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Dreams from My Father



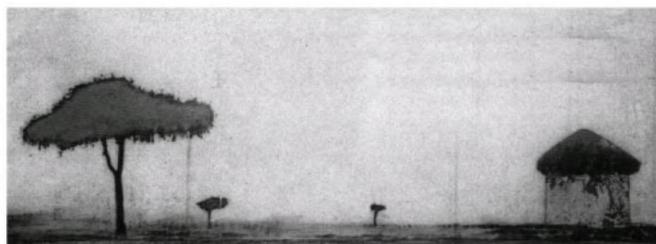
A Story of Race and Inheritance

Barack Obama



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CHAPTER ONE

A FEW MONTHS AFTER MY twenty-first birthday, a stranger called to give me the news. I was living in New York at the time, on Ninety-fourth between Second and First, part of that unnamed, shifting border between East Harlem and the rest of Manhattan. It was an uninviting block, treeless and barren, lined with soot-colored walk-ups that cast heavy shadows for most of the day. The apartment was small, with slanting floors and irregular heat and a buzzer downstairs that didn't work, so that visitors had to call ahead from a pay phone at the corner gas station, where a black Doberman the size of a wolf paced through the night in vigilant patrol, its jaws clamped around an empty beer bottle.

None of this concerned me much, for I didn't get many visitors. I was impatient in those days, busy with work and unrealized plans, and prone to see other people as unnecessary distractions. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate company exactly. I enjoyed exchanging Spanish pleasantries with my mostly Puerto Rican neighbors, and on my way back from classes I'd usually stop to talk to the boys who hung out on the stoop all summer long about the Knicks or the gunshots they'd heard the night before. When the weather was good, my roommate and I might sit out on the fire escape to smoke cigarettes

and study the dusk washing blue over the city, or watch white people from the better neighborhoods nearby walk their dogs down our block to let the animals shit on our curbs—"Scoop the poop, you bastards!" my roommate would shout with impressive rage, and we'd laugh at the faces of both master and beast, grim and unapologetic as they hunkered down to do the deed.

I enjoyed such moments—but only in brief. If the talk began to wander, or cross the border into familiarity, I would soon find reason to excuse myself. I had grown too comfortable in my solitude, the safest place I knew.

I remember there was an old man living next door who seemed to share my disposition. He lived alone, a gaunt, stooped figure who wore a heavy black overcoat and a misshapen fedora on those rare occasions when he left his apartment. Once in a while I'd run into him on his way back from the store, and I would offer to carry his groceries up the long flight of stairs. He would look at me and shrug, and we would begin our ascent, stopping at each landing so that he could catch his breath. When we finally arrived at his apartment, I'd carefully set the bags down on the floor and he would offer a courtly nod of acknowledgment before shuffling inside and closing the latch. Not a single word would pass between us, and not once did he ever thank me for my efforts.

The old man's silence impressed me; I thought him a kindred spirit. Later, my roommate would find him crumpled up on the third-floor landing, his eyes wide open, his limbs stiff and curled up like a baby's. A crowd gathered; a few of the women crossed themselves, and the smaller children whispered with excitement. Eventually the paramedics arrived to take away the body and the police let themselves into the old man's apartment. It was neat, almost empty—a chair, a desk, the faded portrait of a woman with heavy eyebrows and a gentle smile set atop the mantelpiece. Somebody opened the refrigerator and found close to a thousand dollars in small bills rolled

up inside wads of old newspaper and carefully arranged behind mayonnaise and pickle jars.

The loneliness of the scene affected me, and for the briefest moment I wished that I had learned the old man's name. Then, almost immediately, I regretted my desire, along with its companion grief. I felt as if an understanding had been broken between us—as if, in that barren room, the old man was whispering an untold history, telling me things I preferred not to hear.

It must have been a month or so later, on a cold, dreary November morning, the sun faint behind a gauze of clouds, that the other call came. I was in the middle of making myself breakfast, with coffee on the stove and two eggs in the skillet, when my roommate handed me the phone. The line was thick with static.

“Barry? Barry, is this you?”

“Yes. . . . Who's this?”

“Yes, Barry . . . this is your Aunt Jane. In Nairobi. Can you hear me?”

“I'm sorry—who did you say you were?”

“Aunt Jane. Listen, Barry, your father is dead. He is killed in a car accident. Hello? Can you hear me? I say, your father is dead. Barry, please call your uncle in Boston and tell him. I can't talk now, okay, Barry. I will try to call you again. . . .”

That was all. The line cut off, and I sat down on the couch, smelling eggs burn in the kitchen, staring at cracks in the plaster, trying to measure my loss.

At the time of his death, my father remained a myth to me, both more and less than a man. He had left Hawaii back in 1963, when I was only two years old, so that as a child I knew him only through the stories that my mother and grandparents told. They all had their favorites, each one seamless, burnished smooth from repeated use. I can still picture Gramps leaning back in his old stuffed chair after dinner, sipping whiskey and cleaning his teeth with the cellophane

from his cigarette pack, recounting the time that my father almost threw a man off the Pali Lookout because of a pipe. . . .

“See, your mom and dad decided to take this friend of his sight-seeing around the island. So they drove up to the Lookout, and Barack was probably on the wrong side of the road the whole way over there—”

“Your father was a terrible driver,” my mother explains to me. “He’d end up on the left-hand side, the way the British drive, and if you said something he’d just huff about silly American rules—”

“Well, this particular time they arrived in one piece, and they got out and stood at the railing to admire the view. And Barack, he was puffing away on this pipe that I’d given him for his birthday, pointing out all the sights with the stem, like a sea captain—”

“Your father was really proud of this pipe,” my mother interrupts again. “He’d smoke it all night while he studied, and sometimes—”

“Look, Ann, do you want to tell the story or are you going to let me finish?”

“Sorry, Dad. Go ahead.”

“Anyway, this poor fella—he was another African student, wasn’t he? Fresh off the boat. This poor kid must’ve been impressed with the way Barack was holding forth with this pipe, ’cause he asked if he could give it a try. Your dad thought about it for a minute, and finally agreed, and as soon as the fella took his first puff, he started coughing up a fit. Coughed so hard that the pipe slipped out of his hand and dropped over the railing, a hundred feet down the face of the cliff.”

Gramps stops to take another nip from his flask before continuing. “Well, now, your dad was gracious enough to wait until his friend stopped coughing before he told him to climb over the railing and bring the pipe back. The man took one peek down this ninety-degree incline and told Barack that he’d buy him a replacement—”

“Quite sensibly,” Toot says from the kitchen. (We call my grand-

mother Tutu, Toot for short; it means “grandparent” in Hawaiian, for she decided on the day I was born that she was still too young to be called Granny.) Gramps scowls but decides to ignore her.

“—but Barack was adamant about getting *his* pipe back, because it was a gift and couldn’t be replaced. So the fella took another look, and shook his head again, and that’s when your dad picked him clear off the ground and started dangling him over the railing!”

Gramps lets out a hoot and gives his knee a jovial slap. As he laughs, I imagine myself looking up at my father, dark against the brilliant sun, the transgressor’s arms flailing about as he’s held aloft. A fearsome vision of justice.

“He wasn’t really holding him over the railing, Dad,” my mother says, looking to me with concern, but Gramps takes another sip of whiskey and plows forward.

