

done. I won't. But when I listened to the firewoman's stories I began to see that the fetish priest was right. There is evil in our lineage. There are people who have done wrong because they could not see the result of the wrong. They did not have these burned hands as warning."

She held her hands out to him, and he looked at them carefully. He recognized her skin in his own.

"What I know now, my son: Evil begets evil. It grows. It transmutes, so that sometimes you cannot see that the evil in the world began as the evil in your own home. I'm sorry you have suffered. I'm sorry for the way your suffering casts a shadow over your life, over the woman you have yet to marry, the children you have yet to have."

Yaw looked at her surprised, but she simply smiled. "When someone does wrong, whether it is you or me, whether it is mother or father, whether it is the Gold Coast man or the white man, it is like a fisherman casting a net into the water. He keeps only the one or two fish that he needs to feed himself and puts the rest in the water, thinking that their lives will go back to normal. No one forgets that they were once captive, even if they are now free. But still, Yaw, you have to let yourself be free."

Yaw took his mother up from the ground and into his arms while she kept chanting, "Be free, Yaw. Be free." He hugged her, surprised by how light she was.

Soon Esther and Kukua came in carrying pot after pot of food. They served Yaw and his mother well into the night. They ate until the sun came up.

Sonny

JAIL GAVE SONNY time to read. He used the hours before his mother bailed him out to thumb through *The Souls of Black Folk*. He'd read it four times already, and he still wasn't tired of it. It reaffirmed for him the purpose of his being there, on an iron bench, in an iron cell. Every time he felt the futility of his work for the NAACP, he'd finger the well-worn pages of that book, and it would strengthen his resolve.

"Ain't you tired of this?" Willie said when she stormed through the doors of the police station. She was holding her tattered coat in one hand and a broom in the other. She had been cleaning houses on the Upper East Side for as long as Sonny could remember, and she didn't trust the brooms white people kept around and so she always brought her own, carrying it from subway station to subway station to street to house. When he was a teenager, that broom used to embarrass Sonny no end, seeing his mother lug it around like it was a cross. If she held it on the days she called his name while he played with his friends on the basketball court, he would deny her like Peter.

"Carson!" she'd yell, and as he answered her with silence, he would think that he was justified in not responding, for he'd long since gone by "Sonny." He'd let her call out "Carson" a few times more before he finally said, "What?" He knew he'd pay for it when he got back home. He knew his mother would bring out her Bible and start pray-shouting over him, but he did it anyway.

Sonny took up *The Souls of Black Folk* while the officer opened the door. He nodded at the other men who'd been arrested during the march and brushed past his mother.

"How many times they gotta throw you in jail, huh?" Willie called after him, but Sonny kept walking.

It wasn't like he hadn't asked himself the same thing a hundred times or more. How many times could he pick himself up off the dirty floor of a jail cell? How many hours could he spend marching? How many bruises could he collect from the police? How many letters to the mayor, governor, president could he send? How many more days would it take to get something to change? And when it changed, would it change? Would America be any different, or would it be mostly the same?

For Sonny, the problem with America wasn't segregation but the fact that you could not, in fact, segregate. Sonny had been trying to get away from white people for as long as he could remember, but, big as this country was, there was nowhere to go. Not even Harlem, where white folks owned just about everything an eye could see or a hand could touch. What Sonny wanted was Africa. Marcus Garvey had been onto something. Liberia and Sierra Leone, those two efforts had been a good thing, in theory at least. The problem was that in practice things didn't work the way they did in theory. The practice of segregation still meant that Sonny had to see white people sitting at the front of every bus he took, that he got called "boy" by every other snot-nosed white kid in sight. The practice of segregation meant that he had to feel his separateness as inequality, and *that* was what he could not take.

"Carson, I'm talking to you!" Willie shouted. Sonny knew he was never too old for a knock on his head, and so he turned to face his mother.

"What?"

She gave him a hard look, and he gave it right back. For the first few years of his life, it had just been him and Willie. Try as hard as he might, Sonny could never conjure up a picture of his father, and he still hadn't forgiven his mother for that.

"You's a hardheaded fool," Willie said, pushing past him now. "You

need to stop spendin' time in jail and start spendin' it with your kids. That's what you need to do."

She muttered the last part so that Sonny could barely hear her, but he would have known what she said even if she hadn't said it. He was mad at her because he didn't have a father, and she was mad at him because he'd become as absent as his own.

Sonny was on the housing team at the NAACP. Once a week, he and the other men and women on the team went around to all the different neighborhoods in Harlem to ask people how they were faring.

