

The Counterpoint Lesson

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My father always told me there were two kinds of jazz: white people's jazz, and "the real thing." When he said "real" he'd draw the "e" out a good long while, letting it crest into a warbling falsetto. He'd retrieve an LP from the boxed anthology set in the living room's stereo corner, slap it onto the turntable and, if I was nearby, yank me out of a chair, engaging in a motley assortment of gyrations he referred to as dancing. Wheeling, dipping, sliding, his English Leather aftershave mingling with the faint lilac of the shelf paper that lined my undergarments' dresser drawer. He'd shout encouragement to each vocalist or instrumentalist in turn: "All right now, Bessie!" "Go to town, Louis." "Lionel – let it all out, my brother." On a first-name basis with everybody. I'd stumble and step and whirl in an attempt to keep pace with his frenetic movements. If Benny Goodman or Glen Miller came on – Dad was not on such a casual basis with the white musicians – he'd stop cold and nearly fling me back into my chair. "That's a white cut; you can't dance to that. You're forever trying to figure out the beat."

If my mom was within earshot – and my father would rarely indulge in these tirades if she was not – she'd stick her head around the kitchen corner, or come into the room with one of her university study books tucked under her arm. "Stop filling her head with that backwards logic," she'd say, or something similar, and fix Dad with her deepest scowl.

Mom had once tried to tell me the differences between “hot” and “cool” jazz, but her intricate compare-and-contrast explanation, lost on me, instead left me thinking of my favorite dessert: apple pie à la mode. And how what I most enjoyed about this treat was not so much the apple and vanilla flavors running together, but the sensuous delight of having two distinct temperatures on my tongue at one time: the piping hot pie and the icy vanilla cream, the way it was when I first took a bite. After a few more bites, of course, the ice cream would run all over the pie and temper the whole to a lukewarm consistency; thus, it was the first two or three bites that I savored most.

“It’s what the Lord loves, isn’t it?” my father retorted. “The truth? The truth shall set you free,” he intoned.

“You’re a fine one to be quoting scripture to me,” Mom said, raising her left eyebrow pointedly. Dad rarely accompanied us to church. He said he had his own religion, a special and very private religion that had no church or temple associated with it. During the family reunion last summer, I had met my paternal grandmother for the first time. She and my father were barely on speaking terms, having fallen out over such things as baptism and church attendance years before I was born. Timidly, I’d approached Grandmom and asked her what the name of Dad’s special, private religion was.

“Church of the Heathen,” she told me, her jaw snapping shut in a way that suggested it rarely opened unless it had some piece of ugliness to share.

“Maybe I don’t know too much about the Bible and what’s in it,” Dad countered. “But I *do* know about music and what’s in it. And in *this*” – jerking his head towards Benny or whomever – “there’s nothing

even *resembling* a beat. Even Kitten, at the ripe old age of nine, even *she* knows that.” Grinning at me toothily.

“As long as you’re part of the problem, you’ll never be part of the solution,” Mom muttered sententiously, as though reciting an exalted proverb. She never elaborated on what either the problem or the solution might be. Dad bobbed and grinned, leaning towards me in a conspiratorial pose to wink. “*You* know what the truth is, Kitten.” I didn’t, but I giggled, scrunching my shoulders up to stifle the sound as Mom turned, a square, angry set to her shoulders, and marched out.

One of my favorite cuts was *Dippermouth Blues*. I liked the music, but I was more fascinated with the song’s name. What *was* a dippermouth?

One day I thought I saw one.

My fourth-grade teacher, Miss Drysdale, had had a “nervous breakdown.” That was the term I’d heard some of the other students, and even some of the teachers, whispering at our Tuesday morning assemblies. I watched Miss Drysdale closely, but she didn’t seem to be broken down in any way. I didn’t see any signs of nervousness, either, though she was more absent-minded than usual, and she had become clumsy. On two occasions she tripped over the flagpole while carrying the flag for the Pledge of Allegiance. Another time, she knocked the candy jar off her desk while searching for her red Magic Marker.

