

ONE

Sunlight poured in through Carlos' window that summer morning of 1958. Nudged by the warmth of light on his face, he raised his gangly frame up and sprang out of bed. Bursting with the excitement of being alive, he thought of nothing but the day's expedition on his bike. His mind held visions of conquering 37th Street hill, a v-shaped road across the ghetto near the Woodland Avenue markets. The street descended sharply to railroad tracks that intersected its valley. A courageous biker could cross them with a single bounce if he poured on the speed, "hit it" just right, and didn't chicken out.

Carlos devoured two bowls of cornflakes with gusto, donned his jeans and sneakers and headed for the door. Like the clanging bell of a fire alarm, Aunt Emma's voice reached out from nowhere and stopped him in his tracks:

"Brush yo' teeth boy and comb yo' hair. Missus Blue wants you to run to the store and I know you don't want her and that little niece she got to see yo' head lookin' like no bird's nest!"

Carlos wore his wiry, sponge-textured hair cut flat on the sides and the top. "It's not a bird's nest, Auntie," he answered from the bathroom. "It's called a *German Bush*."

"Call it whatever you want to, Darlin'" Aunt Emma rejoined. "But to me, yo' hair looks mo' like a shoe box than any kinda bush."

He brushed his teeth again and smelled his armpits. As he turned from the mirror, he gave his hairdo one last pat and dashed for the door.

Unlike her nephew, Aunt Emma rarely showed her hair. The day her elder half-sister blackened her eye and pushed her down, something changed inside forever. “Don’t you eva’ think you is betta then me, jest ‘cause you got good hair!” the sibling had warned as she peered down at twelve-year old Emma who laid stunned on the floor. After this, Emma shaved her head. Later, when she grew her hair back she kept it covered or hidden most of the time. Born on a cotton farm in Americus, Georgia, Emma possessed expertise in a psychology taught only on plantations and in the kitchens of white folks she had ironed and cooked for, most of the eighty years she had lived. She knew the horrors of poverty and racism as well as she knew how to bake. For the most part, the heartaches and disappointments she faced did not conquer her spirit. In spite of them all, she laughed often with lightness of heart.

“Hey Mr. Man, its jest a flash in the pan,” she would say when things seemed impossible. A petite old woman, she looked as if she hardly weighed eighty pounds, yet she carried herself with dignity and vigor in her step. Throughout Carlos’ childhood, her keen awareness was both a joy and a pain. At times, he reveled in the safety of her nurturing hugs and understanding. At other times, he wished that he could disappear and escape her knowing glance. Aunt Emma’s visual sharpness rivaled that of Carlos’ mother who saw his pain even when he tried to hide it. Aunt Emma saw his feelings as clearly and as mysteriously as she saw him opening the refrigerator door and sipping milk from the bottle, even when she was around the corner, sitting in her room.

Helen Blue lived downstairs in the building next door to Carlos: a four family brick tenement. She and her music-filled

apartment were an integral part of the mosaic of the neighborhood. The people of 61st Street often lingered to hear the sounds that emanated from her piano, from her records, or sometimes from her radio with which she sang along. Uncle Dan, Carlos' neighbor from across the hall, had told him that in the entertainment world, Mrs. Blue had gained the title Heavenly Helen because of her singing style. "Dat's right, Junior," Uncle Dan said with a sigh. "The woman's voice is so fine, she make you feel like you is in heaven. But you's at the age where I might as well tell you, if you ain't figured it out already, dat some of the men in our neighborhood call her 'heavenly' for reasons other than her voice."

When Carlos told Uncle Dan that he could easily have supposed Mrs. Blue was from heaven, the old man just smiled. In earlier years, Carlos was puzzled to hear neighborhood men refer to Mrs. Blue as a high yellow stallion. Later, he realized that many men found her physically appealing. Part of that appeal was her complexion, which combined with her other womanly attributes and posture to create the statuesqueness of a horse.

"It ain't easy for Miss Helen, Junior. I can sho'nuff guarantee you dat," the old man advised the colt. "We got the original souls of Black Folks on the inside and rainbow colors on the outside. Wit' dis comes a buncha problems from our own peoples and from the world. If you's white you right. If you yellow, you mellow. If you brown, stick around. And if you black, you better git back."

Uncle Dan chuckled as he reached for his swatter and smacked a fly that had pestered him all the while he spoke. "Lawd, Junior. It takes a lotta courage to find yo' balance and understand what beauty and goodness kin be inside yo'self regardless as to how God Almighty made you. So, since we got on dis here subject, we gon' have to talk about it mo' sometime. But not right now."

Mrs. Blue often asked Carlos to go to the store. As he strolled to her doorstep, he wondered about the girl his Aunt had men-

tioned. He knew that Mrs. Blue had two kids almost his age but both were boys. In fact, he had never heard anything about her having a niece.

Carlos loved Mrs. Blue. For him, just seeing her face was reward enough for running an errand. Her light brown eyes were pools of kindness and her smile was bright as a beam of sunlight. As he raised his hand to knock, she opened the door wearing a blue duster and furry flip-flop slippers. "Hi, honey-bunch," she said. "Can you run down to Ross'? Get me a quart of sweet milk, a loaf of bread, and a pack of Salems. You can keep the change. Hurry back, okay?"

As she pressed a dollar into Carlos' hand, he scanned the room behind her in search of a new face. He heard voices and sounds in the background but no one came into view before Mrs. Blue stepped back to close the door. He jumped down the front steps two at a time and hit the sidewalk running. Uncle Dan was already outside in front of their house with his broom. As far as most people knew, his name was Daniel Winters but everyone in the neighborhood called him Uncle Dan. He also had an original African name, which he revealed only to those he trusted. A strong old man from the old school, he talked about how things used to be in his day.

Self-taught and literate from the perspective of Anglo tradition, he preferred the dialect of urban Black Folks. Even though he could speak English well, he favored the other because it was simple and rhythmic as the African drumbeats, which forever haunted his soul. The chatter of people in the ghetto reminded him of sounds of people in the rice fields... the sounds of his youth that connected him back to home. Uncle Dan was full of stories of the antebellum south during which time his grandfather lived. He was thirteen years younger than Aunt Emma but rarely disclosed his exact age. Whenever Carlos asked how old he was,

Uncle Dan quickly threw out a date. Then the old man moved onto other subjects while the youth did the math in his head. Today, like most others, Uncle Dan was sweeping the sidewalk. He did it religiously every summer morning at eight-thirty sharp. Sunday was an exception because he rested on that day. He was just about to turn on the hose to settle the dust when Carlos flew past him like a jet.

“Where’s the fire, Junior? Ooo-oooh wee, Boy you’s a runnin’ fast! Keep on runnin’ like dat and you gon’ be white by the time you get to the corner. Boy, you gon’ run right away from yo’ Blackness, else I’m gon’ beat it off yo’ behind myself if you mess up dis heah sidewalk.”

