

# Mambo Boy

A Novel  
by Ken Okuno

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**SANDWAVE, NOVEMBER 1941**

Dusk, the sun blending in hazy and smudged where sky and sea merge, throwing pink light on the sheet of sand that runs up the cliff behind four young, skinny black haired Japanese American men. One of them is fishing on the rocks. The other three are drinking whiskey squatting around a smoky driftwood fire. One of the drinkers turns and looks at the sun floating orange, then at the fisher:

"Hey Speed. What the hell you lookin' at, old fart. Sun sets every day." Hershey, still the boss, running the card game.

Speed stood next to the casting rig stuck in the sand, pyramid-shaped sinkers, dropper-hooked with mussel flesh, orange-in-daylight, dark blobs in the fading light. The four men had twisted black mussels from the studded rocks, boiled them or threw them on coals, chewy and salty and orange. The mussel was often tough or gritty, they'd chew it a bit for flavor then spit it out. Flavor of the sea. They used them raw for bait. There was mussel on rock as far as the eye could see. Looming behind them on the slope was a vast tongue of sand that'd been pushed up where a freak wave, a monster, had risen up long ago. The Sandwave.

Speed turned and stared, the Sandwave had turned from pink to magenta. He wondered how so much sand got pushed that far up the cliff. "Coulda been a calm day and then a wave came," he mumbled to himself. *Hell of a wave.* Hershey yelled at him. *Damn.*

"Hell Speed, come on and play. I got the luck, you got the

money."

Speed watched the last of the sunset:

*Play cards, drink, gamble, it don't matter. I got no money. Just play the hand, play the cards you're dealt. This place is good for that: no rules, no one comes around. No victory. No defeat. Just the sound of the waves, like a pulse. And a big footprint of sand where the big one tried to break through. Did break through. One time. Wild enough here, just breathe, no choking, breathe and breathe and breathe. So hard to breathe at home. Salt air off the kelp. Sunset. Hair's soaked. Wet but not defeated. Forget we're inmates.*

"You look like a greaser, man. C'mon Speed. Let's see your money. I'll buy you a drink. What you lookin' at up there?"

"Imagine the size of a wave could push that much sand up the hill. That far. Must be couple hundred feet."

The others looked up at the fading landmark. Hidekazu said, "Japanese word tsunami."

Harvard replied, "It was a big ol' fish slapping its tail made the wave. The one that got away."

Everyone laughed, then returned to cards. Speed went back to his bitterness:

*Taste of insult, familiar. Everyone laughing hard. Cut each other – like a habit, a superstition, some kind of laughter is needed, touch the scars, laugh at bad luck. Luck of the Japanese but we can laugh about it. Shape of eyes, color of skin. All suffering done in the dark. No retreat unless they take you away with guns pointed at you. Insults and laughter. Can't be helped, bad luck. Gaman. Law of the land. Land of the free. Inmates.*

Their chariot was cream-colored, dented, a Dodge, Hershey's

car. His real name was Hiroshi, a good-looking hustler, a gambler, organizer, the kind of Buddhahead can make it in this world, the kind with a regular job that comes with wife and children. The kind on the lookout for what comes his way. The one chippin' on his wife with the white girl. A regular guy with his pals but our boy Hershey can get things the others can't. He's got things figured out.

Nearly 3 a.m. Hershey dropped off Speed. Speed stood in front of the house. Just off Crenshaw with an enormous palm in the front yard, a Washingtonia.

The moon was high. The scene was bluish silver. Shadowed by the palm, he looked up, saw the heavy fruit, pale blue in the moonlight, goldenrod by daylight. Washingtonia, next to a sagging shingle-sided house. Mother and father, older brother and his wife and their two boys, one of them a baby. *Too many people sleeping in this house*, thought Speed. He saw the tree as though for the first time: *strange look of pale blue in moonlight: date fruit*. He set his bucket in the kitchen sink and laid out the perch in a neat row in the moonlight. Seven of them, their vertical bars fading in death. He sliced up from the vent, white bellies, dark innards spilling out. He wrapped the guts in newspaper to be buried in the morning, scraped their scales, put them away in the refrigerator that the whole family called an ice box, country folk. His mother would appreciate the fish. Upstairs he laid down atop the blankets, finally tired and cold. He stared at the ceiling, thinking: *This house like a cold oven, cold cold cold, like a closed oven*.

**BILLIE**

Daedelus Verrette showed up around noon like he was going to a gig, his two-tone cordovan and white patent leather shoes crunching on the gravel of the construction yard as he flagged down a flatbed truck swinging into the yard. Always a dresser, Daedelus had slicked himself up extra sharp for the occasion, his "downtown" hat, his black tie with musical curlicues that spoke of Harlem and Hi-De-Ho and jazz, his maroon coat and slacks, his cufflinks, his belt, his cologne. He was trying to get to Union Station. He had a daughter to meet, his only child, hadn't seen her for a long time. Daedelus had gone looking for Virgil, his ride. He was nowhere to be found. The bluesman was desperate. So it came about that he found himself flagging down the truck swinging into the construction yard. The driver was short, skinny, a Japanese born in L.A., a Nisei, shock of black hair, cigaret hanging out of his mouth.

"Speed, got to talk to you. Hey man, I need a favor, a real favor."

Speed leaned out the driver's side window. "Sure Daedelus. What's up?"

"Got to pick up someone at Union Station at noon. Virgil was supposed to take me but he got in a fight with Ella and took off."

"Like to help you Daedelus but I don't got a car, you know that."

"What about the truck?"

"You must be kidding! This thing? What's Smith going to say? He would hit the roof, probably beat me up, fire me for



sure."

"We'd be back before him, Speed, it's noon already, I'm desperate, I got to be there soon. I got someone coming in. I can't let her down." Speed could hear the desperation in his voice.

Speed's mind swirled: *Damn. Why's he got to ask me that. He's hurting, really hurting. All the way downtown. Union Station. Get fired for sure if Smith found out. Yeah, maybe Smith won't find out. Well fuck him anyway.*

"Get in."

Speed's buddy Harvard jumped out without saying a word, just looked at Speed and grinned. Daedelus eased himself in. Speed crashed the gears and took off like a tank. Speed was hatless in khaki workshirt and pants and old work boots, all of it coated in a glaze of grit and sweat. The gears were cranky, the suspension brutal. Eastward down Jefferson at noon on a Friday in November, 1941. Speed was filled with hatred for his foreman Smith. And fear and exhilaration. He had made the forbidden break, the All American fuck you. He had rebelled against his oppressor and in a small way he felt good. Daedelus was filled with visions of who she now was, a daughter not seen in years, and guilt for having left her.

Daedelus had received her letter only the day before, saying she was coming and would he meet her at the train station. Since the letter he had been pulled back to the life he left years ago. He was a bluesman, played juke joints in Arkansas and Louisiana until the Pullman cars and his loneliness stole him away. He got off at the end of the line, a weary ex-bluesman with a battered tenor, an old Buescher that'd seen better days but with which he

had sang his blues. Those juke joints were tough, they made the L.A. scene look high-toned as the Cotton Club but with colored customers. There was much fighting preceded by the usual loud posturing. People lived loud, never far from desperation and violence. One night a huge man came flying out of the crowd of dancers like a big fish jumping out of a stormy sea, splashing onto the tiny stage, swamping it before the musicians could move. Daedelus came out of it with a cut lip and a bent sax, couldn't blow for a week. Later a friend told him about a job for a cook on the Pullmans and he jumped, easiest decision he ever made.

He had a wife and a daughter: Flerida and Osbeth. His juke joint buddies, they understood a regular paycheck and a place to come home to. It worked for a while. He came off the road and worked the Pullman cars five years, cooking in the swaying galley till his leg gave him too much trouble. Always there was the pull of the road and the blues. Then with Flerida having a nervous breakdown and him falling into despair and wanting a new life L.A. collected him like a loose button, a bud of loneliness drifting westward. He stepped off the train one last time and never looked back, burying his guilt in the struggle to survive. He played clubs but soon discovered he could make steadier money booking acts. He drew on his connections, importing acts from Arkansas and Louisiana. After losing money on a few no-shows for the usual show biz excuses, he booked local talent only. He would rent the hall, do the publicity, keep a close eye on the entertainment. The rest, the decorating, costumes, food and drink, he farmed out.

Entertainers were his passion and they were cheap, those who had come off the road like him, worn out, those who had taken regular jobs but still possessed the fire. They all had the fire. None of them could resist coming back, even for a fashion

show held at a high school gym. Fashion shows, costume balls, dance contests, talent contests, whatever it took that made him a few bucks and gave his people a place to shine, a place to take the spotlight, sing the old songs and the latest hits, to be seen by their own. Dancers, musicians, teenagers and old folks, vaudeville veterans, the occasional bebopper, a bluesman or woman, a shouter, a talent, a vanity act, whoever was too old or too young or too spent or too strange to make it big. His people. He booked 'em all. His most regular booking was a club off a Crenshaw alley, Pauline's Pantry.

The headliner at Pauline's Pantry was Virgil Fulsom, one of the youngsters that Daedelus watched as he came up, a talent show crooner who admired Billy Eckstine. Now he was a full-fledged song stylist. He was good looking in a soft way, had gained a reputation as a tough guy and a cocksman. Women were his weak point and he was a favorite of theirs. He had his following at the Pantry, and he had his women. His sex life he kept on the side, each woman knowing she wasn't the only one. Virgil knew how to hustle, he had the knack. He could make a woman feel she was special – while he was with her he believed it himself. He could smile and warm them up, then send them away cold-shouldered. He could play their loyalties and act like a pimp, and still they wanted him. It was his special talent. He must have been tempted to go for the easy money of the shadow world. But Virgil lacked ambition. He only wanted to be Prince of the Pantry.

It was half past by the time they clanked into the parking lot at Union Station. Speed muscled the flatbed into a loading zone, figuring he wouldn't be hassled there. The engine sputtered to a

stop. Daedelus eased out and disappeared into the cavernous station. Birds of Paradise. Palm trees. Spanish tiles. The parking lot full of black sedans, everyone dressed up to travel. Speed watched the fancy dressers, mused to himself: *Never know who you might meet on a train, judge you by your clothes. Move up in society, meet the right people. Got to look right. Need one nice suit anyway. There's Daedelus. And ... Who's that?*

Daedelus emerged carrying a medium-sized suitcase and walking next to a dark haired maiden in a bright green suit. As she got closer Speed's imagination went to a place it had never been. He had never seen a woman so exotic. Her hair long and shiny, her eyebrows strong, her lips generous and lipsticked red, her breasts full, her figure petite, her face a melange of culture he never knew existed.

"Speed, I'd like you to meet Billie. Billie, this is my good friend Speed."

She smiled and held her hand up to him from outside the truck.

"Thanks so much for helping us out, Daedelus told me how you left your job."

"Uh, nice to meet you, Billie."

Daedelus took her around to the passenger door, helped her up and squeezed in next to her. He held her suitcase in his arms. All at once Speed was conscious of his funky state, her presence next to him, her pleasant smell, his hand on the gearshift near her leg, her beauty. The battered truck jerked and rumbled through the parking lot and into a day transformed.

"Billie's a singer, Speed, she been on the road with a Cuban group."

"Oh, then you're Cuban?"

"Yes, I was born there but raised in the States. I live in New

York."

Daedelus didn't say anything but glanced at Billie, wondering.

Billie, excited, asked about Hollywood and the ocean, said she hadn't seen the Pacific, asked whether anyone knew any stars, where was Beverly Hills, the Chinese Theater, that kind of stuff. Daedelus responded to her, Speed was silent till just before he dropped them off at Daedelus's place.

"Billie, uh, are you performing here?"

"No, we're taking a break, the band and me. I wanted to come out to Los Angeles, see Hollywood, see my ... uh, see Daedelus. "

"Well, hope you like it here."

"Thanks for the ride. And nice to meet you." She smiled.

"Hey Speed, really, thanks for the ride. I owe you one. Hey, I got some records I want you to hear. Come on over tomorrow, anytime." Daedelus jumped out, held his hand up to Billie.

Speed was not thinking about Smith on the drive back to the yard. Nothing Smith might do could break the spell: the greenish, flashing, very live spell that came hopping like a bare-butted monkey through the small crack in his shell.

Running the Po'Boy Platter Shop by herself that evening, Ella Maya, after her fight with Virgil that morning, after he called her Ellie May, after he told her she was getting too high up wanting to call herself Maya and why didn't she just go back to Africa and run around naked with the natives. She listened for a while then let him have it good. *That fool got the nerve telling me what I can do, I don't need him, he's a fool, always looking at himself in the mirror, borrowing money, might as well be a real*

*musician for all that kinda play oh yeah and the women. Virgil ... all he wanna do is croon for the girls, get 'em worked up. I should just get rid of him ... 'cept he's good for business. Girls come in, hang out with Virgil, maybe they buy a record. Mambo.*

She smiled. Business. She straightened her display – Afro-Cuban. Word was out. A few years, she figured, mambo be a popular dance. The new craze. Already at the receptions, the fashion shows, between acts at the talent shows, if records were playing they played some mambo, her crowd. Only a matter of time. The bell attached to the front door tinkled.

"Hey Ella."

"Daedelus! And this must be Billie! Ooh she's beautiful Daedelus. Come in, come in."

Ella Maya put up the CLOSED sign and led them through the curtains, through the office, out the back and up the stairs, exposed to the starry sky, talking all the while.

"You must be hungry. I got something on, hope you like it. Oh but Billie, you must have had everything good to eat, back home. She's so beautiful Daedelus. You didn't tell me how beautiful she was."

The bluesman smiled, pleased with Ella Maya's flattery, mostly for Billie's sake. He wanted her to feel welcome. He went to put on a record, something she'd like, Sophisticated Lady? Machito? Billie Holiday? The Ellington finally. Nothing sad but soothing. Ella Maya and Billie were in the kitchen. It was warm there, the smell of simmering spices, Ellington on the phonograph, the breathtaking crescendo: "... into your lone-ly life romance came."

"Something to drink Billie?"

"Sip of rum, straight, if you have it."

"Coming up."

While stirring her pot Ella Maya asked, "What kind of food you like Billie? This is just a simple stew with short ribs but I spiced it up."

"Oh I eat most anything. You know, traveling so much, can't be picky."

"Where have you been? Daedelus tells me you're with a band."

"We're on a break now. But we've been doing shows up and down the east coast mostly. Harlem too. Wherever there's Cubans and other island people."

"Really! Your father and I, we've been trying to get the mambo going here. Do you know Machito?"

"Oh sure. We knew each other in Cuba. He's doing great in New York."

"You've been to Cuba?" Ella Maya looked up from her stirring.

"Oh yes. Didn't Daedelus tell you? I was born there." Daedelus winced just a little, thinking, *Who taught her to make things up like that?*

Ella Maya looked kindly at Billie. "I thought you were from Arkansas honey."

"Oh no. I'm from Cuba. My mother's Cuban. She went back to Cuba after I left home. I haven't seen her in years but she's doing well. She's a healer, mixes herbs and potions. People come to her for all sorts of problems. Cubans like their potions."

For a moment there was silence. Daedelus and Ella Maya were each doing a spin around Billie's story. Ella Maya came out of it first. "So do you miss Cuba?" she asked gently.

"Oh I miss it so much. It's warm, the air is soft and everyone is happy. Flowers all around you, everywhere you look. I love flowers. Harlem is fast, so tough. But they love our music.

That's the best thing about Cuba. There's music everywhere. Wonderful music."

She said it so sweetly that Daedelus and Ella Maya wanted to believe her, wanted to believe the vision.

"Daedelus, honey, why don't you put on some Machito?"

"Yeah, good idea."

He got up, glad for the change of scene, glad to interrupt the stories of Cuba from a girl who had never been there. How far was she going to take this Cuba thing?

The mambo came on. "Blen Blen Blen." A fast-moving mambo that got into her gut right away. From there it split toward head and groin, coming to rest at the back of the skull and the thigh bones. Tension is created along the limbs of the body. The center must move, the extremities will follow. Without hesitation Billie got up, "Come on Daddy. Let's dance. Like when I was a kid."

Billie got up and danced, Daedelus joined her feeling proud and confused and a little angry about her aggressiveness. She is good, though. Daedelus could imagine her looking good on stage, she'd win any of the local talent shows. Billie danced close to her father, shimmying her lithe body in perfect snake rhythm with her hips and legs and feet, closer and closer, touching now a little, now more, and Daedelus couldn't help thinking she was like a young supple Ella Maya. Now her arms above her head, now touching her hips, now touching Daedelus. The intensity of the dance: sexual, that's troubling enough for Daedelus, her hips, her hands, but then he saw something swirling in her eyes, something troubling. The music came to climax then stopped before a short timbale coda, Cuban style, and Billie continued her dance for a few seconds of breathless joy.

"Honey you sure can dance!"



Billie was slow to come out of her dance, as a merengue began, and she swayed to the slower tempo still lost but spent. No one spoke for a while.

Ella Maya broke the spell. "Come sit down here Billie, you too Daedelus, try some of this stew."

Daedelus smiled. "Smells wonderful honey."

Picking at her food, Billie said nothing, still entranced. Then she began singing "Canción del Recuerdo," one of Machito's sentimental ballads, full of feeling and loss, a love song in the Cuban style:

*Clavada tengo una espina ené l corazón*

*Grabado llevo en mi almaé l recuerdo de tu amor*

*De ese amor que se fue.... Y que nunca mas volvio*

...

Billie's voice went up a pitch, like a little girl's. "Remember Daddy, we'd walk along the Malecon, you and me and Mama, the air was always heavy, smelling of flowers – so many flowers in Cuba, flowers all over, I loved the flowers – and then we'd stop at one of the vendors for juice or plantanos, the sweet ones, the ones I like, and there was a band, always a band, really just a bunch of kids, and people would dance a little right there on the street, the wind blowing gentle and warm, the ocean right there next to us by the seawall and every so often a wave would crash against it and we'd feel the spray."

"Yeah honey." Daedelus's voice was gentle. "I remember." But he didn't remember, it was a sweet world, a warm world, a world unlike what she had fled, a world she had created to replace a nightmare.

"I'm so tired, Daddy."

Ella Maya jumped up, "Come on over here to the couch Billie. Lie down for a minute. That's right."

Still entranced, Billie made her way to the couch. Ella Maya covered her with a light blanket. In less than a minute the Mambo Girl, lying there like an exotic flower from a Caribbean island, was asleep.

"What's this Cuba business? You never told me she was in Cuba," Ella spoke gently.

"Oh she's just got a vivid imagination. Don't mean a thing." Daedelus frowned. "She'll get over it." But he was worried.

Later Ella Maya and Daedelus checked on Billie, who was sleeping peacefully. They fell into bed but Daedelus was keyed up. Without being asked, Ella Maya reached down and stroked his penis lightly, Daedelus moaned, then she pulled back the sheet, kissed, stroked for a while, then sucked and pumped it till it erupted, swallowed the sweetness, took a sip of water and fell together asleep. Daedelus a restless, spirit-filled sleep, despite the soporific blow job, despite the return of his daughter. Something was not right. Ella Maya a dreamful sleep, a place of knowledge where there exists a daughter who needs her.

She is Maya, mother of all things. A child has come to her. The child goes wandering dream roads looking for things that heal, things that bring back love. Maya is the mother of all lost things. A child has come looking for her.

About midnight Billie got up, tiptoed out to the back landing, slipped into her shoes, out the back door quietly, not pausing to notice the moon waning to half, high in the sky. At the foot of the stairs she stopped to pick a blossom from the big hibiscus. She put it in her hair like Billie Holiday. She walked

out to Crenshaw Blvd. looking for whatever a Cuba girl looks for her first night in L.A.: a taste of nightlife.

"Hey girl, where you going? You looking for something?"

"Come on with us, we'll show you where."

"Hey, we talking to you honey. You stuck up or what? Why don't you talk to us?"

"Hey are you Mexican or ... what?"

"Ah leave her alone. She's weird anyway."

"Oh sure she is. But she's smooth. Very smooth."

*La Pena que llevo dentro, dentro de mi pecho  
Me dices que te acuerde con todo el corazón  
De mi ya te has olvidado ... no sabes lo que has hecho  
Pero te acordaras ... al oir esta canción  
Pero te acordaras ... al oir esta canción*

And so it was that Billie walked down Crenshaw Blvd. late that Friday evening, singing Machito, a love ballad, approaching her rendezvous at Pauline's Pantry.

After picking up Daedelus and Billie at Union Station, Speed had returned the flatbed truck, avoided Smith, spent the evening drinking with Hershey at his place. Speed imagined the dancing and music at the clubs on Crenshaw. The home scene felt like darkness to him. The tension of generations, Yoshi and Mama, always fighting. At least he had a way out – cruising Crenshaw with Hershey: music, laughter, dancing. He would slump down in Hershey's Dodge as they cruised so no one could tell he was

Japanese. He could pretend he belonged, could pretend he was black, no one could tell.

Later that night cruising in the cream-colored Dodge Hershey saw a beautiful green-dressed woman on the boulevard.

"Wow, look at that one, she's beautiful. She doesn't look like she's working, dressed way too nice." Speed immediately looked up.

"Where you looking?"

"Over there going into that alley where the club is."

"Hey, I know her! That's the one staying with Daedelus. Billie."

"What are you talking about?"

"We picked her up at Union Station. Hey, pull over, I want to talk to her."

"Are you crazy?"

"C'mon Hersh, stop the car. I need to talk to her."

"I'm not letting you go in that place alone."

"Do what you want, I gotta get out."

"Jeez Speed. You're crazy."

## THE MAMBO PARTY

Perez Prado, Pupi Campo, Tito Puente, Chano Pozo, the great Machito – coming up from the islands of the Caribbean, they were drawn to the sounds of America, the sounds of jazz, of New York, of Ellington and Calloway and Hampton and Basie, the music of suffering and joy, and so they followed the footsteps of Machito, who first blended his Cuban folk melodies with African rhythms and American big band arrangements. The Afro-Cuban sounds took hold in New York and floated west on currents of jazz, part of the African American diaspora of the 30s and 40s, during which the cities of the North and Midwest and West swelled with Southern blacks, sensing in the prewar rush to arms their chance to break away, to find something less choking than the dirt of the South, the blunt poverty, the lack of mercy. In California they joined the Okies, the Asians, the Mexicans and anyone else who needed a new place. In California they found the end of the continent and the beginning of possibility, the last chance at freedom and the first taste of freedom. Los Angeles became a basin overflowing with newcomers, they filled the brushland between downtown and the ocean, the vast flats to the south, on Slauson, Vermont, La Brea, Pico, Western, Sawtelle and Crenshaw. Crenshaw was an older area with pockets of fancy homes – above Washington there were estates – but for the most part it reflected the pattern of the flats: an overlay of modest single family dwellings, bungalow courts, second floor walkups, a few large apartment buildings and hotels on the main streets. It was not hip like Harlem, or even Chicago or Kansas City; it was shifting and thrown together, mixing sunshine with music and

food and sex and fighting, friendship and betrayal, a city of refugees and conquerors, gypsies and desperados, temporary diggings for the spirit quest. It held its inhabitants loosely, and they stood restless, ready to flee, as though there was further west they could go.

## PAULINE'S PANTRY

Outfitted head to toe in white: white fringed cowgirl skirt and white fringed shirt, big white stetson hat, white vest, white cowboy boots, shiny as white patent leather. Only a red bandanna tied around her neck stood bold in contrast to the white outfit and her walnut skin. With her hair glossed and tied back in a bun under the big stetson she was an imposing figure, a woman of outsize dimensions and regal air, the queen of the establishment. Standing in the shadows at the back of the club the Queen surveyed her realm: The jazz combo swinging a jump groove with a light touch, the patrons rocking themselves all the way out of their ordinary hard lives, the liquor flowing, the hustlers hustling – all in all a good night, she reflected as she smiled inwardly.

She nodded to a stumpy man standing by the stage. He was smiling broadly, his eyes bright as cymbals, wearing a light chocolate suit that matched his skin, shiny two-toned patent leather shoes, skinny tie like a Harlem hipster. His hair slicked back in the style of the day à la Cab Calloway, though his stomach pooched comfortably. He caught the eye of the drummer as the band went to the turnaround and quickly took it out. Stepping onto the bandstand as the dancers cleared the floor he stood there a moment, his short arms outstretched, confident, smiling. He waited a beat before beginning:

"My my my, looks like everybody ready to have a *good* time. Eagle flies on Friday! Chuckie Bones and his boys, ladies and gentlemens, let's hear it for the band – Familyman on tenor sax, Brucie on the ivories, Charles M. on the double bass (Don't

call him Charlie) and Chuckie Bones on traps. The soulful and sophisticated sounds of the Chuckie Bones Four, management by our own Daedelus Verrette. Daedelus expects great things from these boys. We are confident their career will flourish in his capable hands. Daedelus, you out there? Daedelus! You here tonight? No?

"We pride ourselves on the hippest between-acts music from our record collection, compliments of Ella's Po'Boy Platter Shop – make sure you check out the latest mambo platters from New York, Ella treat you right. Tell her you heard it here and she'll give you 10%." He turned aside to take a fast swallow of whiskey from his pocket flask, swiveled back to the crowd with a big smile.

"They call me the Preacherman – some folks say I like to talk – some folks say I talk *way* too much heh heh. We got quite a show in store. Sit back, relax, have yourself another drink, make it double, order something hot from the kitchen. What y'all eating there? Our Pauline knows her home cookin', smother chicken, collard greens, all the down home specialties ... *and* barbecue. You can see I gone through plenty." Preacherman patted his ample stomach and smiled. "So go on back, Ivan's working his magic. Come out here Ivan, take a bow. Ain't he handsome, ladies? Try some of his sweet potato pie. Miss Pauline had to send all the way back to N'Orleans to find Ivan, ain't that right Pauline? Pauline, you out there? I know you're in the house." Preacherman held his hand to his brow, searched the crowd and pointed to the back.

"There she is, back in the shadows. Bring your magnificent self out here, folks want to see you. Take a bow, Miss Pauline, that's right. Our Pauline's been charming us year after year, singing the old favorites, weaving her magic on those 88s ... there



she goes, moving on to the next table – she gonna talk to *all* of you before the night's over – holding forth like a grand Lady. Ain't she outdone herself with her outfit tonight? [*yells*] She calls that her Western mo-day. Ain't she the most! With her well-known flair, her large appetite for the finer things, her style, her grace, her *savoir faire* – when the moon is full – and it's full every night here – she'll transport you to your Street of Dreams. If you been with us for a long time you might remember those old songs. [*applause and yells*] That's right ... we got witness.

"But times are changing Ladies and Gentlemens. People want to jump 'n jive, have a *good* time, want to hear the latest sounds coming out of Harlem and Kansas City, New Orleans and Chicago, they want to cut loose. Young and old, veteran and tyro, all the artists among us – and we got lots of talent – everybody want to shine. So our Pauline has generously opened her stage to entertainment on the *grand* scale – combos, trios, duos, quartets, comedy acts, vaudevilles, talent shows, dance revues, even the occasional drama – whatever she thinks her public would enjoy. She has proved herself a shrewd judge of talent, and you're about to see one of her most talented." Preacherman paused as if to compose himself. He started his introduction speaking easy and relaxed, building to the sendoff.

"We at Pauline's never tire of being in on the ground floor of a career destined to shoot all the way to the stars. When this young man takes the stage there's always a few of our young ladies who agree wholeheartedly, they can't restrain their squeals and shouts, no one blames them." He pauses and smiles. "We're all here for a good time, that's the truth. One look at this young man – for the ladies of course – his broad shoulders, his bedroom eyes, his smooth cocoa skin ... and the romance begins.

"So at this time Ladies and Gentlemens, we'd like to

introduce to you ... a singer and personality who has entertained us many a time on this very stage, a young man you'll be hearing about on the national scene, whose generous touch [*squeal*] with standards and popular songs has endeared him to all, but especially to the ladies [*yell*], for whom he has a particular *panache*, as the French put it. Ladies and Gentlemens, let's put our hands together for a local boy, the smooth, the debonair, our own ... Virgil Fulsom."

The combo slides easily into the opening strains of "Stardust," one of the top hits of the day, while Virgil glides up to the stage, accepts the mike as though he owned it, slow and calm, and likewise beams as dazzling a smile as any of them's seen, and after a soft- but deep-voiced "Thank you," begins, as Preacherman stepping off the stage interjects a commentary to the opening verse:

"Sometimes I wonder why I spend the lonely night...." *Yes, Ladies and Gentlemens, "... dreaming of a song ..." isn't he fine? "The melody haunts my reverie...." Hold on ladies, there's enough for all. "And I am once again with you...." You know who you are, "when our love was new, and each kiss an inspiration...." It doesn't get any finer than this ladies "... but that was long ago; now my consolation is in the stardust of a song ..." here on the street of dreams.*

Pauline stands to the side in the reflected light of the stage, not in the spotlight but never far from it, surveying her domain like a Lionness, her generous bulk, her commanding presence – she makes a bold statement standing there in her white cowgirl outfit – making sure everyone has a good time at Pauline's Pantry. When Virgil's up there she's got her eyes on the women. He's her drawing card – even when he's not singing he's around to help out most nights, particularly weekends, in case she needs his presence

– but she's seen women make trouble when Virgil's involved, all kinds of trouble – including screeching, hair-pulling fights on stage. She knows what's going on, she knows when to give a little and when to pull the chain. Pauline's wary eyes scan the behavior of her flock – especially the females close up by the stage.

So it is that our Pauline doesn't notice at first the young and *extremely* fine milk and silk chocolate woman who comes walking through the fake red leather doors with two ... what kind of guys are they? Chinese? They sit down real quiet in the very back. But our Virgil *he* notices. When it comes to women Virgil is like a vibrating string, tuned up and ready to make music. And here *she* walks in, the most beautiful of the beautiful in her shimmering green, figure hugging dress. His bedroom eyes open wide at the sight of her and he starts to vibrating at a high pitch, and singing to the back of the room where the milk chocolate beauty sits with her Orientals. Our Pauline, hearing the change in his voice, her eyes widen a moment then narrow just, like a Lionness, and sees the strange trio. Wouldn't you know it but the exotic trio has come in *just* at that moment in his act where Virgil steps off the stage into and among the young ladies.