Orange and black jellybeans splashed onto the floor, a few ricocheting into a corner. Mom heard of the “breakdown” at the Halloween cupcake sale and immediately insisted that I be transferred to a more “stable” environment.

I attended public school at the time, and entered the new classroom

in mid-November. We were enjoying unseasonably warm weather, and I didn't have to wear a jacket until the evenings. I put on a new pair of overalls and a plaid shirt with silver buttons. I arrived that day feeling grateful that I was only changing classrooms, not schools. I'd still double-dutch with Chenoa and Sally and Drew at recess. The four of us would still perform *Intermezzo* on our recorders at the Spring Sing. We just wouldn't be able to pass notes in class about Valéry, the fourth-grader from France who already wore a bra. We wouldn't be able to giggle about Fat Franco and the time he got wedged in between the monkey bars. But, by and large, our lunch and after-school rituals would remain unchanged.

I did not look forward to my meeting with the headmaster, Mr. Stiegler (known by students as simply The Stieg). I had to stop by the front office and see him before proceeding to my new class, even though I knew perfectly well where it was located. When he saw me standing at his door, he smiled broadly and waved me into a green overstuffed chair. A suspicious musty smell rose from the cushions. Mr. Stiegler smiled affably, and posed what to my mind was a series of insipid questions concerning my favorite ice cream, my favorite television show, my favorite doll, and similar pieces of irrelevance. I gave up Fat Albert as the TV show of choice, although he wasn't really it; he was just the first thing that came to mind. My mother had pressed and braided my joboba-scented hair so that it looked the way Fat Albert's female companions wore *their* hair, and the braids were a touch too tight. The Stieg, daunted by my monosyllabic responses, rifled through the crinkled sheets of my academic file, skimming in silence.

When he looked up, the glistening saccharine smile was back in place. Mom would call it a “Title IX smile.”

“So, you’re Chamique Winston,” he said.

The folder in his hand – and every sheet inside of it – clearly said that I was, so I did not feel the need to respond.

“Chamique, are you aware that you read several years above grade level?” His eyebrows arched on the question.

“Yes,” I stated flatly. I didn’t feel that modesty was apropos here; I was starting a new school and needed to present the best possible background.

“And are you aware,” he continued, glancing down at the file, “how unusual that is for your ethnic background?”

I stared at the top of his slick hair. He’d asked the question in the same innocuous tone in which he’d inquired after my preferences in ice cream, but now, staring at his slippery black hair, I imagined a small, prickly burr, falling out of his wide glistening mouth and onto the smooth wooden planks between us. I wondered whether a mouth that wide and that wet, that much like a scoop and a dredge, could be called a dippermouth.

I was without a clever way to parry this; I retreated to my customary directness. “Yes,” I said. Hadn’t Mom always said the shortest distance between two points was a straight line? Well, that’s what my responses were – straight lines. Only, Dad would have it that straight lines were boring. Glen Miller was a straight line, he’d countered Mom. Charlie Parker was like The Dragon Coaster at Rye Playland, just north of the city. Curls and dips and swerves. Kitten knew all about how interesting intricate lines were, didn’t she, as she was the

only one who'd ride the Dragon with him. Whereas Mom wouldn't venture onto any coaster whatever. That was why, he inferred, the only lines she found remarkable were the ones in her geometry text.

Mr. Stiegler looked up sharply, fixing me with a quizzical glare. Had he expected me to take the question as a compliment?

The Stieg was suddenly beamish once more as he announced that the secretary's aide would escort me to my classroom.

I thought about my father and the two kinds of jazz. Whenever I heard the "white" jazz, or the type of jazz that was always playing at The Ground Round restaurant two towns over, I imagined the word *jazz* printed in fancy calligraphy, penned with one of those outrageously expensive instruments I'd seen in our dentist's *Sharper Image* catalogs. I conjured a scene of cool drinks in tall glasses, long straight straws, fruit slices on the rim, and all beneath a twilight sky. Anytime I heard "the real thing," I saw *jazz* written in slanty block letters on a chalkboard, seemingly in a hurried manner but, to those who knew, written not hastily, but heatedly. A gregarious bunch with dark glistening skins, eclectically attired, kale and salsa and ribs round about, also outdoors, but this time under an unrelenting midday sun.

