

*Also by Edward P. Jones*

The Known World  
All Aunt Hagar's Children

# LOST IN THE CITY

STORIES

Edward P. Jones



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# THE SUNDAY FOLLOWING MOTHER'S DAY

When Madeleine Williams was four years old and her brother, Sam, was ten, their father killed their mother one night in early April. If their mother sent forth to her children a cry of help, or of good-bye, they did not hear it, at least not on any conscious level, and they slept clear through to morning. About six thirty that morning, their father, Samuel, called his sister Maddie to tell her what he had done, how he had done it. "I stabbed her a lot," Samuel said, and though Maddie was still rising up from sleep as he talked, those words were forever imprinted on her mind. He told her to come get his babies, that soon they would be up and ready to eat. As far as anyone could ever tell, the two-minute-or-so conversation he had with Maddie was all he would ever say in life about the murder of a woman the whole world believed he loved—give or take this or that—more than anything. After that, the most Samuel would ever say to anyone about it, including his own attorney, was that he was the one.

"Mr. Carlson, it's obvious you cannot structure a defense for a man who does not want to be defended," the judge assigned to the case of the *District of Columbia vs. Samuel Lamont Williams* said at one point to the attorney assigned to defend Samuel. That was but

one of the sentences in the transcript of the trial that Madeleine Williams would come to memorize.

When Maddie arrived at the apartment that morning, she found her brother sitting in near-darkness on the floor near the couch, the telephone resting like a black pet on his lap. Still not quite fully awake, Maddie had traveled the three blocks to the M Street apartment only partially aware of what she was doing. Samuel was dressed only in his underwear; there was no sign of trouble about him that she could see, and for a bit this gave her comfort, and this was what she told the courtroom one sweltering day in July.

But in his bedroom she found her sister-in-law, dead, head down, sitting on the floor with one leg under her in a giant pool of drying blood. In her left hand, the greatest friend of Maddie's life gripped a hairbrush, and her right hand was open, also resting on the floor, palm up, as if expecting a small surprise to be dropped into it. It seemed to Maddie right then that all the innocence and joy and kindness had seeped out of Agnes Marie Williams and had become the pool of blood about her. The floor tilted, and so the blood had flowed through the night in several thin lines from the dead woman, and one line had been heading directly toward where Maddie was standing in the doorway. The front of Agnes's nightgown was soaked through with blood. "He said to me on the phone, 'I stabbed her a lot.'" These words her niece, Madeleine, would find on page twenty-eight of her \$75.86 copy of the trial transcript. The day she bought it—some twenty years after that morning—Madeleine made it all the way home before she discovered that her copy was missing pages forty-five through fifty-two. It would be three weeks before the court clerk could produce the missing pages, and on those pages there were no sentences that Madeleine would come to memorize.

In the next room, Maddie found the children, still asleep, and it was only then that she began to cry. She backed out of the room, and went to her brother, and stood over him. "Say somethin to me," she

hissed. She waited, and then she kicked him as hard as she could in his side, and the force of the kick sent the telephone sliding off his lap. It was the last time in their lives she would ever touch him. Samuel raised his fist to her and kept it raised until she backed off.

"Say somethin, gordamn! Say somethin, you sonofabitch!" She was reliving a spot or two in the last year, the times when Agnes had said it would be all right and Maddie said No and Agnes said Yes it would and then Maddie said Yes because she wanted to believe, too.

Maddie called the police. She went back to close the door of the adults' bedroom and went to the children's room. It took her a few minutes to wake the children and help them dress. As usual, Pookie, as Sam Williams was then called, acted as if he were older than his ten years and dressed without much fuss. But Madeleine was a problem. She complained that she was hungry, and her aunt told her she would get all the food she wanted at her place. Then Madeleine could not find her doll, and it took the three of them several minutes of hunting about the room to find it. Finally, before their aunt opened the door, Pookie said he had to pee. Maddie told him to hold it and Pookie quietly told her that maybe he couldn't, that he might pee on himself. "I told him we were in a hurry," Maddie would tell Madeleine years later, "and that if he did pee on himself, it wouldn't be the worse thing in the world for a boy to do."

Madeleine, as she was used to doing, tweaked her father's nose as Maddie was ushering the children to the front door. This was how her years of nightmares would begin, the nightmares that would keep her sleeping in Maddie's bed until she was eleven.

Outside, Maddie found two white policemen getting out of their patrol car. "Go up to the second floor," she said with authority. "The door's open. I'll be back soon as I can." One, the older, the larger, did not look up when she spoke and seemed preoccupied with fixing something on his hat. The other kept blinking as if he, too, had come directly from his bed; Maddie, pestered by Madeleine years later, would remember that the new day's

sun flowed in on the street and bits of the sun were caught on the blinking man's badge, his brass buttons, the plastic over the brim of his hat.

"Come," she said to the children, and she took Madeleine's hand.

"Aunt Maddie, we ain't even washed our faces," Madeleine said, holding her doll by the back of the neck. "We ain't even brushed our teef yet." "It's okay," Pookie said, patting his sister's head. The woman and the children headed down M Street toward 5th, and so the sun was at their backs.