“Sorry Uncle Dan!” Carlos shouted. Uncle Dan smiled because he knew the boy’s mind was a thousand miles away. The old man did not claim to be a fortune teller but he also smiled because he had a strong feeling something would change soon in Carlos’ life. While he swept that morning, Uncle Dan had caught a glimpse of Mrs. Blue’s niece on the porch.

* * *

Carlos bounded into the store like Superman. He noticed the faint yet familiar smell of sawdust as he crossed the threshold. He recognized the feel of it on the wooden floor as he stepped up to the counter.

“Hi, Mr. Ross!” he called out, surveying the display of penny candies in search of his favorites, as he felt for Mrs. Blue’s dollar in his pocket.

“Hello there young man,” Mr. Ross answered in his usual friendly way. “Looks like you’re a man on the move so we’d better get you taken care of right away, huh?”

Carlos nodded.

“So what can I get you, Son?”

“I’d like to have a loaf of bread, a quart of sweet milk, a pack of Salems, three of those squirrels, and six of those strawberry B.B.Bats.”

Mr. Ross turned forty-eight in spring of that year. Dark-eyed with smooth dark hair that showed its first signs of gray, Carlos liked him in spite of his otherwise average appearance. His face cleanly shaved, he stood five-feet ten inches tall, and was of medium build weighing one hundred seventy pounds. The firm but pleasant quality of his voice drew Carlos to him. The boy liked the man without knowing why.

The grocer moved around the counter quickly to get the items without seeming to be in a hurry. He placed them into a shopping bag and returned to his station. “Would you like to have a bag for these candies?” he asked as he pressed the keys of the cash register. Seventy-eight cents popped up in the register’s window as the cash drawer flew open with the ring of a bell. Mr. Ross stopped the drawer with a press of his belly, while he deftly threw the candies into a little sack. He removed the change from the drawer and pushed it closed. Noticing the move, Carlos wondered if Mr. Ross had learned it from his father. As he was running toward the building, Carlos had glanced at the Ross’ Corner Store sign. It reminded him of what he had heard about how Mr. Ross inherited the store and later, to his father’s horror, shortened his name from Rossini to Ross. Uncle Dan had told Carlos that in the neighborhood, Tony Ross was the last of a dying breed. His father, Mario, had been one of many Italian immigrants to reach New York City in years gone by, who later came to Ohio in search of work in steel mills along the shores of Lake Erie.

“Tony’s daddy opened dat store only as an experiment,” Uncle Dan said with a chuckle. “But in spite a many ups and downs over the years, the business still survived. Now little Tony, who bore the name Antonio Mario Rossini, was ‘spected to be a little

duplicate copy of his daddy and carry on the family tradition. But the boy was split in two 'cause on the one hand, he loved his daddy but on the other hand, he didn't want to be like him 'cause everybody knew dat the father was a bigot. Tony had growed up in the neighborhood and felt so much like he was a part of the people, dat it hit the po' man like a ton a bricks when Blue Joe's mama, Miss Coreena told him, 'You's a nice enough man, Mr. Tony but you needs to remember that it still don't make you black.' Lawd, Junior. You wasn't even an idea at the time 'cause dat was mo' then twenty-five years ago. But as you can see, even after dat incident and maybe even some dat was worse, Mr. Tony never left us."

* * *

"Here you are young man," Mr. Ross said to Carlos. He slid the bag of candies across the counter and dropped two dimes and two pennies into the youth's outstretched hand. Carlos placed the coins into his pocket, grabbed the bags and headed for the door. Carlos' thoughts turned to Blue Joe Davis, the neighborhood bully, because the Corner Store was not far from his house. Blue Joe was seventeen but people who didn't know him, thought he might be twenty-one or twenty-two. Carlos had heard from other kids that when he went into bars, no one asked how old he was.

Though Blue Joe only approached him on rare occasions, it was Carlos' general habit to avoid crossing his path. If Blue Joe wasn't having a bad day, he might just look at you and let you pass. But if he wasn't feeling happy because he'd lost at gambling or had a hangover... he might stomp a cat, or kick a dog or a person, whichever was closest in the moment. So far, Carlos had seen no clue of him. Not seeing Blue Joe was how he preferred it because his mind was on the mystery of the "little niece" and other things that day.

In a few minutes, he was back at Mrs. Blue's door. She opened again, before he could knock and extended her arms for the sack. As she looked into the bag, Carlos utilized the moment to scan the room again. Still, there was no one in view but this time he didn't hear any voices. Smiling, Mrs. Blue looked up from the sack and into his face. "Thanks Suga. You are such a big help," she said. "Child, I don't know what I'd do without you. You're just the kind of young man I want my boys to be. Well, let me get in here and clean my oven. I'll see you after while. Oh, I meant to tell you, your hair looks real nice. Um-hmm. See you later, Sweetie."

"See you later, Mrs. Blue," he droned but Mrs. Blue paused.

"Hey Sweetie!" she said. "I almost forgot. I wanted to introduce you to Kammy."

Carlos turned around slowly. Curious to know more about the girl, he was hoping to see how she looked. He attempted to stay composed so that Mrs. Blue wouldn't catch him uncool. But when he looked towards her, she was still standing alone in the doorway. As he stood trapped in the awkwardness of the moment, Mrs. Blue smiled again. "She's right here. As a matter of fact, she's been waiting right here since you came back from the store. Carlos, may I present Kamara Rivers, better known as Kammy. She'll be with us for a month or two this summer. So, I'll leave you two to talk on your own."

Carlos saw that the little niece was an ordinary girl. But something new and not so ordinary was happening to him. She wore eye glasses with thick-rimmed black frames. Her skin was caramel colored and she had shoulder length braids on either side of her head. The faint sweetness of her lavender lotion wafted to his nostrils.

"Hi," Kamara said. Her voice fell onto Carlos' ears like music that made his heart want to dance. With no warning, his

thoughts were scrambled and it was harder to breathe. His palms were sweaty and perspiration was forming under his arms. He considered fleeing the hallway but for a few seconds, it seemed his legs were missing.

“Maybe we could ride our bikes together sometime,” she said feeling the awkwardness too. “If you have one, that is.”

“Yeah... I mean, yeah, I have a bike,” he stammered. He wanted to say how much he'd like to ride with her but his tongue became a mass of mush. Music in the background betrayed his inner landscape:

Why does my heart skip a crazy beat?

Before I know it will reach defeat!

Tell me why. Why-yyy-yy?

Why do fools fall in love?

“Is that your record?” He stammered.

She smiled and nodded. “Yep. It’s a little old but I still like it.”

“Yeah... me too.”

