why are you reading it?"

"Because it's assigned." I paused, not sure if I should go on. "And because—"

"Because . . ."

"And because the book teaches me things," I said. "About white people, I mean. See, the book's not really about Africa. Or black people. It's about the man who wrote it. The European. The American. A particular way of looking at the world. If you can keep your distance, it's all there, in what's said and what's left unsaid. So I read the book to help me understand just what it is that makes white people so afraid. Their demons. The way ideas get twisted around. It helps me understand how people learn to hate."

"And that's important to you."

My life depends on it, I thought to myself. But I didn't tell Regina that. I just smiled and said, "That's the only way to cure an illness, right? Diagnose it."

She smiled back and sipped her coffee. I had seen her around before, usually sitting in the library with a book in hand, a big, dark woman who wore stockings and dresses that looked homemade, along with tinted, oversized glasses and a scarf always covering her

head. I knew she was a junior, helped organize black student events, didn't go out much. She stirred her coffee idly and asked, "What did Marcus call you just now? Some African name, wasn't it?"

"Barack."

"I thought your name was Barry."

"Barack's my given name. My father's name. He was Kenyan."

"Does it mean something?"

"It means 'Blessed.' In Arabic. My grandfather was a Muslim."

Regina repeated the name to herself, testing out the sound. "Barack. It's beautiful." She leaned forward across the table. "So why does everybody call you Barry?"

"Habit, I guess. My father used it when he arrived in the States. I don't know whether that was his idea or somebody else's. He probably used Barry because it was easier to pronounce. You know—helped him fit in. Then it got passed on to me. So I could fit in."

"Do you mind if I call you Barack?"

I smiled. "Not as long as you say it right."

She tilted her head impatiently, her mouth set in mock offense, her eyes ready to surrender to laughter. We ended up spending the afternoon together, talking and drinking coffee. She told me about her childhood in Chicago, the absent father and struggling mother, the South Side six-flat that never seemed warm enough in winter and got so hot in the summer that people went out by the lake to sleep. She told me about the neighbors on her block, about walking past the taverns and pool halls on the way to church on Sunday. She told me about evenings in the kitchen with uncles and cousins and grandparents, the stew of voices bubbling up in laughter. Her voice evoked a vision of black life in all its possibility, a vision that filled me with longing—a longing for place, and a fixed and definite history. As we were getting up to leave, I told Regina I envied her.

"For what?"

"I don't know. For your memories, I guess."

Regina looked at me and started to laugh, a round, full sound from deep in her belly.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, Barack," she said, catching her breath, "isn't life something? And here I was all this time wishing I'd grown up in Hawaii."

Strange how a single conversation can change you. Or maybe it only seems that way in retrospect. A year passes and you know you feel differently, but you're not sure what or why or how, so your mind casts back for something that might give that difference shape: a word, a glance, a touch. I know that after what seemed like a long absence, I had felt my voice returning to me that afternoon with Regina. It remained shaky afterward, subject to distortion. But entering sophomore year I could feel it growing stronger, sturdier, that constant, honest portion of myself, a bridge between my future and my past.

It was around that time that I got involved in the divestment campaign. It had started as something of a lark, I suppose, part of the radical pose my friends and I sought to maintain, a subconscious end run around issues closer to home. But as the months passed and I found myself drawn into a larger role—contacting representatives of the African National Congress to speak on campus, drafting letters to the faculty, printing up flyers, arguing strategy—I noticed that people had begun to listen to my opinions. It was a discovery that made me hungry for words. Not words to hide behind but words that could carry a message, support an idea. When we started planning the rally for the trustees' meeting, and somebody suggested that I open the thing, I quickly agreed. I figured I was ready, and could reach people where it counted. I thought my voice wouldn't fail me.

Let's see, now. What was it that I had been thinking in those days leading up to the rally? The agenda had been carefully arranged beforehand—I was only supposed to make a few opening remarks, in the middle of which a couple of white students would come onstage

dressed in their paramilitary uniforms to drag me away. A bit of street theater, a way to dramatize the situation for activists in South Africa. I knew the score, had helped plan the script. Only, when I sat down to prepare a few notes for what I might say, something had happened. In my mind it somehow became more than just a two-minute speech, more than a way to prove my political orthodoxy. I started to remember my father's visit to Miss Hefty's class; the look on Coretta's face that day; the power of my father's words to transform. If I could just find the right words, I had thought to myself. With the right words everything could change—South Africa, the lives of ghetto kids just a few miles away, my own tenuous place in the world.

I was still in that trancelike state when I mounted the stage. For I don't know how long, I just stood there, the sun in my eyes, the crowd of a few hundred restless after lunch. A couple of students were throwing a Frisbee on the lawn; others were standing off to the side, ready to break off to the library at any moment. Without waiting for a cue, I stepped up to the microphone.

"There's a struggle going on," I said. My voice barely carried beyond the first few rows. A few people looked up, and I waited for the crowd to quiet.

"I say, there's a struggle going on!"

