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An Integrated Boyhood

Coming of Age in White Cleveland **Phillip M. Richards**

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An Integrated Boyhood: Coming of Age in White Cleveland

PHILLIP M. RICHARDS

An Integrated Boyhood

*Coming of Age
in White Cleveland*

Phillip M. Richards

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For the Memory of Clarence and Juanita Richards

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Series Editor's Foreword

JOHN J. GRABOWSKI

An Integrated Boyhood: Coming of Age in White Cleveland by Phillip Richards provides us with an intimate personal view of an era which challenged the expected and accepted in the United States. Richards came of age in Cleveland during the 1960s, a place and period that have now, arguably, become part of the historical canon. Cleveland, as depicted in the canon, is the polyglot declining industrial city which elected Carl Stokes as the first black mayor of a major American city. That regional event is an critical component of the larger 1960s canon, one which contemporary students read as a series of broadly sketched movements and events including the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, Women's Liberation; urban unrest, assassinations, and student rebellion, all of which, some fifty years later, have become increasingly colored by an aura of psychedelic nostalgia and some of which have unfortunately morphed into broad cultural cliches.

Increasingly lost in this lengthening temporal perspective are two seminal and closely related aspects of the 1960s: the search for personal identity and the rediscovery of a national diversity. Many of the movements that characterized the 1960s both derived from and encouraged a personal search for identity, one often linked to sex, color, ethnicity, and issues of individual freedom and choice. Those personal quests led to a rediscovery of the diversity of the United States, something which countered a long held view of America as a melting pot in which old identities melded into a new and all encompassing national identity. Whether personal or communal, these processes were freighted with angst and joy, and were and remain matters of perplexing complexity which resonate today. The series, *Voices of Diversity*, in which this title has been published, is, in itself, a consequence of that seminal change some five decades ago.

An Integrated Boyhood: Coming of Age in White Cleveland, is an important addition to the series because it so ably reminds us of the “personal” 1960s and the manner in which the changes which took place in that era both derived from and altered the view of self. The memoir does so by taking us to what could be considered the key component of the era, and, indeed, one of the defining characteristics of the American experience over time, race. Richards grew up in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood of Cleveland, a place of middle-class aspiration and one of the few sections of the city which was somewhat integrated. But while many of Richards’ white neighbors and schoolmates may have seen him only in color, he, and particularly his family, saw themselves as a particular shade—aspirational middle class—within that color. It was a status and style that could be viscerally measured against the deportment and “style” of some of the family’s relatives whose central city origins denoted another kind of blackness.

This core issue of personal identity was compounded by Richards’ integrated adolescence, during which he sensed that even middle-class African Americans would not be fully accepted into the white ethnic world of Cleveland with which he interacted on a daily basis in the classroom, or considered as partners in political power by an entrenched ethnic political machine. But as Richards struggled to find himself, he continued to move further away from the normal and expected and became a participant in key aspects of a decade of change. A gifted student, he gained a scholarship to a privileged, largely white, private day school, and then admittance to Yale. He became enmeshed in the left liberal politics of the period, fell in love with folk songs and someone who sang folk-songs, and throughout this journey through adolescence and young adulthood he found himself continually challenged to measure his changing self against the demands of black solidarity and white acceptance.

The intimacy of Phillip Richards’ memoir makes it a powerful agent for moving beyond the clichéd characteristics of one of the most significant eras in American history by placing major change in personal perspective and his voice, in the pages that follow, gives measure to the joys and difficulties of understanding and accepting diversity.

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CHAPTER ONE

A Hopeful Beginning

On the armoire in our dining room sit two of my parents' wedding pictures. One depicts my mother's family arranged in a semicircle around her elderly mother—a small, wizened dark woman in a white dress; the eldest sister of the family, already careworn, but smiling and holding her mother by the arm; and my mother, radiant in her bridal dress, looking straight ahead. My mother is virginal in a white dress, and covering her face is the traditional wedding veil. Her long black hair falls down her in waves. Beside her is my father. My father is a handsome brown-skinned man of medium height with a meticulously groomed moustache. He wears a double-breasted white tuxedo jacket, a formal shirt, a dark pin-dotted tie, and dark pants. Her clothes and abundant hair exude the traditional qualities and inexperience we associate with the bride. His clothing and trimmed features reflect that he has had an opportunity to acquire personal taste in the real world. They stand facing the camera and even now I recognize their broad grins, subdued beneficence, and begrudging approval. Close inspection, however, reveals that the picture is incomplete: there is only one other man here. He, standing within the circle's arc, is clearly a brother. And he will die shortly after the wedding. There is no father to stand with my grandmother in this picture. The family's patriarch, Jimmie Williams, whose name they retain, died eighteen years before. My mother was raised in the home of her eldest sister, Lee Ella, who took her in, as well as their mother and the second-youngest sister, Gladys. In the process, Lee Ella, already burdened with four children and a ne'er-do-well insurance agent for a husband, has sacrificed herself for the sake of the youngest and oldest