Mrs. Cepeda, was standing at the blackboard when the aide led me into the class. She and the class were laughing at a funny cartoon she had taped up on the board. I craned my neck around the aide to see what the figure was. It looked like one of the characters from *Multiplication Rock*, one of the favorite television shows I had neglected to mention to the headmaster. Mrs. Cepeda's grey eyes stopped twinkling as they settled upon me. The students fell silent too, and

now all eyes inspected the new girl, with the dreaded mixture of curiosity and hostility inherent and especially virulent in grammar schools. The aide had carried most of my books for me, and now she walked forward to unload them onto the teacher's desk. Mrs. Cepeda studied me, then leaned over to whisper to the aide, gesturing emphatically. I overheard the words "class," "photographer" and "discoloration." I dared a glance at the students, noting that they were not in their finery today. Was it possible I was transferring just in time to be included in the annual class photos? I loved posing for pictures, and felt a rush of elation. In my mind's eye I saw the long frilly lilac dress, sprayed with tiny daisies, that mom had purchased at Macy's. It hung in my closet in a crisp garment bag that I enjoyed kneading for the wonderful crunchy-crinkle sound, for the pricey-and-precious smell. I hadn't had an occasion to wear it since trying it on in the store. But my defiant glance had also taken in the complexion of the class. It was entirely white. I had never heard the word "discoloration" before, but with the "unusual" verbal abilities to which The Steig had alluded, I could easily enough put the prefix and the root word together, and establish the baffling idea that Mrs. Cepeda felt my presence would spoil her class portrait. As the aide turned to leave, Mrs. Cepeda caught my eye. We regarded one another in silent appraisal, she with cancelled eyes, smiling noncommittally.

My classmates, while not overtly hostile, made no attempt to befriend or welcome me. There was one bully, Marita, in the class, who harassed me during morning break. I understood her to be an established figure in the room; her father owned a national bakery chain

and everyone, including the faculty, kowtowed to her somewhat. (On my third day, the class celebrated a boy's birthday, Leon's. Marita brought in two boxes of iced cinnamon buns from her father's thrift shop. I loved any and all kinds of sweet rolls, but I took one bite of Marita's and coughed as hard and frighteningly as I could manage, ending with a desperate dive for my tepid milk carton. Marita had fixed me with a withering glare.) She had small dark eyes, stringy shoulder-length hair and a girth suggestive of someone who, as my mother would say, "enjoyed all her Sunday dinners." When Marita and her loud mouth got too close, I smelled talc and cornstarch – a bizarre contrast with her demeanor. She stalked me through the playground, loudly criticizing every move I made on the monkey bars and each jump I made on the hopscotch board. She mimicked the way I skipped rope, and referred to the way I ran around the circle in Duck Duck Goose as "gimping." Appallingly, Mrs. Cepeda completed the picture in domino fashion, refusing to call on me, full of smiles and good-mornings for the other students as they arrived each morning, but with no greetings reserved for me.

Lunchtime was both a fright and a bore. As I had anticipated, no one wanted to dine with the new kid. Mrs. Cepeda's class had four cafeteria tables allotted to it; the students crammed themselves around the first three. The girls put their heads close together, one or another of them glancing at me over her shoulder. Two latecomers were forced to sit at my table, and they chose the opposite end, directing all their conversation towards the other tables. My stomach felt the way mom's sweet and shriveled prunes had looked in my breakfast bowl. I took out my ham sandwich. Instead of the usual

ham-and-cheese fare, Mom had used leftover Smithfield ham and spicy honey-dijon mustard. I took small bites, knowing I'd be unable to chew larger chunks in my cotton-dry mouth. I rummaged around my denim knapsack and extracted my Walkman. I popped out my Gloria Estefan tape and swapped it with my Miles Davis cassette. *So What*. I bopped my head the way Dad always did when this cut was on the turntable.

