

PART 1

THE BEARD SCRATCHERS

CHAPTER 1

YOU WOULD THINK they'd be used to me by now. I mean, don't they know that after fourteen hundred years the charade of blackness is over? That we blacks, the once eternally hip, the people who were as right now as Greenwich Mean Time, are, as of today, as yesterday as stone tools, the velocipede, and the paper straw all rolled into one? The Negro is now officially human. Everyone, even the British, says so. It doesn't matter whether anyone truly believes it; we are as mediocre and mundane as the rest of the species. The restless souls of our dead are now free to be who they really are underneath that modern primitive patina. Josephine Baker can take the bone out of her nose, her knock-kneed skeleton back to its original allotment of 206. The lovelorn ghost of Langston Hughes can set down his Montblanc fountain pen (a gift) and open his mouth wide. Not to recite his rhyming populist verse, but to lick and suck some Harlem rapscallion's prodigious member and practice what is, after all, the real oral tradition. The revolutionaries among us can lay down the guns. The war is over. It doesn't matter who won, take your roscoe, the Saturday night special, the nine, the guns you once waved fuck-a-white-man drunkenly in front of the

kids, take those guns and encase them in glass so that they lie passively on the red felt next to the blunderbuss and Portuguese arquebus and Minuteman musket. The battle cry of even the bravest among us is no longer "I'll see you in hell!" but "I'll see you in court." So if you're still upset with history, get a lawyer on the phone and try to collect workmen's comp for slavery. Blackness is passé and I for one couldn't be happier, because now I'm free to go to the tanning salon if I want to, and I want to.

I hand the receptionist the coupon. On the front is a glossy aerial photo of a Caribbean coastline. She flips it over and her eyes drop suspiciously from my face to the back of the card, which reads, ELECTRIC BEACH TANNING SALON. BUY 10 LIGHT BATHS, GET 1 **FREE**. Underneath the promotion, in two rows of five, are ten pfennig-sized circles; and rubber-stamped in each circle is a blazing red-ink sun wearing a toothy smile and sunglasses. Today is the glorious day I redeem my free suntan. But somehow this woman, who has personally stamped at least seven of the ten smiling suns, is reluctant to assign me a tanning room. Usually she stamps my card and under her breath whispers, *Malibu, Waikiki, or Ibiza*, and I go about my business.

A look of bemused familiarity creeps across her face. A look that says, *Maybe I've seen you somewhere before. Didn't you rape me last Tuesday? Aren't you my son's tap dance teacher?*

"Acapulco."

Finally. She pencils my name into the appointment book. I point to the sunscreen in the display case behind her.

"Coppertone," I say.

A tube of Tropical Blend skims over the countertop like a miniature torpedo. The sun protection factor is two. Not strong enough. If the receptionist's white vanilla frosting lip gloss has an SPF of three, my natural complexion is at least a six. I return fire and send the lotion back. "Zu schwach. Ich brauche etwas Stärkeres," I say, asking for something stronger.

Maybe mammals should be classified by their sun protection factors. Married SPF3 female, 35, seeks nonsmoking, spontaneous SPF4 or lighter for discreet affair. SPF7 Rhino Faces Extinction. I'm the Head SPF50 in Charge. *It was the SPF2ness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be for naught.*

The windowless Acapulco room has the macabre feel of a Tijuana cancer clinic. Like the liquor stores, ball courts, and storefront churches back in the old country, Berlin tanning salons are ubiquitous sanctuaries. Places of last resort for the terminally ill, the terminally poor and sinful, the terminally pale. Places where you go when the doctors tell you there's nothing more they can do. When the world tells you you're not doing enough.

A ceiling fan churns efficiently through the musty air. On one dingy aquamarine wall hang two framed, official-looking pieces of parchment, one an inspection certificate from the Berlin Department of Health and Safety, and the other, written in ornate script, a degree from the College of Eternal Harvest in something called Solarology. In the middle of the room sits the tanning bed, a glass-and-chrome-plated panacea from heaven or, more accurately, Taiwan. I undress and lotion up, leaving the door open just a crack.

After years of tanning, my skin has lost much of its elasticity. If I pinch myself on the forearm, the little flesh mound stays there for a few seconds before slowly falling back into place. My complexion has darkened somewhat; it's still a nice, nonthreatening sitcom Negro brown, but now there's a pomegranate-purple undertone that in certain light gives me a more villainous sheen. Half of my information on what's new in African-American pop culture comes from Berliners stopping me on the street and saying, *Du siehst aus wie . . .*, and then I go home and look up Urkel, Homey the Clown, and Dave Chappelle on the Internet. Lately

the resemblances have been to the more sinister, swarthy characters from B-movie adaptations of Elmore Leonard's pulp fiction.