members of her family. This sacrifice is, in 1947, after seventeen years, written in her face. This family is placing its hopes for its youngest, most beautiful daughter in the meticulously dressed man standing beside her in the picture.

My mother's family has, under great hardship, done its best for her. The second picture shows her and my father cutting a slice of the wedding cake, their hands clasped together around the knife. She will, the picture asserts, now make a life for herself together with him. It is hard to see from the picture who guides the knife, but their marriage will be like that. As my father will say long after her death—at a youthful sixty-four—one would push, and the other would pull. It did not matter who at any time was doing what.

He, this picture suggests, is the mature man missing from the first portrait of the familial world headed by Lee Ella. She, the second photograph announces, is the object of a masculine desire shaped by experience. For all of the picture's erotic poignancy, it remains in the bounds of not only good but traditional tastes. One of my mother's German refugee teachers at Hampton, remembering the quotation from Freud, might have looked at the picture and recalled what he called the prerequisites for a good life: *arbeiten und lieben*, "work and love." The two are setting off for a life together already equipped with the most basic elements for human happiness.

They have by this time in their young lives together decided to move to Cleveland, drawn by the city's reputation for plentiful good jobs, spacious housing, and large green lawns. They believe that all this will be available to them if they are willing to work hard enough. Their dress and posture betoken—in their slight but noticeable formality—an aspiration to something beyond the material ease implicit in the silk dresses and elegant suit. My parents, however, have gotten it all wrong. In Cleveland, they will scramble for work often beneath their level of education. They will face equal difficulties acquiring a mortgage from city banks, which are still unwilling to lend to middle-class blacks. And they will move from neighborhood to neighborhood in search of the good schools for which the city is known among their educated acquaintances. Cleveland's expanding black ghetto will cast a shadow over any aspiration to culture evident in their wedding photo.

Although this memoir concerns a young life of mistakes, it will not concentrate on theirs. The trail of errors that I trace here from my entrance to elementary school at Robert Fulton in Cleveland's Mount Pleasant neighborhood to my graduation from Yale is my own. My parents and other elders—all appearances to the contrary—bear no responsibility for these errors. Would that I had understood what they explained to me. The uncovering of these faults was

the beginning of my conscious life. To be sure, the errors I describe typified the dislocated lives of many middle-class blacks in the segregated Cleveland of the fifties, sixties, and early seventies. I grew up in an era of changing certainties of politics, society, and culture. The faults, however, were my own.

I was born in 1950 in Cleveland, Ohio, where my father had come in 1947 to work in the steel mills and auto factories after World War II. My mother joined him in 1948 after graduating from college, taking up residence at the Colored YMCA founded at the century's beginning to aid black migrants from the South.

Before coming to Cleveland, my parents lived in Hampton, Virginia, where they both experienced an upturn in their fortunes. My father had come to Virginia from Kentucky after failing out of Kentucky State College (now Kentucky State University) and returning to his home in Winchester, Kentucky, only to leave again to attend trade school at Hampton Institute. During the war he sailed on the huge naval aircraft carriers on their shakedown cruises amid German submarines in Chesapeake Bay. It was in Hampton that he met my mother. Although he did not finish trade school, his marriage constituted newly solid footing in the world. He made the trip to Cleveland hopeful that his fortunes in the postwar industrial North would continue to improve.

My mother's stay in Hampton also ended in success. She had come to Hampton Institute from Greensboro, North Carolina, where she was raised by her eldest sister, Lee Ella Cheek, after the death of their father. She excelled in her studies and graduated with honors from Hampton, declining a fellowship to Bank Street College of Education at Columbia University. She talked to me often about her early life, and as a child I came to understand why she abandoned an academic career for marriage and a family. A pre-med scholarship student, she had not had much of a social life during college. Her union with my father provided her with new emotional stability and support. She married to acquire what her sisters described as the stable family life that they lost when their father died in 1929, when she was four. She knew of this comfortable family life only from hearsay.