"We got so many roaches and rats, we got to keep the toothbrushes in the fridge," one mother said.

It was the last Friday of the month, and Sonny was still nursing Thursday night's headache. "Mm-hmm," he said to the woman, sweeping a hand over his brow, as though he could mop up a bit of the pain that pulsed there. While she talked, Sonny pretended to take notes in his notepad, but it was the same thing he'd heard at the last place, and the one before that. In fact, Sonny could have not gone to a single apartment and he still would have known what the tenants would say. He and Willie and his sister, Josephine, had lived in conditions like these and much worse.

He could remember with clarity a time when his mother's second husband, Eli, left and took the month's rent with him. Sonny had held baby Josephine in his arms while they all went from block to block, begging anyone who would listen to take them in. They'd ended up in an apartment that had forty people living in it, including a sick old woman who'd lost control of her bowels. Every night the woman would sit in a corner, shaking and crying and filling her shoes with her own shit. Then the rats would come to eat it.

Once, when his mother was desperate, she'd taken them to stay in one of the Manhattan apartments that she cleaned while that family was on vacation. The apartment had six bedrooms for only two people. Sonny didn't know what to do with himself with all that space. He spent the whole day in the smallest room, too scared to touch anything,

knowing that his mother would have to dust off his fingerprints if he was to leave them.

"Can you help, mister?" a boy said.

Sonny dropped his notepad down and looked at him. He was small, but something about the look in his eyes told Sonny that he was older than he looked, maybe fourteen or fifteen. The boy came up to the woman and put a hand on her shoulder. He stared at Sonny longer, and so Sonny had time to study his eyes. They were the biggest eyes Sonny had ever seen on a man or a woman, with eyelashes like the long, glamorous legs of a terrifying spider.

"You can't, can you?" the boy said. He blinked twice quickly, and, watching his spider-leg lashes entangle, Sonny was suddenly filled with fear. "You can't do a single thing, can you?" the boy continued.

Sonny didn't know what to say. He just knew he had to get out of there.

The boy's voice rang in Sonny's head for the rest of that week, month, year. He'd asked to be moved off the housing team, lest he see him again.

"You can't do a single thing, can you?"

Sonny was arrested at another march. And then another. And then another. After the third arrest, when Sonny was already handcuffed, one of the police officers punched him in the face. As his eye started to swell shut, Sonny puckered his lips as if to spit, but the officer just looked him in his one good eye, shook his head, and said, "Do that and you'll die today."

His mother saw his face and started to weep. "I didn't leave Alabama for this!" she said. Sonny was supposed to go to her house for Sunday dinner, but he skipped it. He skipped work that week too.

"You can't do a single thing, can you?"

Reverend George Lee of Mississippi was fatally shot while trying to register to vote.

Rosa Jordan was shot while riding a newly desegregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was pregnant.

"You can't do a single thing, can you?"

Sonny kept skipping out on work. Instead, he sat on a bench next

to the man who swept the barbershops on Seventh. Sonny didn't know the man's name. He just liked to sit and talk to him. Maybe it was the fact that the man held a broom like his mother did. He could talk to him in a way he'd never been able to talk to her. "What do you do when you feel helpless?" Sonny asked.

The man took a long drag off his Newport. "This helps," he said, waving the cigarette in the air. He pulled out a small glassine bag from his pocket and placed it in Sonny's hand. "When that don't help, this do," he said.

Sonny fingered the dope for a while. He didn't speak, and soon the barber sweep took up his broom and left. Sonny sat on that bench for nearly an hour, just running that small bag from finger to finger, thinking about it. He thought about it as he walked the ten blocks home. He thought about it as he fried an egg for dinner. If nothing he did changed anything, then maybe he was the one who would have to make a change. By midafternoon the next day, Sonny had stopped thinking about it.

He called up the NAACP and quit his job before flushing the bag down the toilet.

"What are you gonna do for money?" Josephine asked Sonny. He couldn't keep his apartment now that he didn't have an income, so he was staying at his mother's house until he could figure things out.

Willie stood over the sink, washing dishes and humming her gospel tunes. She hummed loudest when she wanted to appear as though she wasn't listening in.

"I'll figure something out. I always do, don't I?" His voice was a dare, and Josephine didn't accept, leaning back into her seat and becoming, suddenly, silent. His mother hummed a little louder and started to dry the dishes in her hands.

"Let me help you with that, Mama," Sonny said, hopping up.