The brazen ones are seated at the front hoping to be chosen. They all know this part of his act. It's a tradition, a ritual that goes like this: Virgil, singing, smiling, touching, in tantalizing stops and starts, all grace and passion and masculine beauty, he'll tease those poor girls, singing first to one prospect then another, dashing and building their castles, their hopes rising and falling fast like their hearts till one is chosen finally and he takes her, trembling of hand, fluttering of heart, and he leads her to the center of the small dance floor where in the flood of a single spotlight a straight-back chair – her throne – waits for her, and he

sets her down, she the center of attention and envy of her girlfriends and girl enemies, and there he kneels singing to only her and smiling for only her, his special one, his queen, and touches her lightly, and he even, if the signals are right, and they *always* are, he kisses her, and all but dedicates his lonely life to her while she ... well, some of 'em scream and squeal, some nearly swoon and we can only imagine what sort of ecstasy they are feeling and some just smile, knowingly ... and that's how it goes, this charade, this theater, this play within a play.

So he steps out among the girls, making his promenade through the hopefuls up front and then – Pauline of course had seen it coming from far off but was helpless to act in the otherworld of the spotlight – waltzes right by them all the way back into the shadows where the strange trio sits, the beautiful vision in her stunning green outfit (but where did she get it? not any shop on Crenshaw, so enhancing her aura of mystery). *Whatever* she's got, our Virgil is drawn like a bear to honey.

Yes it is something beautiful to watch her, reluctant at first, needing to be pulled to the dance floor by her persistent brown beau to the straight-back chair in the spotlight, and the poor Orientals frozen like they were under a spell. He gets her to stand, singing all the while, smiling his most dazzling smile, and leads his reluctant queen to the spotlight. There she sits on her straight-back throne, a faded hibiscus in her hair, like Billie Holiday, a look of fatigue about her, eyes wary, agitated, like a wild animal who has seen too many hunters. Her pouty lips shine in the stage light. And poor Virgil, this time the tables are turned, he's smitten as never before, working hard to get *some* sort of reaction, trying every *bit* of magic he has learned, singing to her, flashing his smile for her and only her, touching her, but her magic is strong. Everyone is fascinated but no one is pleased

with the scene, not really, not the other women who resent the strange interloper, and especially not Pauline, who sees her Virgil diminished by ... what is it, could it be? dare we say the word? that feeling when someone special comes into your life and changes you forever.... Finally the song is over, "Stardust" is fading and our Virgil is on his knees ready to make his move to kiss her – that always brings down the house – but no, the girl will have none of that: hearing the end of the song she stands and just up and walks back by herself, haughty proud like a queen, shimmering and green and chocolate, joins her Oriental guards. Virgil isn't even granted the final tradition where he leads her back to her table, he just goes back to the record player holding onto his pride, the club buzzing with the shattered ending of the ritual and ain't this a night to be remembered in the long and swinging history of Pauline's Pantry!

So it is that our boy Virgil, feeling a little ragged, a little rough, a little beat up, thinks he'll pick out something powerful to accompany the drama of the night, to give voice to his manhood, just a little frayed, something that will show this creature how truly hip he is, a man who can do more than just croon, more than just a lover, a man of the world, a man among men, a man who has been around, the type of man who can impress a lost swan, a true hipster. He puts on Machito and his Afro-Cubans: "Blen Blen Blen," a fast mambo, the latest, the hippest, the most, straight from New York City.

Immediately our girl comes to life, as though she was sleeping and the music has wakened her, incited her in her little kingdom, and she stands and now she's pulling at one of the poor Orientals, he looks game for it but what else can he do? She grabs him and pulls him up to the dance floor where the chair still stands and there the Oriental moves awkwardly to the fast Latin

beat as best he can while she launches into the most amazing mambo, beginning with a shuffle and basic, her arms a shapely light brown, moving smooth, no fanciness, her hips and shoulders stroking through the beat, like she was swimming, like she was floating, like she was somewhere else not even Pauline's but where? growing to a full-out tidal wave, her arms waving swinging flaying completely from drums and horns and her hair and her eyes and her hips and her dress and it's almost like she is dancing alone, solo, and the Oriental might as well been dancing alone, and him looking at her like she was possessed by the gods, while he makes a play at the dance, moving his feet gamely to mambo but not transforming it like his queen not even close. And look now she's got her belly up close to him and her arms up in the air and he looks at once proud and terrified and helpless, the electricity of it, helpless in her aura. Suddenly the music stops, the Mambo Girl keeps dancing but her partner looking relieved puts his arm around her tiny waist and pulls her real gentle-like, back to the shadow kingdom with the other sentinel, and turns back to stone while she sits there aquiver and the room buzzes.

Of course Our Boy Virgil can't let this lay and who knows what's on his mind but he puts on some Billie Holiday, "I Cover the Waterfront," slow and hip, and everyone watches him make his move but before he can gather himself to cruise back to the shadow kingdom and plead his case for the hand of the exotic Pretender, up jumps the very Mambo Girl herself and goes *right* up to him and speaks, her first words all sultry and yes a little haughty like you might expect of a queen: "Put that Machito back will you honey." Says Virgil, all deep-voiced and romantic: "Oh no you don't want to hear that. Let's slow it down, let me talk to you, let's go over here" and he puts his arm around her lovely slim waist like he's going to slow dance but she's ready for

him, pushes him off but real nice and definite. Then with tension in her voice but *real* steady-like she says: "No. I want to hear Machito." But Our Boy didn't crown himself Prince of the Pantry from being timid, at least not in his little slice of town, so he starts in and steps forward, "C'mon honey ..." but gets no further, having crossed some kind of unseen line on the dancefloor, and she starts commanding him, loud and imperial-like: "I want to hear Machito, I *got* to hear Machito, put on that Machito," and she starts waving her shapely arms around and getting *more* agitated, leaning forward with her slim neck and chin thrust out, her mood changing fast as a gulf coast hurricane. Frustrated from the first, Our Boy Virgil grabs at her, gets her by the wrist and holds tight and yessir that does it. As soon as he grabs her she goes wild, twisting around in his grasp and she yells at the top of her queenly voice: "DON'T YOU TOUCH ME YOU BIG BLACK GORILLA"!

The room is stunned; even Pauline, wading through the onlookers to take charge of the spectacle unfolding in front of her, her cowgirl fringes swaying as she walks through the spotlight, even Pauline is jolted by the dainty pretender's vehemence, she who would dare steal the night from Virgil and embarrass the true Queen of the Pantry, the rightful Queen. But Our Boy Virgil is in a worse way – you know how some nights it don't pay to get up outta bed. Well this was one such for Our Boy, he started badly that afternoon arguing with Ella, his employer at the Platter Shop, and now this crazy Mambo Girl demolishes his act, humiliates him in front of his audience, and, adding injury to insult, seems to be callous to his charm. So it goes that in the instant separating the puffed up finery of his cool from the bruise of her insult, an ancient thing rushes in, and Virgil slaps her, not hard but plenty stinging, like slapping an already angry hive from which you have

*stolen* honey, and, as they say in the biz, well it brought the house down.

Up jumps the Orientals – these boys are fast – and one of them, the dancing fool, he grabs the Mambo Girl, who is all over Virgil kicking and screaming, and of course Our Boy Virgil, who is not known for his smarts, rears back as though to punch the Oriental, half his weight and a foot shorter, when his partner the silent one sneaks in behind him and chops a mean uppercut to Our Boy's kidney. On his way to being doubled over Virgil wings the dancing one in the face with his followthrough. As she's being practically *carried* off – these boys are stronger than they look – our Mambo Girl wakes up and starts cussing poor Virgil in Spanish, at least it sounds like Spanish but it *was* cussing, no mistaking that, and she grabs a glass off a table and throws it at him as she's being carried off, and last we seen of them they was out the door. A few of the boys start up but Pauline, bless her practical heart, says "Hold on, let 'em go," and that's that.

Oh Virgil carried on and stirred up his pals and all that kind of puffing and blowing but our Pauline, the way she figures is, you just witnessed as fine a spectacle as money can't buy, no one got hurt, just slapped around a little bit, you saw dancing hot enough to come from Cuba itself, you saw a comedy at Virgil's expense, him trying to be sentimental, which *is* the funniest, you saw Oriental guys trying to dance and fight and do everything we never thought they could do, and when was the last time you saw *that* in a black club on Crenshaw? And isn't that why everyone comes to the Pantry in the first place: see a little action, have a little harmless fun, be in on the scene? Pauline knows how to do it better than any hostess around.

All the same our Pauline wasn't born in the radish patch.



After the excitement died down and Virgil's pals had gone off talking jive to the fine ladies of the Pantry, our Pauline takes Virgil aside for a little advice.

"Best you stay away from that one." She said that last with concern. Virgil was her main draw on Friday, and business is business. And even if he is brimming with careless swagger she'd gotten used to his puffed up self.

"What, that bitch? Sheeit, she ain't nothin'."

Virgil went on protesting and man-talking though no one was listening. She looked at Virgil: the once suave, the would-be headliner, reduced to a thug. She shook her head and felt a little sorry for him and a little resentful toward the mambo girl.

At that moment a strange figure shimmered half-real next to her, a figure of the imagination, cloaked and swirling of cigar smoke, long nose poking out from under the brim of a pork pie hat, cigar sticking sideways from the corner of his mouth, he raised his head and grinned, his eyes like fierce slashes beneath folds of skin. If he was real he would have been a hipster from Hell. He whispered into Pauline's ear. It was a Trickster's message. Her thoughts followed like this: *Yeah. Got to find out who she is. She can't be allowed to run wild and free in this town. No one make a scene like that at my place without me getting a taste. Either you're friend or you're enemy, ain't no in-between. I'm the one done scratched up this place, Virgil don't know, him being puffed up like a man, but I know. Black cat come tiptoeing into your house you got to decide real quick whether to pet it or shoot it in the eye.... And what the hell she doin' with Chinamens anyway?*

Being a jokester and opportunist, Preacherman broke out in a

big smile as he hopped back onstage, talking fast and hip:

"Them Chinamens runnin' now, carryin' off their Mambo Girl, groovin' 'n scattin' 'n boppin' down Crenshaw, making good their getaway – thanks to our Hostess, she whose light shines bright on all hipness, she who let 'em scam. They done got lucky tonight. We don't need trouble here. We had our laughs. You *fine* Ladies and Gentlemens got all dressed up and come out expectin' a *show*. [snare hits] That you Bones? Chuckie Bones on traps Ladies and Gentlemens, our master of time. He swings hard, hidin' out behind his cymbals, don't be fooled by his size now, stand up and let the folks see you Chuckie."

A short wiry man, dark-skinned, stands for a moment, grinning like a fool. "See him grinnin' back there... I heard you laughin' Bones, when they was slappin' each other like fools, runnin' round, talkin' jive, plain acting crazy. 'Cept for Virgil, he ain't laughin', hahaahhhhhh. That was a real gone scene, wasn't it now? Like vaudeville or a old time minstrel show. 'Stead a black folks playin' white folks playin' black folks actin' like fools we got the yellow man mixed up in there somehow. [snare hit] Mr. Bones! You *ever* seen a Chinaman in the Pantry?" The crowd was hooting and hollering. Chuckie Bones just sat there behind his cymbals and grinned.

Outside, the slash-eyed hustlers ran their Mambo Girl to the car, gunned the motor and disappeared into the night – a cream-colored Dodge – under cover of the moon running sweet and shining like a barlamp, liquid and fat and dreamy. The one who punched Virgil in the kidney, the one called Hershey, drives. The dancing fool, the one called Speed, he's in the passenger seat, the Mambo Girl's in back singing some Spanish, "*Pero te acordaras ... al oír esta canción. Pero te acordaras ... al oír esta canción.*"

"That was the stupidest thing I ever did! We coulda got

killed, you coulda got us both killed, who is that girl anyway? how'd you get mixed up with her? Man, she nearly got us both killed."

"God I'm sorry Hersh, you saved my ass back there, thanks for backin' me up."

"What's this all about?"

"I had no idea she was so crazy."

"How's your face, man?"

"It's nothing."

"Yeah, well you owe me a big one for all this."

The dancer just grinned like he had a *real* live time, like young love while it's still sweet. That little Mambo Girl is burning in his gut like a spicy meal on a hot night, still see the shock on his face watching her smooth and passionate moves to the mambo groove, him doing the best he can to keep with her but she's way more than he can handle, till they came to the end of the song and she was dancing real close to him, belly to belly ... matching steps for a few seconds of pure mambo, best he could do it anyway ... till he started grinning like a monkey. The little Oriental couldn't help himself.

They made a strange picture entering Hershey's house, the dancer with his nose bloodied carrying a sleeping Mambo Girl, dressed in her uptown rags, brilliant green. He laid her down on a couch while Hershey went to wake up his wife Akemi and smooth things over.

"No one was home at Daedelus's so we brought her here."

Akemi noticed Speed's bloody nose. "My God Speed what happened to you?"

"It's nothing."

Hershey said, "Nothing! Sure it's nothing. He only got in a fight with a big colored guy in a club down on Crenshaw."

"What were you fighting about?" Akemi asked.

They all just looked at the Mambo Girl.

"Who is she?"

"Her name's Billie. She's Daedelus's friend, singer in a band."

"She's beautiful." The beauty that outshines race, the race of skin, of hair, of eyes, the race that sees ourselves in the mirror and loves our own image better than all others because the insult of living has made us stingy in our seeing.

"Yeah."

"Why did you bring her here?"

"She was out on the town by herself and got herself in a little trouble. She just needs a place for tonight." A place she can lay low till the waters float her up to the light of day.

"Okay. I'll get a blanket."

## MAMA

She was bent from the years on the farm, picking grapes to be sun dried into raisins. Now the family had moved to the city where life was confusing and where there was no pride in picking grapes as fast as a man.

She was yelling up the stairs.

"I know you were out late last night, like all those other nights. I heard the dogs barking, wan wan wan, wake up the neighbors, what do you think, no one hears?" *My life is suffering. To raise a son, impossible. If we were in Japan I could do it right. Why did we leave?*

Morning. Speed was in the twilight of a confusing dream in which he pursued a beautiful dancing girl dressed in green. A gigantic pelican swooped down and scooped her up in its beak. A large black man grabbed at the pelican's feet and was lifted into the air, while the girl dropped a bead necklace that Speed caught. Green beads. Green dress. He was on a beach.

"Shigema, you've slept enough. Get up."

*O my gosh*, thought Speed. *Billie. Last night. Dancing at the club. Left her at Hershey and Akemi's. Was it a dream?* He pulled on his pants and ran to the phone downstairs, listened to it ring eight times. No answer at Hershey's. His shoes and shirt. Ran down the block to Daedelus's house.

"Boy always running out the house."

She sat down slowly, took a scoop of gen-mai-cha, dumped it into the teapot and poured in the steaming water. The sound of

heat. Rounded, the sound and perfect. Puhtuhphupuhppth:

Cha-no-yu, she mused. Perfect tea:

*No one here knows that kind of thing. No refinement in this country. How can I find peace? Everyone rushing, don't respect parents. Only Yamashita-san has a respectful son. Ah but he's an idiot. Son and father. Father is also idiot, worse idiot. Goes to Japan meetings, talks Japan all the time. An old idiot. Still doesn't realize he's here. We're all here, this is home now. A home where they don't want us.*

She poured tea into a cup, held her hands around it, not picking it up, warmth.

*On one occasion of the Emperor's birthday, long ago in the old country, we visited the temple to pay respect. The Guardians in front, the huge painted statues with bulging muscles and powerful spirit, made of wood. Their faces were twisted into grotesque expressions, as though they were enduring the tortures of hell. Tengu. I did not want to go into the temple. I was afraid. I was a young girl at the time. We were all young. The Meiji Emperor was only 15 when he ascended the Chrysanthemum Throne.*

She looked at her grandson and smiled:

*The spirit of the Buddha is present in all creatures and all things. But some creatures and some things can be harmful. There is evil. We need our allies, things and creatures who can stand in for us against the evil, and they must be equal to the evil in all ways except in their hearts. There they must be pure.*

*Who will stand for us against the evil, who is equal to the evil in all ways yet pure of heart? It must be someone or something that has endured the agony of hell, and come away without bitter demeanor or need for revenge, but purified instead by the fire. Fire of hell. Let them be our servants, our warriors,*

*commanded by one who is pure of heart. Always there is the yin and the yang of good and evil, always there is the need for fierceness, blood and fire, and equally there is the need for purity of heart. Only a drop of such purity is enough to balance a bucket of blood.*

*The Emperor is the drop of purity, but he is so far away. Can one drop of his blood purify the whole bucket of America? Who will stand for us, the Japanese race, who will stand for us stranded here? We are cut off from our power and our purpose. Our children's names are alien. They have taken new names. They have taken new names and new ways. They worship the gods of the new land. They worship the song and the dance of the new land. They worship the people of the new land. Yet we are still here. The gods have permitted this. But who will stand up for us? Evil will visit our race, our small outpost, our eddy backwater. Who will stand for us? Will the village elders stand for us, will they go unafraid into the wilderness for us and bring back a savage they can unleash against the evil?*

*The toddler daubed his face with oatmeal, then rubbed his head with it.*

*Their god allowed himself to be killed. What kind of ascendancy is that? Power of the powerless? Because their god has no power he prevails? We have no power. Yet we do not prevail. It makes no sense. Where is our Temple Guardian to protect us, shield us from their might? Their women and their music and their men and their dance, all these things take us from the Path. And their god who did the utmost devilment, to let himself be killed. So clever. Him most of all.*

*Poor Shigema. He is in the grip of their magic.*

*The cup of tea released vapor, spirit.*

*The family shrine. Butsudan. Light the incense. Strike the*

*bell-like bowl. Sound. Tangerines. Namu Amida Butsu. Namu Amida Butsu. Pray. Attachment is suffering. Sound. Namu Amida Butsu. Bow. Namu Amida Butsu. Photos of the departed. No smiles. Tangerines. Open the drawer. Thank you for your service that I shall learn from. Pick up the piece of paper. Thank you for your happiness that I shall remember always. Unfold the paper. My fancy kimono I leave to my daughter-in-law. My carving of Buddha from Nara I leave to my first son. My framed photograph of the Torii at Miyajima I leave to my second son. This \$100 bill is to be divided up among my grandchildren. Fold the piece of paper. Close the drawer. Sound. Bow. Clap. Tangerine. Photos of the departed. Close the shrine.*

*She looked into the cup, ready for sipping.*

*What is more yielding than water? Water takes the shape of the pitcher, pour it into a cup and it takes the shape of the cup. But when it runs downhill it wears into the hard rock, and the rock cannot withstand the yielding water. The strong are overcome by the weak, pride by surrender, rock by water. Is that how we are?*

*She took the cup, remembering to smell.*

*Not to use the sword, but to be the sword – pure, serene, still – to be immovable. How can I be immovable? How can I find my way in this life? In this country? How can I be the sword, or even the flower? And how can I extinguish the flame of passion when my old age brings such grief – my son has been blinded by their demons?*

*She drank the greenish tea.*

*Long life. Already I have lived too long. Old Emperor dies, I leave Japan. Now I have sons, my life should be joyful, grandsons. No daughter to teach, yes there's Yoshi but she .... Ah well, Yoshi is strong. She can carry the family. She does not*



*have to take care of me. It is better that she works in an office. Better that I am alone. I am ready to die.*

The toddler was in his high chair, smearing oatmeal. She took off his bib, wiped him off, and took him outside. She set him down in the dirt beside the scrawny lemon tree. *Chanduro. What a funny name. Good boy. What's wrong with a Japanese name? Only a few lemons. Getting too cold. Pale yellow skin. Cold. Like the pale sun. Take one.*

She takes a red-orange persimmon from a tree by a wall beside a road in Japan. She is a girl. She has just visited the temple. She understands the Temple Guardians, their ferocity, knows they are friends, they are allies. Still, she fears them. They are unlike the actors in the puppet plays, those that play demons: these she knows are men. The Temple Guardians frighten her. They are carved from wood yet they frighten her. It was the gift of the old carvers to endow their objects with spirit, feral beauty shining through, barely restrained by their element wood. They still live. The wall beside the road goes nowhere, a relic; the tree is gone too. *The Temple has burned. But the demons still live. They live as long as their people live.*

The Tengu in particular, a great and ancient demon, a proud demon, his form perfectly imbued with terror by the old artisans, for centuries he stood there, his face grimacing, his eyes bulging, his hair wild like fire, intimidating the pilgrims who passed through the Temple of Kannon. A great and ancient demon who guards the newborn and about to be born. But the demon itself was not in the wood. He is a shadowy thing, a thing of human longing.

That evening Mama was sitting on the broken down front porch. She had taken an old futon cover and spread it on an old chair, partly for comfort and partly to hide the ragged couch.

Sitting next to her like a shimmering field of energy, wearing a pork pie hat and smoking a cigar, a fullblown hipster, a Trickster, a jazzman, a scatman. Even though he never heard of vaudeville and Groucho Marx and cartoons and Duke Ellington and mambo dancing and Crenshaw Blvd. and Machito and Hollywood he appeared that way anyway, shadowy and caustic. He turned to Mama and smiled at her as she watched Billie and Daedelus come out to their porch in the dusk. She stared at them till they waved at her, then she turned away.

*That black woman with her large earrings, her green dress, her wild ways – she reminds me of a Temple Guardian. She is young but she is black like a demon. Her hair is wild like she thrashes around at night. Yoshi must watch out for her, she must keep her children away from her, that black woman is an evil influence. She's no Guardian. And Daedelus too. What is she to him anyway? She looks like his daughter. Maybe they're both demons, maybe they conspire to do evil. I must watch her. Shigema must stay away from her. Spirits are always looking for a body to play in.*

## TEACHER OF MUSIC

Tall, nearly gaunt Daedelus Verrette wielded the hose from his front porch. The hose end was damaged, and as he squeezed his thumb over the opening to send a stream, a thin side stream wet the front of his pants. He adjusted his grip, a slight grin appeared and turned slowly into a full-blown smile and a barely-mouthed "shit." Speed was just then walking up.

"Hey Daedelus, you heard from Billie? She was at Hershey's place last night. You weren't home and ..."

"Hey Speed, it's alright. She's okay, said she'd be home later. She's hanging out with Akemi. Come on over here. I want to play some records for you."

Speed smiled. Everything was okay. "Hey man, you look like you peed your pants." Daedelus just grinned and motioned Speed up to the porch.

Speed heard a jump groove coming from the living room but couldn't identify the group. He was exposed to the popular bands, the Dorsey brothers, Paul Whiteman, Harry James, Benny Goodman and of course Glenn Miller; he knew little about the great black bands, Ellington and Hampton and Henderson – even Benny Goodman had dropped from his consciousness now that he was playing with black players and out of the mainstream. He knew nothing about the young beboppers. But he knew Daedelus used to play.

"Why do you play this fast stuff man, I can't hardly follow it this early in the morning."

Daedelus grinned. "Got to get the blood flowing, you know, the beat, straight ahead four." He emphasized each last word,

"flowing," "beat," "four." Speed loved the way Daedelus talked, talked with him whenever he got a chance, ever since they moved to Victoria Ave.

"Later I get into the slow stuff, sometimes I go way back, you know what I mean, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, I've played that stuff for you ..."

"Yeah. I don't dig all that old stuff."

"You mean like the blues? I know what you mean, my own kid won't listen to that, gives me a hard time about it. But afternoons I like it, takes me back. It's where I come from. It's where everything comes from, all the race music. Except this here, something special I want to play for you. Heard you shook up the Pantry last night." Daedelus grinned.

Speed had never heard Daedelus talk about a child – it hadn't hit him yet that Billie was his daughter – but he let it go figuring like many things about his neighbor there must be some explanation. Speed followed him into the house. The curtains were pulled nearly shut, a pencil of light lay across the old phonograph:

*Where does he get all these records, bands I never heard of, race records he calls them. Record of race. Records of the race of cars, pistons sucking air. Piss-tins. Records of the Japanese race. Mama Papa go over listen to Japan records at Yamashitas, can't make them out myself, sounds like yodeling, some poor Japanese guy lost his gal, lost his soul, lost everything. Someone always losing his gal. Even the old black stuff that Daedelus plays is easier to take than that. At least it's in English.*

"Hey Speed, listen to this."

Daedelus carefully slipped a record from its jacket. A 78, acetate, black. The speakers hissed and popped, the signal to listen. The music starts. A lead-in riff on, what is it? a snare

drum? It was the same Machito he heard at the Pantry last night, but he was so taken with Billie and the scene was so crazy and scary the music never hit him, just the dancing, Billie's dancing. In the quiet of Daedelus's living room Machito mambos like a tropical fever streaming into his blood, a beat he can barely follow, a big band sound like nothing he's ever heard, curling the beat over and over in lopsided curlicues, carrying a heavy load of rhythm, playing by strange rules, alien rules, and cycling around again, strange as ever, but somehow right, and how do they make it so right? He's mesmerized, puzzled, can't quite grab hold of it. It's exciting, disorienting. It's over before it began.

"What the hell was that? Is this what they were playing at the Pantry?"

Daedelus had a huge grin on his face. "Yeah. It's Cuban music. Machito and his big band. Machito and his Afro-Cubans. Don't hear too much of this around here. Yeah, that's what they play over at the Pantry. What you think?"

"I don't know. It's great, it's ... let's hear it again."

So they played Machito "till the grooves wore out" as Daedelus put it. He was pleased that Speed was open to it, more than open. They played all the mambo Daedelus had, a small collection in Los Angeles in 1941, then played it again. Speed heard the Spanish faintly, so overwhelming was the rhythm. He knew about Mexicans, greasers they called them, pachucos, near downtown, eastward to Boyle Heights, but he didn't have any reason to hang out over there except to go to dances put on by Japanese churches, Christian and Buddhist. He was sure he'd never heard this music.

"I think you're right. This is what they were playing the other night."

"This is Afro-Cuban, that's what they call it. Island music,

from the Caribbean. It don't come here direct, we get it from Harlem ... the hipsters ... you know, jazz guys."

He paused. Shaft of light. Teacher of music.

"See Speed, the thing about the mambo, you got a whole band put together around the drum. They *all* playing the drum. Even the horns, they swing with the drums. The whole band swingin' with the drum. Know what I mean? It's a powerful thing. And it gives you power. That's why they took them away."

"You mean the drums? they took the drums away?"

"In the slave days. A slave master don't want nobody playing drums. You play drums and everybody begin to feel better. Everyone get together. Africans had that kind of thing forever, that kind of drumming. It's powerful, like a religion. You let 'em play drums like that and by and by they don't much feel like being chained. But in Cuba they always played the drums, even in secret."

Speed looked up. "They played in secret?"

"Yeah, that's right. They'd go off in the hills and play the drums. Kep' it alive. It was their religion. They still practice it. They play the drums and dance and let the spirits in. They call 'em Orishas. Spirits of the dance, sort of. They dance and the spirit gets inside 'em."

"Were they evil spirits?"

"Not really. They were protectors. The most powerful one was a trickster. He's a kind of monkey god, 'cause monkeys are always playing tricks. Every culture has that kind of thing. The spirit that plays rough. But for your own good. We've lost a lot of that spirit ... when they took the drums away from the slaves, or killed anyone who played 'em. To get rid of the African religion. So that's how come we got the blues ... that's a little

different kind of spirit ... don't need drums to play the blues ... don't need nothing but the blues. And jazz come from that. That's the music we dance to. That's how we get by. That's how we get our feelings out of us. Blues, jazz, mambo. It's big for us, the music. Cubans are like that too. When Machito and his buddies heard our music they liked it right away. Then they went and took the drums and laid the horns over top of it and Boom, there you got it. So it's jazz and African and Cuban, all mixed up like gumbo. It's powerful like that, the horns riffing, the drums underneath. No one ever thought of that before."

The needle hissed in the center groove. He took off the arm and carefully slipped the last Machito record in its jacket. The music was completely alien to him but still it sounded like home, like somewhere he'd been, or somewhere he'd like to get back to:

*How many drummers? Two or three? Conga, timbales, something else. Never heard that kind of stuff. What do these guys look like? Greasers? Zoot suiters like over East L.A.? Pachucos? Hipsters? Spanish? Hershey must know. Gets over that side of town to the drug stores. Cuban cigars. Whole band playing the drum. Never thought of that. Cubans. Possessed by some kind of god? A monkey? And a whole band playing the drum? Crazy.* He felt like a blip in a bottle that floated over an ocean of mambo.

"Hey Daedalus I got to go."

"Okay Speed, come around any time."

"Is this ... what Billie was dancing to, wasn't it?"

"Oh yeah, the girl can mambo."

"Where do you get that music, those records? Do those guys play around here?"

"Nah. They're New York guys. Not much for L.A. Ella – uh, Ella Maya – keeps a good stock. You know the place, the

Po'Boy Platter Shop, over on Crenshaw. Machito and them guys're Cubans. They play drums real good, but you know, Speed, it beats me how they put it all together. They got their own way of swinging. Anyway, yeah, I'll have to take you over by the shop, show you around, you can get some records. Only way we get to hear 'em is off records. Ella talks about bringing some of those bands over here but really it's just talk."

"What about the big dances they put on at the ballrooms, hell even Buddhaheads can put on a big dance, rent a big room ... like you do."

"Yeah I know. We could rent a room. But it's a long way from here, New York. They'd run into trouble crossing the country. Some of them look colored, it don't matter they speak Spanish, you know. Can't stay at hotels unless ..."

"You mean Cubans are colored? I thought they were Spanish. I pictured them like ... hipsters, zoot suiters, something like that."

"Cubans are Cubans. Some of them are more Negro looking. They're all mixed up like that, color-wise."

Quietly. "Mixed?" The idea had never occurred to Speed. "Yeah. Hey I'll see you soon." *Mixed*.

And quietly as well. "Later Speed."

As Speed turned for the door Daedelus put his hand on his shoulder. "Wait a minute Speed." The bluesman held out the Machito record, the thin acetate moment of wonder. A gift from the teacher of music. Speed was surprised, didn't know what to do.

"Hey thanks, man, but I can't take that. I'll just go over to Crenshaw and buy one for myself. Thanks anyway," and stumbled out.



