

'In other words I am three. One man stands forever in the middle, unconcerned, unmoved, watching, waiting to be allowed to express what he sees to the other two. The second man is like a frightened animal that attacks for fear of being attacked. Then there's an over-loving gentle person who lets people into the uttermost sacred temple of his being and he'll take insults and be trusting and sign contracts without reading them and get talked down to working cheap or for nothing, and when he realizes what's been done to him he feels like killing and destroying everything around him including himself for being so stupid. But he can't – he goes back inside himself.'

'Which one is real?'

'They're *all* real.'

'The man who watches and waits, the man who attacks because he's afraid, and the man who wants to trust and love but retreats each time he finds himself betrayed. Mingus One, Two and Three. Which is the image you want the world to see?'

'What do I care what the world sees, I'm only trying to find out how I should feel about myself. I can't change the fact that they're all against me – that they don't want me to be a success.'

'Who doesn't?'

'Agents and businessmen with big offices who tell me, a black man, that I'm abnormal for thinking we should have our share

of the crop we produce. Musicians are as Jim-Crowed as any black motherfucker on the street and the . . . the . . . well, *they* want to keep it that way.'

'Charles, I know who you mean by *they*, and that's ironic. Because don't you remember saying you came to me not only because I'm a psychologist but also because I'm a Jew? And therefore could relate to your problems?'

'Haw haw! You're funny, doctor.'

'Ah, you're crying again. Here, dry your eyes, Mingus, and don't bullshit me.'

'Haw! Now I got *you* cursing!'

'You've got no exclusive on cursing. Don't bullschitt me. You're a good man, Charles, but there's a lot of fabrication and fantasy in what you say. For instance, no man could have as much intercourse in one night as you claim to have had.'

'The hell he couldn't! Maybe I did exaggerate some things like the weight-lifting and all that 'cause I really don't know how much those bar bells weighed but only two other guys could pick 'em up and their feet sank into the ground!'

'You're changing the subject, my friend. I was asking about the Mexican girls. Why are you obsessed with proving you're a man? Is it because you cry?'

'I am more of a man than any dirty white cocksucker! I *did* fuck twenty-three girls in one night, including the boss's wife! I didn't dig it – I did it because I wanted to die and I hoped it would kill me. But on the way back from Mexico I still felt unsatisfied so I stopped and . . .'

'Go on . . . are you ashamed?'

'Yes because it felt better when I did it to myself than with all those twenty-three dirty-ass whores. They don't love men, they love money.'

'How can you know what they love, Charles? Here. Dry your eyes.'

‘Schitt. Fuck it. Even you just dig money!’

‘Then don’t pay me.’

‘Oh, I dig your psychology! You know saying that makes me want to pay you double.’

‘Nope, I don’t want your money. You’re a sick man. When the time comes that you feel I’ve helped you, buy me a tie or something. And I won’t call you a prevaricator again. What matters is that you stop lying to yourself. Now, earlier you said you were a procurer. Tell me about it. How did you get into that?’

‘Why don’t you ever let me lie on the couch, doctor?’

‘You always choose the chair.’

‘I feel you don’t want me on the couch ’cause I’m coloured and your white patients might be bugged.’

‘Oh, Charles Mingus! You can lie on it, kick it, jump on it, get on it, get under it, turn it over, break it – and pay for it.’

‘Man, you’re crazy! I’m gonna save you.’

‘You’re not trained to save. I am.’

‘I *can* save you. Do you believe in God?’

‘Yes.’

‘As a bogie man?’

‘We’ll get around to that later. Back to the subject, your one-time ill-famed profession.’

‘Well, it’s true I tried to be a pimp, doctor, but I wasn’t really making it ’cause I didn’t enjoy the money the girls got me. I remember the first one I knew – Cindy. She had all this bread under her mattress. Bobo laughed at me ’cause I didn’t take it – he said I didn’t know how to keep a whore.’

‘If you didn’t want the money, what was it you wanted?’

‘Maybe just to see if I could do what the other pimps did.’

‘Why?’

‘That’s almost impossible to explain – how you feel when

you're a kid and the king pimps come back to the neighbourhood. They pose and twirl their watchchains and sport their new Cadillacs and Rollsies and expensive tailored clothes. It was like the closest thing to one of our kind becoming president of the USA. When a young up-and-coming man reaches out to prove himself boss pimp, it's making it. That's what it meant where I come from – proving you're a man.'