Spontaneously, he opened the bag of candies. Drawing out the B.B.Bats, he stepped forward and presented them to Kamara. Surprised and a little nervous, she accepted them. Then she stepped back to close the door. Before that day, what she had received most from boys, were snide remarks about her glasses. None had ever offered a gift. Pausing for a moment, she passed the candies underneath her nose to catch the fragrance and then looked up and smiled at Carlos. “I’m really sorry. I have to go right now,” she said. “But would you do me one favor?”

“Sure.”

“Come back real soon Carlos, okay? And thanks for the strawberry bouquet.”

TWO

Summer evenings found people sitting around on their verandas or on their front steps. For some, like the winos in the alley behind the corner store, an old pop crate might do. Carlos and Kamara rode their bikes while Uncle Dan tried to relax on the porch upstairs. That day had been one of the hottest so far and he was glad it was beginning to end. Aunt Emma and Mr. George, Uncle Dan's long time friend from the flat downstairs, joined him on the porch.

"Um-mmm-Ummh. Lawd, it's hot!" Aunt Emma moaned. She fanned herself with a folded newspaper. On the street below, people of the neighborhood milled around. Smells of barbecue smoke and English Leather cologne permeated the air. Young girls, and a few unshapely women, wore hot pants vainly attempting to find relief from the heat. Young men wore thin-strapped tee shirts and cut-off jeans for shorts. A neighbor, who shaved his head to keep cool, cruised by in his freshly waxed Buick sedan. His radio blasted the bluesy tones of Etta James so loudly, every window on the street rattled. Fleeing the noise, Aunt Emma escaped to her kitchen and left the two men to themselves.

Mr. George, whose passions were cars and gardening, had planted pink roses in the front and back of the house. He enjoyed the upstairs view, as he smiled and listened to his friend's routine complaints: "Doggone them datgummed kids, George... messin' up my sidewalk. While you was tendin' to yo' flowers, I musta fussed at a dozen of them rascals. They be rollin' them tires wit'

sticks and trackin' it up wit' muddy footprints even befo' it gits dry."

Mr. George almost broke into laughter as Uncle Dan suddenly shifted from thoughts of the morning into the moment: "Oo-oooh wee! I smell like a funk bone tonight," he exclaimed as he lifted his arm and put his nose to his armpit. "It was so hot today I had to finish up my hosing early. I broke out in a sweat befo' I got down the front steps. Wasn't no kinda breeze neither. All I could smell was the aroma of Sister Lee's barbecue and that ole stank-breath dog I had to chase off my sidewalk along wit' them kids."

After a brief visit, Mr. George excused himself to tend to some errands. Uncle Dan leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on the banisters, and surveyed the street. As the orange-ball sun descended behind dilapidated buildings to the west, he reflected on the sunset of his own youth. By age seventeen, he had lived a tumultuous life. His grandfather Beyi Sango Alkali was a Yoruba warrior captured on the African West Coast in 1838, brought by ship to the Carolinas, and sold into slavery. Uncle Dan's father, Adam Sango Winters was born on a rice plantation in Charleston in 1861.

Uncle Dan's birthday came after the summer and each time it did, he and Carlos played his guessing game again. But also, the old man repeatedly reminded Carlos that his youth was swiftly passing. "Dat's right Junior," Uncle Dan said with no hint of a smile, "Better listen to yo' Aint Emma boy 'cause 'flash in the pan' is right. You may not believe it but in the blink of an eye, you'll be just as old as me."

Carlos only reacted to the old man's words with a shrug. For him at fourteen, a person twenty-four seemed old. As Uncle Dan was nearly three times that much, it didn't matter if he said he was twenty-four or seventy-two. It was all the same to Carlos.

While sunset marked the end of the day for some, it marked the beginning for others. Aunt Emma called them the “Dazzle Folks,” because of the tinsel and glitter they adorned themselves with and inordinately loved. Slicksters, barflies, pimps, and street-walkers, they were. Junkies, irreverent ruffians, gamblers, party seekers, musicians, and such people as these, who either made their living at night, or found escape in it from the drudgery of their lives in daytime hours.

Joseph Henry Davis was among the people who came alive at night. Strikingly awesome, his complexion was darker than black... a hauntingly ancient African blue-blackness, that framed his purple lips. Dubbed “Blue Joe” by the Ministerial Wizard of the Warrior Kingsmen, he was an ally to one of the most tyrannical gangs ever known to the City of Cleveland. At seventeen, he was already over six feet tall, weighing one hundred ninety pounds. When the sun began to set, Blue Joe began to move. Most often, his meanderings brought him into contact with some facet of the world of Dazzle Folks. He enjoyed music, gambling, and fine food. On his “good nights,” he moved calmly and was suave and discreet. But on bad nights, he often moved into mayhem, which he used like a drug. He and a couple of his thug buddies might “jump some patties,” which meant beating up and robbing white boys who ventured too close to the boundaries of the ghetto. Alternatively, they might “detain” an inexperienced gambler and extort fees for having won too much, or for permission to park his car on the street outside. Most of the people, especially the more fragile ones among “Dazzle Folks” hated to see Blue Joe coming. Wonderfully black-skinned but woefully black-hearted, his astounding, unpredictable way of relating in the world was more than most could comprehend. Having no way of knowing what kind of mood he would be in or when one mood would shift

to another, they simply had to avoid him or align with someone more powerful he might respect.

Blue Joe won one hundred seventy-five dollars in a crap game the night before. He used part of his winnings to purchase two pairs of the most prestigious shoes of the ghetto: Stetson *Stingy-wings*. Slick, sleek, and pretty, they were the longest, narrowest, and smoothest of shoes which sailed through alleys and streets of the city like a schooner sails through the sea. He chose the black pair to wear, and carried the second pair inside a box tucked underneath his arm. He made his way down Short Scovill to 59th Street, crossed over to Quincy Avenue and ducked into Leston Battle's Shine Palace. As he approached the threshold, the atmosphere inside changed from jovial to heavy and the tension grew thick as a brick of cheese. Two young men who until now had only seen Blue Joe from a distance were stunned to see him so close. Their lips turned parched and ashy when unexpectedly their mouths went dry. Before Blue Joe closed the door, both young men got down from the shoeshine stand, the soap still on their shoes. Fearing they would make him angry if he found no empty seat, they interrupted their shines. Noticing the pair as they stood like two cardboard cutouts, Blue Joe broke the silence. "Hey. Really, I ain't in no hurry. Y'all mothafuckas kin git back in yo' seats," he said coolly, his face wearing its usual scowl. Still leery, the young men returned to their seats. But the shoe shiner saw how nervous they were and cut their shoe shines short.

Aside from the fact that he happened to be in a good mood that day, Blue Joe usually did not hassle the stand's owner, Leston Battle. It may have been because he knew that Leston had a violent temper. It was so overwhelming, that even Blue Joe respected it. In spite of his smiling persona, most neighborhood thugs and players understood that when Leston was provoked, he was as fazed by shooting a man, as he would be if he shot at a rock.