Speed stepped into the sunlight breaking through the cloud furrows. He crossed the street to his friend Hidekazu's place:

*Hungry. Could go back to the house, sneak around to the kitchen. Mama be there, and the kid. Maybe Hidekazu's around.*

*Hungry. Great looking place his parents got, all them bonsai-looking shrubs, azaleas and black pine and rafis palm, kept up like a calendar picture. Daedelus, the other extreme, his place is completely neat, no frills. Hungry. Barbecue for sure, everyone likes barbecue. Did colored people invent barbecue too? Mambo, invented that. Hungry. That must be it, music's about hunger! Being hungry, got to have barbecue, listen to mambo. It's about drinking and laughing and ... some kind of ... joy? Maybe it's sex. Ha. Sex can be like laughing? Yeah.*

*Maybe you got to be colored. Or Cuban. Mixed. Why do I have to be ... Yeah, why don't we got mambo? Obligation. Honor. Family. Temples. Stupid. Hungry. That's it, not obligation but hunger passes father to son. Hungry. Never met a Cuban. Wonder what they eat. Wonder what the women are like. Wonder what she's doing now.*

He turned a corner to Hidekazu's house. Anyone could tell at a glance that the yard was someone's pride. Someone saying, "We may not have much but we know who we are." Bonsai on human scale. Speed appreciated the work that went into it but thought it was really too much. He yelled out: "Hidekazu, you there?"

A tiny woman came out on the porch, bowed slightly, he knew she really didn't approve of him though she would never say so, Hidekazu's mother. He was especially respectful.

"Good afternoon Mrs. Yamashita. Is Hidekazu home?"  
Spoken in Japanese.

"Oh yes Shigema. Please come in. We're all just having a bite. Would you please eat with us? It's nothing."

Old man Yamashita ran a dingy repair shop, electric appliances, radios. He was a dreamer, more for tinkering than fixing. For some reason he liked Speed, always had a good word for him, even called him Speedusan, Mr. Speed.

"Speedusan, how are you. Taking a break from your studies? Hope things are going well."

Speed was studying for something big. Speed had left off correcting him, if that was what Yamashita wanted to believe.

"Yes very well."

Mrs. Yamashita set before him a bowl of hot rice, pickled cabbage, pickled turnip, pickled cucumber. Gohan, tsukemono, takuan. He helped himself to a cube of foon yoo, strongly fermented Chinese tofu, and ate it with his rice. Strange world, he thought to himself, Japanese food for breakfast and now lunch. Hidekazu had not said a word. Involved in eating.

"Speedusan, have you thought any more about coming to our meeting?" Old man Yamashita was involved in a Japan society. *Bunch of kooks*, thought Speed. *Patriots. The old man talks about beating the Russians in Manchuria. Glorious victory. Just talk. Dreamer talk.*

After lunch Yamashita-san would walk back to his shop on Crenshaw. They had a car, an old Model A they kept pristine in the garage, but the old man and his wife didn't drive. Hidekazu drove them around but never anywhere interesting except the monthly Japan society meetings. The old man had guts, thought Speed. It was not a good time to promote Japan. There was lots of tension in the air. Embargo. Invasion of China. Speed appreciated their kindness. They treated him like a son. The food was good, cost next to nothing and was offered in friendship. He

didn't feel obligation.

"Don't really have time to take off from my studies."

"Ahhsososo."

Hidekazu stood. "C'mon Speed." They went out to the back yard, Hidekazu lit a smoke.

The big cherry tree in the back yard was half bare, most years it would lose its leaves at the first cold snap then bloom again in the middle of winter, then lose its leaves again and bloom again, a craziness of change that the elder Yamashitas never got used to. They missed the four seasons of Hiroshima. In Los Angeles life was accelerated, but nothing seemed to change much.

"You ever heard of Machito?"

"Nope."

"Cuban. He's got this band that plays ... Cuban music. He calls them his Afro-Cubans. Machito and his Afro-Cubans. It's got a strange beat, can't get it but ... it's real emotional ..."

"That's how I feel about Japanese music."

"No man, it's completely different, this stuff, it moves."

"Japan music moves."

"Yeah okay. What I mean is it's ... not weird like Japanese music, it's ... it's...." Speed could hardly contain his energy. He shook, quivered, the music was still in him and didn't have a way out. "... passionate."

"What?"

"It's about ... feeling and passion and ... sex and ..."

"Sex?" Hidekazu said the word dispassionately.

"I mean ... I heard it just now, at Daedelus's. He says he's going to teach me the dancing. Only saw it once, the dancing." His eyes opened wider as he spoke the word "dancing."

"You're crazy you know, you're getting like Hershey. Why

are you listening to that stuff? You're not Cuban, you don't need to listen to that stuff, whatever it is. Cuban music."

"Yeah. So what. What am I *supposed* to like, Japanese music?"

"Well, not Cuban music."

"Wait till you hear it man." Unearthly howling echoed high over the forest, touching his unconscious with its green urge.

## THE BARBER SHOP

It was Saturday noon, the usual crowd. Everyone was talking about last night's scene at the Pantry. Preacherman the Emcee was laying back in a chair getting his hair marcelled, explaining to Daedelus the foolishness of his ways:

"Y'all done put it on him! You got him all excited for mambo. Daedelus, man, you got the devil in you, playing that music for a yellow man. *It's too much for them!* Ain't part of their blood. You oughta know that, teacher of music and all. Nothing but trouble come of it. Machito echoing all around his head ... like a empty dancehall, ha!"

Preacherman was just getting started, his voice went up in pitch, his audience ready for the show. "Now he got *mambo* in him – he got the urge, he been captivated, charmed, hooked, snatched and trapped – no telling *what* he'll get into. He ain't got much sense, boy coming into Pauline's like that and getting in a fight with Virgil."

Daedelus sat down in an empty chair, "Don't see it can do any harm. Yeah, so he shouldn't have gone to the club. But what's he gonna listen to anyway? Why not mambo?"

"Why not mambo? Why not mambo?" Preacherman was warming to it now, his hands coming out from under the barber sheet to punctuate his points. "Wasn't you listening to me? Mambo's powerful stuff. They got that African thing in it, the drums. Too much for them Orientals. The little Chink ain't part of that. Do he know Cubans? No. Ain't no Cubans in L.A. Do he speak Spanish? No. He ain't eaten the food, drunk the rum, he ain't sung the songs, he ain't had sex or fights or played cards with

Cubans. It's all in his head ... or maybe his crotch. Ha ha hahahah hohohooooo! In his crotch! Maybe he's sweet on the girl. Hahhhhnngggchchch!"

Daedelus waited till Preacherman's laughing fit died down. "You know what Preacherman ... you're a fool. So what if he's doing what he don't know nothin' about ... let him fly. This boy, he's a dreamer, I know him. So maybe he's a little crazy too. But that don't mean the sound don't get to him." Daedelus stood and paced. "All he knows is Cubans got mambo and he wants it bad. Maybe it takes him away from that sad old music his mama and papa play."

Preacherman jumps up, hair straightening paraphernalia and all, the white barber sheet flowing as he gesticulates, working the crowd, excited now by the picture Daedelus has just painted. "Alright then. Alright. The boy's got soul. Listen here, Mr. Chinaman. You want the mambo, it's like this: You got to move your feet [*shuffling in place*] 'cause mambo's the street. It's a big drum, it's a *big* drum played by a big tribe of big colored people, all doing the mambo together, riffs and stop-for-the-breaks mambo."

Preacherman's dancing now, shouting. "We start with the playful drums, the little bongo mambos that throw themselves into the fire. Now we take up the beat with congas, the heartbeat. Let it simmer now! let it ride! let it take your sad ol' life and shake it up, let it take you for a walk and *this* is how we walk, not one foot one foot but one uh uh one ... uh," at this point Preacherman is doing an exaggerated mambo, nearly falling comically. The shop roars with laughter. "That's how you do it, just watch me, just do it like I do it, don't look at the girl, watch me, mambo wants it like I do it, it wants to burn meat, it wants to squeeze fruit, it wants to curl hair or straighten it, lighten skin or

darken it, it wants to buy a fine car and drive it around to the Boulevard, just to be seen. Just to be seen! Just to be seen! You know what street I'm talkin' 'bout, no particular street so long as everybody see you. *That* street. Where your own people can see you. Your very own Cubans, ha! Machito and his Afro-Chinese-Cuban mambo boys. Yessir, Our Boy's fixin' to find himself some real mambo-dancing Afro-Cubans and join in!"

Daedelus had a big smile on, enjoying Preacher's rant, everyone in the shop was enjoying it, even the ones that didn't particularly like the mambo, because it wasn't about mambo, it was about the show they shared every Saturday, the regulars, reviewing the week's events for the elucidation of all and the showmanship of a few, and Preacher was the best.

"Oh, by the way Preacher, he ain't a Chinaman, he's a Jap."

"A Jap? Man, that's really out." Preacher sat down, exhausted.

Just then Virgil and his crowd slid into the shop, the next act, ready to take over the stage. Virgil relaxed in the open chair, started in immediately for the benefit of the full house, his voice booming:

"I get my hands on them Chinks I gonn' squeeze they yella balls," he intoned self-rapturously.

"Uh-hmmmm," from the collective.

"Tha's right. They got the nerve comin' into our place. And that bitch. Never did seen a woman like that."

"Maybe she ain't a woman," said one of his lieutenants.

"What *are* you talking about fool? You'as there."

"I mean maybe she a witch or something."

"Man, you don't know a woman when you seen one."

"What kind a' black woman come into Pauline's with two

Chinese? Specially one looks like that."

"Tha's a good point. Tha's a good point."

"Yeah. She weird. What she be doing hanging out with them boys anyways? They sho as hell wasn't pimping her. If anything she'as pimping them."

"Yeah. They wasn't no pimps. But one of them knew where to hit me. I ever get my hands on him...."

Preacherman, a jokester if ever there was one, could barely restrain himself.

"Say Virg. Maybe it was all a hallucination."

"Yeah right. And maybe my kidney's not sore."

"Well, I heard they ain't Chinese at all. I heard they're Japs."

"Local boys? You must be crazy. They *never* would come into Pauline's with a black woman."

No one noticed the stranger grinning in a corner, cigar sticking from the corner of his mouth, invisible aura of mischief hanging like smoke.



## THE PO'BOY PLATTER SHOP

Looking for a certain storefront on Crenshaw later that afternoon – the Po'Boy Platter Shop – Speed walked through a section bare of Japanese business. He was out of his territory. Now he regretted not accepting Daedelus's offer of the Machito record. He felt exposed, thinshelled. Machito was still echoing in his mind, driving him. He pushed open the door.

The bell tinkled as the door swung open. The black man behind the counter stared as though he had seen something alien. Speed felt panicky. The man was the crooner from the club, the big dog he had fought with, it was Virgil himself, his hair newly conked and slicked. Speed felt like running till he realized Virgil didn't recognize him. Why should he? He'd only had eyes for Billie. Speed stammered:

"Excuse me sir, do you have any Machito records? The one called 'Tanga'?"

The stare continued for a moment. He looked to be about 35. Speed couldn't guess Virgil's age, which was 25. He was a foot taller than Speed. Speed looked young to him. He spoke in a drawl.

"You want a Machito record? ... Hey Ella, come look what we got here."

Ella Maya came from behind a curtain from which flowed Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady." Speed had heard it at Daedelus's. She was about 50, her skin luminous copper, her hair pulled back.

"He wants a Machito record."

Ella Maya looked at Speed, hesitated. Then, "Well, show

him a Machito record then."

As Virgil went in the back room, Ella Maya and Speed checked each other out.

"How do you know about Machito?"

"I don't know much. Only heard a few records."

"Oh?"

"My neighbor played it for me. Daedelus."

"Oh yeah, Daedelus. He likes his mambo, don't he. So you're a friend of Daedelus."

"I live next door." Virgil came back from behind the curtain with a 78, glossy and fragile.

"Well let's see what we got here." She put the record on. "Tanga" by Machito and his Afro-Cubans. Played it through. Even in his nervousness Speed was transfixed. The music felt otherworldly. He didn't move a muscle.

"I'll take it."

"Yeah well, this here's the last one we got." A stone dropped into a clear pool. "This here's the last one so I can't sell it to you. Might somebody want to hear Machito. Why don't you buy this one – Chano Pozo. It's good. Come back next week. Maybe we'll have more Machito then."

Speed heard nothing after the first sentence. Too stunned to press his claim, he bought the Chano Pozo and walked out. The street was bright, the mambo was playing. It was too bright.

"What you do that to the boy for?" said Virgil. Ella Maya looked over expressionless.

"He wants the record he'll come back. Don't want to make it too easy for him."

"You could've sold it to him."

"Yeah. I could have. What's a Jap kid like him want with a Machito record anyway?"

"Don't look like a troublemaker."

"What kind of trouble could he make?" Ella Maya put the acetate platter back in its sleeve. "I'd just like to know what Daedelus is up to," she said to no one, looking at a photo of the band, black and tan, smiling faces. She took the record out and put it back on the player. "Don't they got their own damn music?" The brilliant and passionate "Tanga" flooded the Po'Boy.

The color of skin on Daedelus Verrette was warm like honey, like regular coffee with lots of milk. He moved slow in his house of many knickknacks. Too dark to pass, he often joked, knowing the cousins and aunts, nephews and uncles found the humor too close to laugh about. He didn't blame the light ones who left, the ones who simply stopped coming to family gatherings, never to be seen again. Life was hard, every family had its secrets:

*By fate, by Southern Pacific, end of the line, L.A. All those trips. Back and forth. She was so small then. How old now? 18? Yeah, that's it. Grown up, a singer! Only thing I had and she took it – the music. A singer! Every time I come off the road she come running, wants to hear all the songs, over and over again, wants to hear everything. That little Osbeth loved to sing. Always singing. No surprise she's a singer. But mambo? Wonder where she got that.*

Daedelus put on his pork pie hat and moved slowly out to the street:

*Billie sleeping. Like she never slept before. Guess she tore the place up last night. Hip is acting up. Bad. Need to walk. Spend too much time inside. Got to move. Morning with Speed, then barbershop. That Preacherman!*

Daedelus turned right at the sidewalk, passed the vacant lot overgrown with weeds, passed Speed's house with its big palm tree, looked across the street, Yamashita's house:

*Always waves at me, smiling, loves his garden. Just more trouble if you ask me, every day pick up leaves, every morning, regularlike, the old man like a force of nature. Billie now. Must be she named herself after Billie Holiday. Why now?*

Covering distance now, his stiffness fading, with long strides Daedelus turned onto Crenshaw. He passed the Kokusai Theater, the auto parts, the fish market, the barbecue, the beauty parlor. Came to a record shop. Ella's Po'Boy Platter Shop. Mid-afternoon.

"Hey Daedelus, what's the word."

"How you doing Virgil."

Virgil yelled over his shoulder, "Ella!" then to Daedelus, "Friend of yours come by this morning, looking for a record. A Machito record."

Daedelus couldn't imagine who it was. His generation disliked the young turks, Bird and Dizzy and Bud. To them, Machito was another hipster who played too fast. Didn't have a groove! The young ones, the ones that came to Ella Maya's parties, they listened to that stuff. East Coast, bebop and mambo. The expression on Daedelus's face gave Virgil his opening.

"Yeah, a real hipster. Musta been from New York. Or maybe he was from Cuba. Homesick for the real thing."

Ella Maya came out with a big smile on. "You coming up later honey?"

"I'll be there."

"I got some whiskey too. Virgil been putting you on?"

"Yeah. What's he talking about?"

"Young Jap guy come in, wants to buy a Machito record."

Daedelus smiled. Speed. "Which one he buy?"

"Didn't sell it to him."

Daedelus looked into Ella Maya's face. "Why not?"

"I didn't get it. The boy didn't seem to be the sort."

"What are you talking about? Just 'cause he ain't dressed in cool clothes, just 'cause he ain't black?"

"Well, I don't know. We don't get many of those records in. I just thought one of ... one of our crowd would get more out of it."

"You mean because he's not colored?"

"Well, he sure ain't part of our crowd. What's he doing listening to Machito anyway?"

"He's diggin' it, that's what. He's trying to figure it out, just like anyone else who didn't grow up with it."

"Oh, don't get yourself worked up Daedelus. I'll sell him the damn record. I just wanted to check you out. Sold him a Chano Pozo I had extras of."

"Well Ella, maybe he's going to be the Oriental Machito."

Ella Maya laughed. "You are a troublemaker Daedelus."

Virgil, not known for his powers of deduction, crinkled his eyebrows. "First this guy, then that Chinaman last night ... what's with all the Orientals?"

Daedelus flipped through records and watched Ella Maya on the sly: *Troublemaker. Yeah, I'm that, always was a troublemaker. But the kid was into it. Mambo Speed, mambo mambo. So what? Let him mambo. So he ain't colored. Don't got to be colored, listen to mambo.*

He noticed the new Chano Pozo record, part of the second wave after Machito. He smiled. "Hey Ella, this the Chano Pozo you sold him?"

"Yeah, it just come in. Let's put it on." She came over with

a big smile, excited.

Daedelus slowly handed the record over, looked her over, grinning: *Looking good today, hair pulled back, knows it. Like some kind of Cleopatra, gold earrings, bracelets. Bright red lipstick. Probably worried I'll bring the kid to her regular upstairs hipster party. Maybe I will. Big pot of gumbo, bubblin' all day. Got to sell records. Always puts on the latest mambo. Got to sell records! Looks good, lookin' good, still looks young. How long now, us two? Five years. Since the last train to L.A. Since I left Billie.*

"Hey Ella Maya, you got folks comin' over tonight?"

"Like always. I got beans and rice and gumbo too."

"Sounds good. I'll bring Billie."

*Crowd come in real late last Saturday, but wild ... days get short, cut a rug come Saturday, everyone get into it. Find someone before the darkness comes. Work all week. Find someone or else you'll be alone in the dark.*

Chano Pozo came on loud. Ella Maya moved easy to the beat at first, then pounced on it catlike, for just a young moment to Daedelus' delight. She moved like a young woman, the sight of her took him back: *Sun come up Sunday morning, Sunday morning! naked and my hands on her breasts and she rides me and then me and then her and my heart burning just the way she and how long she comes! and sleeping all day. Wake up again late, touch her. And last night just lay around in bed and eat. Good woman.*

Ella Maya was part of the Crenshaw scene that Daedelus fell into easy as a hungry man falls into a fresh sweet potato pie. Her fame had spread beyond the Po'Boy 'cause of the parties she

threw most Saturdays. Good fixin's, spicy or fried or barbecued or simmered, upstairs in her modest walkup above the Po'Boy Platters (where they give you 10% if you mention the Pantry). There was always gumbo, slick with okra. Catfish, deep fried and spicy from batter. There was black beans and rice and spicy barbecue and pungent tides of peppers and sassafras and waves of congas and timbales, horns and claves, and a nasally-high woman's voice singing songs from old Cuba. Several partyers always brought some special dish just like back home, maybe greens, maybe homemade sausage. Cornbread always. Black-eyed peas on New Years. Rum and whiskey year round. Hipsters young and old. Summertime she'd get Virgil and his buddies to barbecue in the tiny backyard, a party within a party as they drank beer in the fading light, laughing as the music floated down.

The women were fine and sophisticated, she made sure of that, knowing the men would follow. Everyone wanted to be the first to hear the latest sounds from Harlem, show off the new steps with a fine looking partner and make the circuit of hotspots. Once or twice a famous band made the long train ride west. Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday. Validating the locals, cooling in L.A. Rumor went that even Machito was coming out west. Musicians came to her parties after hours. Musicians were always welcome. And Daedelus was always welcome.

Last week Ella dropped the name thing on Daedelus as she paused between bites of pungent chicken from the previous weekend's gumbo on a bed of rice:

"Honey."

"Yeah."

"I been thinking of changing my name."

Daedelus stopped chewing. "What?"

"I dreamed I had a different name."

"You dreamed?"

"My name was Maya."

"Maya."

"Yeah. Isn't it pretty? Maya."

"Yeah, it's nice. What's wrong with Ella?"

"It's okay. But I want to try Maya for a while. I'm tired of Ella. Okay?"

Daedelus was surprised. *Why not? Yeah, why not? Who says we have to take what's given. Why can't we dream it up, any way we want? Why can't she take Maya for a name. Who better to decide than her?*

"So you want me to call you Maya?"

"Yeah."

"What's it mean?"

"I don't know. It just came to me."

"Okay. Maya. It may take a while. What if I call you Ella Maya for a while? get used to it."



## INVITATION TO DANCE

A lone figure emerged from the dark corner where the bus stopped. He slowed as he approached the house with the big Washingtonia palm, his house. Daedelus recognized him first.

"Hey Speed."

"Daedelus! How you doing. Hi Billie. Hey what are you two doing standing in front of the house? Come in for a drink. I was down at the Po'Boy today. I got one by Chano Pozo."

"I heard you went down to Ella's. Virgil there?"

"Yeah, he was there. He looked at me kinda funny, but he didn't say anything. Still doesn't recognize me."

"I'm going over to Ella Maya's – above the Po'Boy. Want to come along? It's kind of a party."

"Are you going to be there?" Speed asked Billie.

"No, I'm tired. Just ... uh, Daedelus."

"I'd better take a rain check. But why don't you come in. Let's have a drink. You must be freezing."

Daedelus and Billie allowed themselves to be led up the steps into the Miyamoto's modest living room. Everyone was home. Full house. Shuffle the deck. Let the chips fall. Speed for once is speeding, excited. The court jester. Foolscape. Joker. A wild card. He goes first for the booze, everyone needs a little something. No time for ice. Baby, it's cold outside. Billie looks great, young, though maybe not young at heart. Tonight she is the Queen of Hearts. Daedelus is the Ace of Spades. Mr. Blues Man. Teacher of music. Speed plays the easy hand first.

"Yoshi, Mas. Look who's here. I invited them in for a drink. You know Daedelus. This is Billie. She's a singer and dancer,

from Cuba." They shake hands.

Mas is a Jack. Speed's older brother. A good man who doesn't see the fork in the road. Jack of all trades. Jack of Clubs. His wife's Yoshi, she's a Queen without a throne, Mama's the Queen in this house. She's a Diamond though. Let's call her the Queen of Diamonds. Comes the Queen Mama of the House. Switch to Japanese:

"Mama, Daedelus is here. Please say hello. This is his friend Billie. We're having a drink."

She bows and smiles, says her pleasantries in Japanese. Returns to the kitchen. Very nice. The Queen of the House. Queen of Clubs.

Papa comes out all smiles, talking Japanese, bows, takes Daedelus's hand, takes Billie's hand. Friendly guy. Wouldn't mind a drink. Sure. Speed the Joker is momentarily stumped, wants to pass on this bet. What's he got showing? The King of Clubs at home is showing a small hand. A friendly hand. What's his game? Bluff? How can you figure these guys out? Who can even figure the game they're playing, high or low, who knows? *ANTE UP.*

"I'm recently from New York but I was born in Cuba. Your children are so beautiful. Just got here. Your weather is beautiful."

"New York must be so exciting. Never been there. Can we see you perform some time?"

"We're on a break. Don't know if we'll come to Los Angeles. But I'd love to. Oh yes Speed's quite a mambo dancer. Didn't he tell you? I'm teaching him."

"Maybe we can all take mambo lessons. If Speed can do it, we can do it. Hahahah. Yeah, that's for sure."

*RAISE.*

"She's a professional, she don't want to teach us." Joker's not so wild.

"Oh I'll be glad to teach you. Any time. It's easy. Fun." Queen of Heart's showing.

"You're staying with Daedelus?" Queen of Diamonds wants to play.

"Er ah, Billie and I were friends back in Arkansas, before I come out to California." Ace of Spades isn't sure of his hand.

*RAISE.*

"Hey Speed, why don't you put on that record you bought." Queen of Diamonds raises.

The Joker thinks for a moment, an identity crisis of sorts, am I a Joker or am I a Joker? He decides he's a Joker. The record goes on. The expectant crackle. Chano Pozo. The real thing. They play it through and listen politely.

Only Papa and Thomas are moving. Papa's nodding his head and smiling! So he's the one holding the cards! Papa asks to hear it again. Joker goes and puts it on again. Billie can stand it no longer and jumps up and dances a demure (for her) mambo. Papa shuffles over to her, all smiles, and shuffles along with her, imitating as best he can. Right in the middle of everyone. Shuffles a mambo like his son, must be in the blood. An odd King and Queen. The other cards are stunned.

When the music stops Papa says in Japanese, "That's good. Good spirit. I like that. Please thank Billie-san for her dance."

Papa bows to Billie, who bows back. The King of Clubs and the Queen of Hearts. Daedelus, the Ace of Spades, knows when to bow out. Always leave 'em yelling for more.

"Well, we better be going. Thanks for the drink. Nice meeting everyone."

*CALL.*

But the Joker, emboldened, is not finished. He walks out the door with the Queen of Hearts. He wants to see her cards. She's game! She wants to play! He says to name the time and place. She says tomorrow in the City of Angels, the fabled land of fantasy and oranges, of which she has seen only this neighborhood and a lively little bar, wouldn't mind seeing Chinatown, she says, wants to find a Chinese dress, one of those slinky things like you see in the movies. Too rich for his blood, really. He has no car. But he's a wild card. He's the Joker, is he not? He's not about to fold.

Papa was worried. His lifelong dialogue with Speed was simple: Don't do fast things, don't become too American, don't bring shame to the family, don't become close to low people, colored people. He had enjoyed the dance but he felt alone, abandoned. It wasn't his dance.

Speed dissolved. Papa's own face, anger. Outskirts of Hiroshima, 1911, dusty, rural, poor. A hothead ready to win the world, nothing to lose, second son. Come to America, go back with lots of money. Be a big man in the village. Go against the family. Second son, nothing to lose:

*I was so foolish. Like Speed. What is life trying to teach me with all this suffering? the years in Hawaii, the cane fields, the cruelty of bosses, a rough life, Mama came, then Masayuki, joy! then escape to California, always go east, don't look back, always east, the rising sun, Wyoming, but more cruel, cold not imaginable, California picking grapes, live in shacks, Speed arrives, years in Hanford, father dies in Japan, can't return, no money, Los Angeles. Now this, my son is running around with black people, no regular job, no wife, no children. My life is*

*suffering.*

He was tired. His head slumped against his chest. *Gaman. The real meaning of life. Gaman. Endure. Gaman. Do not complain. Gaman. Endure. Gaman. Hold on, hold steady. There is a reason for the suffering. Do not bring attention to your suffering. Gaman.* He heard the ancient familiar warbling of the bamboo flute, slow and high pitched. A procession of priests, drumming and incense and lonely sutra. His spirit was pinned to a branch of green leaves waved high in the air like a sign, his special icon in the smoke-filled autumn air, high with black incense, an occasional drum hit, promenade in white robes and black trapezoidal hats, a parade of priests. They waved the branch but his spirit would not fly. Instead it was in the stones, the water, the bamboo, maybe it was in the chrysanthemum, the fish, the bird, the chicken, the pig, the strange lizard that lives in the irrigation ditch, long as a man's arm. He recognized the place. Yes, he had been here before. *Some island. Warm in the summer, sticky, so to wash the sweat off and soak in a wooden tub ... the wood. Water in wood. What is it about? Water in wood, not a natural thing, won't last. The wood rots unless it's onzen water, hot spring, the minerals seep in from the earth, volcanic, the wood turns grey. Grey like in winter, the wood is hard with cold, so much wood, enough to last forever, never give out. The forest, we only farm the edge of it, no one goes into the wilderness, no one goes far from the village, no one enters the forest except in fall to pick mushrooms, only bandits and bad people live in the forest. But I am like a tree, that's what I am, I grow, and when I grow many enough I am the forest. How can this be? that I grow big enough to be a forest yet no one enters the forest, everyone fears it. I have become the forest that no one enters.*

Billie stretched out on Daedelus's bed:

*Tired. Breathe. Feet hurt. So much dancing. So much walking. Oh, that big truck with Daddy and Speed. Good for hauling clean lumber. Build me a new house, clean-smelling. First Japanese I met. What's he like? Glad I brought a summer dress. Warm up tomorrow? Come to Los Angeles and freeze. At least there are lots of flowers, so many flowers here. Billie on Holiday, seeing the flowers, seeing the sights. See a family tonight. See Speed tomorrow. Chinese, slinky dresses. Red slinky dress. Papa spending the night at Ella Maya's. Big party there. Every Saturday night, he says. Wants to show me off. Too tired. Chinese dress. Sunday. Sleepy.*

It was a humpback moon shone through the back window of Miss Maya's flat on the second floor overlooking a back alley. Nearly naked, our girl had oiled herself for the bluish moonlight and the man in the shadow. She was wearing gold – earrings, bracelets, a big necklace – ostrich feathers stuck through the back strap of her bra and down her panties. The feathers floated over her like a headdress. She moved in slow steps toward the bed, a merengue playing, letting double the beats pass for each step of her stately dance, floating on the wave of rhythm in soft waves of her arms, moving back and forth in front of the window, teasing the moonlight, swaying before him and stretching her arms out to him, Daedelus sitting there with a smile, his priestess of the goddess Maya doing her ceremony for him and the moon. As the song ended, Maya continued to move in silence till the fast mambo came on, then she stopped and let the energy build in her,

quivering against the beat, and then she took it and she rode it, or it rode her, like a creature of the goddess. She danced on it and behind it and above it and below it for Daedelus, her wonderman and servant till it all fell apart in the final gliss and crash and she fell laughing into him on the bed and he laughing, kissing and stroking while the record hissed, return arm on the blink, the hissing, the riding, Maya riding Daedelus, Daedelus riding Maya, still wearing her gold but the ostrich feathers have been swept off her. Red smoke from the spirit dimension drifted in.

Sunday morning Ella Maya grabbed a recent Perez Prado record. Added a Machito for good measure. She wasn't sure if Pauline already had the Machito record but it didn't matter. It was time to make her rounds:

*Running clouds and wind. Cold for L.A. Long coat. Glad. Red. Red car. Lots of red this season. What the hell is going on with Billie? Make sure no one gets hurt, that's all. What else can I do? Daedelus's daughter.*

*What's with this guy Speed? He got a crush on her? He's a strange one. Can't be he likes colored girls. Maybe he just likes mambo. That guy don't know what he's getting into. Crenshaw.*

She stepped down from the street car and walked the few steps to the alley:

*Pauline's Pantry. Not a bad name. How about Pauline's Paradise. All that Hawaii stuff. Soldiers dancing hula. Whew, this place. The usual smell. No paradise.*

"Hello. Anyone here?"

"Come out back."

Ella Maya meandered through the tables, chairs still upside down on them, to the cramped room at the back. Pauline had

filled the room with publicity photos, business records and knickknacks; there was scant room left for herself but her heavy arms could reach most anything she needed without her rising. Pauline had even cut a peephole in the door so she could observe the action without making herself known. Today the door was open. There was a straight back chair opposite the desk.

"Ella! Come in. Can I get you a drink?"

"Oh no. Too early for me. Thanks though. I'm going by Ella Maya these days."

"Oh. Okay. Ella Maya." Pauline looked amused.