'And when you proved it, what did you want?'

'Just play music, that's all.'

'I've been reading about you in a magazine. You didn't tell me you were such a famous musician.'

'That don't mean schitt. That's a system those that own us use. They make us famous and give us names – the King of this, the Count of that, the Duke of *what!* We die broke anyhow – and sometimes I think I dig death more than I dig facing this white world.'

'We're making progress, Charles, but perhaps we've done enough for today.'

'I wanted to tell you about Fats – I dreamed about him again last night.'

'Fine. Keep it on ice till next time. Good-bye, Chazz.'

'So long, doctor.'

## 2

Baby had just turned two, on 22 April 1924, out at 1621 East One Hundred and Eighth Street in the city of Watts in Los Angeles County in the State of California.

He was done for – his head split wide open on the corner of

a Goodwill-store old-fashioned second-hand-me-down white-folks' bedroom-set dresser. I hadn't realized how important the little fellow was. Everybody got so upset. I found myself outside him for the first time since he was born, standing beside him with Mama and his older sisters, Grace and Vivian. Grace was screaming, 'Baby's dead! Baby's dead! Oh, Lord Jesus! My baby brother's gone!'

Here comes Daddy! He's looking down at poor, unconscious Baby. Everything will be all right now. But even Daddy cries out, 'Oh my God, he's dying! Mama, get some ice, fold it in a clean cloth, wrap him up good, hold his head up high so he won't bleed no faster, we gotta get him to the hospital! Pray, Vivian! Grace! Mama! All of us gotta pray! Oh Lord, save my boy!'

Daddy drove the Chevrolet sedan as fast as he could to the clinic at One Hundred and Third Street in downtown Watts. On the way, they all prayed and cried and pleaded with God to please save Baby. Nurse took one look and rushed him to the operating room. 'I'll do my best, Mr and Mrs Mingus,' the doctor said, 'but he's going fast.'

'God help us! Oh Lord, not now!'

But though they had so much faith in this guy named God, Baby wouldn't respond. I decided to go back inside and take over until he could get himself together. No one seemed to notice as I climbed up on the white table where Baby was laid out and materialized myself into the big hole over his left eye. Just to console everybody, I breathed deep and exhaled and Baby let out his first scream since early that morning when Grace had tickled his stomach till it hurt.

The doctor took the bows and credit. 'Don't worry, a week or so and he'll be as good as new. He's lost a lot of blood and we'll need X-rays, of course, there may be a fracture or concussion. Come back in the morning.'

I started to leave again when the family did but Baby had hold of me now and was hanging on for dear life, so I stayed with him and I've been with him ever since.

Baby was so little, but big-jointed, with oversized shoulders and hips. Pigeon-toed and bow-legged, running and playing all day, he was the boy they'd longed for in the family. He'd have his tantrums, falls, thrills – Sunday wading in the tides at Santa Monica, carefully watched, yelled at not to go out too far. The big picnic basket on the grass, the cold chicken a little sandy and tasting so much better than at home. He had a few toys, liked water bugs, and kept ants in bottles. And all – not some but all – of the pretty little girls he saw he loved instantly.

Yet I felt sorry for the little fellow. They all loved him, they said, but they loved him like a puppy. He was becoming a person and no one took notice. They'd poke at him and say, 'What cute dimples!' He'd blush browner and feel frustrated that he couldn't ask serious questions because he didn't know how to talk yet. Still, he was so well protected from the world at large that if he was left alone one second outside his big backyard fence he was completely befuddled.

One day I saw that Baby had a brain. One of the neighbours, a cranky old night-watchman named Mr Davis, had often complained about Baby's beloved dog Buster sniffing round his terrier bitch. One terrible day Mr Davis called across the fence to Mama and said, 'Your dog just got run over! Better come and get him.' I was proud of my boy. He had seen Daddy shoot birds out of the sky with his rifle and somehow he knew, he *knew*, that Mr Davis had shot Buster. He was enraged – he wanted to get Daddy's rifle and kill Mr Davis's she-dog! But I calmed him and told him to remain silent and that when Daddy came home somehow justice would be done. So Baby waited

to see if Daddy would take his rifle and go shoot Mr Davis. But Daddy didn't even seem to notice the bullet hole in poor Buster's neck. He dug a nice grave in the backyard and Baby put flowers on it and that was the last of his little dirty white male poodle. Baby cried, but Daddy only said, 'Son, God will take care of it all.'

