

## *Prologue*

This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I've never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier indifferent to the ways of mercantilism and minimum-wage expectations. I've never burgled a house. Held up a liquor store. Never boarded a crowded bus or subway car, sat in a seat reserved for the elderly, pulled out my gigantic penis and masturbated to satisfaction with a perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look on my face. But here I am, in the cavernous chambers of the Supreme Court of the United States of America, my car illegally and somewhat ironically parked on Constitution Avenue, my hands cuffed and crossed behind my back, my right to remain silent long since waived and said goodbye to as I sit in a thickly padded chair that, much like this country, isn't quite as comfortable as it looks.

Summoned here by an officious-looking envelope stamped **IMPORTANT!** in large, sweepstakes-red letters, I haven't stopped squirming since I arrived in this city.

"Dear Sir," the letter read.

"Congratulations, you may already be a winner! Your case has been selected from hundreds of other appellate cases to be heard

by the Supreme Court of the United States of America. What a glorious honor! It's highly recommended that you arrive at least two hours early for your hearing scheduled for 10:00 a.m. on the morning of March 19, the year of our Lord . . ." The letter closed with directions to the Supreme Court building from the airport, the train station, I-95, and a set of clip-out coupons to various attractions, restaurants, bed-and-breakfasts, and the like. There was no signature. It simply ended . . .

Sincerely yours,

The People of the United States of America

Washington, D.C., with its wide streets, confounding roundabouts, marble statues, Doric columns, and domes, is supposed to feel like ancient Rome (that is, if the streets of ancient Rome were lined with homeless black people, bomb-sniffing dogs, tour buses, and cherry blossoms). Yesterday afternoon, like some sandal-shod Ethiope from the sticks of the darkest of the Los Angeles jungles, I ventured from the hotel and joined the hajj of blue-jeaned yokels that paraded slowly and patriotically past the empire's historic landmarks. I stared in awe at the Lincoln Memorial. If Honest Abe had come to life and somehow managed to lift his bony twenty-three-foot, four-inch frame from his throne, what would he say? What would he do? Would he break-dance? Would he pitch pennies against the curbside? Would he read the paper and see that the Union he saved was now a dysfunctional plutocracy, that the people he freed were now slaves to rhythm, rap, and predatory lending, and that today his skill set would be better suited to the basketball court than the White House? There he could catch the rock on the break, pull up for a bearded three-pointer, hold the pose, and talk shit as the ball popped the net. The Great Emancipator, you can't stop him, you can only hope to contain him.

Not surprisingly, there's nothing to do at the Pentagon except

start a war. Tourists aren't even allowed to take photos with the building in the background, so when the sailor-suited family of Navy veterans four generations deep handed me a disposable camera and asked me to follow at a distance and secretly take photos of them while they snapped to attention, saluted, and flashed peace signs for no apparent reason, I was only too happy to serve my country. At the National Mall there was a one-man march on Washington. A lone white boy lay on the grass, fucking with the depth perception in such a way that the distant Washington Monument looked like a massive, pointy-tipped, Caucasian hard-on streaming from his unzipped trousers. He joked with passersby, smiling into their camera phones and stroking his trick photography priapism.

At the zoo, I stood in front of the primate cage listening to a woman marvel at how "presidential" the four-hundred-pound gorilla looked sitting astride a shorn oaken limb, keeping a watchful eye over his caged brood. When her boyfriend, his finger tapping the informational placard, pointed out the "presidential" silverback's name coincidentally was Baraka, the woman laughed aloud, until she saw me, the other four-hundred-pound gorilla in the room, stuffing something that might have been the last of a Big Stick Popsicle or a Chiquita banana in my mouth. Then she became disconsolate, crying and apologizing for having spoken her mind and my having been born. "Some of my best friends are monkeys," she said accidentally. It was my turn to laugh. I understood where she was coming from. This whole city's a Freudian slip of the tongue, a concrete hard-on for America's deeds and misdeeds. Slavery? Manifest Destiny? *Laverne & Shirley*? Standing by idly while Germany tried to kill every Jew in Europe? Why some of my best friends are the Museum of African Art, the Holocaust Museum, the Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of Women in the Arts. And furthermore, I'll have you know, my sister's daughter is married to an orangutan.

All it takes is a day trip through Georgetown and Chinatown. A slow saunter past the White House, Phoenix House, Blair House, and the local crackhouse for the message to become abundantly clear. Be it ancient Rome or modern-day America, you're either citizen or slave. Lion or Jew. Guilty or innocent. Comfortable or uncomfortable. And here, in the Supreme Court of the United States of America, fuck if between the handcuffs and the slipperiness of this chair's leather upholstery, the only way I can keep from spilling my ass ignominiously onto the goddamn floor is to lean back until I'm reclined at an angle just short of detention-room nonchalance, but definitely well past courtroom contempt.