"Wondered if you had this Perez Prado." Pauline looked at the record.

"No I don't. I'm sure it's great."

"And this Machito?"

"Yeah, I got that one."

"Oh good. Well, why don't you take it anyway, in case the other gets broke, or maybe you want to give it away ..."

"Okay, thanks."

"So how's it going?"

"Going good. We had a pretty good weekend, considering."

"Virgil's night Friday, wasn't it? How'd it go?"

"Oh, you know Virgil. Lots of women in here, the usual crowd."

"I, uh, heard you had a little excitement ... with the women."

"Oh, who said that?"

"Just word on the street, what little comes my way."

"Uh huh. Well, nothing to be concerned about."

"Oh, I'm not concerned. I just thought ... maybe ... we could talk some more about booking one of those New York bands to come out here. I mean, since mambo's getting popular. The way the youngsters are dancing it."



Pauline's eyes narrowed just. "You trying to say something, why don't you say it."

"Oh I don't mean anything by it. It's my business is all. It's both our business. Entertainment. Like that woman who was in here last night. The one who danced. Quite a entertainer, don't you think?"

"Yeah. She's alright. You know who she is?"

"I do."

At this point Pauline stood up and moved gracefully to the bar, went behind and put out a couple of glasses. Filled each one with an inch of dark rum. Picked hers up and drank it in one gulp. Ella Maya followed her to the bar but didn't sit, didn't touch her glass. She said nothing. Pauline broke the silence.

"Yeah. Girl like that could have a following round this town. If she hook up with the right people."

"Oh?"

"Well, she can't just come in here spectin' to cruise. Some people might get upset, them that's established."

"Such as yourself?"

"Oh no. I was thinking more about Virgil. I don't want to see the girl get hurt. I might be willing to help her out."

Ella Maya fell silent again. She smiled, satisfied that Pauline was on her side, on Billie's side, willing to help out, as she said, but not trusting her completely. She stood up, gulped her drink. She had done what she could to help out. *Daedelus's daughter, making a scene! A dancer!*

"Well, I don't want to see her get hurt neither. Know what I mean? Right now she's on a little break. She's not looking to steal anything away from you. Thanks for the drink. We'll talk again." Pauline just looked at her, then:

"Hey, wait ... who were those boys anyways, her

bodyguards?"

Ella Maya laughed. "Yeah. Those were her bodyguards."

Daedelus at the library: *Maya, goddess, an orisha to certain West African tribes, possessor of the spirit of motherhood and regeneration. Associated with the ocean.*

## THE DATE

The black skin of the Ford was satin in the overcast dawn. The young man limped as he moved around the car wiping with a soft cloth. Bought used, the black Model A was pampered. He had made it his mission to keep it pristine and free of the road's decay. The world's decay. His parents used it once or twice a year for the occasional trip, and the monthly Japan society meetings. He always drove. The wax job was always perfect and shiny. Each weekend he washed and waxed it whether or not it was dusty, whether or not it had been driven. The car was his obligation and his joy; that and Saturdays with the guys. He lived at home, worked at his old man's junk shop. He could not see himself getting married, or having any sort of romantic relationship at all, at least not while his parents were alive. He did not talk about these things.

Hidekazu was old country. For him to be Japanese was to be of the village, with a thin layer of America laid on. He was Kibei, American-born but schooled in Japan, he would always be a misfit. Still he was one of the guys, part of the group. They made sure to include him on the Saturday outings. Harvard was smart, he was going to college, and Hershey was simply too far out there for Hidekazu to see. But Speed was basically a loser. Like him. Left behind in the American story Hidekazu had prepared himself to be a loser and figured Speed had done the same. Now he wasn't so sure. Speed was breaking the fundamental rule: never diverge from the group.

The car was where he lavished his energy and libido. But when Speed called asking to borrow it, it was cool with Hidekazu.

They never did anything on Sundays anyway.

"Speed! How you doing?"

"Good. Hey I appreciate this Hidekazu."

"Cold this morning. What are you up to?"

"Uh well, you know Daedelus, he's got a friend staying with him, named Billie, and I thought I'd show her around town."

"Billie? That's a girl?"

"Yeah. She's a singer. Her band is on a break now and she's out here visiting."

"Is she kurombo?"

"Nah. She ain't colored. She's a Cuban. Pretty. You'd like her."

Hidekazu was stunned that Speed had asked this favor to show a colored person around town – a Cuban! He wasn't fooled. For a full minute Hidekazu kept buffing the finish, slowly, silently, inward: puzzled:

*Cuban. Not Japanese. Why is he doing this? This can't be Obligation. There is no family connection, this can't be Obligation. They are not Japanese, these people, Daedelus, this girl. There's no Obligation with black people. Not possible. Black people are not even like white people, you don't have to work for them, you don't have to be involved with them. They're not from Japan. They're from Africa. Slaves. There's no Obligation there. Maybe it's about ... sex? Can't be. Speed must be confused about this whole thing. I can't let him make a big mistake. Maybe she's put a spell on him.*

"What about Reiko?"

"Reiko! I haven't seen her in weeks. Hell, man, I just want to take her around town."

"But she's not Japanese."

"So what, I'm not Cuban."

"Yeah. So why are you taking her?"

"I just want to. She's new in town."

"She's a kurombo."

"She's not colored, she's Cuban."

"You should go out with Japanese girls."

"You don't understand. She's different. She's beautiful. And you should see her dance. I like her."

"You trying to get laid?"

"Aw man, if you don't want to loan me the car just say so. What's the big deal anyway? I'm just showing a out-of-towner some of the sights. It don't mean I want to screw her. And what if I do? It's my business."

"I just don't want you to get a bad reputation."

"That's a laugh. What kind of reputation I got now? I got no money, got no steady job, still live with my parents." Speed was momentarily embarrassed since Hidekazu fit the same description.

"At least I don't go out with black girls," Hidekazu lashed out.

"You don't go out with any girls at all," Speed stung back.

Hidekazu said nothing. But Speed knew what Hidekazu was getting at. He also knew what the car meant to Hidekazu. Speed was embarrassed to ask and bitter that he had to borrow a car in the first place. But he swallowed the bitterness.

"Sorry ... So what is it, are you going to let me use the car?"

"Yeah. Okay. But keep away from the black part of town. Trouble there you know. You and that girl. If they see you."

Speed had not thought of that. "Yeah. Anyway she wants to go to Chinatown. We'll be okay."

As Speed eased the Model A down the short driveway, the sun broke through the marbled cloud layer and glinted off the

shiny fender and headlamp. Hidekazu could not help but admire his machine, felt a bit of pride that he was sending Speed off in this most beautiful of vehicles. Though he disapproved of the object Hidekazu had a paternal feeling about the favor he was granting Speed. Though he never would be in Speed's place, he imagined it was he too who was driving out to meet Billie. He too who was breaking out:

*We've shared our guts with each other. We are of one spirit. We are like newborns to each other. With others we let things fall to the ground. But we have shared our guts and our nakedness. May Speed find what he is looking for on his journey. May he find his home in this universe. May he never forget where he comes from. Let there be no blame in a Japan man driving off in a fine American car to meet a Cuba girl. And the girl? What is it she wants, a visit to Hollywood? a visit to Japan? But why? Speed is not a Japan man. Maybe she doesn't know. Well, let her find what she is looking for. It can't be easy in this life to be a black person. Buddha said we must accept all kinds of changes, all kinds of weather in this life. Was he thinking a Japan man would go around with a Cuba girl? Shigataganai.*

The second rule of life is to live – so on a beautiful fall Sunday afternoon Speed and Billie went shopping for a sweet outfit, Chinese. Speed, who would have done anything for her but knew nothing about anything Chinese, took her to the Far East Cafe on First Street, Li'l Tokyo, where the locals went for Chinese food, then to Chinatown. They walked close to each other, touching, playing with the novelty, no blame in the innocence of the touch, gravitating north from Li'l Tokyo toward the San Gabriels, snow-capped for this occasion, the surreal and

sudden granite upthrust that defines the arid bowl that Angelenos tamed as long as water flowed through political channels. Through horizontal layers of conquest and migration: Li'l Tokyo, the Mission, Olvera Street, Chinatown, East Los Angeles, the railroad tracks, and in the foothills the estate of the capitalist Henry Huntington overseeing his bounty. Only the natives are missing. No one has seen them for a century.

Far East Restaurant up the shopworn cluttered street: egg foo yung dishware pour chop suey tea on the table dark and oyster sauce color booth, the shops are closed the shops are closed, pass the Mission, pass Olvera Street, big ranchera hats skeletons jumping beans pretty Mexican white cotton peasant embroidery designs, no sale but think about it, don't need pesos only dollars, no border patrol, no federales, stay away from the tracks, Union Station, train ride. Possibly, probably. In love.

The bright daylight turns on Chinatown, the Ming Dynasty rebuilt, red and gold, bright on Broadway in L.A., they pass through the everyday exotic of 3,000 years of history, East is East and West is Hollywood and Chinatown, pass through the gates, a hundred years of faux-exotic Americana. Somehow they survived the passage: the Dragon Gates and Dragon Throne and Dragon Ladies, the moon bridges and silk dresses and bridal headgear. Silk. The power of the worm, simplicity in the complex, layers upon layers, the stuff of ancient barter worth traveling across Asia to touch and see and taste and smell. But mostly it's the people that survived. They're all here in L.A., drawing tourists still, even from distant Crenshaw.

"Let's go in and look. They're beautiful."

"Expensive I'm sure."

"I got money."

The shop lady asked, "You like try on?" Billie came out

looking like a dream. A figure-hugging thing, crimson with simple brief embroidery, covering up to the throat but short sleeved. Not silk after all, more like satin, shiny and lush. Cheongsam. She looked so good even the shop lady gave in to a rare impulse and cut the deal thin. Billie looked stunning. She had swept up her hair and set it in place with a Chinese comb she bought there. They walked through Chinatown, everyone's eyes on them, Chinese eyes, Caucasian eyes, local eyes, tourist eyes. The blue cotton dress was wrapped and tied in brown paper. Speed carried it under his arm. They were young and alive, and Speed was proud to walk beside her. The second rule of life is to live.

"Honey I'm tired. Let's take a cab back to Li'l Tokyo. It's starting to drizzle."

Rolling down Broadway, City Hall to the left, left on First the question bothered him. As they got out and Billie paid, he looked at her in the shiny crimson cheongsam and asked, "Why me? Why not Virgil or someone else colored?"

Billie looked at Speed and kissed him sweetly. "I think we'd make pretty babies."

"You must be kidding."

Billie laughed at his discomfort. "Don't worry Speed. I'm way too young to be having a family."

Speed was silent a moment, relieved. "Let's look for a club. I could use a drink."

The long-nosed Trickster laughed, his eyes crinkled and narrow, while newborn energy flowed over Li'l Tokyo.



## CHARLIE CHAN

The club was a tiny dive off San Pedro north of First St., the heart of Li'l Tokyo, paper lanterns hanging overhead, chipped statue of big-bellied Hotei on the bar, symbol of good fortune, the usual cheap decor. The only thing classy about the bar was the name: The Floatin' World, a reference to the pleasure district of a city of old Japan.

An older Nisei, already losing his hair, came out from behind the bar, still wearing his drink-stained apron. By the way he talked he fancied himself a hipster, except he stuttered as he tried to talk too fast:

"Ladies and ... mmm Gentlemen, at this time we would like to introduce to you a, uh, hepcat ... b-b-been holding forth at The Floatin' World ... goes by the name of ... sss Charlie Chan. Let's hear it for Charlie Chan and his Hepcats, ChCharlie Chan, Ladies and Gentlemen. All you cats and, uh, kittens ... dig it."

Charlie Chan was a hip Genghis Khan: zoot suit, chain and shades, Fu Manchu moustache and goatee, complete with New York attitude. Holding a sax, alto, blowing airy quick phrases off to the side of the stage, "Come Rain or Come Shine," Arlen and Mercer. The Hepcats, bass player and guitar player, followed him into the song, no drummer tonight. Charlie played the mellow tones, a long string of notes repeated, reaching back, drinking the full delicious liquor of it, like a master exploiting the tension of the words: I'm gonna love you, like nobody's loved you, come rain or come shine. Slow and slower, deep and deeper, all the way till feeling and sound and song melted into each other. After the last note Mr. Fu Manchu reached into his coat pocket for a

bottle, pulled down his hat and slouched coolly through the space separating him from Speed and Billie, still carrying his sax, touching each table with one index finger as he loafed by, image of a hipster walking across the club, his eye on a mango Dragon Lady.

"Say, cool brother 'n sister. I could tell you cats diggin' the groove."

"Yeah. It was great."

"Name's Charlie Chan."

"Oh hey, you play real good Charlie. My name's Speed. This is Billie."

Our man Charlie touched the table and feigned heat, snatching his finger back. "Sizzlin'. You the hippest mama ever show up in this crib. You look like a chocolate Chinese sister. I heard about that before but never seen it ... ooooh, baby, you look fine in your red dress."

"Oh thank you. But I'm not Chinese."

"Yeah? Neither am I. I dig your threads the most, baby."

Speed, puzzled, asked, "Why do you call yourself Charlie Chan if you're not Chinese?"

Charlie stood straight for a moment and expounded: "It's a mystery needin' play, brother, like Charlie Parker cuttin' a trey. I'm the Chinese Yardbird of First Street L.A. and I don't care what Confucius say. You dig? I get over, man. The colored brothers see me comin', they say, It's Charlie Chan, Here come Charlie Chan! Everbody dig it. Everyone laugh. Got to have a name. Charlie Chan! Can't have them say, Here come Tojo, or some such. Don't nobody wanna jam wit' Tojo. Dig it children? They wanna jam wit' Charlie Chan."

Billie enjoyed his jive. "Yeah. Like when I was singing, how could I go out with a name like Osbeth?"

Charlie smiled broadly. "Ooooh, I knew it. I was gonna ask you but now you *gotta* come up and favor us with a little number. These people never seen anything like you, singin' wise or hipness-wise. For that matter, me neither. I'll call you ... Billie Chan. If tha's all righ' wit' you, sister."

"Sure. Why not? What's in a name."

"Great. What you wanna sing?"

"How about `But Not For Me' kinda slow?"

"Scintillatin'! We'll torch it up. Give this room a little class. Oh hey, I didn' even offer you a drink."

Speed accepted a refill from Chan's bottle but Lady Billie stuck with sake. Chan reached into his coat and pulled out a glass, smiling. Speed realized then that Chan was loaded. *He's played a lot of sax in his life to play that well after that much booze. He's flying.*

"Other than radio and records ... and these people only listen to the popular stuff ... they don't hear the real jazz. They get it from me!" He said it proudly, with a grin, and took another drink from his bottle.

"That's right, they got Charlie Chan, they got me! You dig? I'm their ambassador to the colored folk. You'll never find Buddhaheads in a colored club. Second hand is OK by them. Hey, man, I'm Charlie Chan. I ain't colored, I ain't even Chinese. Ain't that a bitch! I'm just livin' the music and I'm as close as they gonna get. I'm the Chinese Charlie Parker! They know I'm a puttin' *something* on 'em. But they don't know what it is. Hahaha."

Speed, a man of the people, felt compelled to defend his people. "Well sure, man, of course. They just want to live and let live. Why should they listen to colored music? That'd just make them stand out from the crowd."

"Yeah yeah, but it's no big deal; anybody else can go to a jazz club. White people go to jazz clubs."

"They can afford to. It's their country."

"That's right brother. And The Floatin' World is our country. That's what I'm sayin'. Gotta groove to *something* in this life. Black people don't make it easy for us. You ever heard that song 'Chinese Rhythm' ... 'Chinese Food'? Real ching chong Chinaman stuff. Black people just as prejudiced as white people far as I'm concerned. So that's how come I'm Charlie Chan, got to be hip, got to be cool, got to be funny. Gotta swing. If I was black and played this good, I'd be in the *life!*"

Dragon Lady Billie said sweetly, "It ain't never going to be right. You just gotta love the music. You're in the life."

"Right you are baby, I'm in the life. And on that I b'lieve we got da groove. Like the Duke says, It don't mean a thing ...."

Chan rose, bowed to Billie and lifted his glass to Speed, downed it, wiped it on his coat and plopped it back in. He cruised back to his sidemen, readied sax without speaking, and launched into an obbligato "April in Paris." On the second verse the sidemen came in at the bridge and fell into rhythm. They rode to the end of the song where Chan spooned out obbligato till his cup runneth over, then spilled it in a torrent of notes à la Charlie Parker. Then,

"Hey hey boys and girls, lookin' good alla you from wherever you spent the night, heh heh, and now we gotta treat for you, tha's right! It is my good fortune to introduce a *young* lady dragon lady just in from Hong Kong or Manila or Singapore or somewhere back that way, way back in the alleyways where the old time down home okazu is kep' cookin' alla time. Comin' to the soulfullest place in Li'l Tokyo, The Floatin' World of Charlie Chan, don't work it too hard boys 'n girls, just swing. Have I ever

steered you wrong? stick with me, stick *with* me, I'll show you the real goods, heh heh: She's a Chinese soul sister. She's a empress of something smooth, I'm sure o' that... she calls herself Billie Chan, no relation, fortunately, 'cause she is *fine!* Come on and help me bring her up here, let's show her our cool for the finer things in jazz music, let's hear it for the crimson lady, the geisha of groove, the empress of ... uh anything she wants to be, Billie Chan!"

Playing her radiant Chinese self, she smoothed her walk, still sexy. The band converged on the audible rainbow with a groove laid out, the bass taking the bottom end, the dark blues and purples, the guitar taking the green rhythm, and playing counterpoint in reds and yellows was the sax of Charlie Chan, playing that pure black Charlie Parker sound with its pure blackness, black enough to lighten the load of the yellow brothers and sisters. Then Billie,

*They're singing songs of love but not for me.  
A lucky star's above, but not for me.*

Our Mango Dragon Lady Billie was singing real easy, no pressure playing here, a roomful of Orientals, being the source, ambassador of her music, they'd give her the benefit of doubt if they had any but they were fully charmed. She was fine in her crimson outfit, come to see them in their part of town, honoring them, a gift freely given. Let no one report the Mambo Dragon Girl for dressing in a crimson Chinese outfit for an audience never been to Harlem. Let no one report Charlie Chan for a Jap fool playing a bebopping Chinaman. For this one night they've run away from the All American crucible that burns off this kind of nonsense, burns off anything that does not help them survive.

Maybe it's stuff they want to keep, just for laughs. They know they shouldn't keep anything for laughs. The heat will melt that off, like a decoration, like frivolity, like a luxury you can't afford in the fierce and bloody furnace of being colored in America.

Chan started into "Body and Soul" directly. Billie joined in with utter conviction. The simple act of wearing the crimson dress has given our Dragon Girl a new voice, a new face, new courage. Spring has come tonight. Chan is flying in the truthful night of Spring. Against the counterpoint of Billie he weaves strings in the sky like a Messenger, half between heaven and earth. He is hollow and full of energy, like earth lightning burning a path in the air, rising up from the ground. The truth is in the music. It's the promised freedom of America, and who would have guessed they'd find it here, in their own little backyard. For one night in 1941 in Li'l Tokyo the wounded edges touched each other and had fun, floating over hard waves of power and blood and history, about to be swept away.

The black cigar smoke and wide brimmed pork pie hat appeared in the back by the bar. As Chan was playing, a voice was heard in his head and in his playing: *If you suffer like a black man maybe you can be a black man.* That's what the voice says. *Black is the suffering, black is the beauty. Fly until you find it, Mr. Chan. Go ahead and fly. Never come down.*

Billie sat down happy. The entire room was applauding like crazy, yelling for more. Chan was in a world of his own, smiling, nodding, saying softly, "That was gone." Speed was proud and excited.

"Billie! That was great!"

"Thanks. That Charlie can *play*."

"Yeah, he's good. But you were wonderful!"

Billie whispered to Speed, "It's different without drums. Just you and the song."

Chan came over, seeming to be even more disoriented in his swagger between tables. He had a cool sliver of grin shining through his Fu Manchu. "Hey Billie, that was nasty."

"Thanks Charlie."

He turns to Speed and whispers, "Girl can swing."

Charlie Chan went back to the band corner and launched into Strayhorn's "Lush Life." The guitar and bass hung on to the complex changes, but Charlie played over them like a bird soaring over trees. He was in another world.

*Life is lonely, again, and only last year  
Everything seemed so sure.*

That night Speed is still speeding, even in his sleep. He's going so fast he's flying across the Pacific. The clouds race past the half moon as the Stratoliner races the advancing sun. He's bringing his musical organization, Speed and His Afro-Cubans, Featuring Miss Billie, to Japan, a triumphant return of the blood that bled to sweet Hawaii and the West, returning to reclaim its place in the Rising Sun, returning to repay its debt to blood, returning on wings of mambo. His blood returns rhythm to the sluggish, the gloomy, the dutiful blood that's been stranded for centuries and hasn't got a clue as to how to groove. He doesn't want to hear about cherry blossoms or Obon festivals, or haiku or Emperor, especially the Emperor. His Emperor is named

Machito, his swordsmen wield congas and timbales, saxes and trumpets. Speed is an ambassador of a great country called the Mambo Empire, and he comes in peace, bringing the message of mambo. Let the mambo take you. You will not have time for war or sadness or *gaman*.

The horns are riffing and then everyone drops out except the drummers. Above the complex weave of beat the ride cymbal floats, fluid, encircling him, and Speed is transported by the fierce and loving beat. He closes his eyes and senses that a trance has fallen over the band, the audience and Billie, who moves to the beat with limbs and hips and muscles loose and independent, up and out, in and over, braiding her limbs through the rhythm like smoke rising above a fire. Abruptly the rhythm stops for one beat, the drums in unison fill the break, blam, blam blam, bud-dah bud-dah, Billie steps forward after a return riff from the horn section and she begins to sing, her high nasality meant to cut through and excite, an artifice the Japanese understand. The horns are riffing behind her, and she is singing. And the drums are weaving the beat into wings, the beat is flying. It is all too much. Speed smiles. The song never ends. Japan is changed forever.

Speed looks stage right and striding onstage, big smile on his face, thin moustache, is Machito himself, the Emperor. He smiles at Speed and embraces him while the crowd cheers. The song keeps on but Billie and Speed walk off stage together after taking their bows. They head for the bright sand beach still in their mambo clothes and run laughing into the waves. They are anointed by immersion. They are purified. The song never ends but it fades a little in the distance. Billie and Speed, Speed and Billie. She is so ... Cuban ... he can't imagine ... what ... it would be like. Crashing waves is the best he can do. So be it. Crashing



waves. That's not so bad. He's tired. He's slowing down. He can hear the surf crashing in the distance. Cuba. He can hear monkeys crashing through branches in the forest.

## FOOTPRINTS

The next morning they met again. It was a Monday, a work day, Speed left the house as usual, carrying his lunchbox with a thermos of tea, rice balls, pickled radish – cha, nigiri, daikon – on his way to the construction yard. Once out of sight he doubled back to Daedelus' house, keeping an eye out for Mama. Billie was waiting there, Billie who held shimmering green possibility for Speed. He had seen her dance, had heard her sing. He was smitten.

She came out looking beautiful in the light blue summer dress. This morning she was simmering with energy. She wants to see the tourist sights. He hardly knows the sights. Crenshaw district, the coast – that's what he knows. He's a tourist here too. She doesn't care. Like every tourist he headed for Hollywood. Romance of the make-believe. First stop: the Chinese Theater. Handprints. Footprints. Pawprints. Cigarprints. Noseprints. The reddish ornate pagoda towering above them, a faux Chinese monument to Hollywood. A place Speed had not seen. Billie was excited, running from print to print.

"Clark Gable, and look, Lana Turner. Over here." Her voice echoed among the columns. "Let's go inside, in the theater."

"There's no picture showing now. They're closed."

"C'mon. Let's try." She went up to the doors. Remarkably they swung open for her. Speed held back. Billie grabbed him and pulled him through into the cool darkness. The ornate curlicues of the walls and ceiling were suggestive of flowers hidden in the semidarkness. Further into the dark was the stage,

footlights shone on the curtain beyond. They sat in the back row, whispering.

"Isn't this great?"

"Yeah. It's cool. I've never been here."

"But you live here! I'd be here all the time if I lived here. It's beautiful. This is a great place to see a picture. Can you imagine all the stars that have sat here, all the premiers they've had? Maybe someone famous sat in this seat."

"Why would they sit in the back."

"Maybe they wanted to neck." On an impulse Billie grabbed Speed and kissed him hard and fast on the lips. Speed was breathless for a moment, more surprised than anything. Then Billie was up and about.

"I love it when there's no one here." She went spinning down the aisle, a spontaneous dance, all the way to the front.

"I can imagine ... wouldn't this be the greatest place for a mambo concert? We could get Machito to come out and play! Machito at the Chinese Theater! What a show that would be!"

It was an enticing idea that wove through Speed's native caution in this place out of bounds.

"Yeah. That *would* be something."

Billie ran up to the stage and started dancing. A wild mambo, like she danced at Pauline's. Without the music it was oddly disturbing, she flailed her arms as though the mambo had begun with the climax and had nowhere to go.

"C'mon and dance with me." Infected by her passion, aroused by her dance, he got up on the stage and began his movement, feeling silly in the cavernous theater. The footlights shining on the curtain put their show in surreal light. Speed imagined the sight they made. After some minutes and under the influence of Billie's total commitment to the music she was

hearing in her head, Speed felt it come together for him, become a real dance without the glue of sound. He was getting into it. They were making their own sound. Some kind of dance was happening. They worked hard. Soon trumpets were riffing over the drums like birds of prey riffing over the sound of waves. Tropical. The piano groove came through from underneath like a strong thread holding a loose weave. The air was warm like in the tropics, the smell of salt in the air and a sense of being lifted by the air. Plantains, the sweet ones she liked, were being offered to Billie, gifts given because she could hear the mambo through the silence.

Then a rough voice cut into their trance: "Hey, what're you kids doing, get down from there."

Speed froze. Billie kept on as though nothing had happened. A man was coming toward them in the semidarkness.

"Get the hell out of here."

"Billie, we better go."

Billie kept dancing.

"I told you to get the hell out of here. What do you think you're doing anyway. You trying to make trouble? Damn hipsters."

"We're going. C'mon Billie."

He was nearly to the stage and could see them clearly.

"Why you're a fucking Jap. I oughta break you in half. Get your nigger girl off the stage."

Billie slowed and looked at the man for the first time. He was large, officious-looking. His puffy face was by now clearly visible in the reflected stage light. Billie strode off the stage while staring at the man. She approached him. Speed was next to her. He had seen this side of Billie once before, had seen her sudden anger, eyes gone cold. Speed grabbed at her too late. She

went off on Puffy Face like a fuseless firecracker, hissing, poking her finger at his chest:

"You fat evil bastard! You fucking white piece of ....!" Billie pushed him. Puffy Face stumbled, fell back against the row of seats, collected himself, took a wild swing at Billie. Missed. Speed shoved him and grabbed Billie around the waist, pulling her back. She was a Fury, screaming. Speed could barely hold her. Puffy Face took the opening and lumbered up the aisle. Billie wrestled Speed, got away, took off after the man, Speed right behind. When they got to the lobby Puffy Face had disappeared, probably to call the police. Speed hustled Billie out of there more easily than he hustled her at Pauline's.

Once out into the cool grey daylight Billie started laughing. Speed made her run the two blocks to their car. It appeared they were making good their getaway. By the time they were in the Model A Speed was into the spirit of escapade. He shouted, "Hoooo-ooooo" and jammed the Model A into gear, drove off madly. He was sure Hidekazu had never driven it like this. He felt as though he was betraying his friend by driving it hard. Then he felt like they were Bonnie and Clyde. He grinned with the thought of Hidekazu seeing his car being driven as a getaway car. Exciting. He recalled the look on Puffy's face when Billie tore into him. It was funny. He laughed.

Billie laughed. They both laughed. Somehow they were together, driving down Sunset laughing. He realized he was having fun, of a sort he had never had.

They drove west down Sunset, not thinking about their destination, sharing their laughter. They found themselves at the mouth of the canyon that opens out to the Pacific. Speed turned up the coast automatically. The day was still grey.

"Ooooh. This is the first I've seen the Pacific. It's beautiful here."

"Yeah. Too bad it's overcast. The sun may still break through."

"Do you come out here often?"

"Nearly every weekend. I like to go up the coast a little with the guys, a place where the sand's been washed up on the mountain."

"Let's go there."

"Okay. It's not much to see."

This part of the coast meets the water in a crumbling earthen wall that rises above a narrow beach that fronts the waves. Further north the land becomes firmer and the road rides the wave of earth hundreds of feet above the surf. But here California Route 1 dips to sand level.

"What do you do there?"

"Oh, we fish a little, but mostly sit around a fire and drink and gamble."

"Can we have a fire?"

"Sure."

The salt air off the waves had gotten into Billie's hair and reminded it of its African forebears, that part that got delivered down the genetic pipeline. Speed had enjoyed nuzzling the

softness of it as they sat butt to crotch, him behind, her in front, his arms wrapped around her, free to explore her breasts and belly. He noted with amazement how it had frizzed up and how it had absorbed and was releasing the smoke of the driftwood fire. Smoke.

"Your hair smells like smoke."

"I'm glad you showed me this place. I love it here."

"Well, it's more interesting with you here, I can tell you that."

"Don't you have fun when you come here with Hershey and them?"

"Oh yeah. I wouldn't really call it fun. It's more like ... getting away. It's a place where you can do or say what you want and no one cares what you do or say. Or think. I mostly think."

"What do you think about?"

Speed's turn to be silent, a full minute. Then, softly, "Why did you come out here to stay with Daedelus?"

"Daedelus ... is my Daddy."

"So ... you're not Cuban. You're a Negro?"

Billie was perturbed by the turn of the conversation. "It's almost the same thing. I mean, almost the same blood. I'm part white, part black, part Indian, for all I know I'm part Spanish or French. I can be Cuban if I want to."

"It's okay by me if you want to be Cuban."

"I'm tired of being black. There's too many places I got to stay away from, places I got to act right. Even in L.A. I grew up in Arkansas. It's worse there. You can't even *say* anything. You got to be a *good* nigger." Billie stood up, walked around the fire.

"I want to be Cuban. Why can't I be Cuban? Or Japanese if I want to? Your skin is dark as mine. 'Be a credit to your race.' That's what they say. I don't want to be a credit."

They said nothing for a couple of minutes. The intensity of the conversation. Too close to let stand. Too close to the swirling waters. Too close to despair.