“At this point, other people were starting to stare, and your mother was begging Barack to stop. I guess Barack’s friend was just holding his breath and saying his prayers. Anyway, after a couple of minutes, your dad set the man back down on his feet, patted him on the back, and suggested, calm as you please, that they all go find themselves a beer. And don’t you know, that’s how your dad acted for the rest of the tour—like nothing happened. Of course, your mother was still pretty upset when they got home. In fact, she was barely talking to your dad. Barack wasn’t helping matters any, either, ’cause when your mother tried to tell us what had happened he just shook his head and started to laugh. ‘Relax, Anna,’ he said to her—your dad had this deep baritone, see, and this British accent.” My grandfather tucks his chin into his neck at this point, to capture the full effect. “‘Relax, Anna,’ he said. ‘I only wanted to teach the chap a lesson about the proper care of other people’s property!’”

Gramps would start to laugh again until he started to cough, and Toot would mutter under her breath that she supposed it was a good thing

that my father had realized that dropping the pipe had just been an accident because who knows what might have happened otherwise, and my mother would roll her eyes at me and say they were exaggerating.

“Your father can be a bit domineering,” my mother would admit with a hint of a smile. “But it’s just that he is basically a very honest person. That makes him uncompromising sometimes.”

She preferred a gentler portrait of my father. She would tell the story of when he arrived to accept his Phi Beta Kappa key in his favorite outfit—jeans and an old knit shirt with a leopard-print pattern. “Nobody told him it was this big honor, so he walked in and found everyone standing around this elegant room dressed in tuxedos. The only time I ever saw him embarrassed.”

And Gramps, suddenly thoughtful, would start nodding to himself “It’s a fact, Bar,” he would say. “Your dad could handle just about any situation, and that made everybody like him. Remember the time he had to sing at the International Music Festival? He’d agreed to sing some African songs, but when he arrived it turned out to be this big to-do, and the woman who performed just before him was a semi-professional singer, a Hawaiian gal with a full band to back her up. Anyone else would have stopped right there, you know, and explained that there had been a mistake. But not Barack. He got up and started singing in front of this big crowd—which is no easy feat, let me tell you—and he wasn’t great, but he was so sure of himself that before you knew it he was getting as much applause as anybody.”

My grandfather would shake his head and get out of his chair to flip on the TV set. “Now there’s something you can learn from your dad,” he would tell me. “*Confidence*. The secret to a man’s success.”

That’s how all the stories went—compact, apocryphal, told in rapid succession in the course of one evening, then packed away for months, sometimes years, in my family’s memory. Like the few photographs of my father that remained in the house, old black-and-white studio

prints that I might run across while rummaging through the closets in search of Christmas ornaments or an old snorkel set. At the point where my own memories begin, my mother had already begun a courtship with the man who would become her second husband, and I sensed without explanation why the photographs had to be stored away. But once in a while, sitting on the floor with my mother, the smell of dust and mothballs rising from the crumbling album, I would stare at my father's likeness—the dark laughing face, the prominent forehead and thick glasses that made him appear older than his years—and listen as the events of his life tumbled into a single narrative.

He was an African, I would learn, a Kenyan of the Luo tribe, born on the shores of Lake Victoria in a place called Alego. The village was poor, but his father—my other grandfather, Hussein Onyango Obama—had been a prominent farmer, an elder of the tribe, a medicine man with healing powers. My father grew up herding his father's goats and attending the local school, set up by the British colonial administration, where he had shown great promise. He eventually won a scholarship to study in Nairobi; and then, on the eve of Kenyan independence, he had been selected by Kenyan leaders and American sponsors to attend a university in the United States, joining the first large wave of Africans to be sent forth to master Western technology and bring it back to forge a new, modern Africa.

In 1959, at the age of twenty-three, he arrived at the University of Hawaii as that institution's first African student. He studied econometrics, worked with unsurpassed concentration, and graduated in three years at the top of his class. His friends were legion, and he helped organize the International Students Association, of which he became the first president. In a Russian language course, he met an awkward, shy American girl, only eighteen, and they fell in love. The girl's parents, wary at first, were won over by his charm and intellect; the young couple married, and she bore them a son, to whom he

bequeathed his name. He won another scholarship—this time to pursue his Ph.D. at Harvard—but not the money to take his new family with him. A separation occurred, and he returned to Africa to fulfill his promise to the continent. The mother and child stayed behind, but the bond of love survived the distances. . . .

There the album would close, and I would wander off content, swaddled in a tale that placed me in the center of a vast and orderly universe. Even in the abridged version that my mother and grandparents offered, there were many things I didn't understand. But I rarely asked for the details that might resolve the meaning of "Ph.D." or "colonialism," or locate Alego on a map. Instead, the path of my father's life occupied the same terrain as a book my mother once bought for me, a book called *Origins*, a collection of creation tales from around the world, stories of Genesis and the tree where man was born, Prometheus and the gift of fire, the tortoise of Hindu legend that floated in space, supporting the weight of the world on its back. Later, when I became more familiar with the narrower path to happiness to be found in television and the movies, I'd become troubled by questions. What supported the tortoise? Why did an omnipotent God let a snake cause such grief? Why didn't my father return? But at the age of five or six I was satisfied to leave these distant mysteries intact, each story self-contained and as true as the next, to be carried off into peaceful dreams.

That my father looked nothing like the people around me—that he was black as pitch, my mother white as milk—barely registered in my mind.

In fact, I can recall only one story that dealt explicitly with the subject of race; as I got older, it would be repeated more often, as if it captured the essence of the morality tale that my father's life had become. According to the story, after long hours of study, my father had joined my grandfather and several other friends at a local Waikiki bar. Everyone was in a festive mood, eating and drinking to the

sounds of a slack-key guitar, when a white man abruptly announced to the bartender, loudly enough for everyone to hear, that he shouldn't have to drink good liquor "next to a nigger." The room fell quiet and people turned to my father, expecting a fight. Instead, my father stood up, walked over to the man, smiled, and proceeded to lecture him about the folly of bigotry, the promise of the American dream, and the universal rights of man. "This fella felt so bad when Barack was finished," Gramps would say, "that he reached into his pocket and gave Barack a hundred dollars on the spot. Paid for all our drinks and puu-puus for the rest of the night—and your dad's rent for the rest of the month."

By the time I was a teenager, I'd grown skeptical of this story's veracity and had set it aside with the rest. Until I received a phone call, many years later, from a Japanese-American man who said he had been my father's classmate in Hawaii and now taught at a mid-western university. He was very gracious, a bit embarrassed by his own impulsiveness; he explained that he had seen an interview of me in his local paper and that the sight of my father's name had brought back a rush of memories. Then, during the course of our conversation, he repeated the same story that my grandfather had told, about the white man who had tried to purchase my father's forgiveness. "I'll never forget that," the man said to me over the phone; and in his voice I heard the same note that I'd heard from Gramps so many years before, that note of disbelief—and hope.

Miscegenation. The word is humpbacked, ugly, portending a monstrous outcome: like *antebellum* or *octoroon*, it evokes images of another era, a distant world of horsewhips and flames, dead magnolias and crumbling porticos. And yet it wasn't until 1967—the year I celebrated my sixth birthday and Jimi Hendrix performed at Monterey, three years after Dr. King received the Nobel Peace Prize, a time when America had already begun to weary of black demands for equality, the problem of

discrimination presumably solved—that the Supreme Court of the United States would get around to telling the state of Virginia that its ban on interracial marriages violated the Constitution. In 1960, the year that my parents were married, *miscegenation* still described a felony in over half the states in the Union. In many parts of the South, my father could have been strung up from a tree for merely looking at my mother the wrong way; in the most sophisticated of northern cities, the hostile stares, the whispers, might have driven a woman in my mother's predicament into a back-alley abortion—or at the very least to a distant convent that could arrange for adoption. Their very image together would have been considered lurid and perverse, a handy retort to the handful of softheaded liberals who supported a civil rights agenda.