Hear that name 'God' again, Baby? Oh, yes. Baby silently prayed that God would handle Mr Davis in some drastic way. But Baby grew bigger and older and nothing happened to Mr Davis, nothing at all – except he seemed to become aware of the hatred and contempt Baby felt and he began to watch my boy resentfully and never missed a chance to wisecrack about his being so big and clumsy and dumb. My boy said nothing but often while he practised his music four or five hours a day he thought about Mr Davis. Much later when he was fourteen and reading a book in the library about a man named Sigmund Freud, he wondered if Freud had known a Mr Davis in his childhood.

My boy was four years old and he felt pretty strange on his first day of school, clinging to Mama's hand, trotting along on his bow-legs, stumbling over his pigeon-toes, headed for the principal's office. Here went a brown baby with complexes, off to kindergarten to develop more. The kids all laughed as they passed and he didn't know if it was at him or his mother, who had taken off her work clothes and put on her Sunday go-to-meetin's for this occasion. He had overheard Daddy saying, 'Take that damned snuff out of your mouth! And don't dress so damn sloppy. You ain't fit for a pig to come home to!' It had to be true, Daddy was next to God and even sometimes told God what to do: 'God *damn* it!' he'd say when he got good and angry.

Weekdays Mama ploughed the back yard, planted the corn,

tomatoes, string beans and onions, cleaned the chicken pens that held over a hundred hens and roosters, gathered eggs, mended the fence, cut and watered the grass, scrubbed and mopped the house, cooked and washed dishes, patched the children's clothes, made the girls' dresses and covered their ungodly asses with big black bloomers gathered with elastic just above the knee.

Were these strange little people really laughing at his mother? He thought she looked beautiful. He was confused by the yelling and fighting and screaming all round him but he hung on to her and didn't cry.

Mrs Corick, the big fat white lady principal was less than five feet tall and wore a short, neat little dress that flowered out to expose her legs, shaped like oversize country-fair blue-ribbon hams. She had bosoms like two strapped-down white winter melons. She looked bigger than a cow! Her face was fat like Santa's, bursting with joy, and she blushed continuously for no apparent reason. My boy wondered if she was rosy all over.

So Charles had entered school and his problems with the outside world began. I wanted him to know that he was not alone, that I was with him for a lifetime, so after this day I tried harder to communicate with him. It seemed difficult – maybe I had waited too long and he'd already developed a thinking pattern of his own.

One day he stole. He'd eaten his lunch on the way to school and at recess he went to the cloakroom and I saw him eating a sandwich that wasn't his. At noon another little kid began to cry and I looked closely at Charles's guilty face. I scolded him for that, and he heard. He promised he'd never take anything again as long as he lived.

It was about this time he heard himself called a strange name. Playing in the sandbox he was pouring nice hot sand down inside his pants because it felt so good. He was yanked



from the box by a teacher. 'SEX PERVERT!' she said. He didn't know what it meant but he soon heard more on the subject. The little girl was Beulah Clemmons and Charles hadn't even noticed her that day, let alone looked up her dress. Besides, at home he'd seen his sisters in the bathtub and what could Beulah have under her dress different from Grace and Vivian? He was sitting on a bench at lunchtime, peeking around a corner of the schoolhouse, watching the girls and making eyes. Suddenly Mrs Pinkham, the spelling teacher, pulled him to his feet and slapped him and the Truant Officer grabbed him by the ear and booted him all the way up to the Fat Principal's office. 'Mrs Corick,' he said with satisfaction 'we caught him looking up Beulah Clemmons' dress! This boy should be sent to Boyle Heights this time for sure.' Boyle Heights was the school for disturbed and recalcitrant children.

'Mr Cuff, be good enough to go down and pick up Mrs Mingus,' the Fat Principal said. 'We're going to stop this kind of thing once and for all. You nasty thing, Charles!'

My boy remembered this was his daddy's day off and began picturing his own funeral. Daddy was quick with the strap these days and often whipped him for things he hardly understood, like letting water get into his boots when he waded home from school in the flowing gutters after a heavy rain – though he was careful and never knew how it happened. Sometimes there were two thrashings, one from Mama's switch and the second, much worse, from Daddy's doubled-up strap.