Work keys jangling like sleigh bells, the Court officers march into the chambers like a two-by-two wagonless team of crew-cut Clydesdales harnessed together by a love of God and country. The lead dray, a proud Budweiser of a woman with a brightly colored sash of citations rainbowed across her chest, taps the back of my seat. She wants me to sit up straight, but the legendary civil disobedient that I am, I defiantly tilt myself even farther back in the chair, only to crash to the floor in a painful pratfall of inept nonviolent resistance. She dangles a handcuff key in my face and, with one thick hairless arm, hoists me upright, scooting my chair in so close to the table that I can see my suit and tie's reflection in its shiny, lemony-fresh mahogany finish. I've never worn a suit before, and the man who sold me this one said, "You're going to like the way you look. I guarantee it." But the face in the table staring back at me looks like what any business-suit-wearing, cornrowed, dreadlocked, bald-headed, corporate Afro'd black man whose name you don't know and whose face you don't recognize looks like—he looks like a criminal.

"When you look good, you feel good," the salesman also promised me. Guaranteed it. So when I get home I'm going to ask for my \$129 back, because I don't like the way I look. The way I feel. I feel like my suit—cheap, itchy, and coming apart at the seams.

Most times cops expect to be thanked. Whether they've just given you directions to the post office, beaten your ass in the back-seat of the patrol car, or, in my case, uncuffed you, returned your weed, drug paraphernalia, and provided you with the traditional Supreme Court quill. But this one has had a look of pity on her face, ever since this morning, when she and her posse met me atop the Supreme Court's vaunted forty-fourth stair. Under a pediment inscribed with the words *EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW* they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, squinting into the morning sun, windbreakers dotted with the dandruff of fallen cherry blossoms, blocking my entrance into the building. We all knew that this was a charade, a last-minute meaningless show of power by the state. The only one not in on the joke was the cocker spaniel. His retractable leash whirring behind him, he bounded up to me, excitedly sniffed my shoes and my pant legs, nuzzled my crotch with his wet snot-encrusted nose, then obediently sat down beside me, his tail proudly pounding the ground. I've been charged with a crime so heinous that busting me for possession of marijuana on federal property would be like charging Hitler with loitering and a multinational oil company like British Petroleum with littering after fifty years of exploding refineries, toxic spills and emissions, and a shamelessly disingenuous advertising campaign. So I clear my pipe with two loud raps on the mahogany table. Brush and blow the gummy resin onto the floor, stuff the bowl with homegrown, and like a firing squad commander lighting a deserter's last cigarette, the lady cop obligingly flicks her BIC and sparks me up. I refuse the blindfold and take the most glorious toke ever taken in the history of pot smoking. Call every racially profiled, abortion-denied, flag-burning, Fifth Amendment taker and tell them to demand a retrial, because I'm getting high in the highest court in the land. The officers stare at me in amazement. I'm the Scopes monkey, the missing link in the evolution of African-American jurisprudence come to life. I can hear the cocker spaniel whimpering in the corridor,

pawing at the door, as I blow an A-bomb mushroom-cloud-sized plume of smoke into the faces that line the giant friezes on the ceiling. Hammurabi, Moses, Solomon—these veined Spanish marble incantations of democracy and fair play—Muhammad, Napoleon, Charlemagne, and some buffed ancient Greek frat boy in a toga stand above me, casting their stony judgmental gazes down upon me. I wonder if they looked at the Scottsboro Boys and Al Gore, Jr., with the same disdain.

Only Confucius looks chill. The sporty Chinese satin robe with the big sleeves, kung fu shoes, Shaolin sifu beard and mustache. I hold the pipe high overhead and offer him a hit; the longest journey starts with a single puff . . .

“That ‘longest journey’ shit is Lao-tzu,” he says.

“All you motherfucking philosopher-poets sound alike to me,” I say.