Blue Joe glanced at the owner half-looking away. "Leston, m'man. Wha'z-happ'nin'?"

"Nothin' to me," Leston replied as he glimpsed Blue Joe's new Stetsons. One of the young men finished, got down, and then Blue Joe climbed up. "Them is some awfully pretty kicks, young Brother," Leston said. "Where'd you cop? Woodland?"

"Yeah."

"Uh-huh. Well, you definitely brought them to right place," continued Leston. "My man Jackson here will put such a smokin' on them bad boys people will think they're made out of glass. Do your thing Jackson!"

Leston moved on to another customer and Shineman Jackson did his thing. Popping the shine rag to the music on the jukebox, he shined both pairs of Blue Joe's new shoes and sent him on his way. As soon as the door closed on Blue Joe, the atmosphere of the shine parlor lightened. The two young men burst into nervous laughter and began to breathe normally again. Shineman offered them water and attempted to put them at ease but they still left the parlor not fully recovered.

"If there's anybody I ever seen that blows an ill wind, it's that Negro there," Leston said as he stood at the window and watched Blue Joe make his way down the street.

"Uh-huh," Shineman mumbled, as he pressed a tin of Griffin shoe polish closed. "I believe you is right Boss. That young brother is definitely from bad seed."

* * *

For Carlos, the sun was setting on a beautiful day. He had gone to Quincy Woods for a picnic, with Mrs. Blue, her two sons, Mark and Jason and Kamara. Mr. George volunteered to give them a ride, so they all climbed into his old DeSoto sedan.

By the time Uncle Dan finished his first hosing, they were all packed and ready to go. They reached the park before nine.

Quincy Woods was one of the last vestiges of natural beauty remaining in the ghetto. A heavenly park, complete with a brook that ended in a circular pond with a waterfall, it surrounded one of the city's water reservoirs. Someone who understood human inclinations, likely gave the name Devil's Kitchen to an area near the falls, set deep in the woods. While the quietness of that part of the park held the power to inspire its visitors, it could also turn minds of the careless towards mischief.

Kamara and Carlos walked and played all along the wooded path that ran beside the creek. When they reached Devil's Kitchen, they were spellbound. The trees and plants were luscious and the fragrance of pines was hypnotic. They played hide and seek, and chased each other all over the park. Out of breath from running, they stopped to rest for a moment. Kamara leaned against a tree and smiled.

"You know, you only caught me because I let you."

Carlos marveled at the perfection of her teeth and the sweetness of her breath. In the four weeks he had known her, he never stood so close to her before. His heart was beating like a drum.

"Uh-huh. Girl, I could catch you with a blindfold on."

"Well, I'll race you and win... any day *boy*."

She smiled and moved away from the tree. As she stepped around Carlos, she muffled a cough. She hooked his little finger with her own. "C'mon, we better go," she said.

On their way back to the place where Mrs. Blue was setting up lunch, Kamara found some budding roses just off the path. "Carlos!" She called as she knelt beside the bush.

"Yeah?" he answered as her hand extended toward the rose.

Before that time in his life, he had never truly looked at a flower. Looking now, he was struck by its uncomplicated beauty. He noticed shades of color on the petals, how they were tucked together, and how they unfolded like pairs within pairs of opening hands. Kamara leaned close into the blossoms and a petal of the flower brushed against her face.

“Would you like to know a secret?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said.

She explored the rose with the tip of her finger as she spoke. “Right now, I feel like I could be this flower. I guess... I mean... I’m really glad I met you, Carlos.”

A single petal fell from the rose. She picked it up and gently pressed it into his hand.

“Look Carlos! See?” she whispered. Then suddenly she stood up and dashed away, the braids on either side of her head floating on the breeze like streamers. “Race you back Carlos!” she called out with a giggle, as he stood looking at the gift he was given.

* * *

On that first picnic with Kamara, by unspoken words and secret pledges, Carlos gave his heart away. In the late afternoon, as soon as they had gotten back to their houses, he ransacked his bedroom in search of Davy Crockett cards. Still affected by the things Kamara said to him in the woods, the only way he knew to express what he felt was to give her something that he really liked. Two hundred fifty cards collected from bubble gum were the most precious things he had to offer. It was the first time he gave away anything that he truly valued. But what was most surprising to him about giving anything to Kamara was that, afterwards, what he remembered most was an overwhelming desire to give her more and more.

Kamara and Carlos rode their bikes around the neighborhood until the day began to end. They had just paused to look at the sunset and the red-orange colors that it painted across the skies. The faint sound of Carlos' mother calling his name interrupted their reverie. He turned and placed his foot on the pedal, then signaled Kamara to make their last race of the day. In a moment, he took off in a burst of dust and she followed closely behind him. As they reached the end of the alley that passed between their houses, Carlos slid around to the left, skidding across Uncle Dan's sidewalk. As he approached the street, he caught a glimpse of some pedestrian making his way along. There was no time to warn Kamara. Being only seconds behind him, she crashed into that person, who was none other than Blue Joe Davis. Carlos yelled as she attempted to apply her brakes, but the front wheel of her bike rolled clumsily over the toe of Blue Joe's newly shined shoe.

"Goddammit! Son of a bitch! Y'all little mothafuckas gon' git yo' necks broke! Look at my fuckin' shoes. Shhhh-it!" Blue Joe glanced up from his shoes for the first time to notice Kamara calmly looking up directly into his face. "What you lookin' at? I ain't seen yo' little skinny ass around here before. What's yo' name, Li'l Miss Muffet or somethin' like that?" he asked without any real concern, his head reared back as he guffawed. He was astounded to hear the young girl rally as she scowled without blinking her eyes:

"Whoever you are Mister, you don't have to talk to me like that. I'm sorry about your shoes. Now, if you would please excuse me, I have to go into the house."

"You must don't know who I is, bitch!" Blue Joe growled. "You ain't going no damn place until you get down on yo' li'l knobby knees and shine my fuckin' shoes. You is lucky you's such a young mothafucka or I'd make you buy me another pair."

“She hasn’t done nothing to you Blue Joe,” Carlos interjected. “I think you better just leave this girl alone! Here’s a quarter for another shoeshine.” Carlos removed the money from his pocket. He spoke with a fearless clarity that surprised Blue Joe and himself. He had hardly said three words to Blue Joe in his entire lifetime. It was a spectacle for Blue Joe, who could hardly believe his ears.

“Well, well, well. Look at dis here li’l courageous mothafucka.” The corners of his mouth turned down in a sarcasm that slurred his speech. He drew near, his beady eyes peering at Carlos from the pinkish-reddened eyeballs in which they were set. “Here you is, ain’t hardly able to tie yo’ shoelaces and you gon’ be a knight in shinin’ armor for this li’l bitch?”