Judge John Tellingford chose to sentence Samuel Williams to twenty-five years at Lorton and, Madeleine found on page 164 of the transcript, the judge noted that for whatever demented reason the father had stabbed to death the mother of his children, he had seen fit to spare his children an equally horrendous fate. "You are lucky, Larry, your wife wasn't white," he said. "Or the full force of the people would have come down on that head of yours." In *A Pictorial History of the Judicial System in the District of Columbia*, Madeleine would find a picture of Judge Tellingford. He had had a huge forehead many inches high and he had been a very small white man ("a towering figure on the bench," a *Washington Post* obituary would say), much smaller than any of the other judges in the book, and Madeleine could tell this even though Judge Tellingford had been photographed, like the others, in his judicial robe.

Of the newspapers, only the tabloid-sized *Washington Daily News* reported what had happened. In a drafty room at the Library of Congress, with the light on her microfilm-reading machine flickering the whole time, a pregnant Madeleine would find the headline, at the bottom of page thirteen, accompanied by about an inch and a half of print: **NEGRO CHEF KILLS WIFE.**

Madeleine and Pookie never saw the apartment again, and until she was about six, when Pookie told her to stop saying it or he would knock her in the mouth, she would pass the apartment building at 427 M Street, Northwest, and tell whomever she was with that up

there on the second floor was where her daddy had stabbed her mama to death.

By default, Maddie Williams became their guardian. Maddie, who had lived with few cares, with neither child nor chick, as she told the world, had long before made peace with herself about never marrying, about never wanting a family. And so for weeks and weeks after the murder she beseeched Agnes's family to take Madeleine and Pookie. The idea of being responsible for them for years and years terrified her. But each time she called on the telephone or knocked on their door at the fine house on New Jersey Avenue, someone in Agnes's family would remind her that they had never wanted their daughter, their sister, their Aggie, to marry that man. "We knew he wasn't any good," they would say, and Maddie would go away knowing that what they really meant was that her brother had always been too dark for them.

She herself was a very dark-skinned woman with long hair she usually wore in a bun propped in all its abundance with hairpins on the back of her head, like a picture hanging on a wall. She loved men, men who would have killed for her, and it frightened her that she would have to give up all the colored men in the world for two children. Sometimes, for years after she took the children into her life, as she lay on that freed hair in the arms of some man after they both had come and come again and the man was no longer drowning her with such foolishness about baby this and baby that, she would find herself beginning to fall asleep. Then, ever so slowly, her eyes would begin to open as she tried to remember if she had left the children with someone. And if she hadn't, the man, in the dark, would reach across the bed to her as Maddie dressed.

"Oh, baby," the man would say. "Oh, baby, I thought we'd have another go-round."

"Next time, sweetie. I promise. The next time."

Most of Maddie's male friends had cars and they were all too happy to give her and the children a ride down to Lorton to visit Samuel. In the beginning, despite Madeleine's nightmares and despite

Pookie's questions to Maddie, the children would go up to him willingly in the crowded visiting room and play the games, like tweaking his nose, that they had played once upon a time. But gradually Pookie retreated to a corner of the waiting room and would not move until it was time to go. "I won't force him to do anything! Not a single goddamn thing!" Maddie told Samuel once when he called from Lorton to ask her to get Pookie to be more affectionate. "You lucky they even come see you a tall. You gettin more than you deserve and don't forget that." And it wasn't a matter of Pookie being moody, she told her brother. "You gotta have a lotta moods to be moody," she said. "And he ain't got but that one mood."

Madeleine, torn between wanting to be loyal and stand beside Pookie in the visiting room and wanting to be with her father, nevertheless opted to sit in her father's lap and they would share whatever snacks Maddie had brought. Samuel had begun to smoke, and when Madeleine left him, she and her clothes smelled powerfully of smoke. "You smell like Daddy," Pookie would say to her during the ride back home. "Get away from me."

Maddie would sit throughout the visit across the table from Samuel and Madeleine, talking to whatever man had brought them to Lorton. And if the man stayed in his car, she would sit reading a magazine. The only word she ever spoke to her brother during the visit was good-bye, never hello and never anything in between. "I wouldn't have taken you if it was up to me," Maddie would one day tell her niece. "But you and him was tied to each other by blood and there was nothin I could do about that."

At thirteen, Pookie said he would not ever go back to Lorton. "Daddy won't like that," Madeleine said, waving her finger in her brother's face. "I don't care what Daddy don't like," he said. And to Maddie, Pookie said that if Jesus could throw the men out the temple at twelve, he could go down to Lorton or not go down to Lorton. "Pookie actin up," Madeleine told her father during the next visit. "What did he say to that?" Madeleine asked her aunt years later as she held her sleeping son on her lap. "I don't remember," Maddie said.