It’s a trip being the latest in the long line of landmark race-related cases. I suppose the constitutional scholars and cultural paleontologists will argue over my place on the historical timeline. Carbon-date my pipe and determine whether I’m a direct descendant of Dred Scott, that colored conundrum who, as a slave living in a free state, was man enough for his wife and kids, man enough to sue his master for his freedom, but not man enough for the Constitution, because in the eyes of the Court he was simply property: a black biped “with no rights the white man was bound to respect.” They’ll pore over the legal briefs and thumb through the antebellum vellum and try to determine whether or not the outcome of this case confirms or overturns *Plessy v. Ferguson*. They’ll scour the plantations, the projects, and the Tudor suburban subdivision affirmative-action palaces, digging up backyards looking for remnants of the ghosts of discrimination past in the fossilized dice and domino bones, brush the dust off the petrified rights and writs buried in bound legal volumes, and pronounce me as “unforeseen hip-hop generation precedent” in the vein of Luther “Luke Skyy-

walker” Campbell, the gap-toothed rapper who fought for his right to party and parody the white man the way he’d done us for years. Though if I’d been on the other side of the bench, I would’ve snatched the fountain pen from Chief Justice Rehnquist’s hand and written the lone dissenting opinion, stating categorically that “any wack rapper whose signature tune is ‘Me So Horny’ has no rights the white man, or any other B-boy worth his suede Pumas, was bound to respect.”

The smoke burns the inside of my throat. “Equal Justice Under Law!” I shout to no one in particular, a testament to both the potency of the weed and my lightweight constitution. In neighborhoods like the one I grew up in, places that are poor in praxis but rich in rhetoric, the homies have a saying—I’d rather be judged by twelve than carried by six. It’s a maxim, an oft-repeated rap lyric, a last-ditch rock and hard place algorithm that on the surface is about faith in the system but in reality means shoot first, put your trust in the public defender, and be thankful you still have your health. I’m not all that streetwise, but to my knowledge there’s no appellate court corollary. I’ve never heard a corner store roughneck take a sip of malt liquor and say, “I’d rather be reviewed by nine than arbitrated by one.” People have fought and died trying to get some of that “Equal Justice Under Law” advertised so blithely on the outside of this building, but innocent or guilty, most offenders never make it this far. Their courtroom appeals rarely go beyond a mother’s tearful call for the Good Lord’s mercy or a second mortgage on grandma’s house. And if I believed in such slogans, I’d have to say I’ve had more than my share of justice, but I don’t. When people feel the need to adorn a building or a compound with an “*Arbeit Macht Frei*,” a “Biggest Little City in the World,” or “The Happiest Place on Earth,” it’s a sign of insecurity, a contrived excuse for taking up our finite space and time. Ever been to Reno, Nevada? It’s the Shittiest Little City in the World, and if Disneyland was indeed the Happiest Place on Earth, you’d either

keep it a secret or the price of admission would be free and not equivalent to the yearly per capita income of a small sub-Saharan African nation like Detroit.

I didn't always feel this way. Growing up, I used to think all of black America's problems could be solved if we only had a motto. A pithy *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* we could post over squeaky wrought-iron gateways, embroider onto kitchen wall hangings and ceremonial bunting. It, like the best of African-American folklore and hairstyles, would have to be simple, yet profound. Noble, and yet somehow egalitarian. A calling card for an entire race that was raceless on the surface, but quietly understood by those in the know to be very, very black. I don't know where young boys come up with such notions, but when your friends all refer to their parents by their first names, there's the sense that something isn't quite right. And wouldn't it be nice, in these times of constant connip-tion and crisis, for broken Negro families to gather around the hearth, gaze upon the mantelpiece, and take comfort in the uplifting words inscribed on a set of lovingly handcrafted commemorative plates or limited-edition gold coins purchased from a late-night infomercial on an already maxed-out credit card?

Other ethnicities have mottos. "Unconquered and unconquerable" is the calling card of the Chickasaw nation, though it doesn't apply to the casino gaming tables or having fought with Confederates in the Civil War. *Allahu Akbar. Shikata ga nai. Never again. Harvard class of '96. To Protect and to Serve.* These are more than just greetings and trite sayings. They are reenergizing codes. Linguistic chi that strengthens our life force and bonds us to other like-minded, like-skinned, like-shoe-wearing human beings. What is that they say in the Mediterranean? *Stessa faccia, stessa razza.* Same face, same race. Every race has a motto. Don't believe me? You know that dark-haired guy in human resources? The one who acts white, talks white, but doesn't quite look right? Go up to him. Ask him why Mexican goalkeepers play so recklessly or if the food

at the taco truck parked outside is really safe to eat. Go ahead. Ask him. Prod him. Rub the back of his flat *indio* skull and see if he doesn't turn around with the *pronunciamiento* ¡*Por La Raza—todo!* ¡*Fuera de La Raza—nada!* (For the race, everything! Outside the race, nothing!)