Blue Joe feigned a slap at Kamara, then reeled around and grabbed Carlos by the neck, almost lifting him up from the seat of the bike.

“You li’l flimsy-ass mothafucka, I’ll throw yo’ black ass into the middle of next week!” Blue Joe snarled.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a hair-raising command sounded, in a voice such as Carlos had never heard before. It fell unto everyone’s ears: Blue Joe’s, Kamara’s, and his own. With thunderous power, it roared into the moment while Carlos was still in Blue Joe’s grip and gasping for breath.

“PUT THE BOY DOWN NOW, BLUE JOE!”

Blue Joe, who stood frozen in suspended animation, released Carlos at the first sounds of the voice that belonged to Uncle Dan. After a long silence, Uncle Dan spoke again:

“Y’all kids go on and put yo’ bikes away, I think its gettin’ kinda late. And Mr. Blue Joe, I thinks you best be leavin’.”

Blue Joe gave Uncle Dan a hateful stare but he did not utter a word. Seething, he raised his outstretched arm and pointed at

Uncle Dan. With glaring eyes and clenched teeth, he nodded, then slowly turned and continued down the street.

"You've got a lot of nerve, Mr. Blue Joe," Kamara muttered as she moved toward her steps. Both her hands were still rolled into fists and a frown still etched in her face. "Who gives a hoot about your shoe shine?" Her face brightened when she looked back and saw Carlos still standing at the edge of the fence. "It was very brave of you to speak up for me," she said. "In spite of everything, I really had a lot of fun today. See you later, okay?"

"I had fun too... See you later," he answered hoping she couldn't see how embarrassed he felt. He told himself that it was nice she thought he was brave. He wondered what she would have thought if Uncle Dan had not saved him. Would she still think he was brave if she'd seen Blue Joe squeeze his neck until his head popped off and rolled in the street like a pumpkin? But as she said, he'd had a lot of fun in spite of everything. Surprisingly, when she finally disappeared inside her building and he turned toward his, he was already feeling like he missed her. As he puffed to the last step at the top of the hallway stairs carrying his bike, Uncle Dan called out with a chuckle, like nothing had happened:

"Um-mmm-ummh! It's sho'nuff burnin' up out there Junior, ain't it boy?"

Carlos nodded but he was so full of different feelings; he didn't want to talk.

"Um-hmm. Cat gotcha tongue, huh Junior?" Uncle Dan patted his hip in search of his faded red and white kerchief. "Well, like I said boy, I knows it's been sho'nuff burnin' up out there today, in mo' ways than one too, ain't it?" He dragged the kerchief across his balding head, then waved it fan-like just in front of himself to generate some semblance of a breeze. He smiled. "Well, I knows you got a lot on yo' mind already, and I don't want to cause you no extra worry, but I have to tell you boy. Somethin' else is gon'

be burnin' up, if you don't hurry up and get in the house. Yo momma's been callin' you fo' the last half hour."

"How did you do it Uncle Dan?" Carlos asked, attempting to side step the old man's nonchalance. "What did you do to Blue Joe?"

"Wasn't no big mystery Junior. I just knows how to speak a language dat Blue Joe understands... and he knows I ain't afraid to speak it."

"What language is that Uncle Dan? Can you teach me to speak it?"

"Yes I kin Junior... an' I will... in due time. But befo' I teach you dat language, you got two thangs to learn. I'm gon' leave it to you to figure out which one of the two we was using today. The first is when to fight darkness with the power of light and the other is when to fight fire with fire. But you get on in the house now an' if you kin come out and set with me later; we'll talk about thangs for a spell."

THREE

Late in the evening on the day of the picnic, Carlos sat on the porch with Uncle Dan. He wanted to be with Kamara, but by the time that dinner was over, and he had helped with the chores, it was too late to visit. He and Uncle Dan sat quietly together for a while. In the silence, Carlos remembered how his two teen friends, Benny Garfield and Willie Lewis teased him when they saw him walking with Kamara, after the picnic. Both the boys were schoolmates who lived on 61st Street. They sometimes accompanied Carlos on his biking expeditions, went swimming together in summer, or played around the neighborhood. Benny, a gregarious reformed *Fat Albert*, was a husky youth coming into his own. Thanks to his mother's behind-the-scenes talks with Uncle Dan, he had learned healthier ways of dealing with the loss of his incarcerated father, than eating himself to death. A Soul Music fanatic, Benny could sing the lyrics of any Top 25 tune by age ten. Willie... called *Little Willie* by his mother, was a slender, athletic boy... a record setting runner who also loved to tinker with anything electric. His serious persona made him an excellent straight man with Benny for jokes.

"Hey-eee Caaar-los!" Benny yelled. "Who's that with you, Carlos? Is that yo' gurr-rl-friend?"

"Uh-huh, that's her," said Little Willie. "He don't like hangin' out with us no more. He only likes being with *her*... Benny! Oh Benny, it's my heart!" mocked Little Willie, clasping his hands together and pressing them to his chest. He and Benny laughed then, almost in unison they sang a little song they had improvised:

*Where oh where has our friend Carlos gone?
Tell us where oh where kin he be?
Carlos ran away wit' dat li'l skinny girl
Got his nose open wide as a tree.*

"Carlos!" They called out still teasing, "Cool Breeze! Go 'head Carlos, get down! Hey Carlos, is you gon' hold her hand? Hey Carlos, c'mon and shoot some marbles... or is you busy?"

"Yeah, he busy," said Little Willie. "He don't never ride his bike with us no more, do he?"

"Nope," said Benny, feigning perplexity. "And I *wonder* why not. I guess you're right Willie. He just don't wanna be with us."

Uncle Dan's voice interrupted Carlos' musings. "Looks like you got some sho'nuff serious thangs on yo' brain, huh Junior? Boy, yo' eyes was lookin' all glassy there for a minit, like you was under the spell of the Hoochie Koochie Lady or somethin'. You want t'talk to me boy or you want t'keep settin' there lookin' like a zombie?"

Knowing that Uncle Dan understood exactly what was on his mind; Carlos just looked at the old man and shrugged.

"So you thinks that you got some problems huh, Junior? Blue Joe Davis hangin' on yo' neck and that li'l girl hangin' on yo' heart, fillin' up yo' mind and yo' dreams. Then, besides all dis you got all these li'l hard head rascals 'round the neighborhood ridin' on yo' back. Am I right, Junior?"

"Yes sir."

"Umm-hmm. I hear you boy. I'm gon' tell you like the old folks used to say: It's hard but it's fair."

"Huh?" Carlos was totally confused.

"Now let's both take off our socks," said Uncle Dan. "Then just put yo' feet up on the banisters like me."