Many blacks drawn by Cleveland's promise had come to the city in migratory waves in the first fifty years of the twentieth century. Like the late nineteenth-century black writer Charles Chesnutt—also a quondam North Carolina inhabitant—they found the city's thriving business district, factories, and tree-lined neighborhoods a sign of hope. Although my parents found it difficult being so isolated from their tightly knit, geographically close families,

there was consolation. They had known rural Kentucky and coastal Virginia amid the strains of Depression-era poverty and the trauma of World War II mobilization. Despite Cleveland's strangeness, they experienced in their new home a deep exhilaration that they would remember for the rest of their lives. Other events in 1948, the first year of their married life in the city, seemed to justify their dreams. They were fond of reminding themselves that a number of Cleveland's professional sports teams had won league titles that year, and that Cleveland was briefly nicknamed "the city of champions."

My parents' happiness was primarily due to their rapid acquisition of domestic comfort in a city with scarce housing for middle-class blacks. After two years in their first home together, a tiny kitchenette in Glenville, they moved to Mount Pleasant, where they purchased a two-story brown-shingled bungalow on tree-lined 137th Street. They stretched themselves to the last penny to do this, applying to one of the city's established wealthy Negroes for a loan to make their down payment. Two friends from Phillis Wheatley rented the house's paste-walled attic to help with the mortgage. For a long time, my mother worked as a teacher at Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights. As my father gained seniority as a custodian for the Cleveland Board of Education, his income increased and the mortgage became less burdensome, allowing the boarders to leave before I was old enough to remember them.

At five and six years old, my sister Patrice and I found my parents' continuing excitement remarkable and a little embarrassing. We had never known anything other than our Mount Pleasant house, whose gray sofa, thin rug, and spartan kitchen seemed plain and unexceptional compared to the brightly colored carpets, lounge chairs, and dining-room outfits of our aunt and friends' families. We watched with amazement as Mom and Dad enthused over every aspect of the coffee tables, bedroom sets, and piano that they had purchased with their savings from the previous few years. We could not understand the pride they exuded on Saturday mornings when they served waffles at our modest vinyl-covered breakfast table.

By any measure, Clarence and Juanita experienced ample success compared to their fellow migrants. However, they could not ignore the racially grounded social, economic, and political realities that had already set limits on their aspirations by the late fifties. When we children were presumed to be out of hearing range, my parents discussed the obstacles to their economic progress that they faced. These included my father's difficulties obtaining steady decent work despite some college and trade school education, as well as the banks' obvious restrictions on housing loans to middle-class blacks, difficulties that had been faced by black newcomers to Cleveland throughout the century,

and which, beginning in the twenties, were complicated by the presence of European “ethnics,” which included not only the well-entrenched Germans but recently arrived southern and eastern Europeans. The WASP elite favored this population as factory workers, and black workers experienced increased opportunities only during wartime shortages.

Their troubles were exacerbated by the shifting ethnic boundaries within the city. My parents arrived in Glenville at a time when these areas were still relatively integrated; however, these neighborhoods were quickly transformed into black ghettos. The bars, crowded barber shops, groups of unemployed men on corners, hustlers, numbers runners, pimps, and teenage gang members inevitably took the underclass culture—along with the blues, religious ritual, and folk talk—wherever Cleveland’s black world expanded. This occurred quickly in Mount Pleasant in the fifties, although its overwhelmingly white population had been sprinkled with a few blacks since the beginning of the twentieth century. My family’s movement from Mount Pleasant to Invermere in Lee-Harvard, to the Severn Road neighborhood off Taylor Road, and eventually to Forest Hills in the upper Monticello portion of East Cleveland would—to my mother’s dismay—mirror the city’s internal migration of middle- and upper-middle-class blacks.