When I was ten, I spent a long night burrowed under my comforter, cuddled up with Funshine Bear, who, filled with a foamy enigmatic sense of language and a Bloomian dogmatism, was the most literary of the Care Bears and my harshest critic. In the musty darkness of that rayon bat cave, his stubby, all-but-immobile yellow arms struggled to hold the flashlight steady as together we tried to save the black race in eight words or less. Putting my homeschool Latin to good use, I'd crank out a motto, then shove it under his heart-shaped plastic nose for approval. My first effort, *Black America: Veni, vidi, vici—Fried Chicken!* peeled back Funshine's ears and closed his hard plastic eyes in disappointment. *Semper Fi, Semper Funky* raised his polyester hackles, and when he began to paw the mattress in anger and reared up on his stubby yellow legs, baring his ursine fangs and claws, I tried to remember what the Cub Scout manual said to do when confronted by an angry stuffed cartoon bear drunk on stolen credenza wine and editorial power. "If you meet an angry bear—remain calm. Speak in gentle tones, stand your ground, get large, and write in clear, simple, uplifting Latin sentences."

*Unum corpus, una mens, una cor, unum amor.*

One body, one mind, one heart, one love.

Not bad. It had a nice license plate ring to it. I could see it in cursive, circumnavigating the rim of a race war medal of honor. Funshine didn't hate it, but from the way he wrinkled his nose right before falling asleep that night, I could tell he felt my slogan implied a certain groupthink, and weren't black people always

complaining about being labeled as monolithic? I didn't ruin his dreams by telling him that black people do all think alike. They won't admit it, but every black person thinks they're better than every other black person. I never heard back from the NAACP or the Urban League, so the black credo exists only in my head, impatiently waiting on a movement, a nation, and, I suppose, since nowadays branding is everything, a logo.

Maybe we don't need a motto. How many times have I heard someone say, "Nigger, you know me, my motto is . . ."? If I were smart, I'd put my Latin to use. Charge ten dollars a word. Fifteen if they aren't from the neighborhood or want me to translate "Don't hate the player, hate the game." If it's true that one's body is one's temple, I could make good money. Open up a little shop on the boulevard and have a long line of tattooed customers who've transformed themselves into nondenominational places of worship: ankhs, sankofas, and crucifixes fighting for abdominal space with Aztec sun gods and one-star Star of David galaxies. Chinese characters running down shaved calves and spinal columns. Sinological shout-outs to dead loved ones that they think means "Rest in peace, Grandma Beverly," but in reality reads "No tickee! No Bilateral Trade Agreement!" Man, it'd be a goldmine. High as the price of cigarettes, they'd come at all hours of the night. I could sit behind a thick Plexiglas window and have one of those sliding metal drop boxes that the gas station attendants use. I'd slide out the drawer, and like prisoners passing jailhouse kites, my clientele would surreptitiously hand me their affirmations. The harder the man, the neater the handwriting. The more softhearted the woman, the more pugnacious the phrase. "You know me," they'd say, "my motto is . . ." and drop the cash and quotations from Shakespeare and *Scarface*, biblical passages, schoolyard aphorisms, and hoodlum truisms written in every medium from blood to eyeliner into the drawer. And whether it was scribbled on a crumpled-up bar napkin, a paper plate stained with BBQ sauce and potato salad, or

was a page carefully torn from a secret diary kept since a stir in juvenile hall that if I tell anyone about it'll be my ass, *Ya estuvo* (whatever that means), I'd take the job seriously. For these are a people for whom the phrase "Well, if you put a gun to my head . . ." isn't theoretical, and when someone has pressed a cold metal muzzle to the yin and yang symbol tattooed on your temple and you've lived to tell about it, you don't need to have read the *I Ching* to appreciate the cosmic balance of the universe and the power of the tramp stamp. Because what else could your motto possibly be but "What goes around, comes around . . . *Quod circumvehitur, revehitur.*"

When business is slow, they'll come by to show me my handiwork. The olde English lettering glistening in the streetlight, its orthography parsed on their sweaty tank- and tube-topped musculatures. Money talks, bullshit walks . . . *Pecunia sermo, somnium ambulo*. Dative and accusative clauses burnished onto their jugulars, there's something special about having the language of science and romance surf the tidal waves of a homegirl's body fat. Strictly dicky . . . *Austerus verpa*. The shaky noun declension that would ticker-tape across their foreheads would be the closest most of them ever get to being white, to reading white. *Crip up or grip up . . . Criptum vexo vel carpo vex*. It's nonessential essentialism. Blood in, blood out . . . *Minuo in, minuo sicco*. It's the satisfaction of looking at your motto in the mirror and thinking, Any nigger who isn't paranoid is crazy . . . *Ullus niger vir quisnam est non insanus ist rabidus* is something Julius Caesar would've said if he were black. Act your age, not your shoe size . . . *Factio vestri aevum, non vestri calceus amplitudo*. And if an increasingly pluralistic America ever decides to commission a new motto, I'm open for business, because I've got a better one than *E pluribus unum*.