I rent these movies—*Jackie Brown*, *Out of Sight*, *Get Shorty*—and watch them while running back and forth from the TV screen to the bathroom mirror. I think I look nothing like these men, these bad, one-note character actors whose only charisma seems to be the bass in their voices and the inflection in the way they say *motherfucker*. Sam Jackson, Don Cheadle, the chubby asshole from *Be Cool*, they're always smart and dark, but never smart enough to outwit the white guy or dark enough to commit any really heinous crimes.

I often think it would've been easier to have grown up in my father's generation. When he came up, there were only four niggers he could look like: Jackie Robinson, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Louis Armstrong, and Uncle Ben, the thick-lipped man in the chef's hat on the box of instant rice. Today every black male looks like someone. Some athlete, singer, or celluloid simpleton. In Daddy's day, if you described a black man to somebody who didn't know him, you'd say he looks like the type of nigger who'd kick your natural ass; now you say he looks like Magic Johnson or Chris Rock, the type of nigger who'd kiss your natural ass.

Most liniments are cool and soothing, but this isn't the case with sunblock. The stuff smells like brine and has the consistency of rancid butter. My dingy skin seems to repel it. No matter how hard I rub, I can't get the cream to disappear, much less moisturize. The greasy swirls just sit there on my skin like unbuffed car wax. I silence the ceiling fan with a firm pull of the cord. If the fan has slowed down or sped up, I can't tell. One more yank. Same difference. Clumsily, I climb onto the tanning bed and raise my hand until the fan's blades skip across my fingers and gradually come to a stop. There's an oily, linty residue on my hand, which I wipe off on the wall.

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I put on the goggles. The tanning bed is cold but soon warms up. Like a childhood fever, tanning heats you from the inside out. My ash-white bones become calcium coals, briquettes of the soul. Soon I'm back in my bottom bunk, the ultraviolet radiation substituting for my overprotective mother piling blanket after quilt after blanket on her baby boy. The warmth from the lamps becomes indistinguishable from that of my mother's dry, calloused hands. My own skin seems to vitrify, and while I have any range of motion in my arms I slip a CD into the built-in stereo and press play.

Music. My music. Not mine in the sense that backseat lovers have songs or fifties rock 'n' roll belongs to the devil, but mine in the sense that I own the music. I wrote it. I own the publishing. All rights are reserved. The song is titled "Southbound Traffic Jam." It opens with a rumbling melody, ten lanes of bumper-to-bumper morning rush-hour traffic over a sampled Kokomo Arnold guitar solo. In the background, two exits away and tailgating the guitar riff, is the intermezzo, a Peterbilt eighteen-wheeler that merges into the tune with grinding gears and a double blast of its air horn. After sixteen bars of bottleneck guitar and bottlenecked cars (no one ever gets the joke), a Japanese sedan suddenly slams its brakes. The wheels lock. The skid is ominously long and even. I can't count the number of times I've heard this track, and yet that high-pitched screech still makes me brace for impact. Steel myself for the sound of sheet metal folding in stereo. A windshield explodes and ten thousand cubes of safety glass fall to the fast-lane pavement with the digitally crisp tinkle of a Brazilian percussion instrument. Sun Ra's saturnine falsetto bespeaks the urgency.

*So rise lightly from the earth.
And try your wings. Try them now.
While the darkness is invisible.*

The guitar comes up, the traffic chugs on. Kokomo hums and moans. The knees of the receptionist pop. She's at the door, peeking through the crack. Staring at the bulge in my Speedo, listening to my music, and wondering why. How does it come to this?

You'd think I'd be used to it by now—this lack of sunshine. But winter in Berlin isn't so much a season as it is an epoch. Eight months of solid prison-blanket-gray skies that, combined with the smoky nightlife and the brogan solemnity of the Berlin footfall, give the city a black-and-white matinee intrigue. If it weren't so cold I'd think I was doing a cameo in an old Hollywood melodrama. To shake the leaden September-to-April monochrome I find myself colorizing things. Ingrid Bergman's eyes, the Polish prostitute's language, the pastry sprinkles on the *Schoko-Taler* in the *Bäckerei* window, the patches of sky on a partly cloudy to mostly cloudy afternoon are all a false-memory shade of blue. A blue that doesn't exist in nature, but resides only in my mind and the twang of Kokomo's guitar.