\* \* \*

The children in the realm made up these words and they would chant, particularly when Pookie was around:

*Yo daddy killed yo mama  
And soon he'll get yo sista  
Then you'll be next, brotha, brotha.*

After weeks of the chanting, he went after the biggest of the boys who teased him and worked his way down to the smallest, to the ones his own size. Even if it took weeks of picking a fight with one of them, he would persist until he had finally whipped the kid decisively, whether with just his fists, or the help of a brick, dirt in the face, the limb of a tree. And when he was all done, when it seemed that all the boys in Washington, D.C., knew not to mess with Pookie Williams, he would, from time to time, go after someone he had already whipped. "Sing that song," he would say before the first punch. "Sing that song you useta sing."

When Pookie was fifteen, he stayed all night at a friend's house on Ridge Street. It was the first time he had stayed away all night without Maddie knowing where he was. In the morning, he dressed while all in the house were still asleep and went to the kitchen. He had not eaten since lunch the day before and hunger gnawed at his insides. But he found nothing to eat. On the table, he saw a pocketbook with twenty-eight dollars and he pocketed twenty-one. Then, before leaving, he poured salt in the palm of his hand and licked his hand clean and convinced himself that that was enough to fortify him for the time being.

He sat on the corner at New York and New Jersey avenues and waited for the rest of the world to wake up, for Madeleine as she made her way to Walker-Jones.

"Aunt Maddie called the police and had everybody lookin for you," Madeleine said when she saw him.

"It's all right. I done talked to her," he lied. "It's gonna be all right." He gave her twenty dollars. What had worried him most about the hunger he felt before the salt was that his sister would

somehow suffer the same, and he could not abide that. "I'm gonna be goin, so you do everything Aunt Maddie tell you."

"Where you goin, Pookie?"

"To the navy."

"What navy?"

"The navy navy."

"Where you get this money?"

"I took it," he said.

"Aunt Maddie won't let me have no stolen money."

"Hide it away," he said. "You can do that. And don't spend it on somethin stupid. Use it for a mergency."

For a moment, he touched her cheek with the back of his hand, then she watched him walk away, and watching him, she was reminded of a short poem a teacher had made them memorize about a hungry man who went down to the river one day to fish for his supper. "Bye, Pookie," she said, but if he heard, he did not acknowledge. "Bye, Pookie," she said again. She noticed that already he was getting too big for the pants Maddie had purchased only the month before. In her child's mind, he was doing no more than playing hooky for the day and she thought they would see him that evening, but in fact he was gone fifteen years and eight months.

Madeleine never gave Maddie a moment's trouble, her aunt was proud of telling her customers at Cleopatra's Hair Emporium, a small beauty shop of five chairs at 9th and P streets Northwest. At the shop, at the bottom of the mirror at her station, Maddie taped her two favorite photographs, one of herself and the children taken at Sparrow's Beach one day not long after they came to live with her. The man she was seeing at the time had captured the three with their backs to the ocean. She treasured the picture because her nephew and niece were smiling. Above that picture, she had taped a photograph of her and Agnes in their late teens. They were sitting with crossed ankles on the hood of an automobile with an ornament of some being preparing to take flight. There was, on both

their faces, a look of boredom, and there was, as well, a hint of don't-fuck-with-me.

Madeleine took copies of these photographs when she went off to Columbia University, which, she had decided, was far enough away to feel she was setting off on her own and still close enough to get back to Maddie in less than a day.

From Columbia, she wrote to Maddie and Sam, wherever he happened to be, at least three times a week. Aside from a postcard now and again, she stopped writing to Samuel after she was fifteen, for no other reason than that she simply had little to say to him. Way before this, she had stopped going to Lorton to see him, but it was for the reason young people usually stop doing things—there were a thousand other things to do in an ever-expanding world. Her father became little more than a man in prison who, she remembered, smelled of cigarette smoke and who would beg for some sugar when she visited him. But when depression hobbled her and gave her new eyes with which to see the world, she began to imagine that she had seen what her father had done, to imagine that she, standing in the doorway, had been a witness, powerless, but somehow nevertheless culpable. "I told him to just stop writin you when you left for New York," Maddie told her after Madeleine returned for good to Washington. "I told him, 'New York City's bad enough as it is.'"

In her sophomore year, she began to do volunteer work at a preschool for Harlem children. All of the children at the center took to her and she to them, but she was particularly fond of a precocious three-year-old girl, Clarine, who, having learned where Madeleine was from, insisted on calling her Miss Washtron. Somewhere in her life, the child had been told that she was adorable, and she enjoyed standing before Madeleine and the other adults and slowly turning around so that they could get a good look at her in her dress. "See, see, see," she would say as she turned, the hem of the dress in both her outstretched hands.

In that second year as well, she began seeing Curtis Wallace, an

energetic junior from Norfolk. "They all act like they're God's gifts to the world, running around with their giant Afros and talking that trash about treating us like black queens, like the queens we used to be in Africa," she once wrote Maddie. "How many damn queens could there be in one African village anyway? At least he has some humility and feels that he is just one among billions on this planet. . . . If and when we taste the 'forbidden fruit,' as they say around here, I'll let you know. So far, though, he's been hands off."