"Stop fidgeting! I want to make sure I didn't make the hem too short."

I stood on a chair in the bathroom in my socks and shiny beige slip as Mom held the dress-in-progress against my back. Whenever I was alone in the bathroom, I'd stand on the chair and shift it back and forth with my weight. It was a castoff from the kitchen set because of a faulty back leg. Mom had placed a memo pad beneath the leg to steady it. She seemed to take an eternity to study the dress. Katrina's birthday was next weekend, and Mom was sewing a new yellow dress for the occasion.

"This slip itches," I said, scrunching up my shoulders and rolling my head back on my neck. "I like my old ones better."

"It just takes some getting used to. Wearing it to Sunday school today will get you started." She spoke around the two straight pins in her teeth.

I did a backbend, supporting myself on the chair's high back, and watched Mom from an upside down view. "Can I hold pins in my mouth, too?"

"Stand up, stand up. No. Not right now."

"Why do I have to wear a fancy slip?" I asked.

“Would you hold still? Because you’ll be wearing a *very* fancy dress.”

I regarded her reflection in the mirror. She still had her satin sleeping bonnet on. “And why do I have to wear a *very* fancy dress? I didn’t have to at Drew’s or Sally’s parties, and not at Kenneth’s, either. His was the best birthday so far. Remember, the boys outnumbered the girls –“

“However did his mother allow that to come to pass,” Mom muttered.

“– and we all played football. Remember that?”

“Yes, I remember.” Mom took the pins out and stabbed them, with some venom, into her tomato pin cushion. She narrowly missed my electric toothbrush. “I remember you came home with a skinned knee and a cut above your eye.” In the mirror, I saw that her focus was on the dress, but her mouth pulled into a taut line.

“At least I didn’t cry. Like Chenoa. She got hit by the ball just one time and oops! – she bawls all over us.”

“I do wish, Chamique, that you would refrain from participating in risky activities at other people’s houses.” I could feel the irritating tips of her fingers outlining the fabric on my back. She had a week off from her part-time job at the pharmacy, and she insisted on making a party dress from scratch.

“But it was so much fun – much better than spending four hours playing Musical Chairs and Hide and Seek, like we did at Drew’s.”

“Drew’s parents, as I recall, held a very reasonable and altogether appropriate celebration.” Mom finally took the dress down, arranging it on a padded coat hanger. “Seems like parents don’t *raise* kids anymore . . . they just let them come on up, like weeds that never get pruned.”

I whirled. "Oh, can I have some prunes before church?"

"You just finished your cereal, Chamique."

"I know, but just two or three? I have a craving."

"When we get back. Come on, brush your teeth. I laid your skirt and blouse out on your bed."

I hopped down from the chair, landing on one foot and, sliding on the newly-waxed tiles, began doing the Twist.

"So much energy!" Mom exclaimed, although her tone was not one of admiration. "Hush before you wake your father up."

"Sister Adrienne says grades 3 through 6 start rehearsing the Christmas play today. Dad'll come to see that." I nodded and winked at her, the way Dad was always doing to both of us.

Mom pushed the chair back into its corner beside the tub, replacing her shower gels and body shampoo on the seat. "Yes, he's a PCE attendee."

"What's that?" I furrowed my brow. I hated when Mom sprinkled her conversation with phrases and words I didn't understand. I hated when she used them, and I hated having to ask what they meant.

"PCE? Palm Sunday, Christmas, and Easter. That's what Pastor Williams calls folks like your father."

"Why can't I lay out my own clothes?" I asked, turning the cold spigot on full blast to fill my Dixie cup. The force nearly pushed the cup from my hands.

"You're not old enough." Mom removed her sleeping cap and began taking rollers from her hair.