My parents responded to the expansion of Cleveland’s ghetto culture with distress bordering on hysteria. Already in the late fifties my parents began to express their horror at the dispersal of Cleveland’s ghetto population to Mount Pleasant as the Negroes of Hough, Glenwood, and Collinwood, whom my parents had escaped in the late forties, began to appear in our own neighborhood. As my mother and I walked home from the 140th Street library on Friday afternoons, she would discern the telling signs of this inner-city migration: storefront Baptist churches; bars such as the Flame on Kinsman, whose open doors breathed the thick odor of gin; and slick numbers runners and pimps prowling the streets in flashy suits of electric blue or green. Through the plate-glass windows of the barbershop farther east on Kinsman, we could see men idling on padded metal chairs, epitomizing the unruly indirection of inner-city life.

During the course of my boyhood, my parents persistently struggled to buy homes in better and better neighborhoods, going from bank to bank in search of loans, often reaching the point of closing only to have the deal fall through. On Sundays, we often toured suburban areas by car. Our parents, we gradually realized, were preparing an escape not only from the lower-class Negro masses but from blacks in general. My parents found, however, to paraphrase Joe Louis, the great black proletarian hero of the forties, that they could run but they could not hide.

Before I ever heard the word, I knew that my parents were integrationists. They were what Malcolm X would later derisively call “integration-mad Negroes.” Struck by the recent triumphs of Jackie Robinson, Ralph Bunche, and *Brown v. Board of Education*, they imagined the imminent appearance of a cultivated, racially integrated middle-class life in Cleveland. These utopian hopes could not have been more mistaken. The possibility of a racially integrated existence had disappeared long ago with the cultivated, mulatto, elite culture that had existed during the first half of the nineteenth century. These black middle-class tradesmen, artisans, funeral directors, barbers, and entrepreneurs had lived relatively harmoniously with Cleveland whites before the turn of the century. The writer Charles Chesnutt, a highly successful lawyer as well as a man of letters, was an important part of this elite. Chesnutt sent one of his daughters to Smith, another to Flora Stone Mather College at Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve University), and a son to Harvard. He was a member of the city’s major literary, social, and cultural organizations. He would write not only collections of stories but a series of novels concerning the post-Reconstruction South and the new world of the black urban North, and in the teens and twenties, he would bitterly attack the new racism that accompanied Negro migration to the city. As the ghetto formed, the city’s mulatto community disappeared by attrition; and its descendents intermarried with the dark-skinned newcomers from the South. All but a few found themselves absorbed into the world of the southern arrivals, which included not only an unskilled proletariat but also an aspiring professional middle class. Rejected by whites and isolated in the ghetto, the black migrants from the South quickly formed their own institutions.

Except for a few remarkable individuals with whom my parents had no actual contact, their cultural ambitions had no accessible black models. Looking around them, my parents could see examples of their ideal only in figures such as Zelma George, the actress and singer, and the artists and writers of Cleveland’s Karamu House, an interracial center for theater and high culture. This posed an insoluble problem for them and, as they saw it, a barrier to the successful rearing of their children.

Moving from Glenville to Mount Pleasant, my parents continued in the habits of typical southern migrants of their generation. They, like many of our black neighbors, gardened vigorously every summer, in late August canning

our garden's yield of tomatoes, bright yellow squash, and green beans grown on high poles. From our backyard border fence they gathered thick-skinned concord grapes. They also canned peaches, pears, and apples purchased from the farmers' market across the Cuyahoga River in the Near West Side—an apparently racially neutral commercial area, at least on Saturdays. They attended Antioch Baptist Church regularly, teaching Sunday school and going to the noonday sermon while we children participated in junior church run by the minister's wife. They also read the well-established black newspaper the *Call and Post*, edited by the Republican William O. Walker, following the fortunes of black politicians and the paper's attacks on segregation in Cleveland.

However, my parents never completely belonged to those black cultural institutions whose deepest values they would seem to have shared. At times, they blamed their estrangement on their cultural and social habits: they did not drink, smoke, curse, or frequent the jazz joints downtown. Not until the seventies and eighties did they begin to attend events of the Hampton Institute alumni group. Some of the alumni, such as the opera singer Grace Mims and her husband Howard, who would become a professor at Cleveland State, were already distinguished. However, they seemed to know that illustrious couple only by name and reputation.