Immediately, she started in on him so that he knew that she had been listening. "Lucille came by here yesterday asking for you," Willie said. Sonny grunted. "Seem like maybe you should give the girl a call."

"She know how to find me when she want to."

"What about Angela or Rhonda? They know how to find you too? Seem like they only know how to get to my house on days you *ain't* here."

Sonny grunted again. "You don't got to give 'em nothing, Mama," he said.

His mother snorted. She stopped humming and started singing instead. Sonny knew he had to get out of the apartment, and fast. If his women were after him and his mama was singing gospel, he had better find himself a place to be.

He went to see his friend Mohammed about a job. "You should join the Nation of Islam, man," Mohammed said. "Forget the NAACP. They ain't doing shit."

Sonny accepted a glass of water from Mohammed's eldest daughter. He shrugged at his friend. They'd had this conversation before. Sonny couldn't join the Nation of Islam as long as his mother was a devout Christian woman. He would never hear the end of it. Besides, his days of sitting in the back of his mother's church had not left him immune to ideas about the wrath of God. It was not the kind of thing you wanted to attract. "Islam ain't getting shit done neither," he said.

His friend Mohammed used to be named Johnny. They'd met shooting hoops in courts all around Harlem when they were boys, and they'd kept up their friendship, even as their basketball days ended and their midsections grew.

When they'd met, Sonny had still gone by "Carson," but on the court he liked the quickness, the ease of "Sonny," and so he'd adopted that name as his own. His mother hated it. He knew it was because his father used to call him that, but Sonny didn't know a thing about his father and there was no sentimental pull to the name for him other than the sound of the other kids saying "Yeah, Son! Yeah, Sonny!" when he sunk one.

"It's dry out there, Sonny," Mohammed said.

"You gotta know somethin'. Anything, man."

"How much school you had?" Mohammed asked.

"Couple years," Sonny said. In truth, he couldn't remember finishing one year in any one place, so much had he skipped school, moved around, gotten kicked out. One year, out of sheer desperation, his mother had tried to get him into one of the fancy white schools in Manhattan. She'd marched into the office wearing glasses and carrying her best pen. While Sonny looked at the pristine building, clean and shiny, with smartly dressed white children entering and exiting as calmly as can be, he'd thought about his own schools, the ones in Harlem that had the ceiling falling in and smelled of some unnameable funk, and he was surprised that both things could even be called "schools." Sonny could remember how the white school officials had asked his mother if she wanted some coffee. They'd told her that it just wasn't possible for him to go there. It just wasn't possible. Sonny could remember Willie squeezing his hand with one of hers as they walked back to Harlem, wiping away tears with the other. To comfort her, Sonny said he didn't mind his schools because he never went, and Willie said the fact that he never went was what was wrong with them.

"That ain't enough for the one thing I heard about," Mohammed said.

"I gotta work, Mohammed. I got to."

Mohammed nodded slowly, thinking, and the next week he gave Sonny the number of a man who had left the Nation and now owned a bar. Two weeks later Sonny was taking drink orders at Jazzmine, the new jazz club in East Harlem.

Sonny moved his things out of his mother's house the night he found out he got the job. He didn't tell her where he was working because he already knew she didn't approve of jazz or any other kind of secular music. She sang for the church, used her voice for Christ, and that was it. Sonny had asked her once if she had ever wanted to be famous like Billie Holiday, singing so sweet that even white people had to pay attention, but his mother just looked away and told him to be careful of "that kind of life."

Jazzmine was too new to attract the big-time clients and players. Most days, the club was half-empty, and the workers, many of whom

were musicians themselves, hoping to be seen by the kind of people who could make their careers, quit before the club was even six months old. It wasn't long before Sonny became head bartender.

"Gimme a whiskey," a muffled voice called to Sonny one night. He could tell it was a woman's voice, but he couldn't see her face. She was sitting all the way down at the end of the bar, and her head was in her hands.

"Can't serve ya if I can't see ya," he said, and slowly she lifted her head. "Why don't you come on down here and get your drink?"

He had never seen a woman move that slowly. It was like she had to wade through deep and mucky waters to get to him. She couldn't have been more than nineteen years old, but she moved like a world-weary old woman, like sudden movements would break her bones. And when she plopped herself down on the stool in front of him, she still seemed in no hurry.

"Long day?" Sonny asked.

She smiled. "Ain't all days long?"

Sonny got her the drink, and she sipped it just as slowly as she had done everything else.

"My name's Sonny," he said.