"When will I be old enough? Girls in Mrs. Cepeda's class are doing it." I darted a look at her in the mirror, but she concentrated on

her hair and didn't meet my gaze.

"Fifth grade," she said, and I smiled inwardly. No doubt next year, the threshold would be pushed to sixth grade.

"I'm going to add some lace around the collar and then a sash for your waist. Will you like that?"

I had a nagging suspicion that it mattered very little whether I liked it or not.

"Can I have a yellow bow or bead on each braid?"

"Oh, we'll press your hair out on Friday and roll it up," Mom explained. She reached for the can of hair spray on the counter top.

"Why must it be straight?" I asked. "I wore braids to —"

"This is a *formal* party, Chamique. Katrina's mother won't be having any football games going on."

I knew Katrina from my Saturday morning ballet class. She was the best dancer in the class, but then she took classes three times per week. I myself did occasionally attend the Tuesday night class, and sometimes I would see her then, too. Her mother, Mrs. Dannion, and Mom would go to the Italian bakery around the corner and sip espressos until ballet was over.

Katrina lived in a large three-story house that had an intercom system. She lived in southern Westchester county, north of the city. Her property extended 20 acres and had a built-in brick barbecue as well as a kidney-shaped pool that reached 13 feet at the deep end. I'd been to cookouts and slumber parties at her house several times, and always under Dad's grumbling protests. The Dannions were white, and while he never came out and said as much, I felt that was a large part of his disapproval. "Sun worshippers," he called them, though I'd only

seen the family – including Katrina's college-aged sister, Cindy Ann, and their two black poodles, Mishy and Mishegos – sunbathing one time. Usually the same bunch of friends attended each of Katrina's bashes and, while there were two Hispanic girls among them, also from Saturday ballet, the remainder were white.

"A *formal* party for a ten-year-old," he'd scoffed when he saw Mom at the Singer earlier that week.

"Absolutely nothing wrong with that," Mom had said, peering at him over the rims of her sewing glasses. "Not so long before they will be young ladies, and this is her first opportunity to learn graces and deportment and –"

"*Their* graces," Dad answered. "Not ours. You know, if we were down south, and Kitten was doing this with an eye to the Black Debutante Ball –"

"She's doing it with an eye to having a good time with a good group of pals." Mom had returned her attention to her sewing, pumping the foot pedal in a firm rhythmic cadence.

Katrina's mother was a child psychologist while her father was a zoning lawyer. Dad was very proud of his drafting work at a local architectural firm, but he sneered at the Dannions' occupations. They owned identical diesel-fueled cars. I thought they were easygoing, fun-loving people. Mr. Dannion walked around the house in socks all the time, even arriving at the dinner table unshod. Dad usually drove me to Katrina's functions, though he would never get out of the car, much less accept an invitation to enter the house for a lemonade or spiced cider.

I kicked my toothbrush into its low purr. This morning, Christmas

rehearsal and then next weekend, a formal party. Between the two I could tough it out through the third week of Mrs. Cepeda's class.

On Wednesday, Mrs. Cepeda was handing our composition papers back to us. The assignment had consisted of the usual tedium: write a story encompassing that week's vocabulary words. She announced that one story had been particularly imaginative, and she would read that one aloud after handing out all the others. She worked her way around the room, placing a sheet of bright yellow legal paper on each student's desk. However, as her sheaf became smaller every second, and I still sat before a naked desk, my heart began to pound. I didn't quite know what to hope for. If I received a paper, it would mean that my story was not the golden one. Our vocabulary for the week had been nothing new as far as I was concerned: measure, unity, succession, I knew all of these. I'd written a short essay about a fictional saxophonist who played on street corners for a living. He was homeless because the transient hotel he'd been staying in burned down. My protagonist had escaped with only the clothes on his back, a five-dollar bill, and his saxophone. He'd lost his sheet music in the inferno (I thought this quite tragic, as I had lost my copy of recorder music last year on the morning of the Easter Recital), and therefore resorted to creating his own tunes. Improvisation, Dad called it, but I gave it my own spin; "the sax stitched the notes together into a new fabric every night." It reminded me of Mom's Singer, and of the Saturday afternoons we spent at Gimbel's selecting Simplicity patterns for my colorful church dresses. If I *didn't* get a paper back, there I'd be sitting, with my conspicuously clean desktop, calling attention to myself as

some sort of a star during my first month in a new classroom.