"Hey, let's get out of here," said Speed. "I could use a drink."

Hidekazu's Model A was covered with a thin layer of salt after the day's tour, but the salt had little chance to eat through the layers of wax. The old car was handsome and they were handsome. Speed had wanted to drive through Beverly Hills or Hancock Park or Country Club Park to see the big homes they coveted as gardeners. He wanted to pretend Billie and he belonged there. Rich, living in a big house. Like he pretended while cruising Crenshaw. He thought about it again on the coast highway heading back to town.

Speed was feeling the old grip on his lungs as he pulled up in the Model A in front of Hershey and Akemi's house. He needed a drink with his old drinking buddy, his fellow bodyguard and Crenshaw cruiser. No one was home at Daedelus's place so he brought Billie along to continue the party. The Mambo Girl was calm now, a dream gal sleepwalking up the front steps, Speed's arm around her. She stopped to pick a blossom from the hibiscus growing by the door, wore it in her hair like Billie Holiday. Speed watched her, captivated by her beauty.



## WAVES

There were earlier currents. There was the one that brought the battleships of Commodore Perry to Tokyo Harbor in mid-nineteenth century, an event that taught the Japanese that their art of war had been eccentric, almost quaint in a time of steamships and cannon. A century later the pent up reaction washed over Pearl Harbor like an immense typhoon let loose on the Pacific. Between the first wave and the tsunami of war came the milder flow that carried the Japanese to Hawaii to toil in the fields of cane and from there to toil in the Americas, North and South. Now other forces are about to sweep the Japanese settlers away from the Pacific coast, sweep them from Canada too, and Peru and other Latin American countries, sweep them behind barbed wire or prison, and sweep away the life they had carved for themselves in a harsh land.

## LAST DANCE

On a Sunday morning Speed set quietly out from his family's shingle-sided house and walked the fifty steps to the mambo house. It was as though he were leaving Japan and walking over water to paradise, to Cuba. He had kept secret his meetings with Billie – no one in the family except his older sister Yoshi knew. If they saw something they said nothing, hoping by not recognizing it it would not be true. He left as though he were going to cruise Crenshaw with Hershey but always rendezvoused with Billie at the Po'Boy Platter Shop. Hershey would laugh as he dropped off Speed. Ella Maya and Daedelus were usually there as well. They drank rum and listened to records, Ella Maya always had something simmering upstairs. She had taken a shine to Speed and viewed the budding love affair with amused wonder. Like most colored folks – except Daedelus – she had never had contact with her Nisei neighbors. But now she was like a mother to Speed and Billie. They had good times at the Po'Boy, spiced by a sense of danger and rule-breaking.

Most nights Daedelus brought out his old Buescher. They laughed and drank late, and Daedelus worked some of the rust out of his blues. They always played Machito's "Tanga" several times. It was Speed's favorite. Last night after the last record was played he picked up the platter, inspected the grooves and the label, the wonder of it. The wonder that a fragile disk could hold such power and beauty. The music echoed in him, vibrating his imagination as though Machito was playing out on Crenshaw, and L.A. was a tropical rather than desert place, the sky was undulating like some painting not yet dry, the air was soft with

moisture like fresh tears and "Tanga" was playing faintly, then a little louder each moment, but as it came closer it slowed till it was present in the air just over his head, dancing slow as a merengue, a stately dance, a dance of ceremony and courtship and acceptance. He saw himself dancing with Billie and was happy. The Trickster that had been hanging about smiled too, not unacquainted with sudden, inexplicable joy.

It was late the next morning when Speed knocked on Daedelus' door. Billie came out in her sundress, excited and troubled.

"Speed, have you heard? The radio. The Japanese are attacking Pearl Harbor."

Speed was stunned, disbelieving. They went into the living room where disjointed reports were coming in over the radio. Daedelus looked grimly at the floor.

"Things are going to change," he said.

They listened in silence for what seemed a long time but was only minutes. Daedelus was lost in his thoughts. Billie's tension grew. "Let's get out of here Speed. Let's go to the beach, that place we go, where the sand goes up the hill."

"How are we going to get there?" Speed replied woodenly.

"Let's ask Hidekazu for the car, like you did before."

"Yeah, okay," mechanically. He turned and walked the diagonal to the Yamashita house, not caring if anyone saw them.

Hidekazu came to the door. "You heard?" he said.

"Yeah."

"What do you think's going to happen?"

"Don't know. War, probably."

Hidekazu stood there smoking, a far-away look in his eyes.

"Hey Hide, can I borrow the car? Billie and me, we want to get out of here, go to the beach."

Hidekazu turned, looked into the house for a moment, then turned back to Speed.

"Yeah, sure."

They were mostly silent on the drive, didn't notice the rollers coming in under the overcast sky, lost in their reflections. Like before they built a fire, sat watching the waves till it was safe to talk.

"Speed, I'm scared."

"Yeah, me too."

"I'm scared of what will happen to us."

Speed looked at her: *Us, she thinks.* "We'll be okay," reflexively.

"Not here we won't."

"What do you mean."

"They won't let us be. They'll never let us be."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Everyone. Your family. Virgil. People. Society. They won't let us be."

Speed was silent for a moment. He couldn't hear the bombs dropping but he knew his world was changing.

"Maybe we could get out."

She looked at him. Billie's imagination was quick, quicker than Speed's, able to take her far away, anywhere but where she was. For that he loved her, and wished he too could fly like her. Her imagination took over now and spread out lavishly, it grew and scattered its seed over the blue Caribbean, squeezing out beautiful sweet brown almond-eyed children. Her voice was soft as a breeze over powder blue coral flats, and as full of wonder.

"We could go to Cuba. We could join a mambo band. You could play the drums. I could sing and dance. We could have beautiful brown babies."

"Yeah, that would be something. Cuba!" Speed went with her easily, gratefully, anywhere but here.

"Oh, you'd love Cuba. It's warm all the time, the ocean is bluer than blue. The people are friendly, and they just want to *sing* and *dance* and *eat*. People are every kind of color there. There aren't many Orientals, some Chinese. You'd be exotic. And everywhere you go there's music, mambo music. All kinds of music. Island music. We'd have the most popular band in the islands. Let's see, we could call ourselves ..."

"How about ... Los Orientals de Mambo."

"No. I got it: Los Diablos de Mambo. The Mambo Devils. We'd have such a good time! We'd travel around the islands, stay at nice hotels, and no one would make us come in the back entrance or get our food from the kitchen. We could eat in fancy dining rooms, cloth napkins, good silver and wine, and people would come up to us for our autographs, we'd be well known and loved."

"And when we were in the same town with Machito they would invite us to sit in with their band." Speed was getting into the fantasy.

"Yeah, and the next time they'd sit in with us. We'll have our own club. Let's call it El Paradiso. Los Diablos appearing at El Paradiso. Isn't that great! Everyone flowing along in fancy gowns or white suits, with hats, all kinds of hats, and the best cigars. Tropical drinks, rum drinks. Tall drinks. With the cigar and cigaret girl and the flower girl and the photographer girl, all beautiful and suave, the whole scene, like in the movies. A big dance floor. And really good food."

Billie jumped up dancing and Speed was up next to her in a flash. They laughed at their cleverness, giddy with it and the imagined life. The sun had broken through the marine layer, the

sand was warm, the water was quite cold, since this was not Cuba. It didn't matter. Billie started throwing off her clothes, she was rough on clothes, and ran screaming down to the water, nearly naked, wearing bra and panties, screaming, "Cuba Cuba Cuba." Speed just watched her, thinking, *What a strange flower, I hope I don't have to save her, I wonder if I could save her.* Billie called out to Speed but he wouldn't move. He just dug his toes into the sand, enjoying the feel of it. She waded around screaming in the shallow runout of the waves, now cursing him for a coward, then a square, then a Jap. Speed only smiled. Her hair was at maximum electricity, it had the unruly kink going off at all angles, like a bomb.

Billie ran back to the fire and threw herself breathless on Speed. They kissed while he dug his fingers into her buttocks as though he were kneading chopped onions into ground round. Her skin was cool and smooth and deep and buttery but she was trembling with troubled energy. She started tearing at Speed's clothes as she had hers, she was rough on clothes, and soon they were naked together. They each dropped to their knees kissing but she kept going down his torso till she possessed his penis and balls in her hands and from there her lips took over, and Speed was frozen, but feeling more strange than passionate under the circumstances, 200 feet from the roadway and barely hidden. Even so in the cool salty air his lean torso arcing back suggested a sculptured horse in a slow motion buck. He closed his eyes to the sky. But soon the rider wanted to be ridden. Billie turned around, still on her knees, put her wet chest and face in the sand and thrust her arms forward. Speed was inexperienced, started poking around, and after some trial found the place he wanted to be. The passage to the mysteries, but not her mystery. She babbled into the sand, half-words, then screamed as did Speed eventually. His

scream was briefer in duration, more jagged. Afterward he thought, *There's really something about doing it by the ocean.* They went down and washed themselves clean of cum in the mother of all come, releasing his sperm to the winter sea.

The mambo party was over. The real world had smashed its way in. In the days that followed Speed was angry and fearful, his emotions sweeping over him like hot and cold currents. Billie became quiet, withdrawn as a beast of burden as Christmas drew near. No more dancing and singing, no more fighting. One day Speed went over to Daedelus' place. By now he had dropped all secrecy but only Mama noticed. His mother was baffled, hurt, angry, but there was nothing she could do. The family had bigger worries after war was declared. In mid-December he walked up the familiar steps of the modest bungalow where his musical mentor lived with his gifted, troubled daughter. Daedelus came to the door.

"She's gone."

Speed stopped, disbelieving what he had heard.

"What do you mean?"

"She's gone Speed." Daedelus was morose. "She packed her bags and stole off. Last night. Left a little note, said goodbye to you."

"Where'd she go?"

"Back to Arkansas. Her mother. I guess things are tough out there."

Speed didn't hear the last part. Billie was gone. The green flashing moment of joy and laughter had passed out of his life. All he had left was himself.

**REIKO**

As unlike the vibrant Billie as Speed could imagine, Reiko was skinny and shy, almost painfully so. He had hung out with her a few times in L.A. before he met Billie but forgot her once he entered Billie's world. On the long train ride over the frigid high desert they met again, Speed self-conscious in dungarees, Reiko wearing her one good suit for the train ride. Soldiers had blacked out the windows. The captives had no idea where they were going, only that they were a long way from home, their lives spinning like tops, their fate out of their hands. Rumors were rampant. Fear was constant. In these surroundings Speed and Reiko were drawn to each other and rediscovered some dignity in their encounter. Once they arrived at their new quarters, a place called Rohwer, Arkansas, cleared from bottomland near the Mississippi River on Route 1, they became sweethearts. For Mama that was the one good thing about the camp, almost made it worthwhile. No black people, no Daedelus, no Billie, only Japanese people, their own kind. Speed was drawn to Reiko's surprising fierceness: She hated camp.

"Everyone says to *gaman*," she spoke softly but the intensity in her voice was apparent. "Hold on. Bear up. Don't complain. What are we holding on for?"

"I don't know. What else can we do? It's just the way it is." Speed was resigned to their fate.

"I wonder what any of us has to *gaman* for."

"Don't talk like that. We have to."

"They take our homes, take us out of school, we have to *gaman*? Can't be helped, they say. Bear up. *Gaman*. I hate



*gaman*. What are we holding on for?"

Speed had no answer. He could have repeated what their leaders were saying, that they had to prove they were good Americans. Patriots. Show them we can endure. He didn't have the heart to say it to her. He didn't believe it either.

The camp consisted of rows of shabby barracks. They had duties, they tried to be self-supporting, they reestablished schools, churches, farms, sewing clubs, baseball teams, planted gardens, they lived and died and fell in and out of love. In the summer it was miserably humid, in spring the camp was a quagmire and full of insects, in the winter it was bitter cold and the mud froze. Only then did the ground lose the smell of rot.

Cuba was a dream. It took Speed away from bitter existence:

*This place needs a little life. Mambo! If everyone learned the mambo ... The whole place'd be jumping, like Saturday night every night, riffing and grooving, a big band, and all these Japs shuffling around doing mambo, the old time farmers and these bent-over old ladies and the young hipsters and the idealistic No No boys and the children, the children! all of them doing mambo, forgetting their bitterness for a night. Billie and me teaching them. Yeah.*

*A whole city of Japs doing the Afro-Cuban, dancing in the world's loneliest place like it was no big deal.*

*Billie's here. Somewhere in Arkansas. She's no darker than me. She'd fit right in. Our children, brown children with big eyes. And all kinds of different hair, different dark fuzzy hair, what does it matter? Wonderful children!*

In the cramped barracks lying on his bed thinking these thoughts of freedom Speed sensed a breeze blowing over him. But there was no breeze; it was part of a dream that grew out of longing:

Billie came to him as though she had stepped out of Cuba, Billie wearing a colorful wraparound, looking native and completely at ease. They are at camp; the barracks floor is covered with palm mats, light brown and soft. Now she is standing on a beach, smiling at Speed. She is humming, a cloth loosely wrapped around her, and when Speed touches her it drops down to her waist and does not disturb her singing. As though on cue he lovingly cups both hands around one breast, her left breast, and holds it and lifts it slightly. Her breast is warm, his hands are warm. Now he is holding her face and she is speaking in her girlish voice. Billie stands up still naked to the waist and speaks but he cannot make out what she is saying. Now she is dancing. Speed cups his hands around her left breast. He lifts it slightly and brings his mouth to it, circling the aureole with his tongue. He envelops the nipple with his lips and moves the breast around with his hands. Their bodies overlap each other like a double exposed photo. She comes to earth beside him with her hands overhead, still holding his, still dancing. A balletic move. In a flash it occurs to Speed that he doesn't know what he's doing, she's moving like the breeze or the sunshine, a dream world kind of reality, and he's no dancer. How is this working? She dances running and has her hands over her head and now Speed flies behind flaglike and featherweight in slow motion.

A sudden concussion. Speed stops, looks up at a mushroom cloud on the horizon. The cloud is iridescent and changing, flowing with sparks, it looks strangely beautiful to Speed. The

wind rises and palms are bent to the ground. Speed holds onto the sand and somehow he is not swept away. The wind stops and silence dominates, death and sorrow. A light rain of sadness comes drifting down in white fluffs. People start arriving on the beach dressed in their Sunday morning or Saturday night best, as the case may be, as in a snowstorm. It's a funeral. Speed is conscious of his near nakedness, he is in undershorts, he does not speak to anyone. They begin a procession, music begins playing, an old spiritual, "Let My People Go." He recognizes Ella Maya and Daedelus, Pauline and Virgil too, he recognizes other faces from the neighborhood, most of them black. Then the whole camp, Rohwer, follows behind, all the Issei and Nisei prisoners singing, "Let My People Go."

In a flash the dream shifts mood like a New Orleans funeral shifting to march mode. It begins with drumming, a single drum echoing in a forest, then a scratchy 78 of Bessie Smith plays over the drums, like the blues over Africa. Machito's powerful "Tanga" comes on, the song Speed first heard at Daedelus's. After a while the horns drop away and only the drums continue, pure passionate flow. The people have been dancing all the while. Speed realizes they are celebrating. He joins the dancing procession and sees they are boarding a ship. At the gangplank is Billie. She is dressed as a geisha and is bowing and welcoming the people on board. The ship is luxurious, like a floating hotel, and there is food and drink and music. As Daedelus boards he sees Speed and exults,

"We're going back, come with us Speed!"

"Where are you going?"

"Why, Japan of course," and Daedelus climbs the gangplank with the rest of the celebrants, now singing a Bessie Smith song over the drums while dancing mambo.

Speed yells, "No! You can't do that! They don't want you. They hate you," but the gang is aboard and doesn't hear. The freedom ship is full and heading for the Far East. They have finally been released, black and yellow alike. A roaring of water begins and accelerates. The ship rises on a hill of water. The water floods the Sandwave. Daedelus and Ella Maya shout back, "Come with us."

"No. You'll die there. Don't go. You're free and proud and ... they hate that stuff. They'll make you *gaman*. They don't know how to mambo. Go to Cuba! You've got to go to Cuba!"

The shimmering wave lifts the luxury cruiser like an immense hand holding a miniature, and as it rises the sea sucks up into the hand and Speed can see myriad tiny creatures scuttling where the water has pulled back. Then ever so slowly the wave moves westward toward Japan. Speed is angry, upset, till a thought strikes him: They're bringing mambo! That's it! They're missionaries of mambo. They brought it and grew it and loved it and protected it and now they're taking it to all the lonely places that haven't heard it yet. Maybe I *should* have gone with them, Speed thinks. He wants to be nurtured and loved and protected by the mambo. He looks around. Billie is next to him. He reaches out to her but she pushes him away.

"Stupid niggers," she says. She drives Hidekazu's car across the ocean like a boat, she speeds into the mushroom cloud and disappears. Speed's sorrow and anger clash like two waves meeting. The Free Monkey stands with a smile on his narrow face, then breaks out in raucous laughter. For the moment he is happy.

Speed jumped up fully awake and rummaged through his

suitcase. He found his 78 of Machito's "Tanga," handling it like an artifact, looking in wonder at the green label. The next day he found Reiko and played Machito for her on the central barrack's only phonograph. She was delighted and took to the dance like a natural. They danced together, alone on a rainy afternoon in early spring. They danced as often as they could, holding onto the thin platter as though it were a life preserver in an ocean of hopelessness. They danced through the spring, green on green.

According to Papa Arkansas was green as Japan. He spent hours observing the forest. It was almost as though he were home. But for Speed and Reiko the camp was dulling routine. Eventually they risked living. After months they escaped on a humid late spring day ... ducked through a hole in the fence for a few hours of freedom. Everyone in camp knew about the hole in the fence but only a few dared break the rules. They ran for the woods, drawn to the shadows. The surface of the flooded creek the first time they saw it was dark and greasy-looking in the overgrown woods a mile from the big-bellied Mississippi. The flooded creek, choked and forbidden, a wild place, thrashed by the spring flood. They were free. They were happy, laughing like kids, crazy after all the weeks cooped up in camp. They had found the scorned wilderness. It made them whole for a while.

One day at the creek Reiko came to him. She had put flowers in her hair. She sat next to Speed stringing flowers gracefully, as though she had all the time in the world. Reiko worked while Speed watched. Then she stopped, looked at Speed and took loose flowers in both hands and threw them up in the air laughing. He kissed her then, and put his hand on her breast.

She said, "That's nice, the one closest to the heart." *What is she talking about?* and kissed her and her lips melted into him as though they were one skin of the same papaya bitten softly into,

red and yellow, bitten lips, bitten fruit, softly bitten they kissed and they kissed. Speed stood up.

"Let me show you this slow dance." He began to dance and teach Reiko to dance a merengue, old-fashioned and graceful, like Billie had taught him, and while dancing Speed heard the beat weaving in and out of the sound of water. He was chosen for sure. He was chosen. Reiko's hands were warm, her breast was warm. Speed took her hands and held them over her head. He kissed her neck from ear to ear, left to right ear. Somehow she continued dancing and smiling. She danced light as a feather.

They were not locals. So many things they didn't know about: unseen loggerheads, widowmakers and things that could drag a person to death. One time, fully clothed, Reiko was caught by some snag like a claw that they never saw that dragged her downstream to the big eddy that played with her for agonizing minutes while Speed went crazy pulling on her from the bank and nearly got sucked in himself but it wasn't his time till with the last bit of strength that surged out of them Speed dragged her out to the bank where she gasped and coughed for minutes. It was a close call and Speed thought he had lost her.

After that they still went there, at Reiko's insistence, sneaked off through the mosquitos and the heat, but wore nothing when they went in, no clothes to catch and drag a person down. They didn't care that it was dangerous, they were young and special and bitter. They were in love, enough for Reiko to accept his advances on the grassy bank, both of them naked and wet. She knew enough to grab his penis and satisfy him and later she admitted she wasn't sure she loved him. Speed didn't care and kissed her anyway and wanted more and Rei responded each time

with her hands for a minute then gently pushed him away but still he loved her desperately, like he loved Billie but without the unreality.

There was a last time. They were walking back from the river and they passed a shack. A young, skinny white woman wearing a thin cotton housedress saw them and yelled out in panic to her children. She was gaunt and the veins in her throat stood out as she screamed. Speed never forgot the fear in her voice as she hustled her children inside, glancing over her shoulder. She was afraid, as though Speed and Rei were the enemy. *They're afraid of us!* thought Speed. He was shocked. They said nothing walking back but Rei started to cry, quietly, Rei who had been so strong and fierce. Speed was afraid her sadness would overwhelm her. He said nothing, should have said something, but he didn't. What could he say? They got back to the gap in the fence and still couldn't talk. They never talked about it. Reiko became withdrawn, avoided company, even Speed.

A week later Rei dressed up in her suit, sneaked alone out the gap in the fence, went over the fields to the woods and sank herself down in the flooded creek wearing her good suit, the one she wore on the train coming out to Arkansas, so skinny, she was always so skinny, even Mama couldn't put meat on her bones. Her breath stopped underwater. Speed found her the next day, caught in flooded branches. Speed grieved as he watched the flooded creek lap against her legs, still half submerged, while holding her head in his hands: *She would have never drifted to the big river, if that was her intention. She would never have made the clean salty ocean. The creek is too choked for that. Still, she was the only one who got out. That's what she wanted, to fly out of camp and watch the expressions on their faces as she left ... She finally did it.*

In the days after the funeral his bitterness grew. *An honorable death? The gods are not satisfied. No higher purpose. She was alone. Underwater. No freedom. No mambo. No Cuba. Her country had declared war on her, and finally she surrendered.*

"She couldn't *gaman*. She saw their fear," Speed reflected. "After that she couldn't *gaman*. There was nothing to *gaman* for."

After that Speed could barely *gaman*. Reiko's death was almost more than he could bear. Mama had loved her too, more than simply as a potential wife for her son. To Mama Reiko had the true Japanese spirit – Mama also wasn't so sure they should just *gaman*, like they had always done. The camp was beyond *gaman*. Perhaps Reiko was right. Life is not more precious than the sword. She kept her thoughts to herself. But no one took it as hard as Speed. He moved through camp as though his spirit had left him, as though he were a zombie.

The war was winding down and finally he got word he could leave, as long as he stayed away from the west coast, still a suspected terrorist, as long as he had somewhere to go. In his mind anywhere was better than Rohwer. He thought immediately of Billie. She was somewhere in Arkansas. He decided to find her. As a final gesture he went back to the creek. One last time.

Squatting by the water Speed let his awareness wander back to Reiko, and then Billie, till they melted: He sees them sitting skin on skin by the creek, back to back, front to front, back to front. Other voices come, strange, faraway voices, but somehow familiar, smoky, urging him, *If this should happen to you, if you should lose all hope, let the wave pull you all the way in, let yourself be swept out to sea, the vast watery plain, the mother of*



*come, till you drown.*

Eyes closed, Speed tasted the saltiness on his lips remembered from Billie's skin, that time by the Sandwave, after Pearl Harbor day. There was a circle of salt, crusty and pure, surrounding the emptiness of him. The ancient purity. The circle that protects him. Salt dried from the immersion. Salt licked from the clean dark skin of Billie. He wants to let himself be swept out to sea. He sees the currents of the creek twining like ropes of yarn, he sees Reiko pulled by the flow, then he sees steam rising from the unraveling.

"Be nice if it was a hot spring," he spoke aloud. *She could have been purified, cleansed, before she ...*

*Old worship of steaming water, island of volcanoes, bubbling hot springs. Earth-creating power, the old volcano mixed with water. Fire and water. Scrub yourself raw-clean for a long long time, till you are pure, really pure, for the holy cauldron. It makes sense. Life is hard. Honor above all. When all else fails, the honor of death. An offering to the old gods. A clean death worthy of gods, the Japanese religion. Be ready to die. Endure at any cost, gaman, but be ready for the clean death.*

*They tell us the loser is the winner: makeru ga kachi: They tell us it takes a bigger man to give in. What if they have guns? force of arms? death to deliver? Delivery of death. Oh God Reiko. Beautiful Rei. No beauty to her sacrifice. The loser is the loser. Casualties of war. Prisoners of war. "Nothing clean around here," he said aloud. "Nothing clean."*

He stood, tossed a stick into the water, spoke aloud, "That's over. Machito's in Cuba and Cuba's alive. Billie's alive. I'm alive. Let's get out of this place. Don't you see Rei? It's warm in Cuba. The ocean is bluer than blue. The people dance, really dance. They swing like a big band but the leader is the drum.

Not like Japan where there's just the one sad drum that everyone has to dance to. In Cuba they swing. We can be happy there."

He was crying. His heart held the suffering of his people but the joy was far across the blue Caribbean. Cuba.

**MOJO**

His hands were clawlike, shiny. The skin was ebony, but the kind that had a luster of brown like walnut. The rest of his skin was smooth and glistening but the hands, on these the skin was stretched and cracked. He knew many stories from the other world, and these he applied to his doings in this world. The main story is that of power, his power, not of this world, the small amount he was able to coax out of the other world, this was his passion, this was his source. But like a dying spring his source of power had run out, he had found he was a flawed medium. He had known his powers since he was a child. He was looked upon in the area as the spirit source. His bitterness was great when he found his power was of the second order, his gift only good enough to find the true mediums.

Florida had been his great find. He had soothed her when she was afraid, when the power first came to her, when she was possessed and saw movements among the weeds and trees, when she first saw the nibbling and gaping spirits of those things and heard their pleas and demands, their squeaks and groans. Her husband had fled, not able to handle her hearing of the voices. Mojo had taught her to listen to the plants, to not be afraid, had taught her everything he could. She alone had figured how to speak to them, to ask them for help. She had become the touchstone, able to call up the orisha without his help. So he turned his attention to the daughter.

He heard she was back. In her he sought the power he coveted. He taught her to call up the possession and she reveled in the dance. But like the brown cast to the color of his ebony,

perhaps like the impurity that over time blocked the fullness of his power, he fell back on the darker powers he did not fully understand. He wanted her for himself, the daughter, and he took her. But he could never capture her spirit. But now she was back. He would have a second chance. He decided to call the Free Monkey – Eshu, the Trickster – and bid him do his pleasure. But the orisha is never a possession. The shaman was taking a risk calling up powers he didn't understand. He was desperate. He had lost the mother, perhaps the daughter could be his. His clawlike hand curled around a feathered stick, he sucked in his breath suddenly, held it, and exhaled with a high pitched shriek.

"Daedelus, it's Speed." Speed had called in a few favors to call long distance on the camp phone.

"Speed!" Daedelus was genuinely surprised. It had been over a year. "Where you at?"

"Still in Arkansas."

"What's going on?"

"I'm getting out." Speed's voice was excited.

"Hey, that's great. When will I see you?"

"I don't know exactly. I, uh ... where's Billie? How's she doing?"

Daedelus was silent for a moment. "Billie. I don't hear from her too much. In fact I haven't heard from her since she left."

"She still with her mother?"

"Yeah, far as I know."

"I ... I thought I'd visit her, you know, once I get out of here."

"Hey, that would be great. You could look in on her."

"Where exactly is she?"

"Her mama lives outside a little town called Yellow Bayou

off Highway 65, south of you. You're in Rohwer, right? Go south on 65, then take Route 144 and then head left. Got that? She's a mile out of town, middle of nowhere. Off Levee Road. Still goes by Verrette, I think. Florida Verrette. You'll have to ask around."

"Okay. I got it."

"Hey Speed."

"Yeah."

"If you see her, tell her I love her."

"Yeah, sure."

"And if you go down there, be careful."

"Yeah. I know."

Speed knew but his immediate concern was money. He knew he couldn't hitch hike in the South. No one would pick him up. Or even worse, someone would pick him up and ask questions or worse. He called on Hidekazu, who was in camp with his mother. His father was in a high security camp called Tule Lake in California, where they sent those suspicious of subversion. Anyone a member of a group with ties to Japan was under suspicion. The old man had been among the first to be rounded up.

"Hidekazu, I need some dough." Speed was nervous but determined. Hidekazu took a final drag on his cigaret, flicked it away, stood and went into the barracks. When he came out he held an envelope out to Speed.

"This is what I've saved up."

Speed opened it. Several hundred dollars.

"How much can I borrow?"

"Just leave us a little. We don't need much." Speed took a few bills.

"Thanks Hide. Only need enough for a bus ticket and a few

dollars more. Got to get out, you know."

"Yeah, forget it. Pay me back when you can. Hey, where you going?"

"I'm ... uh, looking for Billie. She's somewhere in Arkansas. South of here. With her mother."

Hidekazu wasn't easily impressed but now he couldn't think of a thing to say to his old friend, just stared, amazed at the change. Speed dropped his gaze, turned and went.

A shack among softwood trees and hanging moss, faint sun through the filtering canopy, musty smell of bottomland hanging like smoke. It had taken Speed an hour of carefully threading the maze of spongy roads through forest and swamp once he left Highway 65. The bus ride had been uneventful but for the stares of the locals. He pretended to himself he was Chinese, a man on an errand, pretended not to see the rattiness of his suitcase, pretended not to fear the hostility of the bus driver when he asked to be dropped off in the middle of nowhere. Highway 65 at Route 144. The air was thick with humidity. Speed moved as though through water, slowly, gracefully, up to the shack, calling out as he neared it, holding his fear tight to his chest. It didn't pay to surprise a person out here.

"Anyone home? Hello in there."

"Who's there?"

"That you Mrs. Verrette?"

"What you want?"

"Is Billie there? I'm a friend of hers."

The door opened a crack. Florida Verrette looked as though she had stayed up all night, the skin beneath her eyes was pulled down, the color still luminous.

"Uh, your daughter Osbeth. Is she here?"

The door opened and Speed entered. Weeds hung from the walls and rafters, drying. It was as though he had left the canopy of forest and entered a cave, the smell of weeds hanging low and musty and silent, piles of herbs littering every flat surface, some of it pulverized to powder. The locals still called on herbal familiars for love problems, body ailments, spirit disorders. He had heard Billie say that her mother had become a plant lady, but he had no idea what that meant. His eyes were wide, his spirit oppressed, claustrophobic, fearful.

"I, uh, I'm a friend of Billie's ... Osbeth's. We were friends in L.A. With Daedelus." Right away Speed regretted saying anything about Daedelus. Flerida just looked at Speed out of the corner of her eye. She went back to a table full of little piles of ground herbs, dried flowers, what looked like scraps from the forest floor, and small creatures, frogs perhaps, or beetles, dried; she went back to grinding things, always moving, keeping busy, humming slightly, swaying. The shack had a good sized, screened porch, a small bedroom, a kitchen in the corner, a wood stove. He felt like he was back in the barracks at Rohwer. He savored the homey feeling from seeing the stock pot simmering on the stove. The aroma, however, was bitter as a plant lady would make the world. Speed simply sat there for nearly an hour, mesmerized, while she created the world, adding a pinch of herbs now and then to the dark brown serum brewing on the stove.