My parents rejected the alumni as snobs, often citing as an example a pompous dentist who openly attacked members incapable of making large contributions. Despite the political consciousness of the *Call and Post*, they mocked the pretensions of the blacks in its society pages, called it sensationalistic, and contemptuously rejected the pragmatic Republican politics of its editor, who had had no other political choices during the thirties, forties, and fifties. At the same time, they eschewed the urbanized black proletariat from the South surrounding us. Their straight-laced habits made them homeless among Cleveland's freewheeling black world. Although they would appear to be aspiring to the highest sphere of black Cleveland life, one assumes that they might judge the drinking, talk, gambling, and frequenting of jazz clubs there at least as harshly as anything they had found in proletarian life. My mother and father kept to themselves, tended to the rearing of their children, and forbade us—me and my sisters—to immerse ourselves in the declining black world around us. In their own way, they walled the family off from our immediate community. They drew, I suspect, much of their ambitions for their children's education from a fire that fed on resentment acquired before I knew them.

My siblings and I, however, took for granted the cultural activities in which our parents immersed us. As they would often remind us over dinner, they pinched pennies to put us in what they called “good situations,” a string of high-minded activities intended to prepare us for a racially integrated world of culture. These included music theory and piano lessons at the Cleveland settlement house and then the Cleveland Institute of Music as well as Dalcroze classes and reading programs at the public library on 140th and Kinsman in Mount Pleasant. This aspiration to culture, we soon realized, explained the rigor of our summer vacations, which included day camp run by a local civic organization, and later Hiram House overnight camp for two weeks, as well as eight-week sessions of French lessons at the Western Reserve University demonstration school for new language teachers. Our parents assumed that these activities would allow us as a family to transcend Cleveland’s ghetto world, the reality of the black community on the East Side, which was dominated by a transplanted and urbanized southern black proletarian religious, political, and social ethos of the bars, storefront churches, and crowded allies of the Hough, Central, and Glenville slums.

Our upbringing was also characterized by an asceticism opposed to the “extravagant” and “flamboyant” manner shared, according to my parents, by the black elite and the masses. My parents sought to teach us to resist not only the ghetto ethos but the ostentatious snobbery that they attributed to upper-class blacks. Similarly, they conceived of their rigorous saving and frugal habits of dress, eating, and entertainment—we watched TV only briefly on weekends under our parents’ supervision—as a means of distinguishing ourselves from these styles of the ghetto.

For them, the ghetto was not a demographic abstraction but a symbol of the pathology of blackness itself—a pathology to be resisted by stringently budgeted daily lives. Only their economies, my parents felt, kept them suspended over the ghetto abyss into which they might fall. This high-wire act carried its own psychology of building internal pressures not unlike the dangers posed by the steam boilers my father attended to as a custodian at A. J. Rickoff or Robert Fulton Elementary School. Like an untended boiler, these pressures threatened internal damage and eventual explosion.

My earliest memories of this domestic anxiety depict my parents poring over the bills on Friday night and Saturday morning, the culmination of a week of worry. The financial stocktaking on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings measured the toll of the week’s expenditures in the writing of checks and the recording of bank balances. Seemingly endless sums were calculated and often recalculated in my mother’s looping handwriting on long white business

envelopes. The clearing of these proliferating columns from the table signaled the household's true measure of time: the end of a week's bookkeeping.

All the advantages that we enjoyed, my older sister and I were given to understand, hung in a balance with the tiny fund that provided us with ground meat and soup bones, tomatoes, lettuce, and carrots, as well as toothpaste, soap, and shampoo. This penury was alleviated only by coupons clipped from the previous week's morning newspaper supplements and the Sunday advertisement section.

Restricted to our house and its surrounding yard, I grew up within the compass of my family's inner and outer restraints. Although physically healthy, I was uncoordinated and clumsy. I could not swing a baseball bat or throw a ball properly. This incompetence made me a target of my classmates' teasing, and as a child, I developed a sensitivity that resulted in an explosive but usually hidden temper that revealed itself at the most unexpected moments. Some of this anger took the form of malingering or sabotage. Denied the freedom of the playground, I was disobedient. When my father cleaned the leaves from the gutter with a stream of water during spring housecleaning, I would randomly turn on the spigot to watch the foaming bubbles at my end of the transparent hose. He whipped me for this, but I was always angry enough to do it again at the end of the summer. I was only letting off steam. My older sister behaved even more outrageously. Three or four hours into our regular pilgrimages through Cleveland's old downtown Halle's and Higbee's department stores, we would typically become ravenous with hunger, and then angry when our parents—who we knew carried money for a day's worth of parking at the multilevel concrete city parking lots—refused to buy us hot dogs and peanuts from the vendors tending metal carts along the streets. One hot day, my sister's patience ran out. In outraged desperation, she filched several handfuls of honeyed peanuts and gummy fruits from the open canisters in the confectionary section of May Company. Seeing her with the stolen candy as we prepared to leave the store, my horrified father threatened to turn her in to the police. I profited from his preoccupation with my sister by filling my own pockets with sweets.