On days when the skies are clear and that stark blue I'd long forgotten, I sprint out of the apartment and into the blinding afternoon looking for affection and serotonins. For an instant I forget where I am, then I notice the narrow wheelbases on the cars parked along the street with showroom precision. At the intersection of Schlüterstrasse and Mommenstrasse, dogs, dog owners, and unescorted schoolchildren, all equally well behaved, patiently wait for the walk signal. I look down at my funny-looking shoes and I remember where I am. *Berlin, yup, Berlin.*

The quirky functionality of the German shoe, like that of Volkswagens and Bauhaus, grows on you. If one is a creationist, the Adam and Eve of German cobblery are the bowling and nursing shoe, respectively. Shoe Darwinists such as myself believe the lungfish of the species is the three-hundred-year-old Birkenstock.

I own a highly evolved pair of Birkenstocks, all-season Hush Puppy-hiking boot hybrids that adapt to the ever-changing environment like suede chameleons. It is in these sturdy marvels of natural selection that I traipse around the city frantically searching for the sun in the same panic-stricken manner in which I look for my keys. The deductive clichés run through my head: *When did you last see the sun? Are you sure you had it when you left the house?* I work my way backward from the shadows of the Cinzano umbrellas that front the outdoor cafés and head for the Ku'damm shopping district. The crushed quartz in the sidewalk sparkles. Tourists wave from the tops of the double-decker buses. The sun is indeed “out,” but I can never find it in the sky.

None of the Germanic tribes had a sun god. Pagan as philosophy professors, the Visigoths, the Franks, and the Vandals knew better than to believe in something they couldn't see. Ra, Helios, Huitzilopochtli—my name for the sun is Charlie. I weave in and out of pedestrians imagining that two thousand years ago some Hun idler shod not in Birkenstocks but straw sandals trod the same path looking for solar spoor in these now-concrete wilds. But I catch only glimpses of the yellow deity, the corona shimmering through the leaves of the tree blossoms in Tiergarten Park, the herbalescent shampoo sheen in a tall blonde's hippie-straight locks, maybe a reflection in a skyscraper's glacial façade. My sightings are never more than partial eclipses; castle parapet or church steeple, something is always in the way.

Knowing the Egyptians haven't done anything of note in three thousand years, the Berlin civil engineers must have taken a cue from the ancient ones. Giza's men of science built Cheops's pyramids to align with the celestial pole, and so too did Berlin's urban planners, establishing a zoning code that seemingly stipulates every structure, be it building, billboard, street lamp, or bird's nest, be erected to such a height or in such manner as to prevent any

person of normal stature standing at any point within the city limits from having a clear and unobstructed view of the sun.

I always conveniently abandon the search at Winterfeldtplatz, the bells of Saint Matthias ringing in the dusk and signaling an end to the hunt. The sky darkens. The acrid smell of charred pita bread and shawarma lingers in the air. An old man rides a creaky two-speed. A woman curses her uncooperative daughter. The lights inside the Slumberland bar flicker on. In all the time I've lived here I've seen one sunset. And if it hadn't been for the reunification of Germany it wouldn't be that many.

The buzzer goes off but before I start to climb out the receptionist resets the tanning-bed timer for fifteen more minutes, restarts my song, and beckons me to lie back down. Retaking her seat, she listens to the music, one corner of her mouth raised in a deeply impressed smile. Suddenly that corner lowers into a pensive frown. Her fingers stop dancing. Her feet stop tapping. She wants to know why. Why I tan. Why I came to Germany. I tell her it will take more than fifteen minutes to answer that question. It will take the two of us having one of those good horizontal relationships, the kind that the day-to-day verticality of dating, jogging, and window-shopping eventually destroys after two years. By the time I got to the point where I mailed her postcards with accidental haikus scribbled hastily on their backs . . .

*In bed we cool. Kiss.
Soon as my feet hit the floor—
The shit go haywire.*

. . . her question would remain unanswered, then I'll call her whining, "I sent you a postcard, please don't read it." She'd want to break up with me, but wouldn't go through with it because she still hadn't found out why.

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She shifts her plump behind in the chair. The chair squeaks. My sphincter tightens. Other than that I don't move. To move would mess up the comfort level, and I haven't been this comfortable in years.

On our way out of the Electric Beach my freshly irradiated face quickly loses its battle against the brick-cold night. Always a clean city, on winter nights Berlin is especially anti-septic. Often, I swear, there's a hint of ammonia in the air. This is not the hermetic sterility of a private Swiss hospital but the damp Mop & Glo slickness of a late-night supermarket aisle that leaves me wondering what historical spills have just been tidied up.