Sure—but would you let your daughter marry one?

The fact that my grandparents had answered yes to this question, no matter how grudgingly, remains an enduring puzzle to me. There was nothing in their background to predict such a response, no New England transcendentalists or wild-eyed socialists in their family tree. True, Kansas had fought on the Union side of the Civil War; Gramps liked to remind me that various strands of the family contained ardent abolitionists. If asked, Toot would turn her head in profile to show off her beaked nose, which, along with a pair of jet-black eyes, was offered as proof of Cherokee blood.

But an old, sepia-toned photograph on the bookshelf spoke most eloquently of their roots. It showed Toot's grandparents, of Scottish and English stock, standing in front of a ramshackle homestead, unsmiling and dressed in coarse wool, their eyes squinting at the sun-baked, flinty life that stretched out before them. Theirs were the faces of American Gothic, the WASP bloodline's poorer cousins, and in their eyes one could see truths that I would have to learn later as facts: that Kansas had entered the Union free only after a violent precursor to the Civil War, the battle in which John Brown's sword tasted first

blood; that while one of my great-great-grandfathers, Christopher Columbus Clark, had been a decorated Union soldier, his wife's mother was rumored to have been a second cousin of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy; that although another distant ancestor had indeed been a full-blooded Cherokee, such lineage was a source of considerable shame to Toot's mother, who blanched whenever someone mentioned the subject and hoped to carry the secret to her grave.

That was the world in which my grandparents had been raised, the dab-smack, landlocked center of the country, a place where decency and endurance and the pioneer spirit were joined at the hip with conformity and suspicion and the potential for unblinking cruelty. They had grown up less than twenty miles away from each other—my grandmother in Augusta, my grandfather in El Dorado, towns too small to warrant boldface on a road map—and the childhoods they liked to recall for my benefit portrayed small-town, Depression-era America in all its innocent glory: Fourth of July parades and the picture shows on the side of a barn; fireflies in a jar and the taste of vine-ripe tomatoes, sweet as apples; dust storms and hailstorms and classrooms filled with farm boys who got sewn into their woolen underwear at the beginning of winter and stank like pigs as the months wore on.

Even the trauma of bank failures and farm foreclosures seemed romantic when spun through the loom of my grandparents' memories, a time when hardship, the great leveler that had brought people closer together, was shared by all. So you had to listen carefully to recognize the subtle hierarchies and unspoken codes that had policed their early lives, the distinctions of people who don't have a lot and live in the middle of nowhere. It had to do with something called respectability—there were respectable people and not-so-respectable people—and although you didn't have to be rich to be respectable, you sure had to work harder at it if you weren't.

Toot's family was respectable. Her father held a steady job all

through the Depression, managing an oil lease for Standard Oil. Her mother had taught normal school before the children were born. The family kept their house spotless and ordered Great Books through the mail; they read the Bible but generally shunned the tent revival circuit, preferring a straight-backed form of Methodism that valued reason over passion and temperance over both.

My grandfather's station was more troublesome. Nobody was sure why—the grandparents who had raised him and his older brother weren't very well off, but they were decent, God-fearing Baptists, supporting themselves with work in the oil rigs around Wichita. Somehow, though, Gramps had turned out a bit wild. Some of the neighbors pointed to his mother's suicide: it was Stanley, after all, then only eight years old, who had found her body. Other, less charitable, souls would simply shake their heads: The boy takes after his philandering father, they would opine, the undoubtable cause of the mother's unfortunate demise.

Whatever the reason, Gramps's reputation was apparently well deserved. By the age of fifteen he'd been thrown out of high school for punching the principal in the nose. For the next three years he lived off odd jobs, hopping rail cars to Chicago, then California, then back again, dabbling in moonshine, cards, and women. As he liked to tell it, he knew his way around Wichita, where both his and Toot's families had moved by that time, and Toot doesn't contradict him; certainly, Toot's parents believed the stories that they'd heard about the young man and strongly disapproved of the budding courtship. The first time Toot brought Gramps over to her house to meet the family, her father took one look at my grandfather's black, slicked-back hair and his perpetual wise-guy grin and offered his unvarnished assessment.

"He looks like a wop."

My grandmother didn't care. To her, a home economics major fresh out of high school and tired of respectability, my grandfather

must have cut a dashing figure. I sometimes imagine them in every American town in those years before the war, him in baggy pants and a starched undershirt, brim hat cocked back on his head, offering a cigarette to this smart-talking girl with too much red lipstick and hair dyed blond and legs nice enough to model hosiery for the local department store. He's telling her about the big cities, the endless highway, his imminent escape from the empty, dust-ridden plains, where big plans mean a job as a bank manager and entertainment means an ice-cream soda and a Sunday matinee, where fear and lack of imagination choke your dreams so that you already know on the day that you're born just where you'll die and who it is that'll bury you. He won't end up like that, my grandfather insists; he has dreams, he has plans; he will infect my grandmother with the great peripatetic itch that had brought both their forebears across the Atlantic and half of a continent so many years before.

They eloped just in time for the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and my grandfather enlisted. And at this point the story quickens in my mind like one of those old movies that show a wall calendar's pages peeled back faster and faster by invisible hands, the headlines of Hitler and Churchill and Roosevelt and Normandy spinning wildly to the drone of bombing attacks, the voice of Edward R. Murrow and the BBC. I watch as my mother is born at the army base where Gramps is stationed; my grandmother is Rosie the Riveter, working on a bomber assembly line; my grandfather sloshes around in the mud of France, part of Patton's army.

Gramps returned from the war never having seen real combat, and the family headed to California, where he enrolled at Berkeley under the GI bill. But the classroom couldn't contain his ambitions, his restlessness, and so the family moved again, first back to Kansas, then through a series of small Texas towns, then finally to Seattle, where they stayed long enough for my mother to finish high school. Gramps worked as a furniture salesman; they bought a house and found them-

selves bridge partners. They were pleased that my mother proved bright in school, although when she was offered early admission into the University of Chicago, my grandfather forbade her to go, deciding that she was still too young to be living on her own.

And that's where the story might have stopped: a home, a family, a respectable life. Except something must have still been gnawing at my grandfather's heart. I can imagine him standing at the edge of the Pacific, his hair prematurely gray, his tall, lanky frame bulkier now, looking out at the horizon until he could see it curve and still smelling, deep in his nostrils, the oil rigs and corn husks and hard-bitten lives that he thought he had left far behind. So that when the manager of the furniture company where he worked happened to mention that a new store was about to open in Honolulu, that business prospects seemed limitless there, what with statehood right around the corner, he would rush home that same day and talk my grandmother into selling their house and packing up yet again, to embark on the final leg of their journey, west, toward the setting sun. . . .

He would always be like that, my grandfather, always searching for that new start, always running away from the familiar. By the time the family arrived in Hawaii, his character would have been fully formed, I think—the generosity and eagerness to please, the awkward mix of sophistication and provincialism, the rawness of emotion that could make him at once tactless and easily bruised. His was an American character, one typical of men of his generation, men who embraced the notion of freedom and individualism and the open road without always knowing its price, and whose enthusiasms could as easily lead to the cowardice of McCarthyism as to the heroics of World War II. Men who were both dangerous and promising precisely because of their fundamental innocence; men prone, in the end, to disappointment.

