

## *Prologue*

On one hand this messiah gig is a bitch. On the other I've managed to fill the perennial void in African-American leadership. There is no longer a need for fed-up second-class citizens to place a want ad in the Sunday classifieds reading:

### *Negro Demagogue*

Must have ability to lead a divided, downtrodden, and alienated people to the Promised Land. Good communication skills required. Pay commensurate with ability. No experience necessary.

Being a poet, and thus expert in the ways of soulful coercion, I am eminently qualified. My book, *Watermelanin*, has sold 126 million copies. I have the ear of the academics, the street denizens, and the political cabalists. Leader of the Black Community? There is no better job fit.

I didn't interview for the job. I was drafted by 22 million hitherto unaffiliated souls into serving as full-time Svengali and foster parent to an abandoned people. I spoon-feed them grueled futility, unveil the oblivion that is black America's existence and the hopelessness of the struggle. In return I receive fanatical avian obedience. Wherever I travel, a long queue of baby black goslings files behind a plastic wind-up

bard spring-driven toward self-destruction, crossing the information superhighway and refusing to look both ways. If a movie mogul buys the film rights to my life, the *TV Guide* synopsis will read:

In the struggle for freedom, a reluctant young poet convinces black Americans to give up hope and kill themselves in a climactic crash 'n' burn finale. Full of laughs and high jinks. Some violence and adult language.

In the quest for equality, black folks have tried everything. We've begged, revolted, entertained, intermarried, and are still treated like shit. Nothing works, so why suffer the slow deaths of toxic addiction and the American work ethic when the immediate gratification of suicide awaits? In glorious defiance of the survival instinct, Negroes stream into Hillside, California, like lemmings. Every day they wishfully look heavenward, peering into the California smog for a metallic gray atomic dot that will gradually expand until it explodes some one thousand feet over our natural and processed heads. It will be the Emancipation Disintegration. Lunch counters, bus seats, and executive washrooms be damned; our mass suicide will be the ultimate sit-in.

They're all here, the black American iconographic araaay, making final preparations for Elysium approximately five hundred years after our arrival in this purgatory. The well-dressed guy who worked in the corporate mailroom and malapropped his way through your patronizing efforts to engage him in small talk wonders if he left the stove on, then laughs aloud at the absurdity of it all. The innocuous Democratic ex-mayor of your city writes mediocre elegiac verse without a nod to the absurdity of it all. That fine young black thing you drooled over in eighth-grade gym class struts up and down the block looking for one last world to rock. The woman who sat next to

you clutching her handbag while you waited for the morning bus and then elbowed you in the solar plexus fighting for a seat plans to call her boss and talk shit until the last minute, then put the receiver to the explosion, saying, “I won’t be in to work tomorrow. I’ll be a fuckin’ evaporated carbon dustball. You slave-drivin’ fuck.”

Last week’s issue of *Time* magazine identified me as the “Ebon Pied Piper.” In *U.S. News & World Report* I was “the bellwether to ethnic hara-kiri.” History will add my name to the list of maniacal messiahs who sit in Hells homeroom answering the Devil’s roll call: Jim Jones, David Koresh, whoever led the charge of the Light Brigade, Charles Manson, General Westmoreland, and me. These pages are my memoirs, the battlefield remains of a frightened deserter in the eternal war for civility.



“MAMA BABY,  
PAPA MAYBE”



# One

Unlike the typical bluesy earthy folksy denim-overalls noble-in-the-face-of-cracker-racism aw shucks Pulitzer-Prize-winning protagonist mojo magic black man, I am not the seventh son of a seventh son of a seventh son. I wish I were, but fate shorted me by six brothers and three uncles. The chieftains and queens who sit on top of old Mount Kilimanjaro left me out of the will. They bequeathed me nothing, stingy bastards. Cruelly cheating me of my mythological inheritance, my aboriginal superpowers. I never possessed the god-given ability to strike down race politic evildoers with a tribal chant, the wave of a beaded whammy stick, and a mean glance. Maybe some family fool fucked up and slighted the ancients. Pissed off the gods, too much mumbo in the jumbo perhaps, and so the sons must suffer the sins of the father.

My name is Kaufman, Gunnar Kaufman. I'm black Orestes in the cursed House of Atreus. Preordained by a set of weak-kneed DNA to shuffle in the footsteps of a long cowardly queue of coons, Uncle Toms, and faithful boogedy-boogedy retainers. I am the number-one son of a spineless colorstruck son of a bitch who was the third son of an ass-kissing sell-out house Negro who was indeed a seventh son but only by default. (Grandpa Giuseppe Kaufman rolled over his older twin brother Johann in his sleep, smothering him

and staking claim to the cherished seventh sonship.) From birth my parents indoctrinated me with the idea that the surreal escapades and “T’s a-comin’” watermelon chicanery of my forefathers was the stuff of hero worship. Their resolute deeds and Uncle Tom exploits were passed down by my mother’s dinner table macaroni-and-cheese oral history lessons. There is nothing worse than a loud griot, and my mother was the loudest.