The ubiquitous commemorative plaques, placed with the utmost care as to be somehow noticeable yet unobtrusive, call out these disasters like weary graveyard shift cashiers. *We have a holocaust in aisle two. Broken shop glass in aisle five. Milli Vanilli in frozen foods.* These metallic Post-it notes aren't religious quotes and self-help affirmations like those pasted onto bathroom mirrors and refrigerator doors, but they are reminders to never forget, moral demarcations welded onto pillars, embedded into sidewalks, etched into granite walls, and hopefully burnished onto our minds. WAY BACK WHEN, AND PROBABLY TOMORROW, IN THE EXACT PLACE WHERE YOU NOW STAND, SOMETHING HAPPENED. WHATEVER HAPPENED, AT LEAST ONE PERSON GAVE A FUCK, AND AT LEAST ONE PERSON DIDN'T. WHICH ONE WOULD YOU HAVE BEEN? WHICH ONE WILL YOU BE?

At the Nollendorfplatz U-bahn station we catch ourselves staring blankly at a marble plaque memorializing the homosexual victims of National Socialism. People whom the inscription described as having their bodies beaten to death (*totgeschlagen*) and their stories silenced to death (*totgeschwiegen*).

"What did you do last night?"

It's an odd question. One that is usually only asked by a best

friend after a drag on a borrowed cigarette or the pulling of a strange hair from a familiar shoulder. I'm thankful for it, though. She doesn't want to dwell in the not-so-distant past, and neither do I. "Nothing. What about you?"

"Nothing."

"What about the day before yesterday?" she asks, pulling in close enough to squeeze the air from my down jacket.

"The day before yesterday?" I say, reaching behind my back and breaking her grip. "I was really busy the day before yesterday."

She's hurt that I refuse to share, but the day before yesterday is too personal. The day before yesterday was the most important day of my life.

On the elevated tracks above us her train brakes to a halt. She's trying to hold my gaze; however, my attention is focused on a place I can't see but know is there. A place two blocks and a left turn behind her—the Slumberland bar. My patronizing good-bye kiss on the forehead is quickly countered with a kiss of her own. A lingering smack on the lips that gives me a glimpse into what could be our future, a long stretch of day after tomorrows that would be soft, impulsive, slightly salty, and an inch and a half taller than me. *Bing-bong*. The two-note electronic chime sounds, the pneumatic doors hiss to a close, and in a sense we've both missed our trains.

Not getting the anticipated response from me, the receptionist quickly folds her arms in disgust, her hands tucked tightly into her armpits. I want to ask her to do it again. Not kiss me, but fold her arms. The sandpapery sound of the linen sleeves of her lab coat rubbing together makes the tip of my penis itch. It's time to say good-bye. I reach out to lift the name tag poorly fastened to the receptionist's lapel. It reads, *Empfangsdame*, German for receptionist.

I begin to backpedal, expecting her figure to recede into the night. It doesn't. Her lab coat is too bright. She stands there like

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a stubborn ghost of my satyric past, present and future refusing to disappear.

It's a slow Monday night; the Slumberland is gloomy and quiet. Only the jukebox's flickering lights and a Nigerian trying to impress a blonde with his Zippo lighter tricks punctuate the musty stillness. I order a wheat beer, then insert some money into the jukebox. I punch in 4701, "In a Sentimental Mood." Duke Ellington's languorous legato soft-shoes into the bar and, as advertised, puts me in a sentimental mood about the day before yesterday.

Most languages have a word for the day before yesterday. *An-teayer* in Spanish. *Vorgestern* in German. There is no word for it in English. It's a language that tries to keep the past simple and perfect, free of the subjunctive blurring of memory and mood. I take out a pen, tapping the end impatiently on a bar napkin as I try to think of an English word for "the day before yesterday."

I consider myself to be a political-linguistic refugee, come to Germany seeking asylum in a country where I don't have to hear people say "nonplussed" when they mean "nonchalant" or have to listen to a military spokesperson euphemistically refer to a helicopter's crashing into a mountainside as a "hard landing," and I can't begin to explain how liberating it is to live in a place where I can go through an autumn of Sundays without once having to hear someone say, "The only thing the prevent defense does is prevent you from winning." Listening to America these days is like listening to the fallen King Lear using his royal gibberish to turn field mice and shadows into real enemies. America is always composing empty phrases like "keeping it real," "intelligent design," "hip-hop generation," and "first responders" as a way to disguise the emptiness and the mundanity.