In 1960, though, my grandfather had not yet been tested; the disappointments would come later, and even then they would come

slowly, without the violence that might have changed him, for better or worse. In the back of his mind he had come to consider himself as something of a freethinker—bohemian, even. He wrote poetry on occasion, listened to jazz, counted a number of Jews he'd met in the furniture business as his closest friends. In his only skirmish into organized religion, he would enroll the family in the local Unitarian Universalist congregation; he liked the idea that Unitarians drew on the scriptures of all the great religions ("It's like you get five religions in one," he would say). Toot would eventually dissuade him of his views on the church ("For Christ's sake, Stanley, religion's not supposed to be like buying breakfast cereal!"), but if my grandmother was more skeptical by nature, and disagreed with Gramps on some of his more outlandish notions, her own stubborn independence, her own insistence on thinking something through for herself, generally brought them into rough alignment.

All this marked them as vaguely liberal, although their ideas would never congeal into anything like a firm ideology; in this, too, they were American. And so, when my mother came home one day and mentioned a friend she had met at the University of Hawaii, an African student named Barack, their first impulse was to invite him over for dinner. The poor kid's probably lonely, Gramps would have thought, so far away from home. Better take a look at him, Toot would have said to herself. When my father arrived at the door, Gramps might have been immediately struck by the African's resemblance to Nat King Cole, one of his favorite singers; I imagine him asking my father if he can sing, not understanding the mortified look on my mother's face. Gramps is probably too busy telling one of his jokes or arguing with Toot over how to cook the steaks to notice my mother reach out and squeeze the smooth, sinewy hand beside hers. Toot notices, but she's polite enough to bite her lip and offer dessert; her instincts warn her against making a scene. When the evening is over, they'll both remark on how intelligent the young man seems, so

dignified, with the measured gestures, the graceful draping of one leg over another—and how about that accent!

But would they let their daughter *marry* one?

We don't know yet; the story to this point doesn't explain enough. The truth is that, like most white Americans at the time, they had never really given black people much thought. Jim Crow had made its way north into Kansas well before my grandparents were born, but at least around Wichita it appeared in its more informal, genteel form, without much of the violence that pervaded the Deep South. The same unspoken codes that governed life among whites kept contact between the races to a minimum; when black people appear at all in the Kansas of my grandparents' memories, the images are fleeting—black men who come around the oil fields once in a while, searching for work as hired hands; black women taking in the white folks' laundry or helping clean white homes. Blacks are there but not there, like Sam the piano player or Beulah the maid or Amos and Andy on the radio—shadowy, silent presences that elicit neither passion nor fear.

It wasn't until my family moved to Texas, after the war, that questions of race began to intrude on their lives. During his first week on the job there, Gramps received some friendly advice from his fellow furniture salesman about serving black and Mexican customers: "If the coloreds want to look at the merchandise, they need to come after hours and arrange for their own delivery." Later, at the bank where she worked, Toot made the acquaintance of the janitor, a tall and dignified black World War II vet she remembers only as Mr. Reed. While the two of them chatted in the hallway one day, a secretary in the office stormed up and hissed that Toot should never, ever, "call no nigger 'Mister.'" Not long afterward, Toot would find Mr. Reed in a corner of the building weeping quietly to himself. When she asked him what was wrong, he straightened his back, dried his eyes, and responded with a question of his own.

"What have we ever done to be treated so mean?"

My grandmother didn't have an answer that day, but the question lingered in her mind, one that she and Gramps would sometimes discuss once my mother had gone to bed. They decided that Toot would keep calling Mr. Reed "Mister," although she understood, with a mixture of relief and sadness, the careful distance that the janitor now maintained whenever they passed each other in the halls. Gramps began to decline invitations from his coworkers to go out for a beer, telling them he had to get home to keep the wife happy. They grew inward, skittish, filled with vague apprehension, as if they were permanent strangers in town.

This bad new air hit my mother the hardest. She was eleven or twelve by this time, an only child just growing out of a bad case of asthma. The illness, along with the numerous moves, had made her something of a loner—cheerful and easy-tempered but prone to bury her head in a book or wander off on solitary walks—and Toot began to worry that this latest move had only made her daughter's eccentricities more pronounced. My mother made few friends at her new school. She was teased mercilessly for her name, Stanley Ann (one of Gramps's less judicious ideas—he had wanted a son). Stanley Steamer, they called her. Stan the Man. When Toot got home from work, she would usually find my mother alone in the front yard, swinging her legs off the porch or lying in the grass, pulled into some solitary world of her own.

Except for one day. There was that one hot, windless day when Toot came home to find a crowd of children gathered outside the picket fence that surrounded their house. As Toot drew closer, she could make out the sounds of mirthless laughter, the contortions of rage and disgust on the children's faces. The children were chanting, in a high-pitched, alternating rhythm:

"Nigger lover!"

"Dirty Yankee!"

"Nigger lover!"

The children scattered when they saw Toot, but not before one of the boys had sent the stone in his hand sailing over the fence. Toot's eyes followed the stone's trajectory as it came to rest at the foot of a tree. And there she saw the cause for all the excitement: my mother and a black girl of about the same age lying side by side on their stomachs in the grass, their skirts gathered up above their knees, their toes dug into the ground, their heads propped up on their hands in front of one of my mother's books. From a distance the two girls seemed perfectly serene beneath the leafy shade. It was only when Toot opened the gate that she realized the black girl was shaking and my mother's eyes shone with tears. The girls remained motionless, paralyzed in their fear, until Toot finally leaned down and put her hands on both their heads.

"If you two are going to play," she said, "then for goodness sake, go on inside. Come on. Both of you." She picked up my mother and reached for the other girl's hand, but before she could say anything more, the girl was in a full sprint, her long legs like a whippet's as she vanished down the street.

Gramps was beside himself when he heard what had happened. He interrogated my mother, wrote down names. The next day he took the morning off from work to visit the school principal. He personally called the parents of some of the offending children to give them a piece of his mind. And from every adult that he spoke to, he received the same response:

"You best talk to your daughter, Mr. Dunham. White girls don't play with coloreds in this town."

It's hard to know how much weight to give to these episodes, what permanent allegiances were made or broken, or whether they stand out only in the light of subsequent events. Whenever he spoke to me about it, Gramps would insist that the family left Texas in part because of their discomfort with such racism. Toot would be more

circumspect; once, when we were alone, she told me that they had moved from Texas only because Gramps wasn't doing particularly well on his job, and because a friend in Seattle had promised him something better. According to her, the word *racism* wasn't even in their vocabulary back then. "Your grandfather and I just figured we should treat people decently, Bar. That's all."

She's wise that way, my grandmother, suspicious of overwrought sentiments or overblown claims, content with common sense. Which is why I tend to trust her account of events; it corresponds to what I know about my grandfather, his tendency to rewrite his history to conform with the image he wished for himself.

And yet I don't entirely dismiss Gramps's recollection of events as a convenient bit of puffery, another act of white revisionism. I can't, precisely because I know how strongly Gramps believed in his fictions, how badly he wanted them to be true, even if he didn't always know how to make them so. After Texas I suspect that black people became a part of these fictions of his, the narrative that worked its way through his dreams. The condition of the black race, their pain, their wounds, would in his mind become merged with his own: the absent father and the hint of scandal, a mother who had gone away, the cruelty of other children, the realization that he was no fair-haired boy—that he looked like a "wop." Racism was part of that past, his instincts told him, part of convention and respectability and status, the smirks and whispers and gossip that had kept him on the outside looking in.