The Frisbee players stopped.

"It's happening an ocean away. But it's a struggle that touches each and every one of us. Whether we know it or not. Whether we want it or not. A struggle that demands we choose sides. Not between black and white. Not between rich and poor. No—it's a harder choice than that. It's a choice between dignity and servitude. Between fairness and injustice. Between commitment and indifference. A choice between right and wrong . . ."

I stopped. The crowd was quiet now, watching me. Somebody started to clap. "Go on with it, Barack," somebody else shouted. "Tell it like it is." Then the others started in, clapping, cheering, and I

knew that I had them, that the connection had been made. I took hold of the mike, ready to plunge on, when I felt someone's hands grabbing me from behind. It was just as we'd planned it, Andy and Jonathan looking grim-faced behind their dark glasses. They started yanking me off the stage, and I was supposed to act like I was trying to break free, except a part of me wasn't acting, I really wanted to stay up there, to hear my voice bouncing off the crowd and returning back to me in applause. I had so much left to say.

But my part was over. I stood on the side as Marcus stepped up to the mike in his white T-shirt and denims, lean and dark and straight-backed and righteous. He explained to the audience what they had just witnessed, why the administration's waffling on the issue of South Africa was unacceptable. Then Regina got up and testified, about the pride her family had felt in seeing her at college and the shame she now felt knowing that she was a part of an institution that paid for its privilege with the profits of oppression. I should have been proud of the two of them; they were eloquent, you could tell the crowd was moved. But I wasn't really listening anymore. I was on the outside again, watching, judging, skeptical. Through my eyes, we suddenly appeared like the sleek and well-fed amateurs we were, with our black chiffon armbands and hand-painted signs and earnest young faces. The Frisbee players had returned to their game. When the trustees began to arrive for their meeting, a few of them paused behind the glass walls of the administration building to watch us, and I noticed the old white men chuckling to themselves, one old geezer even waving in our direction. The whole thing was a farce, I thought to myself—the rally, the banners, everything. A pleasant afternoon diversion, a school play without the parents. And me and my one-minute oration—the biggest farce of all.

At the party that night, Regina came up to me and offered her congratulations. I asked what for.

"For that wonderful speech you gave."

I popped open a beer. "It was short, anyway."

Regina ignored my sarcasm. "That's what made it so effective," she said. "You spoke from the heart, Barack. It made people want to hear more. When they pulled you away, it was as if—"

"Listen, Regina," I said, cutting her off, "you are a very sweet lady. And I'm happy you enjoyed my little performance today. But that's the last time you will ever hear another speech out of me. I'm going to leave the preaching to you. And to Marcus. Me, I've decided I've got no business speaking for black folks."

"And why is that?"

I sipped on my beer, my eyes wandering over the dancers in front of us. "Because I've got nothing to say, Regina. I don't believe we made any difference by what we did today. I don't believe that what happens to a kid in Soweto makes much difference to the people we were talking to. Pretty words don't make it so. So why do I pretend otherwise? I'll tell you why. Because it makes *me* feel important. Because *I* like the applause. It gives me a nice, cheap thrill. That's all."

"You don't really believe that."

"That's what I believe."

She stared at me, puzzled, trying to figure out whether I was pulling her leg. "Well, you could have fooled me," she said finally, trying to match my tone. "Seemed to me like I heard a man speak who believed in something. A black man who cared. But hey, I guess I'm stupid."

I took another swig of beer and waved at someone coming through the door. "Not stupid, Regina. Naive."

She took a step back, her hands on her hips. "Naive? *You're* calling *me* naive? Uh-uh. I don't think so. If anybody's naive, it's you. You're the one who seems to think he can run away from himself. You're the one who thinks he can avoid what he feels." She stuck a finger in my chest. "You wanna know what your real problem is? You always think

everything's about you. You're just like Reggie and Marcus and Steve and all the other brothers out here. The rally is about you. The speech is about you. The hurt is always your hurt. Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Obama. It's not just about you. It's never just about you. It's about people who need your help. Children who are depending on you. They're not interested in your irony or your sophistication or your ego getting bruised. And neither am I."

Just as she was finishing, Reggie wandered out of the kitchen, drunker than I was. He came over and threw his arm around my shoulder. "Obama! Great party, man!" He threw Regina a sloppy grin. "Let me tell you, Regina, Obama and me go way back. Should have seen our parties last year, back at the dorms. Man, you remember that time we stayed up the whole weekend? Forty hours, no sleep. Started Saturday morning and didn't stop till Monday."

I tried to change the subject, but Reggie was on a roll. "I'm telling you, Regina, it was wild. When the maids show up Monday morning, we were all still sitting in the hallway, looking like zombies. Bottles everywhere. Cigarette butts. Newspapers. That spot where Jimmy threw up . . ." Reggie turned to me and started to laugh, spilling more beer on the rug. "You remember, don't you, man? Shit was so bad, those little old Mexican ladies started to cry. '*Dios Mio*,' one of 'em says, and the other one starts patting her on the back. Oh shit, we were crazy. . . ."