Upon returning home, my parents immediately sent Patrice to her bedroom. She was confined there until the family finished dinner. In the car, she had insisted that this punishment meant nothing to her. Still surging with rebellion at home, she gorged herself in her bedroom, she later boasted to me, on the chocolates, nuts, and sugared fruits that she had earlier salted away in her purse. Her defiance persisted when my parents called her down to the living room. Emboldened by her heightened blood sugar, she shouted over the

stairway banister that she would steal wherever she pleased then returned to her bedroom, slamming the door shut. My parents stared for a moment at her door and returned to the kitchen to consider further action. She had shocked the entire family. In the wake of this event, the very air circulating through the house still quivered with her rage.

My father's mention of the police in the store was not unusual, although he knew that they would not be bothered by such trivial matters. How could they care about missing candy corn, given the number of black pimps and drunks everywhere on the streets? What would they do but return my sister and me to our parents after such petty thefts? Yet our parents continually warned us against engaging in the displays of disrespect toward the police that we saw practiced by the young black teenagers who called them "cops," mocked their movements, and gathered around the squad cars during the school fights that took place with increasing frequency following afternoon dismissals at Robert Fulton and St. Cecilia. (Our teachers at Robert Fulton Elementary School checked our pockets for sharpened pencils and knives before our dismissal on the days of anticipated fights.)

The police kept an eye out for crime in Cleveland's black community; and our criminal motives, my parents stressed, were implicit in our blackness. Alone on the street, we could not be parsed out from our less polite black fellows. We were continually under their official scrutiny, a powerful extension of the city's white Polish, Hungarian, and Italian authority that could land us in court, a holding pen, or reform school rather than our kitchen, where we would merely be whipped. It was not uncommon to see black youngsters driven away in squad cars after school fights. This, according to our parents, could only be the beginning of judgment by an impersonal white law.

These fears were reinforced by the newspaper headlines of the evening *Press*, the *Call and Post*, and the only slightly more restrained *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Their front pages and features sections frequently carried stories of the presence, apprehension, trials, imprisonment, and execution of black criminals. In the eyes of the city's media, these black criminals represented Negro rage against Cleveland's eastern European and Italian establishment and tarnished the respectability of the colored population. The black criminals were, in our minds, part of a drama around which our sense of acceptable and unacceptable Negro behavior turned. Barely more acceptable were black lawyers, the defenders of the colored criminals, and sometimes their white mob bosses.

Finally, my parents feared that the horrors of black criminal excess and behavior might penetrate the blood boundaries of our isolated Cleveland family.

My Aunt Gladys and Uncle Lonnie's marriage offered a glimpse of the social collapse threatened by black city existence that my parents so feared. Gladys had come to Cleveland from Newport News shortly after my mother's arrival. She was accompanied by her husband, Lonnie, an army veteran trained as a dental hygienist. (His prospects had made him a more favored prospective in-law than my father for my mother's family.) Educated as a nurse, she had passed her national nursing board examination a year before her expected graduation from North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham. Even though she never graduated from college, she worked as a nurse for her entire professional life and was, by her own account, the first black registered nurse hired in Cleveland's VA hospital. She was an elegant, well-dressed woman whose temperament swung from manic excitement to depression. Sadly, her domestic life was horrific. She was constantly abused by her husband not only emotionally but physically.

Lonnie's intended career as a dental hygienist never materialized, and he soon obtained work with the post office, a stable, relatively generous federal employer that allowed black men to provide their families with middle-class lives. At work he drove a mail truck, making special deliveries. Although he and Gladys earned what my mother called "good money"—certainly more than my parents—Lonnie did not follow this path to bourgeois life. Indeed, he clearly repudiated the family's Puritan morality and their middle-class aspirations. Gladys and Lonnie lived in an apartment on the top floor of a duplex house. His drinking, gambling, and consorting with women interfered with his contribution to the household income, and their spending was too undisciplined to provide adequate credit for the purchase of a home. We would often spend Sunday and weekday afternoons together in their upstairs home. At home Lonnie was seldom sober, although nowhere in their house did I ever see liquor. Indeed, I seldom saw Lonnie for long. After a brief appearance, he eagerly fled our presence, probably for his friends downtown.