As Mrs. Cepeda read the first sentence of my story, I did my best to cover my empty desk with my scrawny black goose-bumped arms. I glanced about as nonchalantly as I could – and noticed that none of the students listened to the story. They were, instead, engaged in a heated search for the telltale desk. Quick studies, they found it soon enough. I caught Marita's eye across a framework of restless bodies and swinging ponytails. Just beyond Marita's glare, I could see the visor of Leon's green baseball cap rotate in my direction. Susan was midway between myself and Marita, and when Susan, too, swiveled around to regard me, her lacy pink bow obliterated our sightline; Marita and I both leaned to the left, instinctively correcting for Susan's big hair. Our gaze held for a minute, then she mouthed three pivotal words: "Is it yours?"

I nodded. As Mrs. Cepeda reached the end of my story, she looked me directly in the eye, and with a straight but earnest face, complimented me on my work.

"Here, you want to put these hot dogs in the stove?" Dad held the package of franks aloft, coaxing me in from the enclosed red porch off the back of our house. I slid the door closed behind me and pulled off my jacket.

"Wash your hands first." Mom, having heard Dad's invite, called to us from the study down the hall.

"Thought you were translatin' Latin in there," Dad yelled back.

"I can translate and listen at the same time." I heard her chair squeak across the floorboards. I peered around the kitchen corner, but

she didn't make an appearance. "Great," Dad mumbled. "Last thing I need is a twice-blessed woman."

"I *heard* that!" Mom screamed down the hall.

I grinned and reached for the bottle of dishwashing soap on the sink.

"Mom tells me that Kitten brought a perfect paper home this afternoon," Dad said, his head inside the refrigerator.

"Well, not *perfect*," I said, "but pretty good. Even the teacher admitted it to the whole class. You know, the one that doesn't like me so good."

"You're not worried about that. You know the stock you're descended from." His voice lowered. "You won't be in that class forever; half the year's gone already."

"She talks to everyone in the class except me."

"Today was different though, wasn't it? Listen – don't let folks like that rent a room in your head; they're not worthy tenants. Got that?"

I didn't, but I nodded. I split the frankfurters with a plastic knife and laid them in neat rows on a cookie sheet.

"Tell you what. Why don't you go slap some Parker on the player?" Dad took the cookie sheet and put it on the oven's top rack.

"The bottom," I cried. "The bottom cooks faster."

He rolled his eyes in an exaggerated way and moved the franks to the bottom rack.

"Mom's studying," I said.

"Parker'll help her study."

"No, he won't. Even I can't study with music on – especially good music," I added. "I get too distracted by the – oh! There was a girl at the bus stop this morning who was wearing a lot of perfume?"

It smelled like *Love's Baby Soft*? Well, all the yellow jackets were swarming around her, and she kept waving at them and ducking."

Dad slid into a chair and leaned back, his laughter escaping like a wild, rocking thing.

"Everywhere she ran, the bees would be right there. And she kept saying over and over 'the bees are *distracted* to me, they're *distracted* to me because of my perfume.'"

"And that's – the smart-ass school – we've been shoppin' – all over kingdom come for?" He chuckled so hard he could hardly talk.

"Language!" Mom called sharply, and Dad and I were off into fresh stifled peals. We heard Mom close the study's door and head up to the second floor, but she'd closed the door softly so I guessed she wasn't angry.

"What did you find that's new today, Kitten?" Dad asked, when he could catch his breath.

"New?" I asked. I joined him at the table.

"Yeah, remember our pact? Last weekend? Every day you have to find something that's new on your way to or from school."