I smiled weakly, feeling Regina stare me down like the bum that I was. When she finally spoke it was as if Reggie weren't there.

"You think that's funny?" she said to me. Her voice was shaking, barely a whisper. "Is that what's real to you, Barack—making a mess for somebody else to clean up? That could have been my grandmother, you know. She had to clean up behind people for most of her life. I'll bet the people she worked for thought it was funny, too."

She grabbed her purse off the coffee table and headed for the door. I thought about running after her, but I noticed a few people

staring at me and I didn't want a scene. Reggie pulled on my arm, looking hurt and confused, like a lost child.

"What's her problem?" he said.

"Nothing," I said. I took the beer out of Reggie's hand and set it on top of the bookshelf. "She just believes in things that aren't really there."

I rose from the couch and opened my front door, the pent-up smoke trailing me out of the room like a spirit. Up above, the moon had slipped out of sight, only its glow still visible along the rim of high clouds. The sky had begun to lighten; the air tasted of dew.

Look at yourself before you pass judgment. Don't make someone else clean up your mess. It's not about you. They were such simple points, homilies I had heard a thousand times before, in all their variations, from TV sitcoms and philosophy books, from my grandparents and from my mother. I had stopped listening at a certain point, I now realized, so wrapped up had I been in my own perceived injuries, so eager was I to escape the imagined traps that white authority had set for me. To that white world, I had been willing to cede the values of my childhood, as if those values were somehow irreversibly soiled by the endless falsehoods that white spoke about black.

Except now I was hearing the same thing from black people I respected, people with more excuses for bitterness than I might ever claim for myself. Who told you that being honest was a white thing? they asked me. Who sold you this bill of goods, that your situation exempted you from being thoughtful or diligent or kind, or that morality had a color? You've lost your way, brother. Your ideas about yourself—about who you are and who you might become—have grown stunted and narrow and small.

I sat down on the doorstep and rubbed the knot in the back of my neck. How had that happened? I started to ask myself, but before the

question had even formed in my mind, I already knew the answer. Fear. The same fear that had caused me to push Coretta away back in grammar school. The same fear that had caused me to ridicule Tim in front of Marcus and Reggie. The constant, crippling fear that I didn't belong somehow, that unless I dodged and hid and pretended to be something I wasn't I would forever remain an outsider, with the rest of the world, black and white, always standing in judgment.

So Regina was right; it had been just about me. My fear. My needs. And now? I imagined Regina's grandmother somewhere, her back bent, the flesh of her arms shaking as she scrubbed an endless floor. Slowly, the old woman lifted her head to look straight at me, and in her sagging face I saw that what bound us together went beyond anger or despair or pity.

What was she asking of me, then? Determination, mostly. The determination to push against whatever power kept her stooped instead of standing straight. The determination to resist the easy or the expedient. You might be locked into a world not of your own making, her eyes said, but you still have a claim on how it is shaped. You still have responsibilities.

The old woman's face dissolved from my mind, only to be replaced by a series of others. The copper-skinned face of the Mexican maid, straining as she carries out the garbage. The face of Lolo's mother drawn with grief as she watches the Dutch burn down her house. The tight-lipped, chalk-colored face of Toot as she boards the six-thirty A.M. bus that will take her to work. Only a lack of imagination, a failure of nerve, had made me think that I had to choose between them. They all asked the same thing of me, these grandmothers of mine.

My identity might begin with the fact of my race, but it didn't, couldn't, end there.

At least that's what I would choose to believe.

For a few minutes more I sat still in my doorway, watching the sun glide into place, thinking about the call to Regina I'd be making that day. Behind me, Billie was on her last song. I picked up the refrain, humming a few bars. Her voice sounded different to me now. Beneath the layers of hurt, beneath the ragged laughter, I heard a willingness to endure. Endure—and make music that wasn't there before.

CHAPTER SIX

I SPENT MY FIRST NIGHT in Manhattan curled up in an alleyway. It wasn't intentional; while still in L.A., I had heard that a friend of a friend would be vacating her apartment in Spanish Harlem, near Columbia, and that given New York's real estate market I'd better grab it while I could. An agreement was reached; I wired ahead with the date of my August arrival; and after dragging my luggage through the airport, the subways, Times Square, and across 109th from Broadway to Amsterdam, I finally stood at the door, a few minutes past ten P.M.

I pressed the buzzer repeatedly, but no one answered. The street was empty, the buildings on either side boarded up, a bulk of rectangular shadows. Eventually, a young Puerto Rican woman emerged from the building, throwing a nervous look my way before heading down the street. I rushed to catch the door before it slammed shut, and, pulling my luggage behind me, proceeded upstairs to knock, and then bang, on the apartment door. Again, no answer, just a sound down the hall of a deadbolt thrown into place.

New York. Just like I pictured it. I checked my wallet—not enough money for a motel. I knew one person in New York, a guy named Sadik whom I'd met in L.A., but he'd told me that he worked all night at a