Mom raised my sisters and me as the hard-won spoils of a vicious custody battle that left the porcelain shrapnel of supper-dish grenades embedded in my father’s neck. The divorce made Mama, Ms. Brenda W. Kaufman, determined to make sure that her children knew their forebears. As a Brooklyn orphan who had never seen her parents or her birth certificate, Mom adopted my father’s patriarchal family history for her misbegotten origins.

On summer afternoons Nicole, Christina, and I sat at my mother’s feet, tracing our bloodlines by running our fingers over the bulging veins that tunneled in her ashy legs. She’d place her hideous pedal extremities on a throw pillow and we would conduct our ancestral investigation while filing down the rock-hard bunions and other dermal crustaceans on her feet.

We started with the basics. *Danger, Kids at Work*. Nicole, my youngest sister, whom I nicknamed the Incredible Eternal Wailing Baby, would open up the questioning in her self-centered style, all the while scraping the mound of dead skin that was my mother’s left heel.

“Maw, am I adopted?”

“No, you are not adopted. I showed you the stretch marks last week. Put some elbow grease into it, goddammit. Pull the skin off with your fingers if you have to, shit.”

Then Christina, middle child, whom I lovingly rechristened with the Native American appellation *Fingers-in-Both-Nostrils-Thumb-in-Mouth-and-Snot-All-Over-the-Fucking-Place*, would pull on the heartstrings to tighten the filial ties.



“What about me and Gunnar?”

“No.”

“Can you prove it?” Christina would ask, anxious and unconvinced, her heavy breathing blowing mucus bubbles from her nose.

“Which ones those crinkly lines on your stomach is mines?”

“Chrissy, if anyone is fool enough to tell you that they your parents, believe them. Okay?”

“Maw.”

“What, Gunnar?”

“Your feet stank.”

“Shut up before I make you fill out that application to military school.”

The advanced course in Kaufman genealogy didn't start until Mom returned home from earning our livings by testing the unlucky poor for VD at a free clinic in East Los Angeles. I remember she enjoyed bringing the sharp stainless-steel tools of her trade and glossy Polaroids of the most advanced cases to the dinner table. Spit-shining the speculums and catheters, she'd tell her awful jokes about “pricking the pricks and hunting the cunts.” I swear somewhere in her unknown past traveling minstrels cakewalked across candlelit theater stages.

The seven o'clock suppers were carnival sideshows, featuring Mom the Amazing Crazy Lady. She'd wipe our greasy lips, lecturing us about the horrors of sexually transmitted disease while passing mashed potatoes and photos of pussy lesions around the table. For the coup de grace she'd open a prophylactic package, remove and unroll a blue sheath, and stuff the receptacle end into a nostril. Then she'd sit there lecturing us about the joys of safe sex with a crumpled condom swinging from her nose and bouncing off her chin with each syllable. Suddenly she'd press the open nostril closed with her finger and with a snort snake the unlubricated rubber up her nose. She'd open her mouth and produce a soggy piece

of latex, holding it up for all to see with a gloating “Ta-dah. Let’s eat.”

The festivities continued throughout the meal. Though her designation as world’s loudest griot cannot be substantiated, the *Guinness Book of World Records* lists her as having the world’s loudest swallow.

SWALLOW. Ms. Brenda W. Kaufman (b. 1955) of Los Angeles recorded unamplified swallows at 47 db (busy street = 70 db, jet engine = 130) while guesting on the David Letterman show drinking New York City tap water on May 3, 1985.

On her birthdays I watch the videotape of her performance. A man with an English accent holds a microphone to her throat while she enthusiastically drinks a clear glass of water. In the bottom righthand corner of the screen is a VU meter with a needle that jumps wildly with every booming swallow. My sisters and I yelled our heads off every time the needle moved into the red zone.

When she returned, we proudly took turns placing our fingers on her bobbing Adam’s apple as she drank her milk. Between swallows Mom would ask about our schoolwork and bemoan our miseducations. Slamming down an empty glass of milk, she’d run her tongue over her top lip and bellow, “See, there isn’t anything a Kaufman can’t do. Those history books say anything about your great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather on your father’s side, Euripides Kaufman? Betcha they don’t. Pass the fucking dinner buns and let Mama tell you about a colonial Negro who would’ve pulled himself up by the bootstraps had he had boots. The first of a legacy of colored men who forged their own way in the world. Gunnar, you listenin’?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mom could tell a motherfucking story. She’d start in with Euripides Kaufman, the youngest slave in history to buy his freedom. I heard the chains shackled to the spirits of Kaufman Negroes past slink and rattle up to the dining room windows. Dead niggers who smacked their arid lips and held their rumbling vacuous stomachs while they stared at the fried chicken, waiting for Mom to tell their tales.