Lonnie flouted our standards of respectability in more serious ways. Both my mother and father refrained from openly displaying affection or discussing sexual matters. Although they shared a deep affection, they would exchange only brusque pecks in our presence. So shocking was Lonnie's behavior, however, that my mother broke this strict code in conversation with me. When I was in my early teens, during Gladys's divorce, my mother told me in a hushed, faltering voice that Lonnie had made "indiscreet demands" of my aunt. I did not understand what she meant by this until I was forbidden to wear Lonnie's swimsuit when I forgot to bring my own trunks to a family picnic. My father explained to me that Lonnie hired prostitutes in the Hough

and Glenville slums, which raised fears of sexually transmitted diseases. His drinking eventually metastasized into alcoholism, which destroyed his ability to hold any position at the post office or to find a job elsewhere. As his savings from his relatively generous salary dried up, he himself deteriorated. To no one's surprise, his decaying body was discovered in an empty ghetto building sometime in the early sixties. No cause for his death was ever identified.

At nine or ten years of age, I felt an immediate attraction to Lonnie and his defiance. His manner exuded the anger that I felt during piano practice, chores with my father, and forced marches downtown to buy the same blue oxford shirts and khakis time after time. Lonnie's arrogance also reflected my sister's deeper rage, which won her even more strapping from my father—about three a month—than the one or two I received. (I was angry about this and kept careful count.) The rebellious stylishness of black life oozed from Lonnie's leather jackets, Ban-Lon shirts, sharkskin pants, and then-fashionable ribbed silk socks. Similarly attractive to me was the carelessness with which he smoked, his cigarette—usually a Camel—dangling from his lips. He wore sleek sunglasses as much for effect as need. His hair was cut short but tastefully oiled, his moustache fastidiously trimmed. Even dressed in his blue serge post-office uniform, he exuded a sense of confidence.

Lonnie enjoyed saying shocking things, many of which I only gleaned from my parents' conversations after visits with my Aunt Gladys. She had at one time obviously been attracted to Lonnie's raffish manners and enjoyed shocking my mother as well as my father. Even after they separated and divorced, Lonnie continued to be a presence in Gladys's home, and his appearance led to scenes that evoked emotions that my mother and father ordinarily did not display at home. "What has four legs, three eyes, and a white pussy?" Lonnie asked one time at a gathering of friends during the Christmas season, referring to the short, black one-eyed Sammy Davis Jr. and his tall blonde Swedish wife, May Britt. Embarrassed by the use of such language in the presence of children, my mother and father flinched, put down their glasses of eggnog, hustled us into the car, and drove off, my father tight lipped and my mother open mouthed, silent with rage. I rarely heard Lonnie speak for long, but his obscenity assaulted the senses like a punch to the belly. Amid our polite family gatherings, his spiel of curses was almost political—brutalizing, defying, and confronting his surprised middle-class audience with the nihilism of the black ghetto world.

The scene that I recall most vividly, recounted by my parents in whispers, concerned my grandmother, who had come from the South when I was about

five to help my parents raise my sister and me. She was a small, slender woman who wore dark floral prints and kept half-dollars rolled in the foot of one of her flesh-colored stockings. She took snuff, which my father bought for her at the drugstore. She had, in the early twentieth century, been the wife of a successful farmer near Weldon, North Carolina, on the Virginia border. After losing her husband and property during the Depression, she had recovered a stable life in the home of my Aunt Lee Ella.

From my grandmother's point of view, Gladys's marriage to this drunkard was a sign of the family's decline into the urban ghetto. My grandmother would glare at Lonnie when she saw him and sometimes would shake her fist at him for no reason. Typically he responded to her fist shaking with only a bland stare. After one intense confrontation, however, he had had enough. Standing up and looking her straight in the face, he unzipped the fly of his post-office pants, withdrew his long brown member, and waved it at her. The horrified old woman was finally silenced, but Lonnie continued to stand there, shaking his genitalia like a fairy-tale godmother's wand, pronouncing a curse on the family matriarch, her clan's pretensions, and their bourgeois absurdity.