*Tu dormis, tu perdis . . .* You snooze, you lose.

Someone takes the pipe from my hand. "C'mon, man. That shit is cashed. It's time to make the donuts, homie." Hampton Fiske,

my lawyer and old friend, calmly wafts away the last of the pot smoke, then engulfs me in an antifungal cloud of spray-can air freshener. I'm too high to speak, so we greet each other with chin-up, what's-up nods, and share a knowing smile, because we both recognize the scent. Tropic Breeze—same shit we used to hide the evidence from our parents because it smelled like angel dust. If moms came home, kicked off the espadrilles, and found the crib redolent of Apple Cinnamon or Strawberries and Cream, she'd know we'd been smoking, but if the crib smelled like PCP, then the stench could be blamed on "Uncle Rick and them," or alternatively, she could say nothing, too tired to deal with the possibility that her only child was addicted to sherm, and hope the problem would simply go away.

Arguing cases in front of the Supreme Court isn't Hamp's bailiwick. He's an old-school criminal defense attorney. When you call his office, you invariably get put on hold. Not because he's busy or there's no receptionist, or you've called at the same time as some other sap who saw his ad on a bus stop bench or the 800 number (1-800-FREEDOM) scratched by paid transients onto metal holding-cell mirrors and backseat police car Plexiglas. It's because he likes to listen to his answering machine, a ten-minute recitation of his legal triumphs and mistrials.

*"You have reached the Fiske Group—Any Firm Can List the Charges, We Can Beat the Charges. Not Guilty—Murder. Not Guilty—DUI. Not Guilty—Assault of a Police Officer. Not Guilty—Sexual Abuse. Not Guilty—Child Abuse. Not Guilty—Elderly Abuse. Dismissed—Theft. Dismissed—Forgery. Dismissed—Domestic Violence (more than one thousand cases). Dismissed—Sexual Conduct with a Minor. Dismissed—Involving a Child in Drug Activity. Dismissed—Kidnapping . . ."*

Hamp knows that only the most desperate of the accused will have the patience to sit through that litany of damn near every criminal statute in the Los Angeles County penal code, first in En-

glish, then in Spanish, then in Tagalog. And those are the people he likes to represent. The wretched of the Earth, he calls us. People too poor to afford cable and too stupid to know that they aren't missing anything. "If Jean Valjean had me representing him," he likes to say, "then *Les Misérables* would've only been six pages long. Dismissed—Loaf of Bread Pilferery."

My crimes aren't listed on the answering machine. At the arraignment in district court right before the judge asked me to enter a plea, he read the list of felonious charges against me. Allegations that in summation accused me of everything from desecration of the Homeland to conspiracy to upset the apple cart just when things were going so well. Dumbfounded, I stood before the court, trying to figure out if there was a state of being between "guilty" and "innocent." Why were those my only alternatives? I thought. Why couldn't I be "neither" or "both"?

After a long pause, I finally faced the bench and said, "Your Honor, I plead human." For this I received an understanding snicker from the judge and a citation for contempt of court, which Hamp instantly got reduced to time served, right before making an innocent plea on my behalf and half-jokingly requesting a change of venue, suggesting Nuremburg or Salem, Massachusetts, as possible locales given the serious nature of the charges. And while he never said anything to me, my guess is that the ramifications of what he'd previously thought would be a simple case of standard black inner-city absurdity suddenly struck him, and he applied for admission to the Supreme Court bar the very next day.

But that's old news. For now, I'm here in Washington, D.C., dangling at the end of my legal rope, stoned on memory and marijuana. My mouth bone-dry and feeling like I've just woken up on the #7 bus, drunk as fuck after a long futile night of carousing and chasing Mexican babes at the Santa Monica pier, looking out the window and coming to the slow, marijuana-impaired realization that I've missed my stop and have no idea where I am or why

everybody is looking at me. Like this woman in the Court's front row, leaning over the wooden banister, her face a knotted and twisted burl of anger as she flips her long, slender, manicured, press-on-nailed middle fingers in my direction. Black women have beautiful hands, and with every "fuck you" cocoa-butter stab of the air, her hands become more and more elegant. They're the hands of a poet, one of those natural-haired, brass-bangled teacher-poets whose elegiac verse compares everything to jazz. Childbirth is like jazz. Muhammad Ali is like jazz. Philadelphia is like jazz. Jazz is like jazz. Everything is like jazz except for me. To her I'm like a remixed Anglo-Saxon appropriation of black music. I'm Pat Boone in blackface singing a watered-down version of Fats Domino's "Ain't That a Shame." I'm every note of nonpunk British rock 'n' roll plucked and strummed since the Beatles hit that mind-reverberating chord that opens "A Hard Day's Night." But what about Bobby "What You Won't Do for Love" Caldwell, Gerry Mulligan, Third Bass, and Janis Joplin? I want to shout back at her. What about Eric Clapton? Wait, I take that back. Fuck Eric Clapton. Ample bosoms first, she hops the rail, bogarts her way past the cops, and bolts toward me, her thumb-sucking charges clinging desperately to her "Don't You See How Insanely Long, Soft, Shiny, and Expensive This Is? Motherfucker, YOU WILL Treat Me Like a Queen!" Toni Morrison signature model pashmina shawl trailing behind her like a cashmere kite tail.