Too small to smelt and work iron in his master’s Boston blacksmith shop, Euripides spent his bondage doing donkey work. After running barefoot errands over the downtown cobblestones, he’d look for ways to fill his idle time. Sitting on the grassy banks of the Charles River, he’d watch the jongleurs woo money from the pockets of sentimental passersby. At age seven Euripides saw a means of income. The baby entrepreneur ran home, spread globs of lamp oil over sooty black skin, and parked himself outside the busiest entrance to the Boston Common. Every promenading Bostonian who passed him by answered Euripides’s toothy obsequious grin and gleaming complexion with a concerned “Can I help you, son?” To which Euripides replied, “Would you like to rub me head for good luck? Cost a sixpence.”

Soon Euripides had a steady clientele of Brahmins and Tories, redcoats and militiamen paying to pass their palms over his bristly head for luck and a guaranteed afterlife. Six months later he decided to shave his skull to heighten the tactile pleasure, and business boomed. Word quickly got back to his owner and eponym Chauncy Kaufman about the little tar baby’s ingenuity in bringing a small measure of fame to his shop. Soon customers came into the shop to have their horses shod and to pat the “’til black bastard’s” head. Customers rode up, tied their horses to the hitching post, and proclaimed, “Four new shoes, Chauncy. Where’s Euripides? Last week I forgot to palm his stubbly skull and the missus caught me bugging the Negro lass in the attic. Come ’ere, you baldheaded good-luck charm, you.”

One mild spring day the nine-year-old Euripides puzzled out how much to charge for a “He’s so cute” grab ’n’ twist of the cheek. He looked up to see a black boy about his age auctioned off next to a fruit stand for fifteen pounds. “Snoo-kums, on your way back from getting the wig powdered at the coiffeur’s, would you please pick up some tomatoes, a head of lettuce, and a little nigger child?” Ever the shrewd business-kid and eager to appraise his own worth, Euripides asked his sweaty coal-faced owner if he was worth fifteen pounds on the open market. Master Kaufman assured Euripides that a clever pickaninny such as himself was worth twice that amount. Euripides then reached into his satchel and plonked down thirty pounds in savings from his head-rubbing business on the anvil. Euripides Kaufman walked out of the shop a nine-year-old freeman never giving a second thought to buying a hat. He went on to become a merchant sailor who attained unheralded fame for being in Mama’s words, “the brains behind the Boston Massacre.”

Familial legend has it that on March 5, 1770, Euripides Kaufman artfully dodged a redcoat’s musket shot with his name on it and Crispus Attucks woke up in nigger heaven a martyr. That historic afternoon Euripides and Crispus, his ace boon coon since childhood, sat in a Boston pub drinking drafts of Samuel Adams pale ale. Oh to be free, black, and twenty-one, drunk on home-brewed hops and the mascot-like acceptance of his fellow white merchant seafarers. The only drawback to Euripides’s freedom was that he couldn’t charge when the locals rubbed his head with vigorous patronization. “Euripides, you dusky halyard-knot-headed black bloke, how old were you when you started to shed your monkey fur? Maybe you still sleep in it to keep warm at night?”

What’re a few nigger jokes among friends? We Kaufmans have always been the type of niggers who can take a joke. I used to visit my father, the sketch artist at the Wilshire LAPD precinct. His fellow officers would stand around cluttered

desks breaking themselves up by telling how-many-niggers-does-it-take jokes, pounding each other on the back and looking over their broad shoulders to see if me and Daddy were laughing. Dad always was. The epaulets on his shoulders raising up like inchworms as he giggled. I never laughed until my father slapped me hard between the shoulder blades. The heavy-handed blow bringing my weight to my tiptoes, raising my chin from my chest, and I'd burp out a couple of titters of self-defilement. Even if I didn't get the joke. "What they mean, 'Lick their lips and stick 'em to the wall?'" Later I'd watch my father draw composite sketches for victimized citizens who used his face as reference point. "He was thick-lipped, nose a tad bigger than yours, with your nostril flare though." Daddy would bring some felon to still life and without looking up from his measured strokes admonish me that my face better not appear on any police officer's sketchpad. He'd send me home in a patrol car, black charcoal smudged all over my face and his patriotic wisdom ringing in my ears: "Remember, Gunnar, God, country, and laughter, the world's best medicine. Did your mother get the check?"

It figures a sell-out Kaufman helped jump-start the American Revolution.

Liver-lipped Euripides Kaufman, pint full, whistle and lips wet, deftly redirected the scorn of his colonial rabble-rousing shipmates from him onto a lone adolescent redcoat sentinel stationed in front of the House of Commons just outside the tavern. "Hey, blokes. Isn't that lobster-backed scoundrel the Brit scalawag who cheated the barber Jack Milton out of the coinage for a fair-priced trimming 'n' shave yesterday past?" With Euripides and Crispus leading the way, the drunken mob scampered outside for a closer look. Mugs in hand, they surrounded the nervous guard and peppered him with insults. Euripides stood about a yard away from the redcoat, looked him up and down, turned to his mates, and said, "Verily, that's the tea-and-crumpet-eating-scofflaw. Crispus will support me claim, won't you, big boy?"