He thought with terror of the punishment for wetting his bed. Daddy had warned him one night and the next morning Mama slipped in early and whispered, 'Get up, son, go pee – you don't want Daddy to beat you, you know what he said!' But she was too late and Charles began to cry. The bedroom door shot open and Daddy entered like the wrath of God. With his strap and fist he outdid himself while Charles was

praying that Mrs Haynes next door would hear and yell as she always did, 'Stop abusing those children or I'll call the police!' But this time she must have been sound asleep.

The beatings at dawn went on for months and it got so sometimes they didn't even wake my boy. Daddy would beat on his body but the child was no longer inside, he was out with me waiting till the agony was over. He tried to find ways to foil these misguided parents, like changing the bottom sheet to the top, hoping it would dry with the heat of his body. Sometimes when Daddy thundered 'Did he wet?' Mama, the official peefeeler, would reach under the blanket and touch the dampness of his long old-fashioned nightgown and, feeling sorry for Charles, she'd give his butt a little slap and say, 'I think he's going to be all right, Daddy.'

One morning my boy opened his eyes to see his father shaking a bottle under his nose. 'Good thing you didn't pee, boy! See this bottle of Lysol? Next time I'm gonna take this stuff and burn it right off!' The words struck icy horror to his heart and echoed through the years as he rose in the early hours and made an extra trip to the bathroom to relieve the damaged kidneys that had gone unattended in his childhood.

It was during this period that Charles asked me to take him away, out of himself, and let him die. When I refused, he no longer believed in me and began to pray to Jesus Christ to wake him up so his father wouldn't burn him or if that was impossible, to take him up to heaven with the angels. So I began to watch over him all night and in the early morning I tugged at him and said, 'Wake up, Charles!' He jumped up blind with sleep and reached under the bed for the chamber pot. Once in his haste he mistook his shoe for the pot and gratefully made water in it while shouting 'Thank you, Jesus!' And so the morning beatings ceased and Charles was convinced Jesus had heard his cry for help. After that he called on Jesus for everything.

He was sending prayers up fearfully now as Mr Cuff and his parents entered the Fat Principal's office. His father looked straight at him and said, 'Now, son, I don't want you to lie to me – if you do I'm through with you forever. This man here tells me you were looking up some girl's dress. I'm not going to whip you if you tell the truth. Where's the girl?'

'Here's Beulah,' Mrs Corick said.

'Did my boy try to look up your dress?'

'Yes. I was swinging on the rings and he was lying on the bench looking up my dress, that's what Mrs Pinkham said.'

'Son, why were you crying when I came in?'

'Mrs Pinkham was slapping me and—'

'Who the hell is Mrs Pinkham?'

'The spelling teacher.'

'What happened to your lip and your left eye?'

'Mr Cuff bumped me when he kicked me up the stairs.'

'I did no such thing!' said Mr Cuff.

'Yes, he did, the kids saw him,' Beulah said unexpectedly.

Mr Mingus took everyone outside to the scene of the crime. He had Beulah get up on the rings. Then he had the Truant Officer lie down on the bench, then the Fat Principal, and finally he lay there himself. He was getting madder by the minute and when he rose from the bench he said to Mr Cuff, 'Now, you red-necked son-of-a-bitch, tell me I'm a liar and kick my ass like you done my little boy 'cause you can't even see her from here, let alone see up her dress! You low trash, wasting my time bringing me down here! Lay a hand on my son again and I'll kick your ass all over this county of Watts!' Mama cried, 'Now Daddy, you know your temper! You've proven you're right. Let's be respectable and go home.'

Not long after that incident, a very spicy little five-year-old Mexican girl named Hoacha showed him how they could

prop up their big colouring books on their desks to block the teacher's view, and kiss each other and hold hands. He enjoyed that part but he was puzzled when one day she whispered with flashing eyes that he should get excused and wait for her in the place the *girls* went! When she came she pulled him into a booth, locked the door, stood on the toilet seat, pulled up her dress and slipped down her pants and told him to kiss her. Do you know what my boy did? Climbed up beside her and kissed her cheeks and said warmly 'I love you too!' Then he went back to the school-room.

One day Hoacha didn't come to school and she never came back any more. Charles got very worried and ran around the Mexican neighbourhood asking 'Where's Hoacha? Where's Hoacha?' They said she moved away and he went home that evening with a broken heart. I consoled him and reminded him of all the other girls he liked – Evelyn, Caroline, Juanita, Jacqueline, Lois, Marian ... But Charles kept on missing Hoacha till the day he met his next love.