Now she's in my face, mumbling calmly but incoherently about black pride, the slave ships, the three-fifths clause, Ronald Reagan, the poll tax, the March on Washington, the myth of the drop-back quarterback, how even the white-robed horses of the Ku Klux Klan were racist, and, most emphatically, how the malleable minds of the ever-increasingly redundant "*young black youth*" must be protected. And lo, the mind of the little waterheaded boy with both arms wrapped about his teacher's hips, his face buried in her crotch, definitely needs a bodyguard, or at least a mental prophy-

lactic. He comes up for air looking expectantly to me for an explanation as to why his teacher hates me so. Not getting one, the pupil returns to the warm moistness of his happy place, oblivious to the stereotype that black males don't go down there. What could I have said to him? "You know how when you play Chutes and Ladders and you're almost at the finish line, but you spin a six and land on that long, really curvy red slide that takes you from square sixty-seven all the way back to number twenty-four?"

"Yes, sir," he'd say politely.

"Well," I'd say, rubbing his ball-peen-hammer head, "I'm that long red slide."

The teacher-poet slaps me hard across the face. And I know why. She, like most everyone here, wants me to feel guilty. Wants me to show some contrition, to break down in tears, to save the state some money and her the embarrassment of sharing my blackness. I, too, keep waiting for that familiar, overwhelming sense of black guilt to drop me to my knees. Knock me down peg by meaningless idiomatic peg, until I'm bent over in total supplication to America, tearfully confessing my sins against color and country, begging my proud black history for forgiveness. But there's nothing. Only the buzz of the air conditioner and my high, and as security escorts her back to her seat, the little boy trailing behind her, holding on to her scarf for dear life, the sting in my cheek that she hopes will smart in perpetuity has already faded and I find myself unable to conjure up a single guilty pang.

That's the bitch of it, to be on trial for my life, and for the first time ever not feel guilty. That omnipresent guilt that's as black as fast-food apple pie and prison basketball is finally gone, and it feels almost white to be unburdened from the racial shame that makes a bespectacled college freshman dread Fried Chicken Fridays at the dining hall. I was the "diversity" the school trumpeted so loudly in its glossy literature, but there wasn't enough financial aid in the world to get me to suck the gristle from a leg bone in front of

the entire freshman class. I'm no longer party to that collective guilt that keeps the third-chair cellist, the administrative secretary, the stock clerk, the not-really-all-that-attractive-but-she's-black beauty pageant winner from showing up for work Monday morning and shooting every white motherfucker in the place. It's a guilt that has obligated me to mutter "My bad" for every misplaced bounce pass, politician under federal investigation, every bug-eyed and Rastus-voiced comedian, and every black film made since 1968. But I don't feel responsible anymore. I understand now that the only time black people don't feel guilty is when we've actually done something wrong, because that relieves us of the cognitive dissonance of being black and innocent, and in a way the prospect of going to jail becomes a relief. In the way that cooning is a relief, voting Republican is a relief, marrying white is a relief—albeit a temporary one.

Uncomfortable with being so comfortable, I make one last attempt to be at one with my people. I close my eyes, place my head on the table, and bury my broad nose in the crook of my arm. I focus on my breathing, shutting out the flags and the fanfare, and cull through my vast repository of daydream blackness until I dredge up the scratchy archival footage of the civil rights struggle. Handling it carefully by its sensitive edges, I remove it from its sacred canister, thread it through mental sprockets and psychological gates, and past the bulb in my head that flickers with the occasional decent idea. I flip on the projector. There's no need to focus. Human carnage is always filmed and remembered in the highest definition. The images are crystal-clear, permanently burned into our memories and plasma television screens. That incessant Black History Month loop of barking dogs, gushing fire hoses, and carbuncles oozing blood through two-dollar haircuts, colorless blood spilling down faces shiny with sweat and the light of the evening news, these are the pictures that form our collective 16 mm superego. But today I'm all medulla oblongata and I can't