Those instincts count for something, I think; for many white people of my grandparents' generation and background, the instincts ran in an opposite direction, the direction of the mob. And although Gramps's relationship with my mother was already strained by the time they reached Hawaii—she would never quite forgive his instability and often-violent temper and would grow ashamed of his crude, ham-fisted manners—it was this desire of his to obliterate the

past, this confidence in the possibility of remaking the world from whole cloth, that proved to be his most lasting patrimony. Whether Gramps realized it or not, the sight of his daughter with a black man offered at some deep unexplored level a window into his own heart.

Not that such self-knowledge, even if accessible, would have made my mother's engagement any easier for him to swallow. In fact, how and when the marriage occurred remains a bit murky, a bill of particulars that I've never quite had the courage to explore. There's no record of a real wedding, a cake, a ring, a giving away of the bride. No families were in attendance; it's not even clear that people back in Kansas were fully informed. Just a small civil ceremony, a justice of the peace. The whole thing seems so fragile in retrospect, so haphazard. And perhaps that's how my grandparents intended it to be, a trial that would pass, just a matter of time, so long as they maintained a stiff upper lip and didn't do anything drastic.

If so, they miscalculated not only my mother's quiet determination but also the sway of their own emotions. First the baby arrived, eight pounds, two ounces, with ten toes and ten fingers and hungry for food. What in the heck were they supposed to do?

Then time and place began to conspire, transforming potential misfortune into something tolerable, even a source of pride. Sharing a few beers with my father, Gramps might listen to his new son-in-law sound off about politics or the economy, about far-off places like Whitehall or the Kremlin, and imagine himself seeing into the future. He would begin to read the newspapers more carefully, finding early reports of America's newfound integrationist creed, and decide in his mind that the world was shrinking, sympathies changing; that the family from Wichita had in fact moved to the forefront of Kennedy's New Frontier and Dr. King's magnificent dream. How could America send men into space and still keep its black citizens in bondage? One of my earliest memories is of sitting on my grandfather's shoulders as the astronauts from one of the Apollo missions

arrived at Hickam Air Force Base after a successful splashdown. I remember the astronauts, in aviator glasses, as being far away, barely visible through the portal of an isolation chamber. But Gramps would always swear that one of the astronauts waved just at me and that I waved back. It was part of the story he told himself. With his black son-in-law and his brown grandson, Gramps had entered the space age.

And what better port for setting off on this new adventure than Hawaii, the Union's newest member? Even now, with the state's population quadrupled, with Waikiki jammed wall to wall with fast-food emporiums and pornographic video stores and subdivisions marching relentlessly into every fold of green hill, I can retrace the first steps I took as a child and be stunned by the beauty of the islands. The trembling blue plane of the Pacific. The moss-covered cliffs and the cool rush of Manoa Falls, with its ginger blossoms and high canopies filled with the sound of invisible birds. The North Shore's thunderous waves, crumbling as if in a slow-motion reel. The shadows off Pali's peaks; the sultry, scented air.

Hawaii! To my family, newly arrived in 1959, it must have seemed as if the earth itself, weary of stampeding armies and bitter civilization, had forced up this chain of emerald rock where pioneers from across the globe could populate the land with children bronzed by the sun. The ugly conquest of the native Hawaiians through aborted treaties and crippling disease brought by the missionaries; the carving up of rich volcanic soil by American companies for sugarcane and pineapple plantations; the indenturing system that kept Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino immigrants stooped sunup to sunset in these same fields; the internment of Japanese-Americans during the war—all this was recent history. And yet, by the time my family arrived, it had somehow vanished from collective memory, like morning mist that the sun burned away. There were too many races, with power among them too diffuse, to impose the mainland's rigid caste system;

one that haunts me no less than it haunted my family, evoking as it does some lost Eden that extends beyond mere childhood.

There was only one problem: my father was missing. He had left paradise, and nothing that my mother or grandparents told me could obviate that single, unassailable fact. Their stories didn't tell me why he had left. They couldn't describe what it might have been like had he stayed. Like the janitor, Mr. Reed, or the black girl who churned up dust as she raced down a Texas road, my father became a prop in someone else's narrative. An attractive prop—the alien figure with the heart of gold, the mysterious stranger who saves the town and wins the girl—but a prop nonetheless.

I don't really blame my mother or grandparents for this. My father may have preferred the image they created for him—indeed, he may have been complicit in its creation. In an article published in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* upon his graduation, he appears guarded and responsible, the model student, ambassador for his continent. He mildly scolds the university for herding visiting students into dormitories and forcing them to attend programs designed to promote cultural understanding—a distraction, he says, from the practical training he seeks. Although he hasn't experienced any problems himself, he detects self-segregation and overt discrimination taking place between the various ethnic groups and expresses wry amusement at the fact that "Caucasians" in Hawaii are occasionally at the receiving end of prejudice. But if his assessment is relatively clear-eyed, he is careful to end on a happy note: One thing other nations can learn from Hawaii, he says, is the willingness of races to work together toward common development, something he has found whites elsewhere too often unwilling to do.

I discovered this article, folded away among my birth certificate and old vaccination forms, when I was in high school. It's a short piece, with a photograph of him. No mention is made of my mother or me, and I'm left to wonder whether the omission was intentional

on my father's part, in anticipation of his long departure. Perhaps the reporter failed to ask personal questions, intimidated by my father's imperious manner; or perhaps it was an editorial decision, not part of the simple story that they were looking for. I wonder, too, whether the omission caused a fight between my parents.

I would not have known at the time, for I was too young to realize that I was supposed to have a live-in father, just as I was too young to know that I needed a race. For an improbably short span it seems that my father fell under the same spell as my mother and her parents; and for the first six years of my life, even as that spell was broken and the worlds that they thought they'd left behind reclaimed each of them, I occupied the place where their dreams had been.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROAD TO THE embassy was choked with traffic: cars, motorcycles, tricycle rickshaws, buses and jitneys filled to twice their capacity, a procession of wheels and limbs all fighting for space in the midafternoon heat. We nudged forward a few feet, stopped, found an opening, stopped again. Our taxi driver shooed away a group of boys who were hawking gum and loose cigarettes, then barely avoided a motor scooter carrying an entire family on its back—father, mother, son, and daughter all leaning as one into a turn, their mouths wrapped with handkerchiefs to blunt the exhaust, a family of bandits. Along the side of the road, wizened brown women in faded brown sarongs stacked straw baskets high with ripening fruit, and a pair of mechanics squatted before their open-air garage, lazily brushing away flies as they took an engine apart. Behind them, the brown earth dipped into a smoldering dump where a pair of round-headed tots frantically chased a scrawny black hen. The children slipped in the mud and corn husks and banana leaves, squealing with pleasure, until they disappeared down the dirt road beyond.

Things eased up once we hit the highway, and the taxi dropped us off in front of the embassy, where a pair of smartly dressed Marines nodded in greeting. Inside the courtyard, the clamor of the street was

replaced by the steady rhythm of gardening clippers. My mother's boss was a portly black man with closely cropped hair sprinkled gray at the temples. An American flag draped down in rich folds from the pole beside his desk. He reached out and offered a firm handshake: "How are you, young man?" He smelled of after-shave and his starched collar cut hard into his neck. I stood at attention as I answered his questions about the progress of my studies. The air in the office was cool and dry, like the air of mountain peaks: the pure and heady breeze of privilege.