I'd forgotten, of course. In the mornings, I was preoccupied with figuring out how to arrange a more comfortable fit for myself in Mrs. Cepeda's classroom. And this afternoon, I'd been in a single-minded hurry to tell Mom about the whole essay episode.

"I meant to follow the little dirt path that runs in back of the playground," I said, "but there's a lot of trees around in there and I didn't know if it would be –"

"Certainly it's all right," Dad said, almost scornfully. "You want to be known as an adventurous lady, don't you?" He tipped his chair

back, balancing on the back two legs and winking at me.

“Mom probably would say to bring a friend with me.” I traced the paisley design on my placemat with my finger.

“Nonsense. It’s right there by the school. Who knows what you missed discovering today?”

“You think it’s okay if I go by myself?”

“Listen – adventurers operate best alone. They make all their best discoveries that way.”

I waited for him to present surefire evidence of just such an adventurer. I imagined she would be black and female. But none was forthcoming. I concentrated more closely on the placemat.

“The Gold Rush? The guy who discovered the gold? Well, he opened his big yap and look what happened.”

I pushed away from the table. “I’m just gonna double-check with Mom,” I said.

“You’re cooking these hot dogs, aren’t you? Who’s gonna watch these hot dogs?”

“I’ll be back,” I said, taking big strides towards the hallway.

“You want to burn the franks? You want charred franks for dinner?” His voice held a comically anxious note in it.

I rounded the corner but spoke over my shoulder. “I’m going to ask Mom.”

“All right, then, go ahead – BURN THEM!”

My body shaking with silent laughter, I took the stairs two at a time.

“You look just like Queen Nefertiti, Kitten.” Dad looked over at me, grinning toothily, while a car behind us laid on the horn.

Dad swung his left arm out of his window and upwards. I knew from past explanations that this gesture was supposed to simulate a bomb being hurled at the offending car. I sat still in my seat, not wanting to wrinkle my crisp dress or mess up my hair. I had waited twenty minutes for my manicure to dry. I'd wanted to try Mom's ruby polish, but she had used a clear lacquer on my nails. Dad had placed Katrina's present, a jigsaw puzzle of two enlarged point shoes, on the back seat so that I could hold my single rose unencumbered. Neither he nor I understood why I had to present a rose to Katrina's mother, but that's what Mom had ordered. I was to give the rose directly to Mrs. Dannion upon my arrival.

"You ever brought a flower to any other shindig?" Dad asked, switching lanes without using his blinker.

I shook my head.

"You know, Katrina's mother orders *her* dresses from fancy-ass catalogs. But *yours* was stitched up for you all special and personal."

"How do you know Kat's never had a homemade dress?" I reached down to loosen my seatbelt a notch.

"Keep that on, Kitten – we're getting on the highway. Has she ever mentioned having a home-sewn dress?" Dad cut his eyes towards me without turning his head.

"Not that I've heard."

"Mmmhmmm. I'll bet Mrs. Dannon can't even thread a needle."

"You can't either," I said, and we both laughed. "And would you stop calling their name like the yogurt?"

Dad shook his head, still chuckling, as we headed away from the

city. Soon, the terrain would change drastically, and we'd see large houses situated in neatly-mowed green yards, trees and shrubs bordering the properties. "I ask you. All this fancy-pants preparation for the Dannons' goings-on. I ask you: who are they when they're out?"

"Out?" I dipped my nose into the flower for its delicate scent and velvety feel.

"At the supermarket, at the drug store, at the post office. Who are they when they're out of their Taj Mahal? Just like any other folks."

"That's right," I said, nodding emphatically and raising my voice. "Just exactly like other people."

"When they're *out*, I said."

"And even when they're *in*," I retorted.

Dad reached to adjust the rear-view mirror, though all he did was shift it about and then right back to its original position. "I can see you've been spending quality time with Mom."

"Daddy. Mom said to behave."

"I think she meant that for you."

"She was looking at *you* when she said it."