concentrate. The film inside my head begins to skip and sputter. The sound cuts out, and protesters falling like dominoes in Selma, Alabama, begin to look like Keystone Negroes slipping en masse on an affirmative-action banana peel and tumbling to the street, a tangled mess of legs and dreams akimbo. The marchers on Washington become civil rights zombies, one hundred thousand strong, somnambulating lockstep onto the mall, stretching out their stiff, needy fingers for their pound of flesh. The head zombie looks exhausted from being raised from the dead every time someone wants to make a point about what black people should and shouldn't do, can and cannot have. He doesn't know the mic is on, and under his breath he confesses that if he'd only tasted that unsweetened swill that passed for iced tea at the segregated lunch counters in the South he would've called the whole civil rights thing off. Before the boycotts, the beatings, and the killings. He places a can of diet soda on the podium. "Things go better with Coke," he says. "It's the real thing!"

Still, I don't feel guilty. If I'm indeed moving backward and dragging all of black America down with me, I couldn't care less. Is it my fault that the only tangible benefit to come out of the civil rights movement is that black people aren't as afraid of dogs as they used to be? No, it isn't.

The Marshal of the Court rises, pounds her gavel, and begins to incant the Court's invocation: "*The honorable, the Chief Justice and the Associate Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States.*"

Hampton lifts me shakily to my feet, and we, along with all those in attendance, rise in ministerial solemnity as the Justices enter the courtroom, trying their level best to look impartial, with their Eisenhower-era hairstyles and "another day, another dollar" blank workaday expressions. Too bad it's impossible not to come off as pompous when you're wearing a silk black robe and the Negro Justice has absentmindedly forgotten to take off his \$50,000

platinum Rolex. I suppose if I had better job security than Father Time, I'd be smug as a motherfucker, too.

*Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!*

At this point, after five years of endless decisions, reversals, appeals, postponements, and pretrial hearings, I don't even know if I'm the plaintiff or the defendant. All I know is that the sour-faced Justice with the post-racial chronometer won't stop looking at me. His beady eyes fixed in this unblinking and unforgiving stare, he's angry that I've fucked up his political expediency. Blown up his spot like a little kid visiting the city zoo for the first time and, frustrated at having walked past cage after seemingly empty reptile cage, finally stops at an enclosure and shouts, "There he is!"

There he is, *Chamaeleo africanus tokenus* hidden way in the back among all the shrubbery, his slimy feet gripped tightly around the judicial branch in a cool torpor, silently gnawing on the leaves of injustice. "Out of sight, out of mind" is the black workingman's motto, but now the entire country can see this one, our collective noses pressed to the glass in amazement that he's been able to camouflage his Alabama jet-black ass against the red, white, and blue of the American flag for so long.

*"All persons having business before the honorable, the Supreme Court of the United States, are admonished to draw near and give their attention, for the Court is now sitting. God save the United States and this honorable Court!"*

Hamp kneads my shoulder, a reminder not to sweat the nappy-headed magistrate or the republic for which he stands. This is the Supreme Court, not the People's Court. I don't have to do anything. I don't need copies of dry cleaner receipts, police reports, or a photograph of a dented bumper. Here the lawyers argue, the judges question, and I get to simply kick back and enjoy my high.

The Chief Justice enters the case. His dispassionate midwestern demeanor goes a long way toward easing the tension in the room. "We'll hear argument first this morning in case 09-2606 . . ."

He pauses, rubs his eyes, then composes himself. “In case 09-2606, *Me v. the United States of America*.” There’s no outburst. Only giggling and eye rolling accompanied by some loud “Who this motherfucker think he is?” teeth sucking. I admit it, *Me v. the United States* sounds a little self-aggrandizing, but what can I say? I’m Me. Literally. A not-so-proud descendant of the Kentucky Mees, one of the first black families to settle in southwest Los Angeles, I can trace my roots all the way back to that first vessel to escape state-sanctioned southern repression—the Greyhound bus. But when I was born, my father, in the twisted tradition of Jewish entertainers who change their names and the uptight, underachieving black men who envy them, decided to truncate the family name, dropping that last unwieldy *e* like Jack Benny dropped Benjamin Kubelsky, Kirk Douglas—Danielovitch, like Jerry Lewis dropped Dean Martin, Max Baer dropped Schmeling, Third Bass dropped science, and Sammy Davis, Jr., dropped Judaism all together. He wasn’t going to let that extra vowel hold me back like it did him. Pops liked to say that he didn’t Anglicize or Africanize my surname, but actualized it, that I was born having reached my full potential and could skip Maslow, third grade, and Jesus.