Our audience over, my mother sat me down in the library while she went off to do some work. I finished my comic books and the homework my mother had made me bring before climbing out of my chair to browse through the stacks. Most of the books held little interest for a nine-year-old boy—World Bank reports, geological surveys, five-year development plans. But in one corner I found a collection of *Life* magazines neatly displayed in clear plastic binders. I thumbed through the glossy advertisements—Goodyear Tires and Dodge Fever, Zenith TV ("Why not the best?") and Campbell's Soup ("Mm-mm good!"), men in white turtlenecks pouring Seagram's over ice as women in red miniskirts looked on admiringly—and felt vaguely reassured. When I came upon a news photograph, I tried to guess the subject of the story before reading the caption. The photograph of French children dashing over cobblestoned streets: that was a happy scene, a game of hide-and-go-seek after a day of schoolbooks and chores; their laughter spoke of freedom. The photograph of a Japanese woman cradling a young, naked girl in a shallow tub: that was sad; the girl was sick, her legs twisted, her head fallen back against the mother's breast, the mother's face tight with grief, perhaps she blamed herself. . . .

Eventually I came across a photograph of an older man in dark glasses and a raincoat walking down an empty road. I couldn't guess what this picture was about; there seemed nothing unusual about the subject. On the next page was another photograph, this one a close-up

of the same man's hands. They had a strange, unnatural pallor, as if blood had been drawn from the flesh. Turning back to the first picture, I now saw that the man's crinkly hair, his heavy lips and broad, fleshy nose, all had this same uneven, ghostly hue.

He must be terribly sick, I thought. A radiation victim, maybe, or an albino—I had seen one of those on the street a few days before, and my mother had explained about such things. Except when I read the words that went with the picture, that wasn't it at all. The man had received a chemical treatment, the article explained, to lighten his complexion. He had paid for it with his own money. He expressed some regret about trying to pass himself off as a white man, was sorry about how badly things had turned out. But the results were irreversible. There were thousands of people like him, black men and women back in America who'd undergone the same treatment in response to advertisements that promised happiness as a white person.

I felt my face and neck get hot. My stomach knotted; the type began to blur on the page. Did my mother know about this? What about her boss—why was he so calm, reading through his reports a few feet down the hall? I had a desperate urge to jump out of my seat, to show them what I had learned, to demand some explanation or assurance. But something held me back. As in a dream, I had no voice for my newfound fear. By the time my mother came to take me home, my face wore a smile and the magazines were back in their proper place. The room, the air, was quiet as before.

We had lived in Indonesia for over three years by that time, the result of my mother's marriage to an Indonesian named Lolo, another student she had met at the University of Hawaii. His name meant "crazy" in Hawaiian, which tickled Gramps to no end, but the meaning didn't suit the man, for Lolo possessed the good manners and easy grace of his people. He was short and brown, handsome, with thick black hair and features that could have as easily been Mexican

loaded with gravel and timber, then the buildings grew taller, like buildings in Hawaii—Hotel Indonesia, very modern, Lolo said, and the new shopping center, white and gleaming—but only a few were higher than the trees that now cooled the road. When we passed a row of big houses with high hedges and sentry posts, my mother said something I couldn't entirely make out, something about the government and a man named Sukarno.

"Who's Sukarno?" I shouted from the backseat, but Lolo appeared not to hear me. Instead, he touched my arm and motioned ahead of us. "Look," he said, pointing upward. There, standing astride the road, was a towering giant at least ten stories tall, with the body of a man and the face of an ape.

"That's Hanuman," Lolo said as we circled the statue, "the monkey god." I turned around in my seat, mesmerized by the solitary figure, so dark against the sun, poised to leap into the sky as puny traffic swirled around its feet. "He's a great warrior," Lolo said firmly. "Strong as a hundred men. When he fights the demons, he's never defeated."

The house was in a still-developing area on the outskirts of town. The road ran over a narrow bridge that spanned a wide brown river; as we passed, I could see villagers bathing and washing clothes along the steep banks below. The road then turned from tarmac to gravel to dirt as it wound past small stores and whitewashed bungalows until it finally petered out into the narrow footpaths of the kampong. The house itself was modest stucco and red tile, but it was open and airy, with a big mango tree in the small courtyard in front. As we passed through the gate, Lolo announced that he had a surprise for me; but before he could explain we heard a deafening howl from high up in the tree. My mother and I jumped back with a start and saw a big, hairy creature with a small, flat head and long, menacing arms drop onto a low branch.

"A monkey!" I shouted.

"An ape," my mother corrected.

Lolo drew a peanut from his pocket and handed it to the animal's grasping fingers. "His name is Tata," he said. "I brought him all the way from New Guinea for you."

I started to step forward to get a closer look, but Tata threatened to lunge, his dark-ringed eyes fierce and suspicious. I decided to stay where I was.

"Don't worry," Lolo said, handing Tata another peanut. "He's on a leash. Come—there's more."

I looked up at my mother, and she gave me a tentative smile. In the backyard, we found what seemed like a small zoo: chickens and ducks running every which way, a big yellow dog with a baleful howl, two birds of paradise, a white cockatoo, and finally two baby crocodiles, half submerged in a fenced-off pond toward the edge of the compound. Lolo stared down at the reptiles. "There were three," he said, "but the biggest one crawled out through a hole in the fence. Slipped into somebody's rice field and ate one of the man's ducks. We had to hunt it by torchlight."

There wasn't much light left, but we took a short walk down the mud path into the village. Groups of giggling neighborhood children waved from their compounds, and a few barefoot old men came up to shake our hands. We stopped at the common, where one of Lolo's men was grazing a few goats, and a small boy came up beside me holding a dragonfly that hovered at the end of a string. When we returned to the house, the man who had carried our luggage was standing in the backyard with a rust-colored hen tucked under his arm and a long knife in his right hand. He said something to Lolo, who nodded and called over to my mother and me. My mother told me to wait where I was and sent Lolo a questioning glance.

"Don't you think he's a little young?"

Lolo shrugged and looked down at me. "The boy should know where his dinner is coming from. What do you think, Barry?" I

looked at my mother, then turned back to face the man holding the chicken. Lolo nodded again, and I watched the man set the bird down, pinning it gently under one knee and pulling its neck out across a narrow gutter. For a moment the bird struggled, beating its wings hard against the ground, a few feathers dancing up with the wind. Then it grew completely still. The man pulled the blade across the bird's neck in a single smooth motion. Blood shot out in a long, crimson ribbon. The man stood up, holding the bird far away from his body, and suddenly tossed it high into the air. It landed with a thud, then struggled to its feet, its head lolling grotesquely against its side, its legs pumping wildly in a wide, wobbly circle. I watched as the circle grew smaller, the blood trickling down to a gurgle, until finally the bird collapsed, lifeless on the grass.

Lolo rubbed his hand across my head and told me and my mother to go wash up before dinner. The three of us ate quietly under a dim yellow bulb—chicken stew and rice, and then a dessert of red, hairy-skinned fruit so sweet at the center that only a stomachache could make me stop. Later, lying alone beneath a mosquito net canopy, I listened to the crickets chirp under the moonlight and remembered the last twitch of life that I'd witnessed a few hours before. I could barely believe my good fortune.

“The first thing to remember is how to protect yourself.”

Lolo and I faced off in the backyard. A day earlier, I had shown up at the house with an egg-sized lump on the side of my head. Lolo had looked up from washing his motorcycle and asked me what had happened, and I told him about my tussle with an older boy who lived down the road. The boy had run off with my friend's soccer ball, I said, in the middle of our game. When I chased after him, the boy picked up a rock. It wasn't fair, I said, my voice choking with aggrievement. He had cheated.

Lolo had parted my hair with his fingers and silently examined the wound. "It's not bleeding," he said finally, before returning to his chrome.

I thought that had ended the matter. But when he came home from work the next day, he had with him two pairs of boxing gloves. They smelled of new leather, the larger pair black, the smaller pair red, the laces tied together and thrown over his shoulder.