Carlos and Uncle Dan's feet lined up on the railing like wooden ducks in a shooting gallery.

"I know you had a rough day but don't let it get you down boy. This stuff dat's happening to you is just life lessons to teach you not to worry. You's a fighter, boy. You ever hear dat saying of the old folks: *Pain will make you stronger if it don't kill you first?*"

"Nope."

"Well you hurtin' ain't you, Boy?"

"Yes."

"But is you dead yet?"

"Nope, I'm not dead."

"Well, dat's good Junior," said Uncle Dan. "It must mean you's getting' stronger. Umm-hmm. Now I'm gon' show you what to do next time you feelin' low like you is today. See our toes up there? Let's pretend dat each toe is a little chimney and all them troubles in yo' head is nothin' but smoke. Now close yo' eyes, Junior and let the smoke float down from yo' head. Down yo' neck through yo' stomach. Down yo' legs and out them little chimneys at the end of yo' feet. Just let them little worries float right out of yo' toes just like they's smoke."

Carlos and Uncle Dan sat quietly for a few minutes. Uncle Dan opened his eyes to peek and noticed that the boy was relaxed.

"Feelin' better, Junior?"

"A little."

"Well, dat's good Junior. Dat's good enough for now. You can open yo' eyes."

Mr. George pulled up in his old DeSoto just as Uncle Dan concluded. He yelled up his greeting as he slammed the car door and headed for the house:

“Hey you two old night birds! What y’all doin’ up so late. Dan, I know you done near ‘bout talked that young boy’s ears right off his head. Better let him get some rest so he kin be fresh tomorrow. You know he got places to go and peoples to see, if you gets my drift.”

“Hush up George, you ol’ buzzard,” answered Uncle Dan. “The boy’s in good hands. It’s a miracle he ever made it to the park ridin’ wit’ you. Cause anybody dat rides wit’ you George, they is takin’ they life in they own hands.”

The two old men laughed and then Mr. George went inside. Just as his door closed, Mrs. Blue came out next door. She looked more beautiful than ever to Carlos who could not believe his eyes. Her hair drawn into a gentle upsweep of curls and she wore ruby red lipstick. Gold earrings adorned her earlobes and complimented her striking black dress. A sleek black Cadillac that he had never seen before waited for her at the curb. She was inside it in a moment and whisked off down the street.

“Well, there she go Junior, none other than Heavenly Helen herself. I tells you boy, the woman sings the Blues so pretty, she rips yo’ heart right outta yo’ chest. Umm-mmm-Ummh! Have mercy!” Uncle Dan exclaimed. He smiled as if he heard her in that very moment.

By now, Carlos had gotten sleepy and was struggling to keep himself awake. Uncle Dan noticed.

“Guess you better git some shut eye, huh, Junior? You looks like a strang of spaghetti or somethin’ there boy, slumped down in yo’ chair. Better go on in the house befo’ you fall over these heah bannisters and bust yo’ head on m’sidewalk.”

Carlos smiled as he got himself onto his feet. “Goodnight Uncle Dan,” he said as he yawned. Even though he felt tired, somehow in that moment, he was happy. What made him smile most was noticing that no matter how badly he felt, Uncle Dan

could make him laugh. In a few minutes, he was in his room stretched out on the bed. He took out his magic pen as he stared at the ceiling in the darkness. He imagined himself boldly writing Kamara's name across the darkness in enormous letters made of light. *KAMARA, KAMARA, KAMARA* he wrote, drifting off to sleep. As he lay there, slowly going under, intermittent ping-pong taps crept into his fading consciousness. At first, the sounds seemed a part of his dreams. But as they became more frequent, he woke up. Stumbling to the window, he stared into the darkness below. Just as he raised the window higher for a better look, a tiny pebble sailed across the sill and gently bounced off his chest. Then he heard a familiar giggle as Kamara's face came into view. Still giggling, she stuck her head out of her bedroom window. Her smile was as bright as a moonbeam. It fell upon his heart like a penetrating ray that completely filled him with joy. Feeling as he did, all he could do was beam a smile back. After a moment, he found his voice:

"Girl!" he said in a playful tone, "What are you doing throwing rocks at my window? How come you're not asleep?"

"I wasn't throwing rocks," she answered. "How could I throw a rock up there to your window and not break it? You must be dreaming Carlos."

Carlos smiled even more when she said this because, when he first heard the sounds, he thought he was dreaming. "You'd better confess girl 'cause I know you're guilty. I can tell by the look on your face."

"You think you're so smart don't you?" she teasingly smirked.

"All I want to know is how you explain these little rocks in my bedroom?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," she said. "I just ran out of carrier pigeons, okay?"

“Girl, you are crazy,” said Carlos.

“Didn’t you want to see me tonight?”

Carlos was silent but she was not.

“I thought you and Uncle Dan were never going to stop talking. What were you two talking about anyway?”

Carlos shrugged.

“Nothing much really,” he mumbled.

“Were you talking about me?” she countered.

“Not really,” he said. Suddenly he was nervous. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow, okay?”

“You don’t want to talk to me anymore?” she said, sounding a little hurt. “That’s okay Carlos. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She disappeared so quickly that he was stunned. Shocked by the sudden end to the conversation, he sat emptily staring into the dark alley again. He realized that all through the evening, even while he sat with Uncle Dan, he wanted to be with her. Somehow, he’d gotten his chance but thrown it away. He jumped into his jeans and raced for the back door of the apartment. That way he would not have to go by Aunt Emma’s or his mother’s room and stand the risk of interrogation. As soon as he entered the rear hallway, he was greatly relieved to find Uncle Dan’s back door closed. Quietly, he stole his way down the stairs. He carefully unlatched the creaky back door of their building and stepped out into the night. As he stopped and knelt down to tie his sneakers, he caught a whiff of the delicate fragrance. Just outside the door, Mr. George’s roses were blooming, fully at their peak. He gathered a few of the fallen petals, and made his way to the alley. The first floor apartments of Mrs. Blue’s building were just above his head because the basement windows were at ground level. Standing just underneath Kamara’s window, he collected a few pebbles to toss at her glass. In a moment, her face reappeared.

“What are you doing boy, throwing rocks at my window?” she mimicked as she held up one of the pebbles.

He was nearly as frozen now, as he had been the first time that he’d met her. His heart was pounding. He forced himself to swallow in order to speak. “I’m sorry,” he said, more to the point than he’d ever been in the month that he had known her.

“Is that why you came, Carlos... just to tell me that?” She smiled from ear to ear. “That’s really sweet of you.” She paused and a familiar seriousness came over her face.

“Carlos, you really made me happy today. I had fun at the park and you really were so brave with Blue Joe... And Carlos? Can I tell you another secret? Carlos, I ...”

“Hey girl, wait a minute! Let me finish before you tell me, okay? I’ve got one request before you do.”