They would walk the girl Clarine home in the evenings because often no one came for her. The child lived in a crowded two-bedroom apartment with at least a dozen other people, including some five or six other children. In all the times she and Curtis took the girl home, she had seen the mother only a few times, and each time the mother had stood in her bathrobe in the entrance to the kitchen smoking a cigarette and watching as Madeleine said good-bye to the girl. "Whatcha takin up?" the mother asked each time. "What's your major?"

In Madeleine's junior year, Clarine's father killed the mother with four pistol shots into the heart. Madeleine could not remember what the mother looked like, and even when she looked down at the woman in her coffin, she could not connect the dead woman with the woman standing in her bathrobe. The girl, along with the other children, had seen her father shoot her mother. She never returned to the preschool, but Madeleine would go to the girl's apartment each day after she had worked at the preschool. They would sit on the couch together, with Madeleine doing all the talking and the girl following the movement of Madeleine's lips as if that were the only way she could understand what was being said. At first, she brought the child small gifts: barrettes, slippers, coloring books. But when she returned, the things would have disappeared, so she took to bringing only snacks, whatever Clarine could eat right there in her presence.

"Why did he do it?" Madeleine asked her aunt one night after she had returned from Clarine's apartment and found everyone

and everything in the apartment gone. Some in the building said the girl's people had come from the South and taken her there, and others said the city government people had put all the children in a house for orphans on Staten Island.

"I don't know," Maddie said. "I only wanted her back, and knowin the why of it didn't have the power to bring her back." She had waited all Madeleine's life for her to ask, had kept that nonanswer poised, and though she had been dozing beside the telephone watching the eleven o'clock television news, the nonanswer sprang from her as if she had been asked her name. "I don't know," Maddie said again. "You alone there?"

"No. Curtis is here. I've been drinking, and please don't tell me I shouldn't have," Madeleine said.

"I've had my share. Why should I tell you different?"

"Why would he shoot her in front of the kids?" Madeleine said. Maddie said, "He didn't shoot her. He stabbed her. If you say the word, I'll have Bo drive us up there tonight."

"No," Madeleine said.

"Then put Curtis on the phone. And put him on now."

She struggled on at Columbia, spending much of her time in an unsuccessful effort to find Clarine. After graduation, she returned to Washington, where Curtis was finishing his first year in law school at Georgetown. He wanted to get married, or, at least, begin living together, but Madeleine said no, and she continued saying no even after she found she was pregnant.

She named the child Sam, after the brother she now knew only from pictures and telephone calls. She was not superstitious, but when she learned her son was retarded, she felt it some trick of God's for giving the child a name that had originated with a man who had killed his wife. Against everyone's wishes, she had the child put in the Children's Center, the D.C. government's Laurel, Maryland, facility for its retarded citizens.

Once or twice a month, Madeleine and Maddie and Curtis and

Bo Cromwell, the man Maddie had settled down with, would drive out on Sunday to the center to see Sam Wallace. The government people had put him in the Martha Eliot Infirmary, for Sam could not walk, and, they would find later, he could not talk. They brought him ice cream or Nilla Wafers or some other treat. Maddie would set him on her lap and coo at him, while Madeleine or Curtis fed him. If he enjoyed what they gave him, there was never any indication from him. And had they brought him nothing, but simply kept him in his wheelchair and watched him the whole visit, he would have responded the same way.

Sunday became the only day off from researching the Why, and after visiting their son, Madeleine and Curtis would spend the rest of the day at Maddie's or go off to a play or movie and restaurant. She had found work as a cataloguer at the Library of Congress, and every day after work she would walk the stacks of that library or of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library for an answer to something Maddie had said did not matter because it would not have brought Agnes back. Everything she found about the Why, however remotely relevant, ended up at her apartment far up Connecticut Avenue. She taped thirty cassettes with Maddie alone, and then searched out people who had lived in the M Street neighborhood when the murder had occurred. Most of them did not remember her or the killing, but she taped them anyway.

By the time her son was one year old, her father had begun writing to her again. Ten- and twenty-page letters in the most beautiful handwriting of anyone she had ever seen, about nothing more than what his days were like and who were the men he spent his days with. And he'd send newspaper and magazine articles he himself had found of interest, each article neatly cut out and pasted on a piece of ruled notebook paper. And he'd send poems—"On Missing a Daughter's 25th Birthday," "The Rage of Being Caged," "On Becoming a Grandfather," "The Light Through the Barred Window." She was, simply, captivated, and it was a very long time before she told anyone what he was doing. He spoke of everything in the world except the Why, and over time she lost the courage to

ask. "I am thinking of you this day and all days . . .," he began his letters.