She slipped him another smile, and her eyes grew amused. "Amani Zulema."

Sonny chuckled. "What kind of name is that?" he asked.

"Mine." She stood up, and with the same slow stroll took her drink across the bar and up onto the stage.

The band that had been playing seemed to bow before her. Without Amani needing to say anything at all, the pianist stood up to give her the stool and the others cleared the stage.

She set her drink on top of the piano and started running her hands along the keys. Here, on the piano, was the same lack of urgency that Sonny had noticed before, just fingers lazily ambling along.

It was when she started singing that the room grew really quiet. She was a small woman, but her voice was so deep, it made her look much larger. There was a gravelly quality to the sound too, like she had been gargling with pebbles to prepare herself. She swayed while she sang. First one way, then a cock of the head before moving the other

way. When she started to scat, the small crowd grunted and moaned and even shouted "Amen!" once or twice. A few people came in off the street and stood in the doorway, just trying to catch sight of her.

She ended in a hum, a sound that seemed to come from the full-est part of her gut, where some said the soul lived. It reminded Sonny of his childhood, of the first day his mother sang out in church. He was young, and Josephine was just a baby bopping on Eli's knee. His mother had dropped her songbook on the ground and the whole congregation had been startled by the noise, looking up at her. Sonny felt his heart catch in his throat. He remembered that he had been embarrassed for her. Back then, he was always angry at or embarrassed by her. But then she had started to sing. "I shall wear a crown," she sang. I shall wear a crown.

It was the most beautiful thing Sonny had ever heard, and he loved his mother then, like he had never loved her before. The congregation said, "Sing, Willie" and "Amen" and "Bless God," and it seemed to Sonny then that his mother didn't have to wait for Heaven for her reward. He could see it; she was already wearing her crown.

Amani finished her humming and smiled at the crowd as they started to roar with clapping and praise. She picked her drink up from the top of the piano and drank it all the way down. She walked back toward Sonny and set the empty glass in front of him. She didn't say another word as she made her way out.

Sonny was staying in some projects on the East Side with some folks he kind of knew. Against his better judgment, he had given his mother his address, and he knew she had given it to Lucille when the woman showed up holding his daughter.

"Sonny!" she shouted. She was standing on the sidewalk outside the apartment building. There could have been upwards of a hundred Sonny's in Harlem. He didn't want to admit that this one was him.

"Carson Clifton, I know you up there."

There was no back door to the apartment, and it would only be a matter of time before Lucille figured out a way up.

Sonny leaned the top half of his body out of his third-floor window.

"Whatchu want, Luce?" he asked. He hadn't seen his daughter in nearly a year. The child was big, too big to be cocked against her tiny mother's hip, but Lucille had always had strength enough to spare.

"Come let us up!" she hollered back, and he sighed one of what Josephine called his "old lady sighs" before going down to get them.

Lucille wasn't in the room but ten seconds before Sonny regretted letting her in.

"We need money, Sonny."

"I know my mama been payin' you."

"What I'm supposed to feed this child? Air? Air can't grow a child."

"I ain't got nothin' for you, Lucille."

"You got this apartment. Angela told me you gave her somethin' just last month."

Sonny shook his head. The lies these women told each other and themselves. "I ain't seen Angela in longer than I seen you."

Lucille harrumphed. "What kind of father are you!"

Sonny was angry now. He hadn't wanted any children, but somehow he had ended up with three. The first was Angela's girl, the second Rhonda's, and the third was Lucille's girl, who had come out a little slow. His mother gave them all some money each month even though he had told her to stop and told each of his women to stop asking her. They didn't listen.

When Angela had given birth to their daughter, Etta, Sonny was only fifteen years old. Angela was only fourteen. They'd said they were gonna get married and do things the right way, but when Angela's parents found out she was pregnant and that the baby was Sonny's, they'd sent her down to Alabama to stay with her family there until the baby was born, and then they wouldn't let him see either girl when Angela came back up.

Sonny really had wanted to do right by Angela, by his daughter, but he was young and unemployed, and he figured Angela's parents were probably right when they said he was basically good for nothing. It nearly broke his heart the day Angela married a young pastor who worked the revival circuits down south. The pastor would leave Angela in Harlem for months at a time, and Sonny thought if he could have her, he would never leave her.