Billie came in to the steamy room, a bag of groceries in her arms.

"Speed!"

Speed stood up, they ran to each other, held each other, Speed held Billie as much from relief as love. He kissed her lightly. Flerida just went on scraping and pulverizing, ignored

them both. Billie spoke breathlessly, "Let me just put this chicken on to boil and we'll go out." Billie quickly threw together a pot of chicken and vegetables, garlic, salt and pepper, filled it with water and set it on the stove to simmer. Against the strong smell of the herbal gruel it was impossible to smell the aroma of dinner.

They went out to the dirt road.

"Are you on the run?"

"Nah. Got out legal. They're letting people out who got a place to go, so long as it's not in California or the west coast. I told them I was working for you." Billie led them out into the woods till they reached a shallow lake, marshlike, full of stumps, the water dark as barley soup. Billie sat staring at the water; Speed was uncomfortable with her silence.

"So, how's it been going? I mean, with your mother and all."

"It's rough. You don't know how she is. She don't hardly take care of herself. And she's been hanging out with ... bad people. Same ones as before. That's why I left in the first place. What about you? How was it in the camp?"

"Same shit. Nobody wants us here and we don't want to be here. Mama and Papa are still in the camp. They'll head back home soon. To L.A. I hate Arkansas."

Billie's eyes went from hazel to yellow specks in the grey, but Speed didn't see because they were both looking out to the horizon. She was silent for a full minute while a movie played in the theater of her mind. Something shifted in her, a mood, a memory, a feeling.

Her eyes, yellow specks amid grey, were wet. Speed loosened his arms around her.

"I'm scared." Billie's voice was childlike. She trembled as though a fit were grabbing her.



"What are you talking about?"

She stood up in front of Speed, he looked at her. Her eyes were yellow-flecked and spinning. He stood up, tried to put his arms around her. She pushed him off, angry, confused.

"Tell me why! I got to know!" she screamed.

"I don't know. What are you talking about?" Speed raised his voice.

"Why do they keep me down?"

Speed froze, his voice coming from faraway memory. Reiko and him walking by a shack. He knew, or thought he knew, what Billie was talking about. "I don't know." The woman screamed at her children to come in. "Maybe they're afraid of you." The screaming echoed inside him. The fear enveloped him like smoke.

"That don't make sense. Why should they be afraid of me? I just want to live. I don't mess with them." Billie was agitated.

"They're afraid of you. They're afraid of us."

"That's ridiculous."

"They're afraid anyway. They've made themselves afraid."

"Why? Why do that?"

"I don't know. They've always done it."

"But why, Speed, why? You got to tell me."

"Because it takes their mind off things."

Billie suddenly calmed. "You mean things they're afraid of?"

It was just something Speed sensed so he said it. "Yeah, that's it. What they're really afraid of."

Billie stopped, then turned and walked toward the lake. Speed walked beside her. After a minute she continued:

"Well I'm not afraid of anything."

"You must be afraid of something. We're all afraid of

something. I'm afraid of something. I'm afraid of drowning."

"Yeah. Okay. Alright then. I'm afraid of spirits."

"Other people are afraid of things too. Some people are afraid of heights."

Billie raised her voice, "Did you hear me Speed? I'm afraid of spirits. Aren't you afraid of spirits?"

"Spirits? What kind of spirits?"

She whispered, "The kind that get inside you and make you do things you don't want to do."

"I don't know about that kind of spirit." He stared into the tea-stained water. They said nothing for a minute. Speed continued:

"Mama talks about the Guardians. She saw them when she was a girl in Japan."

"Guardians? What are they?"

"Some kind of old statues, wood carvings. They're huge anyway. Ornate. They stand guard over temples. Temple Guardians. They're supposed to be some kind of demons, you know. To scare off the evil. They used to be painted up bright colors to make 'em scary, but now most of them are black from fires. The Temple burned down. They're always burning down over there. Everything's made of wood. Those Temple Guardians really moved her when she was little. She still talks about them. It's way out how she talks about them ... like they're real. I think she actually believes in them. They're supposed to be demons, you know. I don't know, never seen one. Probably look like some kind of dragon."

Billie turned and walked back from the shoreline, thinking about what Speed said, "... some kind of dragon." She sat down, or rather, she flatted down like a punctured beach ball and began to weep. "He's got ... chanting and chattering ... screaming so

loud ... picking me up ... holding me down ... I want to fly away...."

Speed sat down next to her and traced in the dirt with a stick, waited for her to slow down, lost in his own thoughts. "Yeah. I feel that way, feel like I can't get away, they're always yelling at me. Can't stand being around them. They drive me crazy." Billie stopped sobbing, looked at Speed:

"What are you talking about?"

"My family."

"I think you're lucky. You don't have crazy spirits like I do. You got family. Or else Guardians. You know where you're from. Oh yeah, your mother's kinda crazy but she's only looking out for you. I like Akemi a lot too."

"Akemi," thought Speed. Akemi who didn't know about her husband's roving eye, or else chose not to see. Hershey had bragged about his conquests. Speed didn't like it: *Hershey's fucked up like the rest of us. Just trying to make it. The one guy that has everything – a steady job, a wife and kids – can't keep from fucking up. Maybe she makes it easier for him, the girlfriend ... nah. He's a fool. A goddamn fool. Billie's right.*

Speed's memory took him back to camp. "We're just inmates anyway. Guys dying in France while their families are parked in Arkansas, guns pointed at them, barbed wire fences."

In Speed's mind a picture of Reiko, so strong but even she .... He continued, "Yeah. One-way tickets. No place to run. No money. We're here to stay. Inmates."

"At least you're not a black man."

Billie put her leg over Speed's, her eyelids rippled as though an elephant had passed in front of her. *I need more room, he's too close. Got to get away. Someone's coming.*

Speed looked at her: *She's exciting. Everything about her's*

*exciting. It must be the mambo. That's what it is about her. Sex and mambo. That's all I need.*

"What do you catch out there?" Billie had come suddenly wide awake and was staring at the water, the sun low, glinting off the surface. She saw breakers coming in like rolls of waxed paper unraveling in her imagination.

"What do you mean? I don't know what kind of fish are here."

"No. I mean in California, at the beach we went to. The Sandwave. What do you catch?"

"Oh. Perch mostly. Sometimes corbina, rockfish. Occasionally we get a little sand shark. That's about it."

Billie repeated the names of the fish. Perch, corbina, rockfish, shark. Perch, corbina, rockfish, shark. Perch, corbina ... whole schools of them. Whole schools. In the bottomless. A cold fear took her. *Something fishlike? with scales? Something. From the bottomless.*

"I wish we were at that beach right now. Looking at the waves. I can see them. Can't you?" Billie's eyes were closed. She was somewhere else. Speed closed his eyes too, allowed himself to drift.

"Yeah." *What do you think Rei? We could dance at the beach, the clean ocean. Wouldn't have to sneak through the fence.*

"Who's Ray?"

"Oh. Sorry. It's short for Reiko, my old girlfriend. She died. I didn't say anything to you about her, how did you know about her?"

"You just said her name. I heard it anyway."

Speed just looked at her.

"Was she in camp?" Billie asked.

"Yeah."

"How'd she die?"

"She ... uh, well, she drowned. We used to sneak out of camp, go swimming in this creek nearby. One day she ... got fed up with it ... killed herself. Drowned." Tears came to his eyes.

They were silent for a minute, then Billie got up and started back to the shack, the sun was down, bugs were coming out. After a while she started humming a melody, a Cuban song: "*Pero te acordaras ... al oír esta canción. Pero te acordaras ... al oír esta canción.*" "You will remember when you hear this song." It was the song she sang whenever the old pain came around. Speed didn't hear, lost in his own pain. The shimmering figure walking beside them was crying tears invisible to this world.

Speed and Billie took over the screened porch. It was still humid in the fall but the heat was less enveloping, less watery. They fell into a routine. Florida would go out to the forest and swamp to collect things. Occasionally Speed and Billie would go along to help. People would come by in the morning or evening to purchase or barter for some potion to cure an ailment or, perhaps, a spirit sickness or a love problem. When they had money they would buy a few things in town. When they didn't there was the garden or the forest. Florida knew what was good to eat. She hardly ever spoke, left Speed and Billie pretty much to themselves. They had the run of the wilderness, and Speed was happy with his freedom and with Billie.

One evening a scrawny black man showed up, hard to tell how old he was, his main feature was his piercing eyes that darted about the shack from Billie to Speed to Florida. His hands were cracked and clawlike. Behind him in the doorway they could see

a dozen others. As soon as they appeared Billie became agitated.

"Let's get out of here Speed," she whispered. She dragged him out with her, even though the bugs were swarming. Billie was scared. Speed hadn't sensed fear from her before.

"What's wrong?"

"That guy. Don't go near him. Mojo."

"Who is he? Is he coming around to buy a potion?"

"No. He's coming around to check up on Mama ... and me. He's one of the ... uh, spirit people."

"What's that mean?"

Billie didn't try to answer, just kept walking away from the house. They could hear his angry voice shouting inside: "Where's Osbeth? Where'd she go?" Over and over.

"We got to go, Speed. It's not safe for you here."

"What do you mean?"

"We got to get out of here. You got any money?"

"Yeah. Got some from Hidekazu."

Billie was shaking with fear.

"Let's go now. Leave this place."

"What do you mean ... I got to get my stuff anyway. The money's back there. What's wrong?"

"He's gonna make trouble." Billie took a deep breath, calmed herself. They were well away from the shack, out by the shallow lake. "Mama, she started hanging around with the spirit people ... after Daddy left for California. She got real strange, wouldn't talk no more, except she talks to spirits, then one day Mojo shows up. He's evil. He uses his power for evil. He says Mama's got power. Big power. He uses her, for her power. Him and his crowd come at night, dance all night like they're possessed. Mama's there, she goes into a trance and then she talks strange. I can't stand to watch it. He says he brings the

orishas to help the people but he's not for the people. He needs Mama's power to attract them – orishas are spirits. He's mean, he makes them do evil things. I hate him. Tonight they'll have their meeting, he'll bring other people over to the house, they'll stay up late, carrying on and getting crazy, dancing wild."

Billie looked at Speed in the twilight. "Better if you don't go around there. He'll try to put a spell on you but Mama won't help him if she can help it. She likes you."

Speed said nothing. *Put a spell on me! That's wild. Her Mama likes me?*

They decided to walk into town. As they passed by the shack they could hear loud chanting and drumming. Inside was a scene of craziness. The room was like a steambath. The people were doing a shuffling dance in a circle. A few of them were spewing out otherworldly sounds. In the center was Mojo, rolling and hopping one legged and chattering like a monkey, his eyes red and jittery, out of control, biting and shrieking. Speed and Billie's senses were alert with fear. The sound was raucous. They walked quickly through the wooded gloom.

There was a lone colored bar in town, more like a roadhouse, but tonight it was quiet, bartender and a couple of old drunks. The action was at Florida's house. They each ordered a beer.

"Why would he put a spell on me?"

Billie looked at Speed. "He's afraid of you so he'll lash out. He's got power. Bad things happen to some people around here. When that happens everyone says it's Mojo."

They sat in silence for a long time, lost in thought. Speed started playing tunes on the jukebox, local race records by artists he had never heard of. Blues. R&B. Somehow it fit. He played juke songs far into the night.

Around midnight people started drifting in. They looked at

Speed and Billie, curious, but no one came close to them. Billie recognized several and whispered to Speed.

"They were over at the house. They won't mess with you. You're bad luck to them. Mojo must've done a spell and they all know it. They won't mess with you. Afraid the evil will rub off on 'em. Strange they quit early, usually they go all night."

Speed got a prickly feeling, hearing that he was maybe carrying a spell. *What the hell. Can't be any worse than what's already happened to me.* A grinning in the spirit world, like a puff of smoke.

"Mojo's gonna make trouble. Mojo's gonna make trouble," Billie repeated under her breath, "Got to get out, got to ... get out." She shuddered as though a bad current went through her. Her voice changed to that of a little girl, rattling on and on, agitated, fearful. Speed was amazed at the shifting of her voice. Like a shift of her face, he observed to himself, as her girlish chatter went on. She was agitated, fearful and angry by turns, talking in that little girl voice. Talking like she was a different person.

"She knew I was going. I didn't tell Mama I was going. I had to run. Don't you see, Daddy? Mojo was coming around and I had to run. I ran away with a musician to New York. Do you know how Mama said Goodbye, Daddy? That first night I opened my suitcase ... she had left a bag of powdered leaves and roots and such in my coat pocket. She knew I was going. That was her way of saying, Goodbye and take care, honey. That was her manna. That was all she could give me. Mama couldn't talk to me or hold me or feed me. She couldn't say nice things. Just wrapped things up for me. Always wrapping things up, tying them up real nice in old newspaper or magazine or wrap in big old leaves, tie it up with twine or vine. Dried bones, put them in the ice box, wrap up little packets of anything. One time she



wrapped her old slipper and walked around the house with one slipper for a week till we found the other. She would do that with pictures or ... she wrapped a picture of you and hid it. After you left. She would wrap a spoon, or a ... why she do that Daddy? Why'd she have to wrap stuff up? like Christmas every day? I'd open packets, see what hairbrush or mirror or shoe might be hid there, or dried bones or weeds or sticks or rocks. But never flowers. Never no flowers, she never brought flowers in the house, never wrapped up no flowers. You got flowers Daddy? You must have lots of flowers. I want flowers."

Her voice was childlike and sorrowful. She whispered as though telling a deep secret. Then she shifted again, her mood twisting toward agitation. She spoke quickly.

"Is this the train took you away? escaping me and Mama and now me, escaping Mojo, train took you to the promise land, didn't take me with you, lef' me to watching seeds sprouting from the walls and ceilings, Mama hangin' weeds 'n roots all ovah house, hangin' from rafters and walls, weeds whippin' like swamp moss whip round by 'cane wind, can't eat 'em, can't live in a house full of weeds. House fulla weeds come to no hope. Mama leave the wash up hanging for days and then she take and dump the clothes on the ground so she can hang weeds. She tells me to run every time Mojo come by. I got light skin, Daddy, is that why Mojo wants me? Why didn't you take me? If I dance real good will you take me with you Daddy? Mojo made me dance. He come by the house. He hits me. He makes me dance. He holds me up in the air and I'm scared. Then he holds me down and lays on me. Then I go flying."

The dream talk faded to dreamless sleep, the shivering returned, then suddenly stopped. Billie opened her eyes, looked at Speed for a split second. He saw her eyes widen in fear.

Suddenly she turned and ran full speed out the door heading back to the shack. Speed ran after her, barely keeping up in the patchy moonlight, down the dirt road, the long driveway to the house. As they burst in the door they smelled a melange of herbs, the shack in ruins, the carefully kept piles of powder spilled to the floor, Mojo beating Florida, kicking her, yelling, redden, the knots of his neck muscles stringy like a chicken's. Florida just cowered in a corner, making no sound. Billie leaped at Mojo but he swatted her away. Speed was frozen. Billie ran into the bedroom, came out with a gun, pointed at Mojo, pulled the trigger, the gun misfired. Mojo turned, his eyes burning, came at Billie, twisted the gun from her hands, slapped her so hard she spun across the room, then he was kicking her, Billie screaming, Mojo yelling. As though in slow motion Speed picked up the gun, took a couple of steps up close to Mojo and pulled the trigger. The black man shuddered. Speed kept thinking, *Inmates*. He thought about Reiko. Anger froze his mind. He pulled the trigger again. He emptied the pistol into him, screaming over the din of gunfire. A cloaked figure stood silently in the corner observing the action. Speed heard the jungle howling and chattering outside in the darkness.

Speed watched Mojo crumple. He felt disembodied, as though someone else were pulling the trigger. Machito's great "Tanga" began playing in his head, quite loudly, drowning out the reverberation of gunshots. The congas carried the groove, and he was whipped away as by a palm branch to the other place. Cuba. Daedalus stood before him playing his horn, then Billie appeared, dancing mambo, holding out her hand, and he took it, and he understood the dance. Even Mojo understood, though his was a dance of death. It was a way to survive. He let the wave sweep him all the way out. The howling never faded.

The next day they carried Mojo's body out to the swamp, far past the shallow lake, along trails that Flerida knew from hunting, out to a section of swamp nearly dark for the overhanging forest, dark of water too, like it was meant for this sort of thing. They weighted the body down with rocks and watched him sink into the watery gruel.

"I wouldn't help him with his spell," said Flerida, watching. Speed was amazed, having barely heard her speak till now.

A month later they heard the camp was closing. At the end only the old folks and children were left. And the graves of the ones who had died, mostly old folks who couldn't handle the change, and one suicide. For the most part they drifted back to L.A. Home. Back to the old neighborhoods, even in some cases back to the same houses.

Speed and Billie lived together with Flerida, helping her replenish her supply of herbs and roots and dried animals, helping her get her life back on track. She seemed happier, talked a bit more, was fond of Speed. No one mentioned Mojo. Speed kept the whole event under water with his other painful memories. Billie was brighter now, Speed often caught her looking at him strangely. She seemed happy and he liked the attention.

One day a car came up the long driveway: a police cruiser with a new coat of paint that barely hid the battered condition of the automobile. Speed and Billie cut out the back. The officer was a large man, white, unhappy with his errand.

"Hello in there."

"What you want?"

"That you Mrs. Verrette?"

"What you want?"

"I just need to ask you a couple of questions."

The door opened a crack.

"We're looking for your daughter Osbeth. Know where she is?"

"No. She left in the middle of the night. Showed up one night the same way."

"Know where she gone off to?"

"That girl been comin' and goin' like that for years. No sense lookin' around here. She gone."

"Mind if I look around?"

"What she done?"

He just pushed his way into the shack. He had heard that Florida Verrette had become a plant lady, but he had never been to her place. He noticed the neat piles of powdered herbs and other concoctions. Uncomfortable, he searched quickly. Her daughter Osbeth was nowhere to be found. Before he left he asked one question: Had she seen Mojo around?

"Mojo don't come by here no more."

After that they pooled their money, found a beat up Model A sitting behind the lone gas station in town. Its windshield was star-cracked, the seats gone bad, the bumpers twisted, the fenders battered, the back seat removed. The rear had been cut out and a wooden stake bed added. It was a country truck that had been used to haul car parts, crops, moonshine, it smelled of stale grass and oil, Speed was able to hold it together with baling wire and rags, elbow grease and rope. The engine ran good but leaked water and oil. The man gladly took his money. They hit the road.

**BLUESMAN**

*My heart is sad and lonely,  
For you I sigh, for you dear only.  
Why haven't you seen it?  
I'm all for you, Body and Soul!*

*I spend my days in longing  
And wond'ring why it's me you're wronging.  
I tell you I mean it,  
I'm all for you, Body and Soul!*

Daedelus filled his emptiness with the well-scratched sound that poured over him like orange-blossom honey: *Billie Holiday at the Philharmonic, regal and lonely and lovely, singing sad as all creation. Lady Day, come to L.A.!* "When you took away romance." *She had something inside, didn't she!* "It looks like the ending," *she had something she couldn't say, tried to say it somehow.* "One more chance." "One more chance." "Dear," the lines stretched lovingly, lingeringly, holding up a teetering ending: "I'm all for you body and soul." *How does she hold herself together body and soul?*

*Lady Day come all the way out here from New York City, singing about how her heart's breaking. Soldiers coming home. All the stories being told now. 'Cept for a few that will never. Pour me the good stuff, man. Good enough to get me through. Good enough for strangers.*

Daedelus moved catlike between phonograph, kitchen and window, taking a peek in the bedroom where Ella Maya's form

mounded the bedspread. At the window he could make out the Yamashita house. It was late for them not to be out on a sunny morning. *Where the hell is everybody?* The late fall sun lays itself over-bright and chalky on the cityscape. Victoria Ave., Yamashita, Verrette and Miyamoto, two houses down and across, part of the brown and yellow landscape of Crenshaw. Same as before the war, like nothing's changed. But something's changed.

Hidekazu came out front, sat on the curb, took out a cigaret and smoked. He just sat in the chalky sun and smoked. After a minute he looked at the sky, stubbed out the smoke and slowly rose, angled the quiet street straight for Daedelus's house, a slight limp. Daedelus came away from the window and opened his door. Billie Holiday still singing "Body and Soul."

"Hidekazu. Come in."

He had never been in Daedelus's house. Like his parents he was cordial to Daedelus. They knew him as a friend of Speed. That was as far as it went.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee? I have some on. Or I can make you tea."

"No need to trouble yourself."

"It's no trouble." Daedelus went into the kitchen to brew some tea. He knew it wasn't the kind of tea that Hidekazu was used to. Hidekazu followed him into the kitchen and sat down at the table. The Kibei spoke first.

"Speed's been out there longer than I thought he would." Hidekazu paused to listen to the 78 playing in the living room.

"What music is that?"

"Billie Holiday. She played here a couple of years ago."

"She sounds so sad. Is that who your Billie is named after?"

"I think so. She named herself. It's not her real name. You know she's my daughter, don't you?"

Hidekazu nodded. "She's pretty."

"Thank you, Hidekazu."

He sat quietly watching Daedelus prepare tea. "I think maybe Speed ... was in love with your Billie."

Daedelus looked up, "Yeah. Maybe so."

Hidekazu sat listening to Billie Holiday till the needle scratched and lifted, wondering what was going through his old buddy to keep him in Arkansas with Billie. The mystery bothered him. Then, speaking as though to himself, the man of few words spoke:

"That song, it's about a feeling. A man and a woman. Body and soul. What Speed feels for your Billie." He stopped as though trying to remember.

"You know, when I came back here from Japan I didn't remember L.A. much at all, even though I was born here. My parents sent me to school in Japan when I was eight. I was fifteen when I came back. My first year at L.A. High, I couldn't believe how ... shallow everyone was. In Japan we went to school like we were in the army. Very strict. Hard work. Discipline. But here it felt like the idea was to have fun. I did not fit in. Even the Nisei, the ones who never went back to Japan, were too Americanized for me."

He stopped again as though he had already said too much. But something was eating him. "They thought we were spies. What a joke. Spies. All the same I thought Japan would win the war. I mean, how could they lose against these Americans who only wanted to play football and go to dances."

Hidekazu accepted a steaming cup of tea. Daedelus knew he needn't offer milk or sugar or lemon. "On the train to Arkansas I saw how big the country was. Mile after mile. I couldn't believe it. That's when I first thought Japan would have a hard time. It is

such a small country. No one there realized how big America was." He paused to think how amazing this was. "But still I thought, the Japanese are so disciplined they will win. Their will is unbreakable. I couldn't believe it when they surrendered."

Daedelus kept silent. He had never heard Hidekazu speak more than a few sentences.

"Last week we went to a USO dance. The soldiers are coming back, every week there's a big dance. Hershey and Harvard, they had been drafted. So we all went to the USO and checked out the dance. I didn't want to go. Hershey was the one that dragged me along. He told them I was a translator from Fort Ord. We didn't stay long. Everybody looked at us funny. Only white people were there. We didn't stay long." Daedelus got up to change the record. "Love Is Here To Stay."

"While we were standing there they played that song, 'It's Been a Long Time.' You know the one,

*'Kiss me once and kiss me twice and kiss me once again,'*

he sang softly. Daedelus nodded. It was a very popular song.

"When that song came on every soldier got up to grab a girl to dance with. Any girl." Hidekazu sipped tea, reflected a moment. "Girls they didn't even know. Strangers."

"They were dancing and some of them were kissing. 'It's been a long, long time,'" he sang. He said nothing for a few seconds, just stared at the floor as though he were seeing the couples on the dance floor at the USO. Finally he looked up. "That would never happen in Japan. There's no such kind of song for us."

Billie Holiday swung easy in the living room:

*In time the Rockies may crumble,*

*Gibraltar will tumble,*



*They're only made of clay,  
But our love is here to stay.*

The two men listened till the scratchy end.

"We are taught we must die for duty and honor and Emperor. Not for a sweetheart, not for someone ... to come home to." He paused to sip his tea. "Like Speed is feeling for your Billie."

"Maybe." Daedelus stood to change the record.

"I think so," said Hidekazu. "Someone to come home to... Americans will fight for that."

Then, after a moment of reflection, "I like this Billie Holiday. She's so sad ... she could be Japanese. All Japanese songs are sad. Not like the USO song. Americans don't have to be so sad. They won the war." He took a last sip of tea. "Why is she sad?"

Daedelus took a deep breath. "Well Hidekazu, I think she's sad because ... she's got a broken heart. And we listen because the songs help us ... when we're broken hearted and life is hard. We know she's feeling like we are. Not everyone feels like that USO song."

Hidekazu thought about that for a moment, then thanked Daedelus for the tea. The mysteries were perhaps a little less impenetrable. He stood and lit a cigaret, took a couple of puffs, let himself out the front door and walked the diagonal back to his house. Daedelus watched him till he disappeared.

The phone rang. "Daddy!"

"Billie! Billie, is that you?"

"Daddy, it's me."

"Where you at?"

"Still in Yellow Bayou with Mama. Daddy, we're coming

back! Me and Speed."

"Hey that's great. What about Mama?"

"She doing fine. Better than ever. She'll be alright. It's better if we leave ... we, uh, we ... the police are looking for us."

"What! What happened?"

"There was this man and he died and they want to talk to us ... I can't talk now."

"What happened Billie?"

"I can't talk about it. But he was bad. A very bad man."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine."

Daedelus paused, slowly replied, "Okay then. How you gonna get home?"

"We got a little money. It's better we stay away from trains and buses and things, so we're gonna drive. We'll drive at night. We bought a old Model A."

"Will it make it?"

"Yeah, Speed's been working on it. Not as nice as Hidekazu's though."

"Hah. Yeah. Hey, they're back. Hidekazu was just here! In fact tell Speed everyone's back, his family too, and they all miss him. You been gone a long time. Both of you."

"I know. Daddy, I got to get off now."

"Yeah, honey. Take care of yourself. See you soon."

"I will Daddy. I love you."

"I love you too, honey."

Daedelus sat, stunned. *Man got killed. Why'd a man have to be killed? A bad man she said. I should've been there. Man got killed. I should've been there. I wasn't there before either. What's the matter with me?* The Bluesman went to his closet, drew out his saxophone case, dusted it off and limped out to the

chalky sunlight, heading for the Pantry. "It's been a long, long time." The words fell into pure desolation. The invisible hipster blew long, sad tones out of his spirit sax.

It was early afternoon, Saturday. The barber shop crowd had migrated to Pauline's for the first drink of the day. Virgil and his cronies, Pauline and Preacherman, Chuckie Bones, a couple of drunks and girlfriends. Preacherman, ever the hipster, hair slicked back, shiny two-toned shoes, watched as Daedelus walked through the door, carrying his sax case. The Bluesman walked straight to the bar, got himself a drink, downed it in one gulp, ordered another. Then he walked slowly, deliberately to the stage, laid down his sax case and opened it up. Daedelus had a reputation as a Bluesman but he hardly ever played in public. His reputation was based mainly in legend. Preacherman bounced up, jumped on stage and picked up the mike with a big grin. All eyes were on the two men. Pauline was holed up in her little office. While Daedelus twisted his mouthpiece onto the cork and warmed up with a few notes, Preacherman started in as though it was Saturday night, as though the liquor was flowing and the joint was jumping. His voice was full and resonant:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, at this time, we at Pauline's Pantry would like to bring up a man you all know, a man that's brought us a sackfulla hip sounds and other acts, from national names to our own local talents. Tonight we have the pleasure of hearing from the man himself on the tenor saxophone. He's a juke joint veteran, our own Booker of Blues, a Jester of Jazz, and uh ... Prime Minister of Promenades, heh heh. Let's give a warm Pantry welcome to our very own impresario, let's hear it for Mr. Daedelus Verrette." *[scattered applause, whistles and*

*catcalls, the regulars still wondering what's going on]* Daedelus begins the Blues in long tones, warming up to the sound of it, deepening, loosening. Not yet really cutting loose.

*[whispered]* "Ooh and don't he look sharp, he knows how to cut a distinguished figure, so hip with his pork pie hat and sharp-creased slacks you could cut yourself, skinny black tie, his shiny two-tone shoes, and big ol' Buescher, now he goes and blows a big slug of air that comes through breathy till finally it catches the tough piece of swamp reed like a salt breeze blowin' through a mangrove patch, comes out the bell banging round in shiny brass tones. The reed don't want to sing that low and mean but Bluesman's got his jaw clamped down mighty, won't let go till it soften and move, the column of air vibrating warm and moist, his spirit pushing out into the room. He's not playing for you an' me, no sir. He's holding strong, playing his own Blues."

"Aw sit down and let the man play," yelled Virgil, his buddies chiming in after him. Preacherman smiled and stood his ground, though he did stop talking for a minute.

Just then Pauline came out her lair, filling the entrance of her hideaway, not wearing the white cowgirl outfit but a blue dress, blue on blue, very Harlem, very Savoy, and equally blue shoes, no earrings not yet, being as it's mid afternoon and she just came out to get close to the sound she's hearing from the stage. The old Lion pulling himself together, the scarred beast still holding gut and jaw enough to sting sad sweetness across the room, enough to draw out the Lionness. The tiny platform, the wine-stained carpet, loose bottles stashed lumpy under the seams, leftover from musicians making their castles in the air. The Lionness touched a switch and the Bluesman took on sheen, flooded in light. She swung round behind the bar, came out with a dark bottle and a couple of shot glasses rolling round like marbles in her heavy

paw, cruised over to dead center of the room and set up behind a cocktail table, poured herself a drink, amusement and curiosity and admiration on her fleshy black face. All the while the Blues cut bitter and sweet, smooth and ragged, long and now short, honking, while Preacherman, unable to hold back any longer, underlaid the sound with a full on sermon, his voice running alongside the blues riffs, now booming, now soft:

*[whispers]* "It's the middle of the day and here we got a man getting himself through the night. If you got the Blues you know how that is. You ain't never had the Blues? well, we can't explain it to you. You have to ask, you'll never know. Hah hah ha. Once he's wrung the sweet pain out of that ol' thick swamp reed he'll be free. You can see his neck strung tight as a mangrove trunk – hanging on for dear life to the thickness of the sound, he takes another breath and no one cares, no one breathes – no drums, no piano, no bass – *[louder]* just Mr. Daedelus trying to set himself free. *[yells, hoots]*

*[shouts]* "He's making a field and tilling it *[yeah]*, turning it to see what's there *[that's right]*, what's alive *[alive]*, what's dead *[what's dead]*, what's joyful and what hurts *[what hurts]*, what's driving up from the red dirt *[red]* and what the worms are up to *[amen]*. Amen to that *[amen]* and amen to all kinda thing you don't see every day *[every day]*, now the earth's being plowed *[that's right]*. Yes honey, we do that here, not just the hip dancin' n romancin' goes on after dark n after hours no sir, we get down to grit." *[amen]*

Pauline watched, hair pulled back like Lady Day (but she's no lady), quiet and curious and a little awestruck like it was Bird himself throwing it down, and tried to make out just exactly what the normally affable and cool Mr. Daedelus was doing on the stage and what in the world Preacherman was preaching about.