A month after he left the sea for good and returned to Washington, Sam Williams found a wreck of a place on Martin Luther King, Jr., Avenue in Anacostia that had been a trophy shop, a place he thought would be perfect for a bakery. In a few months of working alone, he had the place gutted, renovated, equipped, and opened for business. The children in the neighborhood began calling him the donut man. He hired a young man and woman from the neighborhood and trained them in what he called the life wonders of baking. He named the place after his mother and aunt. *The House of Agnes and Maddie. Fine Baked Goods.*

Among the regular customers were some of the parishioners from the Cleansing Waters Baptist Church two blocks away, including the pastor's daughter, Hazel Watts. She was one of the few people who never asked who Agnes and Maddie were. She came in one Saturday to pick up a cake she had ordered for a birthday party for the oldest member of the Usher's Board, and, as had become his custom, Sam waited on her himself. He carried the cake—an orange-icing thing of one layer, two by three feet—to her station wagon.

"Miss Watts," he said, after he had set the cake in and shut the car's back door, "we'd like to see you sometime." He had developed the habit of often speaking about himself in the first person plural. "Maybe dinner, a movie. Something like that. That is, if you aren't married or keepin' company with someone." He did not falter.

"I'm a free woman in that way, Mr. Williams," she said. "Dinner or whatever would be nice."

He walked with her to the driver's side of the car. "Miss Watts, I hope you're not the kind of woman who likes a man to sit around and talk a lotta sweet nothings to a woman, cause we ain't it."

"That's all right, Mr. Williams," she said, looking for her keys in her pocketbook. "I've had my fill of sweet nothings." She opened the door. "And, Mr. Williams, I hope you're not the kind of man

who likes a woman to swoon every time she's within a mile of him, cause I ain't it." She got into her car and handed him a card from the glove compartment.

Having known only prostitutes throughout his time in the world, he was surprised by candor coming from a church woman, and she liked the fact that he was surprised. She said, "I guess this means I don't have to tip you."

In the most luxurious hotel in the Bahamas, with the smell of the ocean thick throughout their room, Sam would say that first day, standing in the night dark at the window, "We're never gonna believe in anything but right now. Not very much of tomorrow. Maybe a little of the tomorrow mornin but no farther than that."

"A bride doesn't want to hear that on her wedding night," Hazel said, coming up to his back and putting her arms around him. She massaged a scar about his stomach, the result of a knife fight with a man in a bar in the Philippines. The keloid scar covered the place where his navel had been. "A bride wants to hear that there will be a million tomorrows. She wants to hear that there will be an always."

"I know," he said. "But I could be dead tomorrow, and then what would you do with all them words?"

That afternoon, on the beach, she had drawn a tiny football field in the sand to begin to teach him the game. He had never had any patience with games beyond a bit of poker here and there. But she had a passion for football. It was one of the few sins she had allowed herself, she said, "and I want you to taste it so I don't go to hell alone." When the lesson for that day was done, she threw the stick into the ocean. "Now," she said, "you teach me something." The sun was at his back and she looked at him with her hand shading her eyes.

"We don't think we have anything like all them quarterback people," he said.

"It don't matter. Anything will do. It don't matter," she said,

for she had been a bride less than twenty-four hours. "Some trick with a string will do."

He moved so that his body was enough shade for her and in moving he covered the football field. "We can teach you to defend yourself if two guys come at you at once," and he held up his fists, ready, coiled, forgetting where he was and to whom he was talking. "I can teach you to put em down flat."

She laughed. She liked it. She reached over and patted his stomach where the scar was. "Can you teach me how to defend against someone who wants to do that to me?" she said, thinking of the Philippines fight.

"That's a lesson for another day," he said, thinking of something else.

That night, in their hotel room, her arms around him as he stood at the window, she said of his words about having only right now, "All right, just don't talk about it anymore."

"We won't," he said. "We won't say a word as long as you know that's what we're thinkin." From the day he arrived back in Washington to the night of the conception of his first son, it was ten months and three days.

Not long after Sam and Hazel returned from their honeymoon, the prison people released Samuel Williams. He made his way alone from Lorton Prison to Washington, a city he had not seen for twenty years. He found a room at Hartnett Hall on 21st Street Northwest, and a few days later, with the help of an ex-offenders' group, he got a job as a short-order cook in a diner on E Street downtown.

Except for a movie now and again and a visit every two weeks or so to see his sister ("I'll give you one hour on Tuesday," she told him, "from six to seven. No more, and it might be less, cordin on how I feel"), the job was about all he had of life. He refused to become friends with any of the people he worked with or with the men who roomed in his building. Once or twice a month he paid

for a whore, but he never brought her back to his room, choosing instead to pay for a two-hour room at the Buckingham, a place at L and 14th that catered to prostitutes and their johns. "Sheets Changed With Regularity," a hand-written sign at the desk said.

Once released, Samuel began writing to his son and received no reply for three months. "20 years of happy living isn't long enough for a motherfucker like you," Sam finally wrote his father. "Get back to us after you spend 10,000 years in hell."

Samuel bought a fireproof box for the letters he received from Madeleine. Though he wrote her at least five times a week, she wrote back only once or twice a week. The most current letter from her he always kept on the top of his room's chest of drawers, dead center, the way some people keep a vase of flowers.