But then he'd look at himself in the mirror sometimes, and he'd see features he didn't recognize from his mother's face. His nose wasn't hers. Nor were his ears. He used to ask his mother about these features when he was young. He used to ask her where his nose, his ears, his lighter skin came from. He used to ask her about his father, and all she would say was that he didn't have a father. He didn't have a father, but he had turned out all right. "Right?" he would tease the man in the mirror. "Right?"

"She ain't even a baby no more, Lucille. Look at her."

The girl was hobbling around the apartment on her little sea legs. Lucille shot Sonny a killing look, snatched the child up, and left.

"And don't go calling my mama for money now neither!" he shouted after her. He could hear her stomping all the way down the stairs and out into the street.

Two days later, Sonny was back at Jazzmine. He had asked the other folks who worked there when Amani would be back, but none of them knew.

"She go where the wind blow," Blind Louis said, wiping down the bar. Sonny must have sighed a little, because soon Louis said, "I know that sound."

"What sound?"

"You don't want none, Sonny."

"Why not?" Sonny asked. What could an old blind man possibly know about wanting a woman just from the sight of her?

"Ain't just about the way a woman look, you gotta think about what's in 'em too," Louis answered, reading his mind. "Ain't nothin' in that woman worth wanting."

Sonny didn't listen. It took three more months for him to see Amani again. By that time he'd gone looking for her, dropping in a club after club, waiting to see some slow stroll make its way up to the stage.

When he found her, she was sitting at a table in the back of the club sleeping. He had to get close to know this, so close he could hear the inhale and exhale of her breath as she snored. He looked around the

room, but Amani was in a dark corner of the bar, and no one seemed to be looking for her. He pushed her arm. Nothing. He pushed her arm again, harder this time. Still nothing. On the third push, she rolled her head to one side so slowly, it was like a boulder moving. She blinked a couple of times, a slow, deliberate movement that brought her heavy lids and thick eyelashes together.

When she looked at him finally, Sonny could see why she might need to blink. Her eyes were bloodshot, the pupils dilated. She blinked twice more, this time quickly, and watching her, it suddenly occurred to Sonny that he hadn't considered what he would do once he'd found her.

"You singing tonight?" he asked meekly.

"Do it look like I'm singing?"

Sonny didn't answer. Amani started to stretch her neck and shoulders. She shook her whole body out. "What do you want, man?" she asked, seeing him again. "What do you want?"

"You," Sonny admitted. He had wanted her since the day he saw her sing. It wasn't her slow gait or the fact that her voice had reminded him of his favorite memory of his mother. It was that he had felt something in himself open up when she started singing that night, and he wanted to capture just a little bit more of that feeling, keep it for himself.

She shook her head at him and smiled a little. "Well, come on."

They went out into the street. Sonny's stepfather, Eli, liked to walk, and when he was around he used to take Sonny and Willie and Josephine all around town. Maybe that was how his mother had grown to like walking too, Sonny thought. He still remembered the day that she had walked with him all the way down into the white part of the city. He'd thought they would keep on going forever and ever, but she had stopped suddenly, and Sonny found himself disappointed, though he hadn't been able to figure out why.

With Amani, Sonny passed by places he knew from his days on the housing team, jazz joints for the down-and-out, cheap food stands, barbershops, all with junkies on the street holding hats outstretched in their hands.

"You ain't told me 'bout your name yet," Sonny said as they stepped over a man lying in the middle of the street.

"Whatchu want to know?"

"You Muslim?"

Amani laughed at him a little. "Naw, I ain't Muslim." Sonny waited for her to speak. He had already said enough. He didn't want to keep pressing her, showing her his desire, his weaknesses. He waited for her to speak. "Amani means 'harmony' in Swahili. When I started singing, I felt like I needed a new name. My mama named me Mary, and ain't nobody gonna hit it big with a name like Mary. And I ain't into all that Nation of Islam and Back to Africa business, but I saw Amani and I felt like it was mine. So I took it."

"You ain't into the 'Back to Africa business,' but you using an African name?" Sonny had put his politics behind him but could feel them creeping up. Amani was nearly half his age. The America she was born into was different from the one he had been born into. He resisted the urge to wag his finger at her.

"We can't go back, can we?" She stopped walking and touched his arm. She looked more serious than she had all night, like she was only just considering that he was a real person and not someone she had dreamed up when he found her asleep. "We can't go back to something we ain't never been to in the first place. It ain't ours anymore. This is." She swept her hand in front of her, as though she were trying to catch all of Harlem in it, all of New York, all of America.