“Okay,” she agreed... still smiling big, her elbow on the windowsill, her chin resting in her hand. She quietly coughed and said, “I’m all ears.”

“Here’s what I want you to do: Close your eyes and put your hand out, but after I say ready don’t open your eyes until you count to ten. Okay?”

“Okay. Here’s my hand,” she giggled as she reached out into the moonlight.

Carlos pressed one of the rose petals into her palm, and then gently rolled her fingers up into a fist. “Ready!” he whispered. As she began counting, he looked at her and smiled then slowly sneaked away:

“One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine... ten.”

FOUR

Later that night after seeing Kamara, Carlos lay wide-awake in his bed. He replayed the sounds of her counting as he crept away. He could still feel her hand extended toward him in the moonlight. Back in his room, he tried to make sense of his feelings. “Kamara, I love you,” he confessed to the walls and the ceilings. To the darkness, he whispered all of the things he felt that he could not express to her face.

He awakened the next morning to the familiar smell of Aunt Emma’s down-home biscuits. He suspected that everyone in their building smelled them because Aunt Emma was up early, especially in the summer. She was among other things, a pastry chef *par excellence*. All doors and windows open, she was busy in her kitchen. Whenever Uncle Dan and Mr. George smelled her rolls and biscuits baking, they plotted to get handouts. Still in his bed, Carlos heard them while they sat on the porch. Uncle Dan began the talk:

“Hey there George, how’d you sleep last night?”

“Er-ra, well... I guess I slept alright,” Mr. George answered, still not yet fully aware of the game. Uncle Dan winked and pointed towards Aunt Emma’s apartment. “Oh. Aaa-ah, yeah Daniel,” Mr. George muttered. “I-I slept okay. How about you?”

“Well George, I tell you. I ain’t have such a good night m’self, no suh. I had some sho’nuff worrifyin’ nightmares.”

“Do tell Daniel, what happened to you Brother? Musta been something you ate. What you think?”

“No suh George, I think it musta been somethin’ dat I *did not* eat. I was bein’ attacked by dis heah giant biscuit.”

Mr. George began to laugh. Finally, he caught on and the boyish seriousness on Uncle Dan’s face amused him. “Gracious alive Brother,” he said, now playing along. “Was the biscuit mean?”

“Yes-suh-ree molasses! Lawd, I tell you George, dis heah biscuit was a monsta. First thang is it was hot! Dat there biscuit musta been five hunnert degrees or mo’.”

“Say what Daniel?”

“Yessuh. George, Dat thang had a ol’ Aint Jemima scarf on fo’ a hat... had these ol’ eyes made outta butter and it had dis big ol’ wide mouth dat was growlin’ and frothin’ wit’ dis heah honey colored syrup. Ummh.” Uncle Dan shook his head as if he remembered. “And the thang was talkin’ to me while it chased me all around dis great big ol’ bread basket.”

Mr. George was shaking with laughter. “So did the biscuit get you Daniel?” he asked, hardly able to speak.

“Well, I tell you George, almost. I was runnin’ across dat basket and all a sudden I came to the end. I jumped up on the wall and tried to climb up dat there lattice work, y’know. But it was slipp’ry ‘cause the basket had dis giant napkin layin’ down inside it, draped all over the wall. George, I tell you soon as I jumped up on dat basket wall I started slippin’ on the napkin and losin’ m’grip. An’ then, George, I started fallin’ so I grabbed fo’ the lattice work but I could only get a hold on the napkin. An’ all the while, dat doggone biscuit was just standing down there lookin’ at me and waitin’ for me to drop. ‘Heh, heh, he-ehhh,’ the biscuit said with dat same ol’ syrupy monsta biscuit grin. ‘You might just as well come on down here Uncle Daniel, ‘cause I sho’nuff been waitin’ a long, long time for this.’”

“Well?” said Mr. George, completely overtaken with laughter, coughing and hardly able to catch his breath.

“Well, I tell you George, I fell down on the floor of the basket and I pulled the napkin down with me as I tried to get m’grip. I fell right on dat monsta biscuit’s syrup-and-butter feet. Then it reached out and grabbed me by the leg and shook me like a dust mop, an’ I was kickin’ and hollerin’ and scufflin’, but I was all tangled up in the napkin and I could not get away. Then dat biscuit monsta leaned close an’ was just about to bite my head off. Lawd, I just figured I was a goner.”

“So what happened, Daniel?” Mr. George asked. “What happened then?”

“I woke up,” said Uncle Dan. “Yessuh, I woke up. And I was still tangled up in m’sheets, I had done broke out in dis cold sweat, and dat there biscuit monsta had done scared off fifty years of life.”

“Aw forget it Dan, you old buzzard,” Mr. George said, finally recovering from his laughter. “It ain’t likely you gonna live another fifty years anyway, besides if that old biscuit had ate you, it probably woulda got acid indigestion.”

“That’s right, probably would!” said Aunt Emma who appeared at the window with a tray of hot biscuits and two cups of coffee. “This here is for you Mr. George. Judgin’ from the story, old Daniel there don’t get on too well with biscuits,” she said smiling. “Guess you gon’ have to try to eat these biscuits all by yo’self Mr. George.”

“Now wait just a minute!” interjected Uncle Dan. “Y’all done missed the whole lesson of dis here story dat was showed to me in m’dream.”

Aunt Emma and Mr. George looked at each other blankly and then at Uncle Dan. Aunt Emma passed the tray to Mr. George as Uncle Dan continued: “The point is you got to face the thang

dat you fears the most and dat's why y'all got to help me with the biscuits. Now pass them biscuits on over heah George."

The three oldsters all laughed together. The two men turned their attention to the biscuits and coffee as Aunt Emma stepped away from the window and moved back to her kitchen. Not much later, she was scrambling some eggs when Carlos entered the room.

"Well, good mornin' Mr. Rip Van Winkle," she said without turning away from the stove. "How you feelin' this lovely day?"

"Good morning Aunty. I'm doing fine, how're you?"

"Just fine Darlin'," she said. She tipped her head to the side so that her cheek was facing his direction. "You got some suga' for me this mornin', now that you done finally come up out of your cave?"

Carlos kissed her as she continued to stir the eggs with an air of nonchalance.

"You sleep good last night?" she casually asked.

"Yes Ma'am," he answered feeling slightly nervous. He could tell that something was about to happen by the matter-of-fact tone of Aunt Emma's voice. Even though it was impossible to evade her, he tried anyway.

"Boy! Those biscuits sure do smell good Aunty. Can I have one? Aunty, I'm so hungry this morning I feel like I could eat a horse."

"Well Darlin'," she chuckled. "I knows one horse that you could start with, that is... if you ain't gon' be needin' it in the future."