Sam was furious when he learned from Maddie that Madeleine had not only not told Samuel where to go, but that she was writing back to him. And for weeks he refused to talk to her. A reconciliation was arranged by Hazel and Maddie on the Sunday before Mother's Day, which happened to be Maddie's birthday. They held a small party for her at Sam and Hazel's house in Anacostia. Late in the day, Sam stopped Madeleine in the kitchen. She was refilling the pitcher of lemonade and he took the pitcher from her.

"Why would anyone in the world write to the man who killed their own mother?" he said, sliding the pitcher far back on the counter.

"Let's not get into all this," she said. "I'm just here to have a good time and to give Maddie a good day."

Despite something in him that abhorred backing down from any position, he had been eager to reconcile because each and every day since his return he was aware of how much he and Madeleine had lost by not being together. So many years, important years, he had told his wife, they had known each other only through hurried, often dutiful, letters and through telephone calls with horrible connections and photographs that often arrived folded despite the "Do Not Fold" instructions written on envelopes. Sometimes, in addi-

tion to the times they had on weekends, Sam would pick her up after work and they would eat at some restaurant near her apartment. It had taken them several months before they could speak to each other without considering each and every word, before they could even comfortably hug hello and good-bye.

"I just wish you'd explain to me this need to write to that guy. I mean, this ain't some kinda fuckin pen pal."

"I know what he is, Sam." The others—Maddie, Hazel, Curtis, Bo, and Sam's new baby—were in the backyard, and Sam and Madeleine could see them through the kitchen window's curtains. The baby, newly weaned from Hazel's breast, had just been bottle-fed, and the adults were taking turns trying to get him to burp.

"I don't think he has anyone else. There's Maddie, but she could take or leave him, and she usually leaves him," Madeleine said. With two fingers she wiped condensation from the pitcher. "It's not like I don't think about what he did. I just think I remember this father man and some good things he did. Maybe I write because blood is thicker than water."

"So's goddamn cookie batter. So what?" Sam said.

"You act as if it's easy for me to write him. It's not. Sometimes I'm afraid, but he keeps writing me, and he sends me things, becomes a father. He sends me things for my son. I want to write 'Why?' but all I can manage to ask is, 'How was your day?' He scares me sometimes, because it's overwhelming, so it's not as if I look forward to hearing from him. He wants to see me, but I always tell him no. Give me credit for that."

He took her arm and squeezed it. "You give us the word," he said. "Just give us the word and we'll break his neck in a thousand places. Break his hands so he can't ever write again." In a few seconds he had become something else.

"No," and she pulled away, looking at him in that "Who are you?" way she did before she became comfortable with him again. "Is that what you think I want?"

"Who the hell knows what you want."

Outside, Maddie, in a chair under the peach tree, had the baby

with his head resting on her shoulder and, with two more pats on the back, the baby finally rewarded her with a loud burp that even Sam and Madeleine could hear. The adults in the backyard shouted "Hooray!" which frightened the child and he began to cry.

"You should talk to him or something," Madeleine said. "He's your son's grandfather."

Sam pulled the pitcher forward and wrapped her fingers around the handle. "You listen to me good: I been all over the damn world," he said, "so when I came back here I knew what I wanted to put in my own world, and he'll never be in it. He's the only black person who can never be in it. We have our wife and child, and you and Maddie and Hazel's family. And there're new friends all over Anacostia I've made, and people who come in the bakery, and people at that church Hazel drags me to." He parted Hazel's lace curtains to get a better look at those in the backyard. "Now and again we meet a complete stranger we like a whole lot and I include that person in." He released the curtains, then straightened them. "But no matter how big we make that world, it'll never be big enough to include him. And he's very lucky, cause we could have killed him a long time ago. I've driven over there a hundred times to do it—that's how much I hate him. But I won't. We won't unless you and Maddie told us that's what yall want. Every day he wakes up he should feel lucky."

He took the pitcher from her. "Your trouble's that you live up there among all them white people. With the ghost people. They believe in that all forgivin' shit, in all that stuff that cripples the soul. You should move out to Anacostia to be with real people, the people who know what day and night is like and never get the two confused." Then he put his hands at the corners of her mouth and tried to fashion a smile. She hugged him, clung to him, and for those moments they were no more or less than a boy and girl without a mother and father.

Madeleine and Curtis had planned to spend Mother's Day at the Children's Center with their child, but Curtis's father became ill

during the week and Curtis went to Norfolk. Madeleine would have waited until he returned to visit the center, but she did not want too much time to pass after Mother's Day before she saw her son.

On the Sunday morning following Mother's Day, she was ready to leave her apartment when the chime on her door rang. She opened the door without looking through the peephole. Samuel stood before her, holding a paper bag with one hand and removing his hat with the other. What she saw was not the man in the letters with the beautiful handwriting, not the man of the poems.

"I'm your father," he said. He smiled and looked momentarily down at his shoes. At five, she stopped counting his missing teeth.

"How did you get in here?" she asked, looking to either side of him into the hall. "The front door is always locked."

He stopped smiling. "Somebody was comin' in and I got to the door fore it closed. I know this ain't spected. I wanted to wish you a happy Mother's Day." He sounded like every black country person she had ever heard, those people who talked of fetchin' this and wearin' britches and someone commencin' to do such and such.