### 3

Tonight is the final rehearsal of the Tom Thumb Wedding. The children are being sorted out and paired up by anxious, nervous parents. The teachers are all excited – the O'Neills have consented to their son and daughter joining the procession! The sisters are screaming about Bernard – handsome, so brilliant, just like his daddy, Officer O'Neill. Charles is left standing alone. Things are sort of dull for an average seven-year-old Don Juan. They're all rushing around discussing who looks

good with whom. He hasn't even had a partner at any of the rehearsals. Who is this kid Bernard, he wonders, feeling out of things. And then it happens – he sees Mariana.

Hot dog! Cupid done walked right in the front door – walks in and unloads bow and arrow, pistol, revolver and machine gun and blasts away at my boy Charlie's heart, soul, body and don't miss nary a smidgen or notch of his entire personage! Grant's Chapel First African Methodist Episcopal Church on the sixteen hundred block of One Hundred and Eighth Street is finally blessed with a miracle, plain as day is from night. Behold, an angel stands in the doorway – a spectacle of sacred loveliness, holding the hand of a lady who could be her mother and standing next to a boy much like Charles. Perhaps a little taller, that's all, just a little taller.

This girl! This little woman! God, beauty is not the word for it! Eyes meet and lock. Watch out! A bossy deaconess in a black bonnet is trying to link her with another partner! It won't work. Charles and the angel stare and stare – nothing can stop them from looking at each other. Mrs Johnson sees and solves the problem. She puts them together, both of them blushing, trembling, looking at the floor, feeling still the other's eyes penetrating to her soul.

A whistle blows and the procession begins. How and where will he ever see her again? What's her name? Where does she live? No matter. Charles knows he'll find her. This is it! There'll never be another.

Rushing home after rehearsal, getting ready for hours, washing and washing over and over, practising walking, trying to turn his feet out so as not to be pigeon-toed, trying to get the bow out of his legs . . . The whole family is coming tonight and they're betting Charles will look more splendid than anyone including Officer O'Neill's son. He patiently allows them to get the tuxedo on him and the big bow tie. Dressed and ready, he

sneaks into the toilet, closes the seat, gets down on his knees and prays like Jesus on the big rock on the Sunday School picture card hanging in a frame over the piano in the livingroom. Placing his hands together under his chin, he looks up at the white bathroom ceiling. 'Dear Jesus, make her love me, please, dear Jesus.' Just as he's said amen his mother calls, her voice starting low and glissandoing up an octave or so. 'Char-rulls! We're going now!' And Daddy booms, 'Come on, boy!'

Grace glows and compliments, 'Ooooh, do I have a handsome brother!' Vivian complains, 'I don't see what this old Tom Thumb wedding is for. Gosh, do I have to go?' Mama warns, 'Now, you all come on 'fore Daddy gets mad.'

'I'm already mad now I've spent all that money buying those damn fool rags and still got to buy tickets to get us in! Over a dollar apiece paid admission and my own son in it! I bet the Reverend passes the collection plate to boot.'

While the rest of the family get their tickets, Grace takes Charles around to the side entrance. Everybody waits his turn to go with his partner through the swinging doors and down the aisle to the miniature pulpit where the mock ceremony will be performed. Charles has already described the angel to his sister. When she sees the little girl she exclaims, 'Oh, yes, you're meant to be together! My little brother Charlie is in love with you, angel honey. What's your name?'

Do you know who she is? The daughter of Officer O'Neill! Entranced, they gaze into each other's eyes.

'All right, parents and children! The procession is about to begin. Everybody out who's not in the wedding! Partners, everyone!'

Grace leaves to go out front but Charles and Mariana stand hypnotized, not even hearing the adult voices. Mrs Johnson gently pushes them into line. 'Partners now!' she calls in her sweet, musical voice. 'Charles – come on, boy, give this

pretty little lady your arm so you can march down the aisle together.'

As they wait in the dimly lighted lobby, no one sees the little adult hands that moistly intertwine, pulsating and clinging, as they move closer and closer together. Had this moment of pure love lasted forever, I'm sure they could both have survived all life's problems.