Dad smirked and turned on the radio, searching for a traffic report. "I hate driving up here. Always a parking lot on the highway."

I whirled to stare at him. "Not today. It's Saturday afternoon."

"Still too much traffic. Idling wastes my gas." This, despite the fact that we busted along at 70 in the HOV lane.

As we turned down the wide road on which Katrina lived, we passed a Tudor-style mansion with a For Sale sign in the yard.

"Probably tired of all the tight-asses up here," Dad mumbled.

I couldn't stifle my laughter. "Dad . . . you need to stop. You said

you'd behave." I pushed my right index finger hard against one of the rose stem's thorns.

"I said no such thing. Your prim mother said that. Remember?"

He pulled up in front of Katrina's house, wheels scraping the curb.

He kept the motor running. "I'll watch until you get inside," he said.

I got out and opened the back door to retrieve Katrina's present. I heard the screen door of the house creak open, and turned to see Mr. Dannion's pudgy figure hustling across the lawn in canary shirt, tan trousers, and argyle socks, bearing a tray of caramel apples.

"Mr. Winston! Good to see ya!" Mr. Dannion grinned widely at me, his glasses sliding up his nose a fraction. A slight breeze lifted his thinning auburn hair. The apples wobbled precariously as he rushed the car's passenger side.

I smirked. Mr. Dannion's haste wouldn't prevent the inevitable. Dad rolled the window down to what Mom called the "Barely Civil Margin," leaving exactly enough space to frame Mr. Dannion's head and the apple tray. I never understood how Dad could operate the automatic window so precisely. Whenever I tried to hit an exact mark myself, I was either too quick or too slow with the switch, and the window would motor past, or else not quite meet, my target.

Dad nodded an acknowledgement but kept one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the stick shift.

"Got a minute to come inside?" Mr. Dannion asked.

"No, no, I've got some work I've got to attend to."

"Oh, a working weekend, is it?"

"You know how it is; work never really stops. Now that Kitten's out from underfoot for a few hours, I'll actually be able to get some-

thing accomplished.” Dad craned his head, looking to share the job with me, but I stepped back out of view, unwilling to rescue him.

“Well, how about a candied apple for your trip back to the city?” Mr. Dannion seemed determined that Dad accept some level of hospitality.

“Nah, I’m supposed to be watching my weight. The wife, she’ll kill me if she sees me with one.”

The wife? I withdrew another pace, and sucked my lips in to maintain a solemn demeanor. Dad wasn’t on any diet, either.

“Maybe one for her? I can wrap it for you.”

“She’s allergic to caramel,” Dad answered tersely.

My shoulders shook now, and I drew a deep breath to collect myself. I shook Katrina’s puzzle so that the pieces rattled inside. Mr. Dannion straightened and looked over at me.

“Uh-oh! I believe I know what that might be.” He lowered his voice to a stage whisper. “But I won’t tell!” He stepped back from the car, extending an arm in a chummy gesture he’d never used with me before. “Guess we’ll be getting inside for the festivities, then.” I wasn’t sure whether he was addressing Dad or myself. “I think that’s Nikki’s car coming up the block, Chamique.”

I moved to Mr. Dannion and waved at Dad. “I’ll call you when I’m ready,” I said.

Dad regarded us, Mr. Dannion’s arm around my shoulders. For an interminable moment, his face remained silent and stony. I imagined my legs to be like Katrina’s cardboard puzzle pieces, and my heart thudded heavily. I felt an inadvertent gust of fright.

“Bye, Dad,” I said, my voice nearly an octave above the norm.

Dad dipped his head to me. His features relaxed, though he didn't smile. "All right now, Kitten. Have a good time, you hear?" He gunned the motor. "I'll watch till you get inside."

I smiled but didn't exhale until Mr. Dannion and I reached the house. On the doorstep I spun about and waved again. Dad was only a silhouette inside the car now, but he raised a hand, then pulled away from the curb, slowly, much slower than I'd expected, and still not using his blinker.

My heart was quiet. □