"Mother's Day was last Sunday. It's past," she said.

"I know," he said. "I started up here last Sunday, but I left your address at home and when I tried to go by memory, I got lost. Never get lost in white folks' neighborhood. The first law a the land." He smiled again. His suit coat and pants had been stylish a generation ago. They did not match, though they were both a dark blue that might appear similar at a glance. His dark gray fedora was now so old that it had the look of something abandoned, something a child pretending to be an adult might wear at Halloween.

"Well, I'm on my way out. I'm afraid I've no time for a visit."

"I can take you," he said. "I can take you wherever you wanna go. I got a car and I can take you wherever you need to go."

"I have my own car. Thanks," she said.

"But I can save you wear and tear on yours," he said. "Save you gas, too. Sides"—and he reached into the paper bag and pulled out a red, drug-store box of chocolates—"I brought you this. Happy Mother's Day. You can eat em on the way to where you goin'."

She told him thanks and placed the box on the table by the door. She did not tell him that she had once, before age twelve, been able to eat all the chocolate she wanted, but now all chocolate made her ill.

With her directions, Samuel drove out of Washington and found the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, heading to Laurel and the center. He and his car smelled heavily of cigarette smoke. All that May the days had been wonderful gifts, and that day was no exception. After they had crossed into Maryland, after there was enough fresh air blowing through the car to force out the smoky air, she relaxed somewhat and lay back in her seat.

"I been tryin to get up the nerve to come see you for a long time," he said at one point, "but I guess it took spring to give me the nerve I needed." He drove with his hat cocked back on his head. It was a sight she remembered from somewhere, but she did not know if it was a memory of him from before they had stopped being a family or from some movie she had seen with Curtis. "It ain't like goin to the store and buyin a loaf of bread, I know that."

Before long, she directed him onto the center's grounds and he parked in front of the infirmary. The infirmary was a one-story brick building of offices and wards where the city people kept the most severely retarded residents, those children and adults who could not talk or walk or feed themselves or communicate. There, too, were the patients from other buildings who had been beaten by the staff or other residents or who had been injured accidentally or neglected to the point where they could no longer care for themselves.

On the lawn there was a family fussing over a fellow who could have been five or in his teens or a man of thirty or so, and who was sitting in the lap of a woman who may have been his mother. Two cars down from where Samuel parked, a man was working deep under the hood of an ancient car. The woman raised her arm and gave an uncomfortably loud hello to Madeleine and Samuel.

Inside the building, they saw no one until they had walked far down the hall to D Ward. All the way down they could hear the

crying and cackling and laughing and shouting of those in other wards. Madeleine realized that she had come without some treat—pieces of fruit or a small box of cookies, something that Curtis usually remembered to bring. At D Ward, after the attendant had wheeled the child Sam out of his ward and left without having spoken one word, Samuel bent down and kissed the boy on the cheek, which embarrassed Madeleine. Sam blinked once and then after a few seconds he blinked again. In the ward, those patients not in their beds were in wheelchairs, gathered around a very loud television set propped up on a dull blue bureau that had no drawers. The only person in the room who seemed interested in the television was an attendant painting her fingernails.

Samuel took the handles of the wheelchair and they went outside. Madeleine had never come there without Curtis or Maddie and she would have preferred going into one of the unoccupied offices in the front and shutting the door.

The woman on the lawn waved them over. "Y'all set a spell with us," she said, then began to introduce those in her family. "And this here is Clement," she said of the retarded boy in her lap. "The baby a the family. Six years old."

"That's the biggest baby I ever saw," said the woman's daughter, who stood beside an older brother, just behind their mother. The brother whispered something in the girl's ear and the two laughed.

"All right now," their mother said, "has enough a that." The woman, Arnisa Isaacs, gave Samuel a blanket and indicated that he should spread it on the grass for him and Madeleine and Sam to sit down on.

"We'll just move around a bit," Madeleine said. She resented Curtis for not being with her, for not protecting her from all this.

"Oh, there's time for that," Arnisa said. "The day is long. Sit a spell." She pointed to the blanket in Samuel's hand and he and Arnisa's son opened it and spread it in front of the woman and her retarded boy.

Sam, freed from the makeshift straps of cloth that had bound him to the wheelchair and placed beside Madeleine on the blanket,

began to look about for the first time. Noticing an empty carton of ice cream, Samuel asked if there was a store nearby. "Like to get my grandson somethin," he said.

"No," Arnisa said. "There used to be a canteen, but all that's gone. This place is goin to hell. The closest place is that place out on the road you came in on."

"Oh, he doesn't need anything," Madeleine said, tying one of the laces on Sam's tennis shoes. "He's probably just eaten lunch. It's not necessary to get him anything."

Samuel did not remember the place on the road and asked Arnisa for directions. She called to her oldest boy, who was helping the man working under the hood of the car. "He'll show you where it is," and before Madeleine could think of something to say, Samuel and the boy were in his car and heading back up the lane. The girl and her brother began helping the retarded brother into his wheelchair and they maneuvered the wobbly chair through the grass onto a paved, stone-littered area that had once been a playground.