The other children are busy preparing for the procession and Mrs Johnson alone sees this just-born little man and woman now in each other's arms. Her face shapes slowly into a big, moon-light smile. Bending to retouch Mariana's lipstick and wipe my boy's forehead, she gently kisses their cheeks. At that moment the three understand what love is and they are all children together. Charles is thinking churches must be good if this is where you meet people like Mrs Johnson. He remembers the Easter egg hunt – the eggs were gone, the fastest kids had found them all. Disappointed, he turned to go home. But Mrs Johnson called out, 'Keep looking, boy! Don't ever quit looking.' 'There ain't no more,' Charles said. 'Look, Charles, they didn't get them all! Why, here's some right here! Bunny left three in a pile. Old Bunn's left a lotta eggs!' She laced them in his hands. They smiled at each other and he ran after her, shouting back to the others: 'Come on, kids! There's a lotta eggs the bunny left!' as time after time she reached in and held her hand under that little old Easter bunny laying coloured eggs right in her big apron pocket and he hid them for the littler kids to find. Oh yes, Mrs Johnson had the Easter bunny in her pocket that day, and tonight she had the secret of life.

The doors swing open. 'Don't be afraid, babies. Lock arms. Hold your flowers straight, Mariana. Walk down the aisle. March!'

A hush comes over the audience. These are children physically, but it is as man and woman they are being married to

love tonight. Attention shifts from the principals to Charles and his little lady. Laughter rolls over the congregation and ends in a sigh as Mariana follows Charles to the boys' side. The instructors separate them, but Charles runs after her and joins the group of girls. He hears his sister's low voice saying, 'It's not Tom Thumb's wedding – my brother's the one really getting married tonight. Go on, brother, marry your Mariana on this fine Christian evening!'

Reverend Jones gives the nod and the mock wedding proceeds with Charles among the bridesmaids, clinging to Mariana. Mrs Foldy plays the introduction on the old upright piano and Bernard O'Neill – Tom Thumb! – makes his grand entrance, strutting and striding up the aisle towards the miniature pulpit. Half-way, he stops with a shocked expression, his eyes on my boy in among the girls and hanging on to his sister, but he regains his dignity and overtakes his best man. The little bride, her make-believe father, a tiny tot carrying the end of a super-long veil and a smaller toddler bearing two rings on a pillow are making their way down the aisle. But my boy and his angel are oblivious to them all.

After the ceremony, the Reverend gives a short sermon. Collection plates are hastily passed and after the recession the crowd bursts into cheers and laughter. Parents search out their children. The mock wedding is over. Mrs O'Neill and her sisters rush towards the only real thing that's happened this evening. Mariana's family are not harsh with her, they're just embarrassed and ashamed and in a hurry to get her into her coat and out of the place, But big, brave, almost-white Officer O'Neill can't resist commenting, 'I'm wondering if this boy's got all his marbles. What's your name, boy?'

'He's Sergeant Mingus's son,' someone says.

'Good evening, *Corporal* O'Neill,' says Daddy.

'Why, hello there, Charlie. You still in the Army?'



‘No, corporal, I’m not still in the Army. You still think you’re white?’ Officer O’Neill says nothing and Daddy continues, ‘Take a good look at my son and your daughter. Ain’t neither one going to pass for white like we did. All it got you was corporal’s stripes in the Army and flat feet as a traffic director. Wake up, nigger. Times are changing.’

‘Well, my old friend Mingus,’ Officer O’Neill laughs, ‘I see one thing ain’t changed is that temper of yours. Let’s not worry about our children. They’ll forget this little puppy affair.’

Mr Mingus is mollified. ‘Um. Humm. Let’s get out of here and have a smoke, O’Neill. Leave the kids to the women.’

And as Mariana with her wrist clasped tightly in her mother’s hand walks backwards towards the exit, she and Charles are still busy every second filling their eyes and souls with each other – as if they somehow knew already they’d never be this close together again.

## 4

Charles was eight when his father first asked him what instrument he wanted to play. Trombone, he decided, because that was the only interesting-looking musical instrument he’d seen up to that time – Mr Young, the choirmaster at church, played one that glittered and glistened while he conducted Watts’s largest Afro-American choir. Charles’s dream was picked out of the Sears Roebuck catalogue and arrived boxed in wood, wrapped in straw and tissue paper, shining and ready to go. Mr Young had agreed to teach him but at the first lesson he seemed surprised that my boy didn’t even know his lines and

spaces. He told him to study the basics with his sister Vivian, who was already appearing in piano recitals. The first thing she taught him was the treble clef and this he learned quickly and he returned to Mr Young eager to play his beautiful horn, but he was called stupid for not knowing a trombone is played in bass clef and sent home again. My boy was so discouraged that he never went back for lessons but did his best practising at home alone until Daddy, disgusted, traded the trombone for a cello without even asking him – and this instrument Charles loved right away. Then Mr Arson came into his life.