Ironically, though the sound of American rhetoric is one of the reasons I left, it's the last remaining tie I have to the country

of my birth. The only person back home I correspond with is Cutter Pinchbeck III, senior editor for the *Kensington-Merriwether Dictionary of Standard American English*. Our relationship is contentious, and like some exiled word revolutionary I try to improve the linguistic repression from afar. To date I've submitted four words for inclusion in the next edition: *etymolophile*, *Corfunian*, *hiphopera*, and *phonographic memory*. I like my words; they're self-explanatory and, to my mind, much needed. Who'd believe that English is the only Indo-European language without an adjective to describe the inhabitants of the island of Corfu? Cutter Pinchbeck says we don't need *Corfunian*. In his priggish rejection letters he states that the people of Corfu are called Greeks, and that an etymolophile wouldn't be a lover of words, but a lover of the origin of words. He patronizingly says that *hiphopera* almost merited a lemma as an innovative, confluent melding of high and low culture; however, it didn't possess the "straight gully, niggerish perspicuity of this year's new entries, e.g., *badonkadonk*, *bling*, *bootylicious*, *dead presidents*, *hoodrat*, *peeps*, and *swol*," just to name a few slang ephemerals. And despite my having enclosed signed affidavits from my mother and a video of me, age twelve, winning twenty-five thousand dollars on *Name That Tune*, Cutter Pinchbeck doesn't believe that I, nor anyone of the hundred billion people who've trodden on earth in the past fifty thousand years, has ever had a phonographic memory—but I do. I remember everything I've ever heard. Every dropped nickel, raindrop drip-drop, sneaker squeak, and sheep bleat. Every jump rope chant, Miss Mary Mack Mack hand clap, and "eenie meanie chili beanie oop bop-bop bellini" method for choosing who's it. I remember every sappy R&B radio lyric and distorted Hendrix riff. Every Itzhak Perlman pluck and squishy backseat contorted make-out session. I can still hear every Hey you, You the man, and John Philip Sousa euphonium toot and every tree rustle and street-

corner hustle. I remember every sound I've ever heard. It's like my entire life is a song I can't get out of my head.

"Ow." The Nigerian has burned himself. He's shaking his hand wildly and sucking air through his teeth. His date laughs, seizes his hand, and licks and nuzzles his seared fingers.

The jukebox ballad ends with a note that Ellington lays down with the gentleness of a child setting a wounded bird into a shoebox lined with tissue paper. A series of English words for "the day before yesterday" dies in the back of my throat—*penultidiem . . . prepretoday . . . yonyesterday . . .*—and like an unwitting Tourette's Syndrome utterance, a word for "the day before yesterday" flies from my mouth. "Retrothence!" The blonde and the Nigerian give me a strange look. I'm going to send that to Cutter Pinchbeck III at *Kensington-Merriwether*. *Retrothence* will look awfully nice on page 1147 of the Fourth College Edition, nestled between *retrospective* and *retroussé*.

"You still have some songs left."

The Nigerian is standing next to the jukebox.

"Put in 1007. You can play anything you want after that."

Rock 'n' roll saunters into the room. Overdubbed guitar riffs that don't come off as gimmicky, drums driving the song with the tough staccato love of a caring drill sergeant, and the bass, the bass is above the fray, suspended above the strings, synthesizers and percussion, brimming with a cocksure confidence, always threatening to show off but never doing it.

"Who is this?"

"The Magnum Opus."*

They're Southern California, sprawling, hazy, fickle, as underground as a rock group that sold twenty thousand records could

*Obscure but seminal L.A. garage band that in 1982 had one groundbreaking gig at the Roxy during which the lead singer, Manuel Ozuna, is reputed to have invented crowd surfing.

be. The critics hail groups like the Smashing Pumpkins and Pearl Jam as the purveyors of the new rock 'n' roll, choosing heroin rapidity over depth, haircuts over musicianship, head-to-toe white-boy pallor over a Mexican/black/American/*guapo*-politic band whose music has nothing to do with being Mexican, American, black, or handsome. High-pitched and just this side of screechy and that side of cogent, the vocals hydroplane over the melody.

"They're good," the Nigerian says.

"They are good," I wanted to say, "but two nights ago, not so far from where you're standing now, me and the greatest musician you've never heard of played two minutes and forty-seven seconds of musical perfection as timeless as the hydrogen atom and *Saturday Night Live*. A beat so perfect as to render musical labels null and void. A melody so transcendental that blackness has officially been declared passé. Finally, us colored folk will be looked upon with blithe indifference, not erotized pity or the disgust of Freudian projection. It's what we've claimed we always wanted, isn't it? To be judged 'not by the color of our skins, but by the content of our character'? Dude, but what we threw down was the content not of character, but *out* of character. It just happened to be of indeterminate blackness and funkier than a motherfucker."