"Y'all be careful now," Arnisa said. She reached across and took Sam's chin in her hand. "And how old's this precious thing?" she said. "Oh, oh, ain't he just the most precious thing in the whole world!" She took Sam onto her lap. "Come here, sugar."

Sam began to drool almost immediately. Madeleine recoiled, and Arnisa leaned around to see what Sam had done. "Oh, honey," Arnisa said, wiping Sam's mouth with a paper towel, "it's only spit. It ain't lye." Then she began telling Madeleine about her life, sparing nothing, it seemed to Madeleine, as if the two women had known each other from day one. The man working on the car was not the children's father, wasn't even her legal husband. "I lucked out when I found him," Arnisa said, looking lovingly at the man still deep in the car. "A good man is hard to find, they say, and that's the eternal truth. And then you throw in a kid—three kids!—not countin the one out here, and you talkin bout a hello and good-bye all in the same day."

Madeleine felt she knew this woman, knew her children, who

were destined for nowhere, knew her common-law husband with his unreliable trash-heap of a car, knew this woman and her wig of "real human hair!" as the television ads proclaimed. Knew their tabloid lives. It occurred to her that they were a part of the same tribe as the nearly toothless man who had come to her door that morning, saying he was her father. The more Arnisa talked, the more she was aware of how much time was going by and kept looking up the lane for the car that would take her back to Washington. Sam leaned his back against the woman's breasts and fell asleep.

Nearly an hour later, Samuel and the boy returned, but they were walking, with the boy trying to balance on the narrow strip of yellow-painted concrete dividing the grass from the lane.

"Where have you been?" Madeleine shouted to Samuel when he was still yards away. "What have you been doing to leave me like this?"

Samuel was surprised at the outburst, but the boy began to explain that the car had died just before they left the center. Samuel had insisted on going on to the store, and he was now holding a bag of something as his daughter raised her finger and berated him. Arnisa stood with Sam in her arms.

"Help me get Sam into the wheelchair so we can get him back," Madeleine said to Samuel. "How in the world are we going to get back home?"

"Oh, honey, Bill can probably fix that car," Arnisa said. "He can fix anything."

They put Sam in his wheelchair, and as Samuel wheeled the boy up the ramp, Madeleine looked her father up and down. "Don't you even know how to dress? Can't you see that that tie doesn't go with that suit—if you can call it a suit—with those shoes. Don't you even know how to match colors?" Samuel said nothing. After they had returned Sam to the ward, Madeleine waited in the infirmary lobby while Arnisa's husband drove Samuel to where his car was. In very little time, they returned with Samuel driving his own car.

Madeleine said nothing more to Arnisa, and she and Samuel drove silently back to Washington. At her apartment, she got out without a word and did not hear Samuel say he was sorry. She opened the building's front door and made sure it locked behind her. When she was back in her apartment, she looked out the window and found that the car had died on him once again. The car was parked in a space near the entrance to the parking lot with its hood up and Samuel was leaning into the car, a man being swallowed up. She lived on the second floor, facing the parking lot, and she could hear him and what he was doing. White people passed and paid no attention to him.

He worked late into the afternoon, now and again stopping to try to start the car or to step back and stare at it as if some solution might rise up from the roof and announce itself. The day was completely ruined for Madeleine, and throughout the afternoon as her father worked she sat angry in the chair with its back to the window. That morning she had looked forward to going to the deli down the street where she and Curtis sometimes bought sandwiches and pastries. But she knew she could not go out with Samuel blocking the path to the deli and the deli would soon be closed. There were few cars or people passing, and most of the world was quiet. The loudest sounds were those of her father's muttering and of his tools against the car's metal, all of it reminding her, first before anything else, that the day was forever wearing itself away.

# LOST IN THE CITY

When the telephone rang about three o'clock that morning, she sat bolt upright in her bed, as if a giant hand had reached through the ceiling and snatched her up. The man sleeping beside her did not stir until the seventh ring, and then only to ask "What? What?" of nothing in particular before returning to sleep. She first sat on the side of the bed and began to hope: a wrong number, or Gail, drunk, in from an evening of bar-hopping, calling to talk about a man. She then sat in the dark on the floor in front of the nightstand. If it was true what her mother had once told her, then nothing rang the telephone like death in the middle of the night.

On the fifteenth ring, she picked up the telephone and said nothing.

"Ms. Walsh? Ms. Lydia Walsh?" a woman said.

"Yes."

"We are very sorry to call at such a time, but your mother died twenty minutes ago." The woman was waiting. "Ms. Walsh?"

"Yes. I'll be there soon as I can," Lydia said.

"Very well. We, the entire staff here at George Washington, are very sorry. Your mother was an exemplary patient," the woman said. "We will expect you very soon."

"Listen," Lydia said. "Don't... don't put that sheet over her face until I get there, okay? I don't want to walk in and see that sheet over her."