In Watts, itinerant teachers – not always skilful or well educated in music themselves – travelled from door to door persuading coloured families to buy lessons for their children. Mr Arson was one of them, out for the few bucks he collected weekly from each of many black families whose money paid his bills in a ‘white only’ section of L.A. He would teach anyone how to play anything even looking like a musical instrument that poor folks might beg or buy second-hand or on the instalment plan. Maybe he didn’t even admit to himself that he cheated his pupils but the truth was he took no time to give the fundamental principles of a good musical education. His short weekly sessions had to result in satisfying sounds that proved to parents their children were really learning something in a status-building money-making field. So Mr Arson by-passed the essentials that even the most talented child must master if he is ever going to learn to read music well, and the parents, as usual, were paying for something their children were not getting.

Mr Arson saw at once Charles could sing the sounds he saw on paper. Good. Without bothering to name the notes, he showed him where to put his fingers on the cello to make that sound. It was as if a bright child who could easily and rapidly pronounce syllables was never taught how syllables fit

into words and words into syntax. I'm sure Mr Arson hadn't any idea his shortcut method would turn out to be great for jazz improvisation, where the musician listens to the sounds he's producing rather than making an intellectual transference from the score paper to the fingering process. Using simple scales and familiar tunes, Mr Arson would count as he bowed his muted, sloppy, gypsy-sounding violin with its resin-caked surface and Charles would follow as best he could by ear, knowing only how it sounded and having no conception of the technical processes he should have been learning at that time.

It was about that time, I remember, that some of the older boys told him about swimming in the Watts Canal without suits, with little white girls who went in naked too! But there were crawfish in the canal and that scared him more than he was tempted by the other thing. Not to be a sissy, he forced himself to join the fellows anyhow, but no white girls showed up – there wasn't a bare ass of any colour without a penis and in addition he almost drowned in the deep and murky canal. I helped him climb out and really felt sorry for him when he discovered someone had stolen his brand-new shoes and pants. Poor Charles had to go home holding eucalyptus branches in front of himself, knowing Daddy would slap him upside the head and send Grace for the strap that hung waiting in the kitchen. When Daddy beat the kids with that doubled-up three-quarter-inch-thick belt, the worst part was not the strap but the blows from the fist that held the strap. I'd say Daddy knew this. I'd say he was a sick man at these times – sick, frustrated at a life spent in the post office when he'd trained to be an architect, and confused in many ways. He taught race prejudice to his children – said they were better than others because they were lighter in colour. Grace was hurt when Daddy said this and she cried and complained that by

his teaching she was the lowest one in the family because she was the darkest. During these discussions Mama would look in the mirror and say how often she was taken for a Mexican because of her freckles, her thin chiselled nose and tiny feet. She believed she was part Indian. But the kids remembered that Daddy said Mexicans and Indians were dirty greasers with lice in their hair. It was confusing.

That year there was a pretty little Irish girl who sat across from him in the last row in reading class. She didn't refuse his fingers that found their way to the edge of her seat and touched her legs while she buried her head in a book and looked serious. And then his turn would come to pretend deep interest in his lessons while her little hand caressed his thigh.

One afternoon they planned to meet at her house after school – 'Mama won't be home till six o'clock,' she said. She showed him the big cream-coloured house half a mile across a lettuce field near the Hundred and Third Street wildcat oil well, next to the old firehouse and police station.

Charles felt safe trudging across the field carrying his school-books – people would think he was going to the stables like the other kids did to look at the horses her father owned. He crept up to the back door and called her name. Two Mexican boys, not much older than he but far larger, opened the door. 'Get out of here NIGGER! Betty's our girl and we don't want any NIGGERS hanging around!'

My boy was shocked. Daddy'd warned him about playing with 'them little black nigger yaps' down the street so how could he be one too? Hadn't those greasers noticed his light colour? For the first time it came to him that whatever shade he was, he was going to be nothing but a nigger to some people.

Losing his girl and becoming a nigger all in one day was too much. Near tears, he ran back across the lettuce field and suddenly three big white men loomed up and roughly

collared him by the road. 'Here, boy! What you doing over this way?'

'Going home from school . . .' Charles managed to say.