The regulars were hooting and hollering, caught up in the emotion and the drama and the sense of the unexpected. Daedelus played on, played riffs and roughness and emotion like a Sunday sermon gone ecstatic while Preacherman's words came out smooth and churchlike, a poet in full voice, egged on by the crowd, inspired by the blues:

"You got your feet makin' the dance [*Preacherman jumps*] and that's all you got. That's all you got. Whoever got no belongings got nothing but himself ... [*Here Preacherman starts shuffling*] ... Ain't nothing in life you can hold onto, not tonight anyway, not money ... not fame ... not family ... not mercy. I say you got the Blues! [*that's right*]. In the light of day maybe it matters but this is the night, this is the night, this is where you take the rawness ... and *make something of it*, something the people can touch.... Maybe you got a lot of anger [*yeah*]. Maybe you live in ruin [*ruin*]. And all you got is the feeling [*play the blues*]. Maybe a man or a woman has captured you [*have mercy*]. Maybe a demon has captured you [*no*]. But damned if we're going through life without the feeling ... 'cause that's the last thing you got before you're not a man anymore ... 'cause there's terror out there ... make you run and hide...."

Preacherman wipes his brow with his handkerchief. "Let me tell you something else about these Blues [*play the blues*]. It was a murderous wind that blew us here [*yeah*]. We were clanking steel this way and that [*steel*]. Chains 'round our limbs [*chains*]. Chains 'round our necks [*necks*]. But not our souls [*not our souls*]. 'Cause we played the Blues [*play the blues*]. And it got us through [*got us through*]. So let me say it again [*say it*] ... no way you can hide [*no way*], when it's all stomped out like that ... when all we had was the Blues ... when all we had was the Blues ... but pretty soon we gonna rise up [*amen*] ... long time coming

*[amen]*. Long time coming *[amen]*. When we raise our heads up *[raise up]*. When we raise our heads up again *[again]*. That's right, long time coming. *[amen]*. Amen *[amen]*. Amen *[amen]*. Amen *[amen]*."

"Amen!" yelled Virgil, standing as though he were back in church, a place he hadn't been in many years. Daedelus had a last push in him, back to the roadhouse, back to his funky roots, back to where he came from. Preacherman, sweating profusely in the spotlight, wiped his shiny head with his handkerchief, looked over at Daedelus honking notes of rage, and followed him back:

"Now Our Man's down to the grit, the tones coming in ragged n nasty n high from the roadhouse, moving up the mouthpiece, a scream of affirmation, saying, 'Here we are, We are here, sho nuff, We're still here.' We been on a night drive, the warning light's come on and we gonna mash down the 'celerator n drive, being it's dark n foggy n we fixin' to end up somewhere we never been before."

Tears were coming down Daedelus' cheeks and his lips were raw from blowing. Preacherman sensed the ending.

*[quietly]* "We give you the star of our firmament, Mr. Daedelus Verrette, a man who has laid down his insides, in broad strokes, run crosswise, against his gut, has said it all, the blood run out and dried up, that which began so mighty, and strong-jawed, now it's frayed out, till his last flourish, the last notes that tumble out of brass, Ladies and Gentlemens, a glissando as they say downtown, ain't nothin' left to say."

The room erupted in shouting. Daedelus looked out, saw Pauline beyond the curtain of light, and stepped down. Preacherman, exhausted, whispered his Benediction:

"Our star, Mr. Daedelus Verrette, steps down out of the spotlight back to the ordinary world, that's all there is, simple as

that. But to you and me, and to me and you, he was in his glory full, yessir, and we *know* how far he come. 'Ain't no good life, but it's *my* life.' [*voice rising*] Let me say it again: 'Ain't no good life ... but it's *my* life.' [*shouting*] Let me say it one more time: 'Ain't no good life ... but it's *my* life.' [*quietly after a pause*] In all his glory. He showed us how far we come, Amen."

Preacherman held his arms high like a preacher, then took his bows to the catcalls of the crowd. Daedelus stepped into the darkness away from the spotlight, sat down next to Pauline. For a long minute the old Lion and old-beyond-her-years Lionness shared the silence between them, though the regulars were back to drinking hard and shouting, slapping the grinning Preacherman on the back saying how he's fulla shit but it was good shit, even going so far as to buy him a drink. They were yelling at Daedelus to come over. He ignored them.

"Never heard you play like that."

"Just ... I don't know what in hell ... all this ..."

Bluesman lifted the shot glass to his lips, swallowed slowly, slammed the glass. Pauline said nothing.

"Billie off in a swamp, me back here. Didn't know what to do 'cept make some noise."

"Yeah, you did that."

"Hnnhhh." Held his head in his hands. "I left her and she grew up. Now she haunts me. Like her mama. If I hadn't been off playing music maybe none of this woulda happened. If I'd a been there for Billie, maybe she wouldn't be in trouble. All because of the damn Blues."

"You did what you had to do to survive."

Daedelus looked at her, huge and impassive in the semidarkness. *Yeah, she's a Blueswoman. She knows how it was. We did what we had to do. To survive. But damn if I don't wish it*



*was different. There had to be some other way.*

Pauline looked into the Bluesman, tried to figure it for a minute but saw nothing but what was. "Heard from her lately?"

"She called." Hands trembly on glass. "She's coming back. With Speed."

"Yeah?"

"Sounds like they on the run. Seems as though a man died back there." Daedelus exhaled deeply. "Don't know the details. Must be some shit went on. She been away a long time. I think she's in trouble."

Pauline reached over to pour two more shots and looked blankly at the empty spot of stage. *Trouble. Business as usual.* Then she said, "What I can't figure is what she doing with that Jap boy."

Daedelus just looked at her, stood, and entered the slow ritual of wiping the brass, cradling it in the case, closing it down. He looked over at Preacherman and Virgil and the regulars, still hootin' and hollerin', as though he noticed them for the first time. They were yelling for him to come over for a drink.

"Fools got nothing better to do than get drunk in the middle of the day."

He looked at Pauline as though to say something. Nothing came out. He looked to the door, entered the shocking light of L.A. while thick white cigar smoke swirled behind him and jungle sounds, howling and chattering, pounded in his ear canal.

## THE NIGHT DRIVE

As the cams pushed the followers that popped the oil-black rockers that rocked the valves that granted breathing of the golden mist that did its job of blasting the grey pitted pistons to the end of their stroke and back – the pendulums of archaic and poisonous design wonderful for their leverage of an ancient source of power – likewise Speed saw his world running by archaic design, a complicated web of rules where nothing was free, where debunked emperors were worshipped and a past that had lost its glory was wished for. An ancient engine that no longer propelled him, no longer a source of power and beauty. A world where you had to *gaman* for nothing and everything, where naked emotions were dangerous if revealed, where everything had to be hidden and held back. Where nothing was free. He sensed the hidden things of Billie's world. The crying and raging and the beauty, the hurt joy that needs a horn played so beautiful and dangerous you must risk your life to live it, life so fierce it needs blues to bear it. And bear witness to it, because no one else was listening. The voice lonely in the wilderness, terrifying, compelling, beautiful to Speed. It was Chan's voice, Billie's voice, even Virgil's voice. And especially Machito's voice. From Japan came *gaman*, from Cuba came *mambo*.

## TENGU

No Buddhaheads left hanging round the swamp. Soon as the gates opened they were gone, like the children of Israel fleeing Pharaoh's land. Speed, who had stayed too long, was getting out too. Only things the pilgrims left behind were their dead. Black, white, red and now yellow, restless and mournful sojourners, finally resting together in the red earth. The land has soaked up the blood of everyone who came. Folks have cut up the green hillsides till you see the dirt bleeding out, red on black asphalt, and they've laid in structures of commerce like sausages in folds of earth, to tame the wilderness. But it's blood that paid it off. If there is love in Arkansas it's buried deep, as far as Speed's concerned, beneath a whole swamp of suffering. It's finally time for a Mambo Boy to go home, leave the dead and mourning, and take his Mambo Girl away with him on the ribbon of oily asphalt they've laid through bottomland and hills. It's time to get out before the flooding sweeps them away forever.

In the last light the highway looked veined. The asphalt was cracked like overbaked cornbread, and where they had repaired it the tar veins were like lacework. The sky ahead of them settled into salmon shape and colors, a fish-boned structure flowering to smoky greyness at the edges, and near the still spine there were sections of oily purple that gradually, slowly moved away from the flame. There was even an eye, greenish/bluish/greyish, inside the yellow center. The yellow center would be the egg sac. Eventually the egg dropped below the horizon, migrating back to

the other side of the world to give birth. They headed out in darkness.

First they went north through Fort Smith, then they left Arkansas, entered Oklahoma and connected to Route 66, caked up and bloody Route 66, the well-traveled path to California, joining the thousands who had streamed out from Texas or Louisiana or Arkansas or Oklahoma to work the defense factories or the fields. They came for work, for family, whatever reason, maybe they just came to look for something new.

Billie and Speed crossed the Texas panhandle, through Amarillo, headed across the raw high desert that stretches halfway across the continent. Traveling at night, sleeping in the car by day, hidden off on some side road, it took them three days to reach the California border. They carried bottles of water in the back to feed the radiator.

The Mojave desert flickered by Billie's eyes like a film about to break, not smooth but in frames that overlapped. It didn't matter. Every frame was the same: sand and scrub brush, scrub brush and sand. She lifted her eyes to the distance where she saw sky and horizon, so far off they feathered into each other. She was tired, hadn't slept well since leaving Arkansas. She felt like every muscle in her body was depleted. She leaned her head against the window, her eyes dropped to the flickering trackside scenery, her eyes slowly closing. She missed the crossing of the river, the Mojave, flowing mostly as an etching in the sand, the big water long since drained, leaving a small stream that curlicued between broad banks of a sand bed. She missed these details, so different from the green on green of Arkansas, but just as hungry in its way. The world was hungry. She didn't want to be swallowed by it. She had been swallowed before.

Fighting sleep she stayed awake most of the drive but the

desert flickering outside finally broke her will and took her into unwanted darkness. Just before she entered she felt something in her coat pocket: a small cloth pouch full of powder, nameless herbs. Manna.

Nearing Barstow Speed tired and looked for a place to stop for the night. He figured they were out of danger, back in California, no one was looking for them here, they could afford to sleep, then drive into L.A. the next morning. They were nearly home and they were exhausted. Outside of Barstow he drove the rattling Model A off the thin asphalt and in among the dusty willows covering the fringes of the Mojave River, the wide and mighty course of sand. Speed parked in an open spot among willows and fell asleep. Billie was already asleep. The rest was like a dream.

At first light Speed opened his eyes, looked around: *Water swept, looks like. Used to be, what? Ocean? covering the whole West. Under it now. The desert underwater. That's what we are, Billie and me, underwater people. Mer people. Before the continent rose. Those mountains over there were islands then. Silhouette of islands and us under water.*

He turned to look at Billie, still asleep: *Sunrise. Billie sleeping. Wind. Wind blows like a spirit, constant. Rivers of sand. Currents of sand. Some say there's water flowing underneath it. Tons of water. A full river of water running cool and strong, hidden under sand. From the far mountains. Hard to imagine. Thunder. First light. Thunder.*

The silence of the desert settled on them like a slow fluttering sheet. Billie emerged from the well of sleep. Speed sat at the wheel observing the wheel of sun. Constant wind and

occasional thunder from the far mountains. Billie ran her fingers through her hair. First light.

"Where are we?"

"Outside Barstow I think."

Billie: *Deeper dear by far.... How do these willows grow? here on the edge of a sand river. Wasted. Deeper dear by far ... than any ocean. Where'd the water come from? to move the sand like that? A big sweeper, a big bull roar. The wasteland. No water here, not green like Arkansas. Dry.*

Speed looked out at the river. A modest creek in a vast dry wash, he blinked and saw it flowing bank to bank, a shimmering broad highway of water, so vast he could not throw a rock across the surreality of it. Then he shook his head clear. *Too much driving, I'm seeing things.* The wash returned to sand, holding only a small stream meandering between the banks. *No sleep. Does funny things.* He thought he heard whispering. *The constant wind does funny things to you,* he reflected.

Speed got out of the car, the spell now broken, walked through the field of dry grass, squatted by the edge of the field. Billie came out and sat on the sand next to a patch of dried waist-high grass in the center of which was the Model A, black. She looked at the broken line of willows. The sun was just below the horizon. Dark clouds had gathered far to the north, unnoticed before the morning.

In the wind Billie heard an elephant bellowing and shivered.

"I hate elephants."

Speed had no idea what she meant, but he too was troubled and full of tension. He had to get out and look around, raw nerves. Too much driving, too much running, too much wind. "That sun feels good coming up. Let's look around."

They got up and walked down to the riverbed. A

meandering stream. They could tell a greater flow had recently come down from the mountain – recent deadfalls, damp sand flats. They walked a mile down the wash, following the winding stream, the sun warming them. Speed started to feel better. Billie too was beginning to enjoy the scene. Tiny birds hopped about in the tangle of wrist-thick branches of willows along the side of the wash.

After half an hour they came to a pretty stream trickling in from a rocky side canyon. They detoured up the canyon, following the stream that had carved a narrow gorge from granite. They came to a series of small, clear pools. One pool was deep enough to take two full strokes in. They shimmied out of their clothes and slid seal-like into the coolness. They swam together for a few minutes, then Billie stretched out on a flat rock in the sun.

Speed laid down in the shallow of the stream, his face above water, his eyes closed, the sun making red behind his eyelids, tiny flashes moving across his field of vision, ears submerged. He heard the crinkling of water over rock and the rolling of pebbles over each other on the streambed. Time melted. He merged fishlike into the stream. He heard whispering in the streamscape. *The stream is time. Water flows over rocks, water is yielding yet it carves rock. Life is yielding, life is strong.* Everything was melting inside him.

After a while they sat together in the shallows.

"When we drove in by the river last night I got this ... feeling from the cool air," said Speed.

"The air?" Billie looked up.

"Yeah. I know it's a little crazy. Like a hunger. A longing. I got it again just now. Wild, huh?"

"I dreamed some elephant got hold of a little girl. Held her

up in the air. She was screaming. Not a happy dream. Doesn't the sun feel good? I feel like dancing."

Billie stood and began moving sinuously, arms waving overhead, a slow mambo. Speed wanted to ask her about the elephant. She looked at Speed, downstream of her. The river cascaded into the pool behind her. "Come on!"

Speed felt foolish. He watched her and the roaring in his ears swelled till it became one with the rush of water. The water flowed over his limbs but she, standing, was the one who moved as though dancing watery and slow, dancing to surface rhythm like riffing water. More and more, the dance had a fishy action as she flickered through moving imaginary water. She circled around him on the smooth granite, dancer and icon, ever deeper into wateriness till she was a shadow on the streambed, fragmented, hard to distinguish from the pattern of light on the riffles. He turned and she merged into the sun and the canyon became lonely, dreamlike, her hair a palmlike halo. The roaring in his ears got louder, a backdrop to the conga drum. The wind picked up. The bongos and timbales added their voices, and by the time the piano and horns jumped in she was dancing full on mambo. He got up and moved with her, his penis flopping side to side, she moved closer to him without touching, his blood rushed to his groin and the dance was truly met. He reached out to stroke her breast but she said "Just dance" and moved out of range. After a skin-warmed while she said "Let's slow dance" and moved slowly closer, looking each other closer, ever so slowly their bare feet inching over the smooth stream bed, closer to wrapping themselves, which they then did, each in the other, like a cocoon undulating with larval energy, and now blind. Speed thought, Love and hunger, while whirling in the wrapup, and she felt a little love too, but also Hurt. The Love was strange for each



of them. There's all kinds of love. This love's not Love, it's a bit hurt and a bit strange, a heart not so full as real love, but empty, clearer, simpler, because someone is willing to *give* you what you *need* that you *never* knew you *wanted* so you feel *full* (and here the clear stream and the warm sun and the smooth rock have fused) ... *full* even while empty and your *stomach* is empty *slapping* full against *another* stomach and both are *empty* and *both* ... *are* ... *full* ... and ... *brimming* ...

Warm from the sun Mambo Girl and Speed uncouple and slide down like salamanders spent in the warm shallows. Their sense of newness and the hunger for love – these things swamp round them in the riffles of the creek and inside them and under them.

Speed: *We can't stay off each other and her hair's a halo, the sun rising behind her, but it's fall and mosquitoes gone, lucky for that, and lucky Oh all right. A pleasure, Miss Billie, to stand with you in the shallows. Hungry though. Need food.*

Billie: *Oh good and good. He's cut off from all that, he's cut off. I don't have to kill. He's my Angel. He does the killing.*

This section of sand and rock was the floor of a vast sea, and water still ran under the caprock. The ancient sea drained out as the land rose, and water still drains in passages carved by that emptying. Speed notices a thin curlicue of brownish water entwining itself round their limbs. He looks upstream to the small cascade at the head of the pool. Running brown. The sight of it – brown water running in a previously clear stream – causes him to stand. The fact still holds no meaning for him. He is not in tune with the desert. The wind picks up.

Billie is lying face up looking at the blue blue sky when the

first curl of brown water comes rolling over her. It's not a big wave but picks up fast, accelerating in volume till Speed grabs her hand and pulls her up quick, the brown current now above their knees. Then the jagged brown-backed serpent, the mile-long engorgement of the granite gash they're in, reaches out in earnest and gloves them in its coils, pushes them over and sweeps them up, holds them tight and threatens to squeeze the life out of them, or else force its anima into them, same result. It's a quiet, beautiful morning up on the mesa but in the narrowing writhes a roaring serpent of particles smashing each other, each according to its nature, yielding and hard, water and mud. Speed and Billie try to hold each other but the water is oily with suspended particles. Soapy and mudslick they are flung like dolls. The canyon is polished, the current carries them over deadfalls and boulders, carries them like it carries everything else it can hold in its brown body, batters them but allows them to blink and breathe between forced gritty mouthfuls.

Speed's thinking: *Oh shit, so this is it, and the car they'll find abandoned, they'll never find our bodies, and what about that river in Arkansas? flooded like this, didn't we learn anything come to this Rei? both of us drowned.*

Billie isn't thinking. The water sweeps them down the mile of terror. Finally the serpent explodes onto the broad bed of the Mojave, spreads and pleats skirt-like, tan on white, mud on sand, cold on hot. Speed is deposited naked on the spreading rivulets, battered but whole. He stands slowly and looks for his lover.

"Billie! Billie!"

He stumbles half blind over the flood plain, exhausted, shivering. Mud oozes between his naked toes. The sun is high now, mid morning, and warm on his back. He sees her hanging in the branches of a good-size mountain laurel swept down from

miles-away peaks. She does not respond to his yell. He runs panic-hearted to the tree, climbs to her. She moans in pain as Speed disentangles her. Has she broken a rib? Her hair is flat and muddy. He carries her up the wash till they have left the mud. He lays her on the warm sand. They are alive.

"Billie, you all right?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. I'm completely fine," she said weakly.

"Okay. We got to get out of here."

"Why? I need to rest."

As if in answer Speed hears or senses the bank-to-bank roll of water like a dirty brown carpet unraveling down the wide, sandy riverbed. He looks up at a thin line of brown reaching completely across the water course, barely knee-high now but deadly. He picks up his Billie and half carries, half drags her toward the line of willows that marks the near bank. He's unconscious of their grunting and swearing and wailing but fully conscious of their state of wrongness, of place and time. They are only a few feet from the willows when the first wave hits them. Stand firm, his body says, or it's the last current you will ever feel. Soon the water comes waist-high and they are swept down the line of willows, salvation beyond reach. They cling like monkeys each to naked other. In the broad flood plain the current moves with inexorable force, and Speed knows they will soon tire and be pulled down drained of body heat in the mass of water. They see a laurel tree – the same one? – moving eerily, slower, in front of them. Letting go of each other they kick and swim out to it, their limbs barely obedient in the frigid water, as though through gelatin, as though in a framed picture or a dream. They are weakening when something grabs at them, something powerful pulls them out and sets their arms over rough branches nearly stripped of leaves, pulls them free of the frigid water. They hang

like tattered bird's nests on the laurel tree swept from far away mountains. With the current just booming along they run like leaves in a flooded gutter.

Somewhere on the low desert the river spreads ever wider till it thins and flattens to a lakebed normally dry. The mountain laurel drags deeper into the mud, greying in the sun, slowly turns and rolls 60 degrees till the force of drag against the bottom overcomes the weakening current. Billie and Speed are wrapped in the branches and now hang cocoon-like over chalky, slow-spreading water. A shimmering figure detaches itself, drops down and splashes into the waist-high alkaline pond. He unlaces first Billie then Speed from the tree, pulls them down to either side of him and with unearthly strength half carries, half drags them across 500 feet of muck and water. He carries them up the first rise and into the first draw, which is bone dry though the riverbed floods nearby. He lays them down. He stands back a moment and watches them. He laughs like a hyena. His laughter drifts upwind. The spirits of the ancestors have been looking out for them. It makes no difference where the ancestors lived – Japan or Africa. They are not ready to let go of these two.

The moon had thinned to a brittle crescent. The last buzzing of light settled on the rimrock to the west, the stars chokingly profuse toward the east. Bitter smoke from the scrub fire scratched Speed's lungs till he was conscious. He sat up, saw Billie, called her gently awake, helped her to a sitting position. She noticed the fire and then the stranger sitting on the other side and slowly pulled her knees up to her breasts. Speed saw him and wrapped his arms around Billie.

In the shifting firelight his face was impassive, reptilian,

huge. His eyes had the Asian epicanthal fold and elongation at the corners. Fierceness from the pupils. And yet they were bulging, like a demon's. His lips were large, his nose was prominent and elongated. The nose in particular. His skin was dark but the actual shade difficult to judge since all of them were covered in a film of the alkaline powder that had settled out on the dry lakebed for eons and formed the muck they emerged from. They looked as though they were tragic players wearing whiteface and body makeup, all the more so in the natural setting and their nakedness, Speed and Billie's: the stranger wore torn khaki. It looked like a foot soldier's uniform, but so ragged and muddy it was hard to tell. By now the evening wind had died a bit but the air was already cold. Speed calculated their situation: without clothing or water, not knowing where they were, they were in a fix. They needed the fire. They could die out there. He had no idea how they got there. Did the stranger pull them out of the river? For a long minute Speed and Billie only watched, like sculptures of flaking clay. Speed started the talk.

"Who are you?"

The stranger looked up at the distant peaks. There was lightning on the mountain. More water coming. Seconds later a soft rumble of thunder. The breeze picked up. The stranger stood, took off his shirt and walked over and draped the shirt on Billie's back over Speed's arm, then walked back to his spot by the fire. They noticed his tattoos. He was covered with tattoos. On his right arm was a stylized demon, ferocious grimace and bulging eyes.

"Name's Tengu," he grunted.

"What are you doing here?"

"I want to fight."

His voice was deep, familiar. *Where have I heard that*

*voice?* thought Speed, but no answer came to him. The stranger in tattered uniform picked up an imaginary rifle, aimed it back and forth. *Patriot* thought Speed.

"You're going to enlist in the army?"

"You're smarter than you look."

"U.S. Army?"

"What kind of question is that? You a deserter?"

Speed and Billie looked at each other, then Speed said, "I got bad news for you, buddy. War's over."

The stranger stared blankly.

"You don't know the war's over? Man, you've been out in the desert a long time! Were you in a camp?"

The stranger nodded. "Ran away to join up."

"Well, we won."

The stranger looked sick, then he began to weep. He wept bitterly. He dropped to his knees and kissed the earth and wept as though his world had ended, though he had a sickly smile on his lips, unseen by Speed and Billie, and his eyes bulged and his crows feet crinkled.

"I need to fight," he sobbed. "How can I prove my loyalty?"

Oblivious to her nakedness Billie got up, paced the sand, full of nervous energy. The stranger looked up from his prone position, asked Billie, "What are you doing out here in the middle of the desert? Don't you have family somewhere?" Billie stopped her pacing, squatted by the fire and wept. She drifted into sleep, a half sleep, a dreamy visit to a surreal wilderness. Speed stayed awake as long as he could till he too fell asleep, exhausted from their ordeal. The desert swelled like a sponge.

The soldier laughed through his own tears, the sound swelling up through the boulders into the night sky. He laughed as though he had told the world's funniest joke.

## DANCE OF THE TRICKSTERS

The River of Heaven was overflowing. In the moonless soul night Billie was sweaty. Her heart was beating silvery and fast like a nighthawk on a silent plummet. She was asleep but sat witness to a ghostly encounter. She saw Speed sleeping next to her, she saw herself and Speed huddled by the fire, saw the stranger sit back and puff on a huge cigar that materialized as though by sleight of hand. She knows he is a spirit. She knows his name – Tengu, original Guardian of Kannon the Compassionate. She watched him. She heard a deep rumble emerge from him, which became a laugh, which became uncontrollable, something like a fit he had been waiting a long time to pitch. He came to with tears in his eyes. A hairy hand reached over and snatched the cigar from him, and a different laughter, monkeylike and raw, captured the moment. Free Monkey's laughter slowed, enough for words to form:

"You're pathetic, soldier boy. You're actually crying."

Another demon, a figure in red and black pantaloons and tall conical hat danced awkwardly, elbows out and flaying, legs pumping, butt twitching. With the monkey butt twitching in his face Tengu was too stunned to make a move. It's a defeat in spirit to acknowledge the Monkey, he thinks. He won't give in to the hairy demon. He is Guardian for Kannon, the great Goddess. Billie hears this somehow, dreamlike.

The butt of Free Monkey twitched in Tengu's face. Free Monkey has no inhibitions. He likes provoking others. He likes stealing hats, smoking stolen stogies, rolling around in shit. He noticed the sleeping figures by the fire. He hopped on one leg,

hooting and laughing, then stopped and stroked Billie's side. She murmured in her sleep – dreams a bad dream about a she-baby and something that throws her through the air. He flicked ashes on her, blew smoke in her face, brought the smoldering cigar close to her skin, turned his head leering at Tengu and hissed:

"What do you think of your Mambo Girl now, bug eye?"

Fierce-eyed Tengu forgets the teaching of the sword, he is after all a demon, not a zen man, not a samurai, not a god. He leaped at the Monkey, smashed him in the face, bowling him over. Free Monkey rolled in the dirt, first from the force of the blow, then on his own energy, rolled and kicked in the dirt, rolled and kicked over the fire, hooting and laughing. The fire was scattered soon and smoking. Tengu saw through the smoke the smoldering light from Free Monkey's red eyes among the remains of embers. A silent Free Monkey is dangerous, but Tengu is no ordinary demon. He has met screeching armies of winged enemies in ancient times. The couple slept fitfully through the buzz of the lordly encounter. Tengu stood his ground next to them. When he could stand the silence no longer Free Monkey argued his case:

"You won't let me tattoo her. You want her for yourself. But where is your mark? Here, take your cigar, mark her."

Free Monkey extended the cigar. Tengu swatted it from his hand and growled: "She has marked herself. She doesn't need your mark."

"They belong to me, the black ones. Keep your own," chattered Free Monkey.

Tengu hissed, "She is heavy with child. I gave her a child. She doesn't need you any more."

Free Monkey hopped on one leg, angry, bug-eyed. "I came here with them on the first ship. I am here for them. Where were



you when they suffered in darkness, treated like animals? You were far away guarding your temple. They survived the lash because of me. The children survived because of me. They are strong because of me."

"That was centuries ago."

"That's right. And we're still here, still strong, still dancing. And look at you, a ghost of what you were. Your country has forgotten you. Your people went placidly to Arkansas. Where were you when they needed help? Your own people are better off with me. I would fight for them. You have lost your teeth."

Tengu shrugged. The ancient teaching returns to him. "You're right. The yellow one needs your teeth. You can have the yellow one. The black one is for me."

The monkey demon howled and gave a chattering speech:

"I am Eshu, God of the Roads, the monkey who is free, hated by missionaries who call me the devil. They hate the dancing, hate anything that makes the people move with passion. The people don't care what they say. The people want me. If the Christians want to call me a devil, so be it. My people know I have power. I have power to heal. Life's a cruel dance. When they dance with Eshu, they come away healed, I open the wound, I pump up the life. I am always called. They need me. I help them fight."

Tengu: "I was called."

"The black ones are for me."

"Mojo got her first."

Free Monkey howled and chattered and hopped. *Mojo got her first.*

Free Monkey is always first, greedy like a monkey; he must receive his portion of sacrifice before any other. He opens doors to create mischief, carries the magic lockpick in his back pocket.

He is first to arrive on the scene. Woe to him or her who does not honor him first; he is the Trickster: he who opens the gate that grants pleasure as well as pain, suffering as well as cure; he who harasses and delights pilgrims, makes faces and plays marbles, he who steals hats and smokes cigarets snatched from mouths, he who sticks out his butt and obscenely waggles it, hops and turns on one leg, acrobat and rogue, daring us to catch him, daring us to teach him a lesson. He is a Free Monkey, and he is angry at the interloper from the East. But he is angry because Tengu said the truth: Mojo got to her first. Mojo is no Trickster who opens doors. Mojo is a man. And now Tengu has been called. The Guardian infuriates him.

Sometimes the medicine comes from another hand. They are demons and they must go where they are called. It is Tengu's trickery that has opened her. The baby has been conceived and is about to come out. It will be a beloved child. If it survives. It is too late to do anything about the birth. Free Monkey knows that. Monkey is angry. Because the black ones are for him.

Suddenly he stops his jumping and chattering, stunned. The yellow one has killed. He has emptied a gun into Mojo. The Free Monkey smiles. *Maybe he is the one who has called me. Maybe I've come for the yellow one. After all, he has killed.* The Free Monkey smiles.