He now finished tying the laces on my gloves and stepped back to examine his handiwork. My hands dangled at my sides like bulbs at the ends of thin stalks. He shook his head and raised the gloves to cover my face.

"There. Keep your hands up." He adjusted my elbows, then crouched into a stance and started to bob. "You want to keep moving, but always stay low—don't give them a target. How does that feel?" I nodded, copying his movements as best I could. After a few minutes, he stopped and held his palm up in front of my nose.

"Okay," he said. "Let's see your swing."

This I could do. I took a step back, wound up, and delivered my best shot. His hand barely wobbled.

"Not bad," Lolo said. He nodded to himself, his expression unchanged. "Not bad at all. Agh, but look where your hands are now. What did I tell you? Get them up. . . ."

I raised my arms, throwing soft jabs at Lolo's palm, glancing up at him every so often and realizing how familiar his face had become after our two years together, as familiar as the earth on which we stood. It had taken me less than six months to learn Indonesia's language, its customs, and its legends. I had survived chicken pox, measles, and the sting of my teachers' bamboo switches. The children of farmers, servants, and low-level bureaucrats had become my best friends, and together we ran the streets morning and night, hustling odd jobs, catching crickets, battling swift kites with razor-sharp lines—the loser watched his kite soar off with the wind, and knew

that somewhere other children had formed a long wobbly train, their heads toward the sky, waiting for their prize to land. With Lolo, I learned how to eat small green chill peppers raw with dinner (plenty of rice), and, away from the dinner table, I was introduced to dog meat (tough), snake meat (tougher), and roasted grasshopper (crunchy). Like many Indonesians, Lolo followed a brand of Islam that could make room for the remnants of more ancient animist and Hindu faiths. He explained that a man took on the powers of whatever he ate: One day soon, he promised, he would bring home a piece of tiger meat for us to share.

That's how things were, one long adventure, the bounty of a young boy's life. In letters to my grandparents, I would faithfully record many of these events, confident that more civilizing packages of chocolate and peanut butter would surely follow. But not everything made its way into my letters; some things I found too difficult to explain. I didn't tell Toot and Gramps about the face of the man who had come to our door one day with a gaping hole where his nose should have been: the whistling sound he made as he asked my mother for food. Nor did I mention the time that one of my friends told me in the middle of recess that his baby brother had died the night before of an evil spirit brought in by the wind—the terror that danced in my friend's eyes for the briefest of moments before he let out a strange laugh and punched my arm and broke off into a breathless run. There was the empty look on the faces of farmers the year the rains never came, the stoop in their shoulders as they wandered barefoot through their barren, cracked fields, bending over every so often to crumble earth between their fingers; and their desperation the following year when the rains lasted for over a month, swelling the river and fields until the streets gushed with water and swept as high as my waist and families scrambled to rescue their goats and their hens even as chunks of their huts washed away.

The world was violent, I was learning, unpredictable and often

of his pant legs to scratch his calf. I noticed a series of indented scars that ran from his ankle halfway up his shin.

“What are those?”

“Leech marks,” he said. “From when I was in New Guinea. They crawl inside your army boots while you’re hiking through the swamps. At night, when you take off your socks, they’re stuck there, fat with blood. You sprinkle salt on them and they die, but you still have to dig them out with a hot knife.”

I ran my finger over one of the oval grooves. It was smooth and hairless where the skin had been singed. I asked Lolo if it had hurt.

“Of course it hurt,” he said, taking a sip from the jug. “Sometimes you can’t worry about hurt. Sometimes you worry only about getting where you have to go.”

We fell silent, and I watched him out of the corner of my eye. I realized that I had never heard him talk about what he was feeling. I had never seen him really angry or sad. He seemed to inhabit a world of hard surfaces and well-defined thoughts. A queer notion suddenly sprang into my head.

“Have you ever seen a man killed?” I asked him.

He glanced down, surprised by the question.

“Have you?” I asked again.

“Yes,” he said.

“Was it bloody?”

“Yes.”

I thought for a moment. “Why was the man killed? The one you saw?”

“Because he was weak.”

“That’s all?”

Lolo shrugged and rolled his pant leg back down. “That’s usually enough. Men take advantage of weakness in other men. They’re just like countries in that way. The strong man takes the weak man’s land. He makes the weak man work in his fields. If the weak man’s woman

is pretty, the strong man will take her.” He paused to take another sip of water, then asked, “Which would you rather be?”

I didn’t answer, and Lolo squinted up at the sky. “Better to be strong,” he said finally, rising to his feet. “If you can’t be strong, be clever and make peace with someone who’s strong. But always better to be strong yourself. Always.”

My mother watched us from inside the house, propped up at her desk grading papers. What are they talking about? she wondered to herself. Blood and guts, probably; swallowing nails. Cheerful, manly things.

She laughed aloud, then caught herself. That wasn’t fair. She really was grateful for Lolo’s solicitude toward me. He wouldn’t have treated his own son very differently. She knew that she was lucky for Lolo’s basic kindness. She set her papers aside and watched me do push-ups. He’s growing so fast, she thought. She tried to picture herself on the day of our arrival, a mother of twenty-four with a child in tow, married to a man whose history, whose country, she barely knew. She had known so little then, she realized now, her innocence carried right along with her American passport. Things could have turned out worse. Much worse.

She had expected it to be difficult, this new life of hers. Before leaving Hawaii, she had tried to learn all she could about Indonesia: the population, fifth in the world, with hundreds of tribes and dialects; the history of colonialism, first the Dutch for over three centuries, then the Japanese during the war, seeking control over vast stores of oil, metal, and timber; the fight for independence after the war and the emergence of a freedom fighter named Sukarno as the country’s first president. Sukarno had recently been replaced, but all the reports said it had been a bloodless coup, and that the people supported the change. Sukarno had grown corrupt, they said; he was a demagogue, totalitarian, too comfortable with the Communists.

A poor country, underdeveloped, utterly foreign—this much she

had known. She was prepared for the dysentery and fevers, the cold water baths and having to squat over a hole in the ground to pee, the electricity's going out every few weeks, the heat and endless mosquitoes. Nothing more than inconveniences, really, and she was tougher than she looked, tougher than even she had known herself to be. And anyway, that was part of what had drawn her to Lolo after Barack had left, the promise of something new and important, helping her husband rebuild a country in a charged and challenging place beyond her parents' reach.

But she wasn't prepared for the loneliness. It was constant, like a shortness of breath. There was nothing definite that she could point to, really. Lolo had welcomed her warmly and gone out of his way to make her feel at home, providing her with whatever creature comforts he could afford. His family had treated her with tact and generosity, and treated her son as one of their own.

Still, something had happened between her and Lolo in the year that they had been apart. In Hawaii he had been so full of life, so eager with his plans. At night when they were alone, he would tell her about growing up as a boy during the war, watching his father and eldest brother leave to join the revolutionary army, hearing the news that both had been killed and everything lost, the Dutch army's setting their house aflame, their flight into the countryside, his mother's selling her gold jewelry a piece at a time in exchange for food. Things would be changing now that the Dutch had been driven out, Lolo had told her; he would return and teach at the university, be a part of that change.

He didn't talk that way anymore. In fact, it seemed as though he barely spoke to her at all, only out of necessity or when spoken to, and even then only of the task at hand, repairing a leak or planning a trip to visit some distant cousin. It was as if he had pulled into some dark hidden place, out of reach, taking with him the brightest part of himself. On some nights, she would hear him up after everyone else

had gone to bed, wandering through the house with a bottle of imported whiskey, nursing his secrets. Other nights he would tuck a pistol under his pillow before falling off to sleep. Whenever she asked him what was wrong, he would gently rebuff her, saying he was just tired. It was as if he had come to mistrust words somehow. Words, and the sentiments words carried.