"What horse is that Aunty?" he asked, completely puzzled by her comment.

"What horse is it? Chile you sho'nuff ought to know the answer to that question better than me. It's that big white one you was ridin' last night. Prob'ly on yo' way to see Missus Blue's little niece in the alley downstairs."

Speechless, Carlos' jaw dropped like the back of a dump truck.

"Umm-hmm! I gotcha didn't I?" his aunt said, laughing at his surprise. "Chile, you might as well close your mouth. Else I can jest set this here plate a biscuits and eggs right inside it, then you can go on outside directly." Aunt Emma laughed again. "Yes Lawd, honey chile. You won't have to waste no time settin' down to the table. You can jest have a instant breakfast. You can eat the biscuits, plate and all."

Still not completely recovered, Carlos stood looking guilty while his aunt went on talking.

"That's alright Darlin', don't worry about it," she said, as she pushed him down into a chair and motioned for him to start eating. "Jest don't never go to prison or no place else you might have to try to escape from, 'cause if you do, you sho'nuff gon' get caught. Chile, you leaves a trail that a body don't have to be no Sherlock Holmes to follow, and clues that even Ray Charles could see. First thing is you left the door wide open. Next thing is you let Miss Tilly Mae's old flea bag of a cat in here. Lawd, I smelt that old thing in my sleep. Woke up itchin' and sneezin' and almost had a heart attack when I sees this old scraggly thing layin on my quilt, all snuggled up with its legs all crossed, jest like it was at home. Chile, near 'bout scared me to death!"

Aunt Emma was laughing now and Carlos was smiling too, as he spread butter on one of the biscuits.

"Lawd, Darlin'," she continued. "I near 'bout jumped straight up to the ceilin'. I chased that thing down the hallway then it was jest about to run into your momma's bedroom when I throwed my slipper and clonked it on the head and then chased it out the back door. When I looked into your room I ain't see you in your bed. I knowed where you was. Sho'nuff when I peeped out the window I seen you down there in the alley." Aunt Emma adjusted her head scarf.

“Boy, you is lucky on two counts,” she said. “First, that the cat did not jump on your momma’s bed. Ooo-oooh wee! Chile, if that hada happened, you and me both woulda had to get out of here ‘cause you know Delores don’t like no cats. And even though there ain’t many peoples she do not like, she likes Tilly Mae *even less* than she likes the cat. Second reason you is lucky is that I didn’t lock you out. If I hadn’t looked out the window, I woulda done it, cause when I followed the cat down the stairs, I seen that the back door was unlatched. But cause I knew you was out, I jest pushed it shut after I chased that little scraggly thing back outside.”

Inescapably caught now, Carlos froze as Aunt Emma presented the clincher.

“Way I figures it boy, you owes me,” she said. Carlos raised his eyebrows. “Umm-hmm. You owes your Aunty but she ain’t gon’ ask you for much. She jest gon’ ask you to run to the dry cleaners to drop off some dresses.”

“D.O. Summers?” he whined. “Gee whiz Aunty it’s so far. Can’ I take ‘em to Mr. Hannahs?”

“Now chile, you knows I sends my good stuff to D.O. Summers. Mr. Hannah is a nice man, but I don’t never send my good stuff to no colored peoples. You know I loves my peoples chile, but them is my best dresses and experience done taught me that if you wants it done right, you got to send to the whites. Besides, you can ride your bike. I’ll roll ‘em up real nice and you can, tie ‘em behind your bicycle seat.”

Carlos knew it was a losing battle to argue for Mr. Hannah’s, which was a lot closer than D.O. Summers. In fact, Mr. Hannah’s was only two doors away from the corner store, but like many others, Aunt Emma believed that the quality of a black-owned business was inferior, unless it marketed barbecue or fried chicken. Beyond this, Mr. Hannah had a second strike against him be-

cause he was an amputee. He lost his left hand in an industrial accident and was dubbed Captain Hook because of the hook-like mechanical prosthesis he sometimes wore. Mr. Hannah was a survivor. A tender-hearted but tenacious man, he held his own and developed an efficient, thriving business. Over the years, he gained the respect and confidence of the neighborhood Folks, both children and adults. Eventually, he even won over Aunt Emma, who had not finished dealing with her nephew on that particular morning.

“Now I jest got one more thing that I needs your help with, Darlin’.”

Carlos looked up so that he could see her face as she pronounced his terrible fate.

“I got to do a bit of laundry and I needs your help to empty the wash machine, whenever I get done with the washing.”

He hated the job because he had to pull the machine halfway across the room in order to hook its draining hose to the bathroom sink. Even though it had coaster-like wheels, it was heavy. He hesitated to answer. As he paused, Aunt Emma continued her advance.

“Well,” she said, as she buffed her nails on her apron. “Ummh, I guess I really do have a responsibility to your momma to let her know about the doors to the house being left unlocked. ‘Specially when I hear her say every night, last thing to a certain individual, mutual acquaintance whose name I ain’t gon’ mention, ‘Lock the doors before you go to sleep.’ Well, I tell you Darlin’, the place ain’t safe! Lawd, crazy as folks is getting’ to be, somebody might jest come right on up in here and knock us all in the head.”

“Okay Aunty, I give,” he said with a sigh. “When do you want me to do it?”

“Probably not today, ‘cause I got some shoppin’ to do. Maybe tomorrow or Monday. But you can go with me shoppin’ if you

want a sweet potato pie. On the way back we gon' stop at Madam Zulu's to pick up my tonic, alright?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Carlos smiled and said.

* * *

Madam Zulu was a medicine woman from Jamaica. She spoke with a noticeably rich accent, laced with the *patois* of her homeland neighborhood that Carlos loved to hear. Her most often-spouted phrase was "*A nuh just yessideh de mi born!*" (I wasn't just born yesterday!). Typically, this was also her answer to playful bribes and ploys from neighborhood Folks. The Madam possessed an amazing understanding of the world of plants and their connection to the human body. Once given a person's name and birth date, she could usually visualize their ailment and its symptoms, then prepare an herbal remedy for relief.

* * *

Carlos found shopping with Aunt Emma easy to take. Usually, she knew what she wanted before she entered the store. She'd just get what she needed and leave. But even if this weren't the case, he'd have carried groceries any day for the promise of one of her pies. Moreover, seeing Madam Zulu was a bonus. Intuitively, Carlos knew that there was something special about her. She was funny and friendly and he always felt special in her company. She called him her handsome prince.

"What time we going shopping, Aunty?" he asked.

"Jest go on outside for a while, Darlin'. I got some things to finish up here in the kitchen before yo' mamma leaves for work. She's 'bout to go on second shift this week. But don't go off too far. I'll holler for you when I gets the things ready for the cleaners. We'll eat a little something when you get back and maybe then we'll go."

"Okay Aunty," he said as he moved toward the door.