They finally got to a housing project way out in West Harlem. The building wasn't locked, and when they entered the hallway, the first thing Sonny noticed was the row of dope fiends lining the walls. They looked like dummies, or like the corpse Sonny had seen when he walked into a funeral home to find the mortician manipulating a body, hooking the elbow up, turning the face left, bending the body at its back.

No one was manipulating these bodies in the hallway—no one that Sonny could see—but he knew immediately that it was a dope house, and suddenly what he hadn't wanted to know about Amani's slow, sleepy movements, her dilated pupils, became all too apparent. He grew nervous, but swallowed it down, because it was important to

him that Amani not see that the longer he was with her, the more he began to feel that he had no control over himself.

They entered a room. A man cradling his own body curled up against the wall on a dirty mattress. Two women were tapping their arms, readying themselves for the needle a second man was holding. They didn't even look up as Sonny and Amani entered.

Everywhere he looked, Sonny saw jazz instruments. Two horns, a bass, a sax. Amani set her things down and sat next to one of the girls, who finally looked up, nodded at them. Amani turned to Sonny, who was still hanging back, his hand still grazing the doorknob.

She didn't say anything. The man passed the needle to the first girl. That girl passed the needle to the second. The second passed the needle to Amani, but she was still looking at Sonny. She was still silent.

Sonny watched her plunge the needle into her arm, watched her eyes roll back. When she looked at him again, she didn't have to speak for him to hear her say, "This is me. You still want it?"

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"Carson! Carson, I know you in there!"

He could hear the voice, but at the same time, he couldn't hear it. He was living in his own head, and he could not tell where that ended and where the world began, and he didn't want to answer the voice until he was sure he knew which side of things it was coming from.

"Carson!"

He sat quietly, or at least what he thought was quietly. He was sweating, his chest heaving up and down, up and down. He would need to go score soon to keep himself from dying.

When the voice outside the door started praying, Sonny knew it was his mother. She had done it a few times before, when he was still mostly sober, when dope was still mostly fun and he felt like he had some control over it.

"Lord, release my son from this torment. Father God, I know he lone gone down to Hell to take a look, but please send him back."

Sonny might have found it soothing if he weren't feeling so sick.

He heaved, nothing at first, but soon he was vomiting in the corner of the room.

His mother's voice grew louder. "Lord, I know you can deliver him from what ails him. Bless him and keep him."

Deliverance was exactly what Sonny wanted. He was a forty-five-year-old dope fiend, and he was tired but he was also sick, and the sickness of trying to come off the dope outweighed his exhaustion with staying on it every single time.

His mother was whispering now, or maybe Sonny's ears were no longer working. Soon he couldn't hear anything at all. Before long, somebody would be home. One of the other fiends he lived with would come in and maybe they would have scored something, but probably they wouldn't have and Sonny would have to begin the ritual of trying to score himself. Instead, he began it now.

He pushed himself up off the ground and put his ear against the door to make certain his mother had gone. Once he knew, he went out to greet Harlem.

Harlem and heroin. Heroin and Harlem. Sonny could no longer think of one without thinking of the other. They sounded alike. Both were going to kill him. The junkies and the jazz had gone together, fed each other, and now every time Sonny heard a horn, he wanted a hit.

Sonny walked down 116th Street. He could almost always score on 116th Street, and he had trained himself to spot junkies and dealers as quickly as possible, letting his eyes scan the folks walking by until they landed on the people who had what he needed. It was a consequence of living inside his own head. It made him aware of others who were doing the same thing.

When Sonny came across the first junkie, he asked if she was holding, and the woman shook her head. When he came across the second one, he asked if he would let him carry, and the man shook his head too, but pointed him along to a guy who was dealing.

Sonny's mother didn't give him money anymore. Angela sometimes did if her Bible-slinging husband had made some extra cash on the revival circuit. Sonny gave the dealer every last dollar he had, and it bought him so little. It bought him next to nothing.

He wanted to shoot it before going back just in case Amani was there. She would take him for the next to nothing he had. Sonny went into the bathroom of a diner and shot up, and instantly he could feel the sickness moving away from him. By the time he made it back home, he felt almost well. Almost, which meant that he would have to score again soon to get a little closer, and again to get a little closer, and again, and again.

Amani sat in front of a mirror, braiding her hair. "Where you been?" she asked.

Sonny didn't answer. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and started rummaging around the fridge for food. They lived in the Johnson Houses on 112th and Lexington, and their door was never locked. Junkies came and went, from one apartment to the next. Someone was passed out on the floor in front of the table.

"Your mama was here," Amani said.