Knowing that the ugliest movie stars, the whitest rappers, and the dumbest intellectuals are often the most respected members of their chosen profession, Hamp, the defense lawyer who looks like a criminal, confidently sets his toothpick on the lectern, runs his tongue over a gold-capped incisor, and straightens his suit, a baby-tooth-white, caftan-baggy, double-breasted ensemble that hangs on his bony frame like an empty hot-air balloon and, depending on your taste in music, either matches or clashes with his aspb-black, Cleopatra chemical perm and the first-round Mike Tyson knockout darkness of his skin. I half expect him to address the court with “Fellow pimps and pippettes, you may have heard that my client is dishonest, but that’s easy for them to say, because my client is a crook!” In an age where social activists have television

shows and millions of dollars, there aren't many left like Hampton Fiske, those pro-bono assholes who believe in the system and in the Constitution, but who can see the gap between reality and rhetoric. And while I don't really know if he truly believes in me or not, I know that when he starts to defend the indefensible, it won't make a difference, because he's a man whose business card motto is "For the poor every day is casual Friday."

Fiske has barely uttered "May it please the Court," when the black Justice moves almost imperceptibly forward in his seat. No one would've noticed, but a squeaky wheel on his swivel chair gave him away. And with each referral to some obscure section of the Civil Rights Act or precedent-setting case, the Justice shifts impatiently, causing his chair to squeak louder and louder with each transfer of his restless body weight from one flabby diabetic butt cheek to the other. You can assimilate the man, but not the blood pressure, and the vein pulsating angrily down the middle of his forehead gives him away. He's giving me that crazy, red-eyed penetrating look that back home we call the Willowbrook Avenue Stare, Willowbrook Avenue being the four-lane river Styx that in 1960s Dickens separated white neighborhoods from black, but now, post-white, post-anybody-with-two-nickels-to-rub-together-flight, hell lies on both sides of the street. The riverbanks are dangerous, and while standing at the crosswalk waiting for the light to change, your life can change. Some drive-by homie, representing some color, clique, or any one of the five stages of grief, can stick his gauge out the passenger-side window of a two-tone coupe, give you the Negro Supreme Court Justice glare, and ask, "Where you from, fool?"

The correct answer, of course, is "Nowhere," but sometimes they don't hear you over the loud, sputtering, unmuffled engine, the contentious confirmation hearing, the liberal media's questioning of your credentials, the conniving black bitch accusing you of sexual harassment. Sometimes "Nowhere" just isn't a good

enough answer. Not because they don't believe you, because "everybody's from somewhere," but because they don't want to believe you. And now, having lost his veneer of patrician civility, this screw-faced magistrate, sitting in his high-backed swivel chair, is no different from the gangbanger cruising up and down Willowbrook Avenue calling and sitting "shotgun" because he has one.

And for the first time in his long tenure on the Supreme Court, the black Justice has a question. He's never interjected before, so he doesn't quite know how. Looking to the Italian Justice for permission, he slowly raises his puffy, cigar-fingered hand in the air, but too infuriated to wait for approval, he blurts out, "Nigger, are you crazy?" in a voice surprisingly high-pitched for a black man his size. Now void of objectivity and equanimity, his ham-sized fists pound the bench so hard the fancy, giant, gold-plated clock suspended from the ceiling above the Chief Justice's head begins to pendulum back and forth. The black Justice moves in too close to his microphone, yelling into it, because although I'm seated only a few feet away from the bench, our differences are light-years apart. He's demanding to know how it is that in this day and age a black man can violate the hallowed principles of the Thirteenth Amendment by owning a slave. How could I willfully ignore the Fourteenth Amendment and argue that sometimes segregation brings people together. Like all people who believe in the system, he wants answers. He wants to believe that Shakespeare wrote all those books, that Lincoln fought the Civil War to free the slaves and the United States fought World War II to rescue the Jews and keep the world safe for democracy, that Jesus and the double feature are coming back. But I'm no Panglossian American. And when I did what I did, I wasn't thinking about inalienable rights, the proud history of our people. I did what worked, and since when did a little slavery and segregation ever hurt anybody, and if so, so fucking be it.

Sometimes, when you're high as I am, the line between thought

and speech blurs, and judging by the way the black Justice is frothing at the mouth, I've said that last bit out loud, ". . . so fucking be it." He stands up like he wants to fight. A wad of spit hocked from the deepest regions of his Yale Law School education chambered on the tip of his tongue. The Chief Justice calls out his name, and the black Justice catches himself and plops back into his chair. Swallowing his saliva, if not his pride. "Racial segregation? Slavery? Why you bitch-made motherfucker, I know goddamn well your parents raised you better than that! So let's get this hanging party started!"