'Let's kill this little nigger,' Red Face said. 'Sneaking over here where he don't belong, trying to rape our sister!'

Rape! What are they talking about? Did Betty tell what we do at school? Is that rape?! Charles began to run but in three steps the men had grabbed him and forced him into the back seat of their dirty old car. They held him down on the floor while Red Face drove to the canal and kicked him out and shoved him to the ground. My boy was in terror – were they going to drown him, down in there with the crawfishes? But since they only slapped him a few times I felt they were trying to scare him – his daddy could hit harder than that. I whispered to him to cry and put on, I knew that would please these turkey-necks.

'Let's teach the dirty little yap his place!' said Pig Eyes. 'We're gonna watch you the rest of your life, ya yella scrunge!' Dirty Fats said. 'Catch you near another white girl and we'll cut your little peter off!'

Charles began to cry and just then two young black boys, the Grissoms, came walking along the canal in the dusk on their way home after crawfishing. The Grissom brothers worked at the market. They were always together and nobody in Watts was stronger and huskier. They took in the scene, and without wasting a moment Booker T. picked up Dirty Fats and slammed him into Red Face while his brother Warthell knocked the other honky down. 'This nigger raped our sister!' yelled Pig Eyes. The Grissoms looked at nine-year-old Charles and smiled sceptically. Then Red Face, who had been briefly out cold, rose up and cried, 'I'm gonna kill *all* these niggers!' The Grissoms waded in roaring and put the white braves to sleep for the last time. Then they walked Charles home and warned him never to say a word to anyone, for Booker was afraid he might have

killed Red Face by tossing him on those sharp rocks which seemed to have put a lot of holes in his head.

However, all three white brothers survived, so for quite a while the Grissoms met Charles each day outside the Hundred and Third Street School and escorted him home, 'cause they expected trouble. And it came. One day a near race riot developed. Betty's brothers drove up to the school with several other white men and they all got out of their cars. It looked ominous, so back in moments with the Derden brothers (who tossed hundred-pound sacks of potatoes at each other all day) and Tan Blue, about the baddest looking young man you ever saw. Tan was big, ebony black, burly and beautiful, two hundred and seventy pounds of solid muscle shaped like Mandrake the Magician's slave, Lothar. He hung out at Steve's Billiard Parlor except during football season, which was the only time he bothered to go to school. He was noted for his exceptional speed – wearing his football suit, he could outrun one of Jordan High's fastest track men, Moulah Johnson.

The odds were about even now, and the Tuckers were on their way. Tan Blue then spoke to the white men very politely, in his over-cool super-hip style. 'I suggest you gentlemen forget whatever you had in mind and go on home. For I must tell you that although the Grissoms and the Derdens and our friends the Tuckers who will shortly be arriving are all sporting gentlemen, I myself don't like fist fighting so I would be obliged to cut you should you get tossed in my direction.'

I'm not sure who would have won but Tan Blue's diplomacy saved the day. Soon after, Betty and her family moved up North and Charles always wondered what would have happened at that meeting they never had in the big cream-coloured house across the lettuce field.

My boy didn't know how to explain to his family what he had just learned – that this dark and light routine was all

bunk. Because if there's any 'Negro' in your ancestry you're a nigger to all greasers, redneck peckerwoods and like-minded folks whether you're coal black or yella like my boy or grey as the palest Caucasian with hazel eyes and sandy hair like Daddy and you better get to know it.

But since Daddy didn't seem to understand this, Charles prayed that they wouldn't come face to face some fine evening when the Grissoms, the Derdens and Tan Blue were walking him home. 'Cause Daddy might blurt out in his ignorance, 'Ain't I told you to stay away from them black niggers?' And wrong as Daddy was, my boy preferred not to see his stern parent flying through the air like a bag of potatoes while Tan Blue peeled him with his razor at every pass.

## 5

Scarlet fever took my boy out of rehearsals with the Los Angeles Junior Philharmonic Orchestra. On his first day back nobody told him changes had been made in the orchestrations, so cocksure Cholly Mingus was earnestly bowing away at their simple version of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and even felt proud as he played on after the others stopped, imagining he was the only one on stage properly following the score.

The stern, angry-looking conductor held up his hand abruptly.

'You, there! Who are you? Can't you read?'

'They shouldn't have stopped! They're all wrong – I was right!' Charles cried.

'We're too far along for backward pupils. Get him out.'