She suspected these problems had something to do with Lolo's job. He was working for the army as a geologist, surveying roads and tunnels, when she arrived. It was mind-numbing work that didn't pay very much; the refrigerator alone cost two months' salary. And now with a wife and child to provide for . . . no wonder he was depressed. She hadn't traveled all this way to be a burden, she decided. She would carry her own weight.

She found herself a job right away teaching English to Indonesian businessmen at the American embassy, part of the U.S. foreign aid package to developing countries. The money helped but didn't relieve her loneliness. The Indonesian businessmen weren't much interested in the niceties of the English language, and several made passes at her. The Americans were mostly older men, careerists in the State Department, the occasional economist or journalist who would mysteriously disappear for months at a time, their affiliation or function in the embassy never quite clear. Some of them were caricatures of the ugly American, prone to making jokes about Indonesians until they found out that she was married to one, and then they would try to play it off—Don't take Jim too seriously, the heat's gotten to him, how's your son by the way, fine, fine boy.

These men knew the country, though, or parts of it anyway, the closets where the skeletons were buried. Over lunch or casual conversation they would share with her things she couldn't learn in the published news reports. They explained how Sukarno had frayed badly the nerves of a U.S. government already obsessed with the march of communism through Indochina, what with his nationalist

rhetoric and his politics of nonalignment—he was as bad as Lumumba or Nasser, only worse, given Indonesia's strategic importance. Word was that the CIA had played a part in the coup, although nobody knew for sure. More certain was the fact that after the coup the military had swept the countryside for supposed Communist sympathizers. The death toll was anybody's guess: a few hundred thousand, maybe; half a million. Even the smart guys at the Agency had lost count.

Innuendo, half-whispered asides; that's how she found out that we had arrived in Djakarta less than a year after one of the more brutal and swift campaigns of suppression in modern times. The idea frightened her, the notion that history could be swallowed up so completely, the same way the rich and loamy earth could soak up the rivers of blood that had once coursed through the streets; the way people could continue about their business beneath giant posters of the new president as if nothing had happened, a nation busy developing itself. As her circle of Indonesian friends widened, a few of them would be willing to tell her other stories—about the corruption that pervaded government agencies, the shakedowns by police and the military, entire industries carved out for the president's family and entourage. And with each new story, she would go to Lolo in private and ask him: "Is it true?"

He would never say. The more she asked, the more steadfast he became in his good-natured silence. "Why are you worrying about such talk?" he would ask her. "Why don't you buy a new dress for the party?" She had finally complained to one of Lolo's cousins, a pediatrician who had helped look after Lolo during the war.

"You don't understand," the cousin had told her gently.

"Understand what?"

"The circumstances of Lolo's return. He hadn't planned on coming back from Hawaii so early, you know. During the purge, all students studying abroad had been summoned without explanation,

company club. Sometimes I would overhear him and my mother arguing in their bedroom, usually about her refusal to attend his company dinner parties, where American businessmen from Texas and Louisiana would slap Lolo's back and boast about the palms they had greased to obtain the new offshore drilling rights, while their wives complained to my mother about the quality of Indonesian help. He would ask her how it would look for him to go alone, and remind her that these were her own people, and my mother's voice would rise to almost a shout.

They are *not* my people.

Such arguments were rare, though; my mother and Lolo would remain cordial through the birth of my sister, Maya, through the separation and eventual divorce, up until the last time I saw Lolo, ten years later, when my mother helped him travel to Los Angeles to treat a liver ailment that would kill him at the age of fifty-one. What tension I noticed had mainly to do with the gradual shift in my mother's attitude toward me. She had always encouraged my rapid acculturation in Indonesia: It had made me relatively self-sufficient, undemanding on a tight budget, and extremely well mannered when compared to other American children. She had taught me to disdain the blend of ignorance and arrogance that too often characterized Americans abroad. But she now had learned, just as Lolo had learned, the chasm that separated the life chances of an American from those of an Indonesian. She knew which side of the divide she wanted her child to be on. I was an American, she decided, and my true life lay elsewhere.

Her initial efforts centered on education. Without the money to send me to the International School, where most of Djakarta's foreign children went, she had arranged from the moment of our arrival to supplement my Indonesian schooling with lessons from a U.S. correspondence course.

Her efforts now redoubled. Five days a week, she came into my room at four in the morning, force-fed me breakfast, and proceeded

to teach me my English lessons for three hours before I left for school and she went to work. I offered stiff resistance to this regimen, but in response to every strategy I concocted, whether unconvincing (“My stomach hurts”) or indisputably true (my eyes kept closing every five minutes), she would patiently repeat her most powerful defense:

“This is no picnic for me either, buster.”

Then there were the periodic concerns with my safety, the voice of my grandmother ascendant. I remember coming home after dark one day to find a large search party of neighbors that had been assembled in our yard. My mother didn’t look happy, but she was so relieved to see me that it took her several minutes to notice a wet sock, brown with mud, wrapped around my forearm.

“What’s that?”

“What?”

“That. Why do you have a sock wrapped around your arm?”

“I cut myself.”

“Let’s see.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“*Barry*. Let me see it.”

I unwrapped the sock, exposing a long gash that ran from my wrist to my elbow. It had missed the vein by an inch, but ran deeper at the muscle, where pinkish flesh pulsed out from under the skin. Hoping to calm her down, I explained what had happened: A friend and I had hitchhiked out to his family’s farm, and it started to rain, and on the farm was a terrific place to mudslide, and there was this barbed wire that marked the farm’s boundaries, and. . . .

“Lolo!”

My mother laughs at this point when she tells this story, the laughter of a mother forgiving her child those sins that have passed. But her tone alters slightly as she remembers that Lolo suggested we wait until morning to get me stitched up, and that she had to browbeat our only neighbor with a car to drive us to the hospital. She remem-

bers that most of the lights were out at the hospital when we arrived, with no receptionist in sight; she recalls the sound of her frantic footsteps echoing through the hallway until she finally found two young men in boxer shorts playing dominoes in a small room in the back. When she asked them where the doctors were, the men cheerfully replied “We are the doctors” and went on to finish their game before slipping on their trousers and giving me twenty stitches that would leave an ugly scar. And through it all was the pervading sense that her child’s life might slip away when she wasn’t looking, that everyone else around her would be too busy trying to survive to notice—that, when it counted, she would have plenty of sympathy but no one beside her who believed in fighting against a threatening fate.

It was those sorts of issues, I realize now, less tangible than school transcripts or medical services, that became the focus of her lessons with me. “If you want to grow into a human being,” she would say to me, “you’re going to need some values.”

Honesty—Lolo should not have hidden the refrigerator in the storage room when the tax officials came, even if everyone else, including the tax officials, expected such things. Fairness—the parents of wealthier students should not give television sets to the teachers during Ramadan, and their children could take no pride in the higher marks they might have received. Straight talk—if you didn’t like the shirt I bought you for your birthday, you should have just said so instead of keeping it wadded up at the bottom of your closet. Independent judgment—just because the other children tease the poor boy about his haircut doesn’t mean you have to do it too.

It was as if, by traveling halfway around the globe, away from the smugness and hypocrisy that familiarity had disclosed, my mother could give voice to the virtues of her midwestern past and offer them up in distilled form. The problem was that she had few reinforcements; whenever she took me aside for such commentary, I would dutifully nod my assent, but she must have known that many of her