Sonny found a piece of bread and ate around the mold. He looked at Amani as she finished her hair and stood up to look at herself. She was getting thick around the middle.

"She say she want you to come home for Sunday dinner."

"Where you going?" he asked Amani. He didn't like it when she got dressed up. She had promised him a long time ago that she would never give up her body for dope, and, in the beginning, Sonny hadn't believed she would be able to keep her promise. A dope fiend's word didn't count for much. Sometimes, for assurance, he would follow her as she walked around Harlem on those nights when she did her hair up, put makeup on her face. Every time he did, it ended the same sad way: Amani begging a club owner to let her sing again, just once more. They almost never did. One time, the dingiest joint in all of Harlem had said yes, and Sonny had stood in the back as Amani got up onstage to blank stares and silence. Nobody remembered what she used to be. All they could see was what she was now.

"You should go see your mama, Sonny. We could use some money."

"Aw, c'mon, Amani. You know she ain't gon' give me nothing."

"She might. If you cleaned yourself up. You could use a shower and a shave. She might give you something."

Sonny went up to Amani. He stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her belly, felt the firmness of its weight. "Why don't you give me something, baby?" he whispered into her ear.

She started to wriggle, but he held firm and she softened, leaned into him. Sonny had never loved her, not really. But he had always wanted her. It took him a while to learn the difference between those two things.

"I just did my hair, Sonny," she said, but she was already offering him her neck, bending it to the left so that he could run his tongue along the right side. "Sing me a li'l something, Amani," he said, reaching for her breast. She hummed at his touch, but didn't sing.

Sonny let his hand wander down from her breast, down to meet the tufts of hair that awaited him. Then she started. "*I loves you, Porgy. Don't let him take me. Don't let him handle me and drive me mad.*" She sang so softly it was almost a whisper. Almost. By the time his fingers found her wet, she was back at the chorus. When she left that night to go out to the jazz clubs, they wouldn't let her sing, but Sonny always did.

"I'll go see my mama," he promised when she left the front door swinging.

Sonny kept a glassine bag of dope in his shoe. It was a reassurance. He walked the many blocks between his house and his mother's house with his big toe clenched around the bag as though it were a small fist. He'd clench it, then release it. Clench it, then release it.

As Sonny passed the projects that filled the distance between his apartment and Willie's, he tried to remember the last time he'd really spoken to his mother. It was 1964, during the riots, and she had asked him to meet her in front of her church so that she could lend him some money. "I don't want to see you dead or worse," she'd said, passing Sonny what little change hadn't made it into the offering plate. As he took the money, Sonny had wondered, What could be worse than dead? But all around him, the evidence was clear. Only weeks before, the NYPD had shot down a fifteen-year-old black boy, a student, for next to nothing. The shooting had started the riots, pitting young black

men and some black women against the police force. The news made it sound like the fault lay with the blacks of Harlem. The violent, the crazy, the monstrous black people who had the gall to demand that their children not be gunned down in the streets. Sonny clutched his mother's money tight as he walked back that day, hoping he wouldn't run into any white people looking to prove a point, because he knew in his body, even if he hadn't yet put it together in his mind, that in America the worst thing you could be was a black man. Worse than dead, you were a dead man walking.

Josephine answered the door. She cradled her baby girl in one arm and her son held her other hand. "You get lost or somethin'?" she asked, shooting him a dirty look.

"Behave," his mother hissed from behind her, but Sonny was glad to see his sister treating him the same way she always had.

"You hungry?" Willie asked. She took the baby from Josephine and started walking toward the kitchen.

"I'ma use the bathroom first," Sonny said, already making his way over. He closed the door and sat on the commode, pulling the bag from his shoe. He hadn't been there a minute, but he was already nervous. He needed something to tide him over.

When he came back out, his mother had already fixed him a plate. His mother and sister watched him while he ate.

"Why you ain't eating?" he asked them.

"Because you 'bout an hour and a half late!" Josephine said through gritted teeth.

Willie put an arm on Josephine's shoulder, then pulled a little money out from inside her bra. "Josey, why don't you run go get these kids something?" she said.

The look Josephine sent Willie hurt Sonny more than anything she had said to him yet. It was a look that asked if Willie would be safe left alone with him, and the uncertain nod Willie gave back just about broke Sonny's heart.

Josephine collected her children and left. Sonny had never seen the baby before, though his mother had come to tell him about the birth. The toddler Sonny had seen once, when he passed Josephine on a quiet street one day. He'd kept his head down and pretended not to see them.

"Thanks for the food, Mama," Sonny said. He was almost finished with his food, and he was starting to feel a little sick from eating so fast. She nodded and heaped another helping onto his plate.

"How long it been since you ate something proper?" she asked.

Sonny shrugged and his mother continued to watch him. He was uncomfortable again; the small hit he took was wearing off too quickly, and he wanted to excuse himself to go do more, but too many trips to the bathroom would only make her suspicious.

"Your father was a white man," Willie said calmly. Sonny nearly choked on the chicken bone he had been working over. "You used to ask me about him, long time ago, and I ain't never told you nothing, so I'm tellin' you now."

She got up to pour a glass from the pitcher of tea she kept by the sink. She drank the whole glass of tea while Sonny watched her back. When she finished that glass, she poured herself another and took it back to the table.

"He didn't start out white," she said. "He was black when I met him, more yellow than black, really. But still, he was colored."

Sonny coughed. He started fingering the chicken bone. "Why you ain't told me before?" he asked. He could feel himself getting angry, but he held it back. He had come here for money, and he couldn't fight with her now. Not now.

"I thought about tellin' you. I did. You saw him once. Day we walked all the way to West 109th Street, you remember that? Your daddy was standing across the street with his white woman and his white baby, and I thought maybe I should tell Carson who that man is, but then I figured it'd be better just to let him go. So I let him go, and we went back to Harlem."

Sonny snapped the chicken bone in half. "Mama, you shoulda stopped him. You shoulda told me, and you shoulda stopped him. I don't know why you always lettin' people walk all over you. My father, Eli, the goddam church. You ain't never fought for nothin'. Not nothin'. Not a day in your life."

His mother reached across the table, put her hand on his shoulder, and squeezed hard until he had to look her in the eyes. "That ain't true, Carson. I fought for you."

He returned his eyes to the two pieces of chicken bone on his plate. He toed the bag in his shoe.

"You think you done somethin' cuz you used to march? I marched. I marched with your father and with my li'l baby all the way up from Alabama. All the way to Harlem. My son was gon' see a better world than what I saw, what my parents saw. I was gon' be a famous singer. Robert wasn't gon' have to work in a mine for some white man. That was a march too, Carson."

Sonny started looking toward the bathroom. He wanted to excuse himself and finish up the bag in his shoe. He knew it would probably be the last he could afford for a long, long while.

Willie cleared his plate and refilled her tea. He could see her standing at the sink, drinking in long, deep breaths, her chest and back rising and falling as she tried to collect herself. She came back and sat down right in front of him, looking at him all the while.

"You was always so angry. Even as a child, you was angry. I used to see you lookin' at me like you was like to kill me, and I didn't know why. Took me a long time to figure out that you was born to a man who could choose his life, but you wouldn't never be able to choose yours, and it seemed like you was born knowing that."

She took a sip of her drink and stared off into space. "White men get a choice. They get to choose they job, choose they house. They get to make black babies, then disappear into thin air, like they wasn't never there to begin with, like these black women they slept with or raped done laid on top of themselves and got pregnant. White men get to choose for black men too. Used to sell 'em; now they just send 'em to prison like they did my daddy, so that they can't be with they kids. Just about breaks my heart to see you, my son, my daddy's grandson, over here with these babies walking up and down Harlem who barely even know your name, let alone your face. Alls I can think is this ain't the way it's s'posed to be. There are things you ain't learned from me, things you picked up from your father even though you ain't know him, things he picked up from white men. It makes me sad to see my son a junkie after all the marchin' I done, but makes me sadder to see you thinkin' you can leave like your daddy did. You keep doin' what you

doin' and the white man don't got to do it no more. He ain't got to sell you or put you in a coal mine to own you. He'll own you just as is, and he'll say you the one who did it. He'll say it's your fault."

Josephine came back in with the kids. They had ice cream smeared on their shirts and contented little smiles on their faces. Josephine didn't wait to hear more. She just took the kids straight into the bedroom to lay them down to sleep.

Willie pulled a wad of cash out from between her breasts and slapped it on the table in front of him. "This what you came for?" she asked.

Sonny could see tears forming in her eyes. He kept toeing the glassine bag, his fingers itching to get at the money.

"Take it and go if you want to," Willie said. "Go if you want to."

What Sonny wanted was to scream, to take the money, take what was left in the bag in his shoe and find somewhere to go shoot up until he could no longer remember the things his mother had told him. That was what he wanted to do. But he didn't do that. Instead, he stayed.