In her dream Billie hears crying. It is the Trickster Tengu. The dragon god is crying. Or is it her baby crying? *Killing won't help,* Tengu whispers. *Your baby is coming. She's crying. She needs you. She needs her mama.*

Next morning they began walking before first light, the air was bone cold. Only the fire, which Tengu stroked all night with

wood, had kept them whole overnight. They hadn't slept much. By the time the sky lightened Tengu had given Billie his shoes, worn completely through in places. Better than nothing. Speed went a mile over the varnished hardpan before his bare feet gave out. They were paralleling the broad arroyo to the left. It was no longer the raging torrent of yesterday, it had returned to its previous form, a flowing stream meandering a great sandy wash. They stood in the growing light like a band of shivering Indians seeing the terrain for the first time.

Tengu stopped and said, "Our only chance is to make time walking by the stream, it's just sand."

Billie's eyes were whirling. "After we get nearly drowned in a flood you want us to walk up that channel? I can still see that brown wave coming down on us. It's sickening."

Tengu yelled at her: "It's your only chance, dancing girl. If you keep going through the brush you'll be burned out before you ever get to Cuba."

Billie was stunned. She stepped into the stream. *How does he know about Cuba?* The sand was cool and wet on her feet, felt good. The stream snaked across the broad wash. The mountains on the horizon were islands of the inland sea, now the source of floods that came like a sudden downpour after the first rain had fully soaked the earth. They no longer heard thunder from that direction. Billie watched the far islands. *Cuba*. She began to sing "Canción del Recuerdo," her old favorite.

*Clavada tengo una espina ené l corazón  
Grabado llevo en mi almaé l recuerdo de tu amor  
De ese amor que se fue.... Y que nunca mas volvio*

...

Billie walked up the wash wearing only Tengu's old ragged

shirt and hat that concealed hardly anything, her hair a great mane flowing, singing in the Spanish that Speed barely got the drift of, conducting in the air with little hand motions. She was beautiful and exotic. She was a woman with a girlish air. Her hands made little motions while she sang, conductor-like, like a kid playing around.

As she sang Speed asked, "What do the words mean?"

Billie looked at him and smiled, then said dreamily, "I have a thorn in my heart ... from the memory of love ... that left and never returned ... engraved on my soul. The pain that I carry ... deep inside ... you ask that I remember ... with all my heart ... but you have already ... forgotten me ... you don't know what ... you have done. But you will remember ... when you hear this song."

Tengu jolted awake as though from a dream, his eyes bulging. He turned, nudged Billie and winked at her while grinning diabolically. Then he turned to Speed and snarled as though possessed and sun-crazed:

"It's because we're Japs. They put us away because we're a crazy people, no regard for life. Face dishonor, go kill yourself. Anything goes wrong, kill yourself. Duty, kill yourself. Fuck up, kill yourself. Always the same answer. Just kill yourself. The last thing you can do. Redemption. Clean slate. You're right about the religion. It's a death wish. They were right to put us away. We're too savage for America. We only want to fight and die. All we care about is honor."

Speed, woozy but surprised, yelled back, "What in hell are you talking about?"

"They give you a medal if you die. A medal! She didn't even get a goddamn medal. She sacrificed herself for honor. Where's her stinkin' medal?"

Speed was stunned. Tengu's last words echoed in his mind:

*Where's her medal? Is he talking about Rei?*

Tengu started sobbing loudly, dramatically: "We're all losers. All we got in this world is loser's honor. Yeah, losers got honor. Almost worth being a loser if you can have some fun. Japs don't even know how to have fun."

All Speed could think of to say was, "I know how to have fun." He heard the mambo, saw himself dancing, saw Billie dancing. "I know how to have fun." Then his lung clutched, his head swirled with images of swirling water and he saw Reiko looking up, breathing water. *Why would she do that? Why would she breathe in sadness? Was she a loser too?*

Tengu smiled wickedly in all his glory like the Trickster he was. His tattoos snarled and mixed and rose and fell to every corner of his skin, twisting like flaming strands of rope. There were dragons and mythic creatures and birds of prey and rats and monkeys and things that looked like insects. The design was ornate and flameful and beautiful and inhuman. There was not a square inch of torso free of the story, for that is what Speed took it as, a frightening struggle among a swarm of creatures, his body a canvas upon which was played out a clash of forces, preening and snarling and scratching and bluffing. Tengu smiled his Trickster smile but knew he was weakening fast. In the heat they watched the skin creatures blur, a bluish haze against dark brown skin. They were lightheaded from too much sun and lack of food. The mountains on the horizon were distant, hazy, kind of shimmery across the sea. Tengu trudged on, head down. A crying woman stood out in the middle of his right shoulder blade.

The tattoo woman seemed to speak to Speed: "Breathe in sadness, breathe out love." It was a funny thing to say, he thought, for someone who drowned. He was lightheaded, in a trance. He breathed in sadness. He heard Machito pouring into

him like brown honey pouring into a bowl, one song melting into another. One foot melting into another. Everything flowed, a thin oozing, like oil rising up from the sand while tons of cool water ran underground. Everything flowed and curled and zigged across the broader path of sand. Speed and Billie and Tengu, all of them running weakly against the stream like salmon at the end of their journey.

Machito was playing in Billie too, over and over. She was singing his song. They had walked all the way from America, over a salt flat that went out from the shore of Cuba for miles and miles into the shallow Caribbean, all the way across the sea to America. A slight current ran against their ankles. Pink exotic birds with long stick legs flew by. Tides were dim this close to the equator. *The sharks will not come in so close. There is not enough water to carry them. It is better this way. We will reach land this way. We will reach Cuba.*

In Arkansas the landscape breathed bitterness, a swamp, frigid mud in winter, flooded out each spring. Speed could never get used to the spongy earth and the rancid smell. Nothing melted in him there. He should have said something. He should have said something but what could he say. He only knew how to *gaman*. But soon he will be in Cuba.

*Then we will play the music that makes life bearable.*  
They walked on and on till they lost track of time.

Like a heated oven after the burners are turned off the desert was beginning its long slide into darkness. The three of them were sliding into darkness as well. They were on their last reserve of hope and strength. Life had become a dream. Tengu didn't look up as they passed the gap in the willows where they

first entered the sand river. He was lost. He was only as strong as his people. They were all fading.

The Free Monkey is not a god, only a lowly demon and not perfect. But he noticed his fellow spirit had missed the car. They didn't see him, not even out of the corner of their eyes. They did not see the little puffs of dust around his feet or the fleas jumping off his back. They did not see him sniff the dried shoots around the Model A that they had passed. Free Monkey howled and chattered by the car but they did not hear. Free Monkey scampered after them, circled around ahead of them, waited for them in the middle of the wash. He didn't think it right that he should lose these newfound players to the desert. If they kept on in their direction they would find only sand and thirst and exhaustion, and they would die. The black one, or maybe the yellow one, is for him. He didn't care which it was. He could feel the water flowing under the sand. A strong flow.

As they approached him the ghostly Monkey hissed and chattered and jumped. The strange trio stopped and looked at the apparition in amazement. Speed was holding Billie up, both of them too dazed to respond. Tengu looked around and realized the Free Monkey was trying to help them. They had gone too far. Tengu turned and pulled them back downstream, in the direction of the Model A. They could hear the Monkey's howling as they whacked through the willows lining the wash. The car was where they had left it in the clearing. Speed and Billie slumped in the front seat and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

When they awoke it was late afternoon and they were alone. Tengu had left them. Free Monkey was nowhere to be seen. Billie still wore Tengu's shirt. Speed saw that it was a tattered

U.S. Army issue khaki. The name on it was "Nakashima."

Billie said, "Let's get out of here. Let's get some clothes on and get the hell out of here."

They cleaned up as best they could. Billie's hair was wild, Speed's not much better. As they were driving the dirt road back toward the highway, Speed once again felt cool longing while crossing the dry wash. *I know how to have fun. I'm no loser. I can mambo.*

In the twilight Billie's mind wandered as she watched the sandy damp riverbed along the road.

*A breeze ... sliding in the open window, over miles of blowing sand, flowing ... like someone's loving me, like someone's calling me. Someone's crying for me. Someone's coming. Like someone stepped on my grave, someone who loves me. Cool like a sheet rippling down my body, naked... I wonder ... if we fell asleep and ran off the road would the sand swallow us up? Would the underground river carry us far away, me and my baby? Could we swim in the river of love, hidden from everyone, me and Speed and our baby?*

Facing a coral slab of cloud hanging low, ivory slit of moon fading into the newborn kingdom of day, sun frontlighting the route from behind him, just getting used to this fragile freedom, Speed headed back to his dance. They rolled into L.A. that night and resumed their lives as though the war had not happened, as though Rohwer had never existed, as though Mojo were only a nightmare. Even the desert seemed like a place they had visited in another life. The Tricksters, as was their nature, followed.



## THINGS FALL APART

You go spinning through life doing the right thing, or taking what comes to you, or maybe you have a plan. You find yourself a minute here, a minute there, in this neighborhood and that city, maybe 20 years have gone by in one place where you been a regular then Blam – something happens and you ask yourself, "How did that happen?" gone, no goodbye, never seen again, like you dropped from the face of the earth like that other life was a dream. Things fall apart. And where are you now? now that your life has come apart at the seams? Chicago Detroit New York Baton Rouge Houston L.A. Denver? – don't matter the place. The location is not a city. It's The Tip Top The Crib Johnnie's 99 The Office Ruby's Hideaway Club 88 and you walk in the door of every such swinging place and you know you're home. Things fall apart but you got greens n sausage n grits n red beans n smother chicken, you got hip grooves for your dancing shoes. You got the Blues, and home is where you know they're paid up and always ready to roll.

## INVITATION

Once back in L.A. Speed grew sullen. Camp had left him bitter. The lessons of the desert faded too. He hated his job and hated living at home. He started drinking too much, staying out late with Hershey, not paying attention to Billie. Billie was helping out at the Po'Boy, where Virgil still came by as though he owned it. It was not like before the war, when Billie and Speed played records and danced, a couple of kids falling in love. The real world was blowing them around, and they spun in the air like crickets in a big wind.

The dream had been coming for several days now.

*The moon was high and faded. She drove up in a huge truck full of new lumber. She was there to tear down their old swamp house full of weeds and roots and animal fur and bones and madness. The lumber was clean and sweet smelling. She will rebuild the old place with new lumber. She jumped down looking for Mama, looking for Mama to dance and clap and be glad to see her little girl who is building her a new house. She heard screaming. Someone was killing Mama. An old man, his skin shiny and cracked, skinny and black and evil, shaking rattles and fanning feathers and blowing smoke, his eyes red, he picked her up and threw her down, he hovered over her, laughed at her, unmoving. An Angel came flying over the house, came down and pointed at the old man. A fist-sized hole materialized clean through him. He didn't die. He just kept laughing. His laughter chilled her like swamp water in winter. Hahahahaha ha ha*

*chchchhhh hooooooooo.*

Billie tried to stay awake so she wouldn't dream, but she exhausted herself. Waking up now alone on the bed, mumbling:

"I had to leave Daddy. Mama done got herself Mojo and I couldn't stand the screamin' and then the Angel come."

She came awake with a start: "You followin' me?"

"What's that Billie?" Daedelus was in the kitchen.

Daedelus went into the bedroom. Billie was staring up at the ceiling, half hypnotized.

"I'm afraid, Daddy."

Daedelus sat on the edge of the bed. "Nothing to be afraid of, honey. Just a bad dream. Come over to the kitchen, I got some chicken livers with lots of onions and peppers, and threw in some walnuts I got from Speed. It's real good."

Billie sat up. She was hungry.

"You alright Billie?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean are you alright? You don't seem right, like there's something bothering you. I'm worried."

"I'm okay. Just having a bad dream." She spoke in a half-whisper.

"What kind of dream? Like your mother had?"

"Yeah, like Mama had." Billie kept her eyes closed. "I'm afraid Daddy. I'm afraid our blood make us this way."

"What way?"

Billie looked away, spoke quickly: "After you left it was hard Daddy, with Mama hummin all night dryin n cuttin n choppin n b'ilin n cryin and for a day and then another day she'd sit and cut her weeds to little pieces."

Daedelus put his hand on her arm, "It's alright honey."

She just took a breath, closed her eyes and went on, "She made little piles of each kind of weed or root till she got them chopped till they powder, little piles that's like money to her, and I had to fend for myself, I brought her food or she wouldn't even eat, or else the neighbors come and bring us food sometimes."

Here she opened her eyes and looked past her Daddy: "She give them little bags of plants or bones or bugs that'll bring their loved one home or cure the gout or bring hurt on someone done hurt on you, and it's all the show we got, Daddy, cuz they're afraid of Mama, they're afraid of me, but they come round to look and look and look and by the time I left she had got herself Mojo."

Daedelus held his daughter while she trembled. His voice got serious. Neither Billie nor Speed had mentioned Mojo. Daedelus couldn't get them to say anything about the man that got killed either.

"What do you mean, Mojo?"

"Daddy, I'm afraid it'll happen to me."

"No honey, your Mama had troubles, but it's not catching. It won't happen to you."

"But it's in our blood. Something's wrong."

"Nothing wrong with our blood honey," Daedelus said gently.

"But I can feel it coming on ... he's coming. I don't think he's dead."

Billie's eyes lost focus but no tears fell. She didn't think in words but sounds and images and feelings, things she kept down like a belly full of raw poison: the sound of her mother screaming, the rush of feathers against her face, the rough whiskered face of Mojo against her face, the silent, hopeless anguish. Watching herself floating away. Watching herself

pulling the trigger.

"I used to be ... a little girl ... but now I got Speed. He's my ... Angel."

"What's that Billie?" But then her face changed, softened, and she fell into a deep sleep.

**GAMAN**

Twisting in and out through damp sheets billowing in the fading light, Thomas, the 7-year old, his dirty hands making streaks, was in his own world and didn't care. Speed sat on the back steps watching him; he knew the boy would get in trouble for it but didn't stop him.

"Hey Thomas."

"Uncle Speed!" He came running. "I saw a huge lizard today! It was just coming out from under the hedge by Hershey's and it was this big!" Thomas held his hands apart, the traditional fisherman pose. Speed believed him.

"Hey that's great Thomas." Speed was his favorite, his confidant.

"Yeah, and I went to get a rope or string or something to catch him but he was gone."

"He'll come back."

Speed dragged himself up the steps.

Immediately, "Shigema! Don't come in with your dirty boots, take off your boots."

"Aw Mama." Speed catted up the stairs to his room knowing she wouldn't follow him. He was back working at the nursery, shovel work as before. *Same house, same job.* He stripped off his dirt-caked and sweaty clothes.

An hour later, cleaned up, Speed looked around the table. Mama holding fort around the stove; his brother's wife Yoshi trying to help out and stay out of the way (always a worried look on her face, the daughter-in-law); Papa looking tired (imperious and straight-backed as always); older brother Mas distracted by

the baby (Mas trying to feed Chuckie); and Thomas telling everyone the story of the lizard (7 year-old kid energy). The warm and familiar smell of rice cooking and okazu bubbling. A moment of oldtime goodness. Like before the war.

"Smells great Mama." Itadakimasu. Everyone just ate for a while, too hungry and fatigued to make small talk. Till Mama began.

"Who was that you were driving with last week, the black man and girl?" Speed hadn't realized that Mama had seen him with Daedelus and Billie. Not much escaped Mama's net.

"You know Daedelus, Mama, and you know Billie. She was here before the war."

"Why can't you go around with your own kind?"

"This is America, Mama, we're free, remember?"

"You're full of crazy ideas. Where did you learn this stuff? Did Daedelus teach you that? He's a bad man. That girl looks like a prostitute. He brings a prostitute to the neighborhood. Maybe he's running a business." Speed's arms tensed. The stress hunched his shoulders and spilled into his voice as suppressed anger.

"You don't know anything about her. She's a singer, a Cuban."

"She looks like a prostitute and she's black. Better not hang out with her. Black people are a bad influence. Everyone knows that."

"I don't have to stand for that!" he yelled.

Older brother intervened. "Calm down. What's going on with you?"

"I don't like getting the third degree!"

"You know how Mama is, she only wants to make sure you don't mess up your life."

Speed had spoken to his mother half in English, partly to annoy her. She only spoke Japanese.

"It's my life. I know what I want."

"You do? What's that?"

Speed couldn't answer. Everyone was startled when Yoshi spoke up. "Speed will find his own way. I am sure he will be a success." She worked full time as a secretary and was the most capable of them at moving in society. White society. But as the daughter-in-law she was not expected to make known her views. Not even expected to have a view.

Mama could restrain herself no longer. "As long as he stops going around with black people. They're dirty and lazy. I'm worried about him."

Before Mama could draw up some tears, Yoshi replied, "Speed's got a good head, Mama, and most of all a good heart. He'll find his way."

This was too much for Mama. "You don't know anything! Just because you work in an office ... you're becoming too American. You're stupid."

Masayuki to the defense. "Lay off her Mama."

Speed came out of his sullenness. "You're all a bunch of racists!"

Papa finally broke his silence. "Be quiet!"

Everyone stopped. Papa was tired, but a pronouncement clearly was called for. He looked up, said bluntly:

"Black people are inferior. The most superior people are Japanese. Chinese people are very clever. Whites have the most power. But black people are inferior."

He went back to eating as though nothing had happened. Speed was stunned. Everyone was stunned. Not so much by the opinions expressed but the directness, the finality. There was



nothing to say and there was everything to say.

"Well, dinner was lovely but I gotta go," Speed said as he stood and walked out, full of turbulence, an incessant chattering in his head, like a treeful of monkeys. He headed straight for Hershey's. They'd sit and drink. After drinking they'd go out. Nothing like cruising Crenshaw to get your mind off your troubles. Just like before the war. Like entering another world. Maybe he'd see Billie. Passion and freedom and danger. The din of chattering grew into a whole tree full of monkeys.

Still in her apron, Yoshi ran out looking for Speed.

"Speed, wait."

He slowed. They walked in silence, then Yoshi said, "Don't take them too seriously, Speed. They only believe what they've been taught to believe. I don't believe that way."

"It's just so pathetic. They don't see. They think they're superior. They look down on everyone. All they can do is look down on colored people. And that makes them superior? Everyone looks down on colored people. And colored people look down on each other, whether they're lighter or darker. That's what Daedelus told me. And Japanese are descended from the gods? It's a crock of shit. Same old shit, but we're still just inmates." Ever since the camps Speed referred to his people as inmates. "Besides, it wasn't colored people put us in camps." The Free Monkey howled. Speed's monkey energy scampered about.

Back at the house that night Yoshi and Mas talked about Speed.

"*Gaman*. He just has to *gaman*," said Mas.

"*Gaman*? For what?" Yoshi was unmoved by her husband.

"I don't know. He's just got to hold on. It's the way it is."

"I wonder what any of us has to hold on for."

"Don't talk like that. We have to *gaman*."

Mas turned away, like his father. Yoshi could tell the conversation was over. Her inner dialogue went on:

*Easy for him to say, first born. Gaman. You work in the fields and then they throw you around in the war and people die, the old folk die, Reiko commits suicide and you gaman. They were so much in love. Can't be helped. No matter, she'll never come back. Can't be helped. Endure. Bear up. Gaman. He hates gaman. I hate gaman. What are we holding on for? What am I holding on for?*

Yoshi drifted off to sleep. She dreamt. Mama glides across to pick up Chuckie after he throws his bowl on the floor, Mama picks him up and coos to him, the bowl turns putrid in an instant and Yoshi is down on her hands and knees cleaning it up, scrubbing the kitchen floor, but the floor has turned to dirt and her scrubbing is wearing a hole in the dirt, the hole is muddy and cold and her right shoulder aches as though a knife were pinning it through and she breaks down crying, the hole widens into a black emptiness that she falls into, she is falling and her child is up there in the warm kitchen being held by Mama ... A man comes to her. He has fierce eyes and long nose but she senses gentleness in his touch. He speaks kindly, understandingly and holds her in his arms and for a moment she is somewhere else, a place she has not seen, and where she is not Japanese but only human.

## POTATO BUG

Speed and Harvard were shoveling pea gravel from off a flatbed. They got to the job site late because Speed had been late waking up. He hated the job, same as he hated it before the war, working for Smith Thorpe. It was the only job he could find. Smith had been cursing and raging because he found the foundation trenching unfinished. He was pushing them to finish the trenching so they could pour cement, he himself digging like a madman. He wasn't supposed to pour cement till the permit was signed off, but he figured he could fix it somehow – sweet talk the inspector or if that didn't work, threaten him. A large man with bulging arms, Smith drove his crews to the limit, backing the drive with his toughness, his quickness to anger around any slacking or setbacks. He admired the Nisei, their willingness to work, their unwillingness to complain when he drove them too hard. Speed hated him.

"Smith is something else."

"Yeah he's working us like slaves today. Too much for you Speed?"

"It's not that. I'm glad we had to do the trench. Don't gotta hear his b.s. Really glad he left before lunch so we don't have to sit through it, hear his stupid views on every damn thing."

"You mean politics. Or maybe religion. He'll talk about anything."

"Yeah. He knows it all. I can't stand it. He's a big expert on Japan, just because he's been there. Like he's fucking sponsoring us in this country, like he's on *our* side and everyone else is lazy and dirty, especially colored people and Mexicans."

"He hates Dutch people too."

"Yeah, I don't know where he got that shit, going on about how we're clean and hardworking. And we got flower arranging and zen gardens. I think he's full of shit."

The Jap boys shoveled the last of the gravel, jumped off the truck, backs aching from the furious morning, and picked their way through the debris and concrete forms to the lone tree. They sat without speaking. Speed dug into the bento his mother had made:

*Onigiri with umeboshi, takuan and a little shoyu chicken and vinegared fish, the last of the perch, the smallest one, deep fried and marinated whole. Ocha. Good. Looks good. Tastes good. Feels good, eating. Completely fine being Japanese, eating. Days getting shorter. Best time of year. If Smith was here we'd have to hear how much he hates working on this job or that job, because of niggers working on it or Mexicans. On and on. What an ass. Much better to eat in peace.*

Speed poured them each a cup of hot tea, inhaled his in with air, a frothy stream. *Those Arkansas kids from the next town, bused in to play us, their eyes bugged out when they saw us. Must have been strange for them, seeing us fenced in and the towers and the soldiers. Taken prisoners for nine innings, didn't have a choice.*

"Hey Harvard, remember those local kids, the time they bused them in to play baseball?"

"Yeah!" He laughed. They had told the story several times but each time it was funnier to them.

"Their eyes were wide! Wonder what the coach told them: Well guys we're going to play a bunch of Jap boys. They're in a prison. Don't worry, we got guards to protect us in case they pull out their samurai swords and come at us."

They both howled. "Man those guys didn't have a chance they were so spooked."

"They must have thought we were criminals. Killers."

"They kept *looking* at the fences." Speed stretched out the word "looking," and with each telling stretched it further.

"And then old Hershey swapped gloves with one of the kids after the game. That was cool."

"Yeah, those guys were all right, just a bunch of high school kids.... Some of them might have got in the war."

The unspoken rule was to tell funny stories.

As he stepped over the newly mounded earth Speed noticed a potato bug churning the loose dirt. He stooped to look, the tiger-striped creature felt alien, its energy coming from seemingly elsewhere than this empty lot in L.A. He stood up and started to bring his shovel down on it, then saw the beauty of the pale orange animal, only for a second, but long enough to cause him to shovel it up with the loose dirt and toss it in the trench. *The cement won't come till tomorrow. Till then you're on your own.*

The storm had swelled up from Mexico and left clouds running over L.A., some rain, some wind. In the breezy afternoon Billie walked across the street to the Yamashita's. She had found the mambo dress in the closet, the green flashing dress she wore the first time she visited, left behind at Daedelus's since before the war. It was Wednesday and Speed was out with his buddies, drinking. The Mambo Girl longed to dance.

Billie knocked strongly. Mrs. Yamashita came to the door. When she saw Billie, dressed for a night on the town, her eyes

opened wide for a moment. Then she turned and called Hidekazu, who was also surprised to see Billie.

"Ah. Billie. How nice to see you. Uh, come in."

Billie went into the living room. Oriental knickknacks, the style reminded her of Daedelus' living room, filled with stuff.

"Would you like some tea?"

"No thanks. I just wanted to know ... if I could borrow your car."

Hidekazu was stunned. The car. During the war they had left the car in the garage, where it had sat as in a time capsule. Their landlords had simply locked the garage and rented out the house, as a favor to the Yamashitas. Hidekazu's parents were perfect tenants, had always paid on time, had kept the yard immaculate. The older white couple that owned the house had taken a liking to the family. They were happy to see them return to the neighborhood. Hidekazu had had to replace the tubes in the tires, which had gone flat, and change the oil, but otherwise the car was perfect.

He had not expected Billie's request. He lit a cigaret and took a couple of puffs. It was one thing for Speed to borrow the car – that was Obligation, with expectations that both parties knew. He did not know what to expect from Billie.

"It's such a great car. Remember we borrowed it, Speed and I ... before the war."

"Of course. Is Speed ...." Hidekazu was wondering why Speed hadn't asked.

"Oh, Speed's off somewhere with Hershey, drinking most likely. I got to get out. I want to go dancing. Daedelus is out and I thought you wouldn't mind." Billie was nervous, excited. Hidekazu believed her, that she wanted to go dancing.

"Dancing. Sure. Dancing. If that's all ...." Hidekazu got up,

got the keys and went out to the garage, Billie followed. Hidekazu had in fact gotten a little sweet on Billie, though it was his secret. He had never said anything to Speed about it.

The car was lustrous in the overcast. Billie took the keys, gave Hidekazu a quick kiss on the cheeks and drove onto the street. Hidekazu watched, amazed that he had done such a thing. His parents watched from the living room window, completely in the dark.

Billie headed for the Po'Boy. Ella Maya and Daedelus would be working. She knew Virgil would be there. She needed to be occupied by something other than her dreams. She went dancing.

Billie stayed out all that night. Daedelus wasn't surprised, not even when she didn't show up the next day. Daedelus had tried to talk his daughter out of hanging out with Virgil. No luck. She and Virgil were going out. He argued but Virgil laughed him off, called him an old man. Virgil had a prize to show off, admirers to satisfy, destiny to meet. He had waited a long time for this, a whole war. Billie was fine, he said, in every way. She was a grown woman and could make her own decisions. And Billie wanted to go. It was no use arguing. Daedelus sensed trouble. Ella Maya was furious with Virgil, but Daedelus knew it was Billie's idea as much as Virgil's.

That Thursday when Hershey and Harvard rolled up in the Dodge to pick up Speed and Hidekazu to go out drinking Daedelus limped out to the street.

"Hey fellas."

"Daedelus. How you doing? Want to go out with us?"

"Nah, you boys go on." Daedelus looked grim. "Say, uh,

Hidekazu, heard from Billie?"

Hidekazu looked down, embarrassed. "No."

Speed looked at them both. "What's going on?"

Daedelus said, "Billie. She borrowed Hidekazu's car. Yesterday. Haven't seen her since."

"What!" Speed was shocked. "Why'd you let her take it?"

"I don't know. She just asked. I thought it was okay."

"Where's she at?"

"Said she wanted to go dancing." Hidekazu looked miserable.

Daedelus said, "She went out with Virgil."

Speed felt sick.

Billie didn't come back that night either and left no word about the car.



**MISSION OF HONOR**

Friday. Speed felt like he was looking into a vortex and being pulled in, losing his balance and falling forward. He walked exhausted and lightheaded into the yard, wet from the drizzle, chattering of monkeys in his head, incessant. Smith was on him right off the bat.

"Well, look who decided to come in. Keeping banker's hours Speed? Where were you yesterday?"

"I, uh, just had some things to take care of. Sorry."

"We only need real workers here. No goldbricks. You a goldbrick Speed?"

"Sorry Smith. I've been busy."

"Busy. You're turning into a fucking greaser. Go help Harvard load sand. He knows how to work."

Harvard was shoveling sand up onto the flatbed. The sand had soaked up the night's rain and was dead weight. He was in a bad mood.

"Fucking Smith. We've already got a load of sand at the site ... he says to load up more. Wet sand. What an asshole." Speed said nothing. Harvard hated the inefficiency, or perhaps it was the stupidity, or perhaps the superiority.

"Yeah, and I'll tell you what's going to happen too. We'll get there, do the job with the sand that's already there and come back and load off the sand we're shoveling now."

They shoveled and grunted, mist rising off their sweat-soaked backs, wrists getting sore along with their torsos and legs.

"What's been going on Speed? Where you been?"

"Ah, I had some business to take care of." Speed hardly ever

had business to take care of. Harvard was not fooled.

"This business ... anything to do with Billie?"

"Billie. Yeah, well, she took off with Hidekazu's car and we been looking for her."

"What? How'd she get hold of Hidekazu's car? He never lets it out of the garage."

"It's a long story."

"Sounds like it."

Just then Smith came steaming over.

"Hey girls, what is this, a kaffeeklatch? You still on vacation Speed? Turning Harvard into a greaser too? I want a day's work for a day's wages." Smith grabbed the shovel from Speed's hand and shoveled like a fury, taking huge bites of the sandpile, using his strength. Harvard tried to keep up. Speed just stood there.

"Okay, that's enough." Smith threw the shovel onto the truck and jumped up into the cab. "Coming ladies?"

He shoved the gears and the flatbed jolted into the grey morning. Everything was violence. All the way to the job he drove like he was escaping purgatory through a window of grace, rapidly closing. The boys were not rattled; Smith always drove this way. All the same, they were not in a mood for small talk.

"What's the matter with you ladies?"

"Aw, we're just tired Smith."

"Tired? What, wife kept you up last night?" They said nothing.

"Oh yeah. You guys aren't married. So you been getting a little pussy? And I thought you might've been queers." Smith laughed uproariously at his humor. They drove in silence.

"I had me a little Japanese girl. I ever tell you about her? Boy she was sweet. I could just pick her up and set her down on

my pole and pump her up and down. Name of Sachiko. What a sweet thing. She was a sweet little piece."

Malignant thoughts filled the cab, coming from Speed mostly. Jobsite. Thankful for work, released from talk, Smith's talk. They tumbled out and spent the next two hours in concentrated work, the way Smith liked it. No conversation, just directions. Digging, shoveling, wooden forms. Till noon.

"Breaktime."

Harvard and Speed shared the rice balls and pickles Harvard's mother had packed. Smith ate a sandwich. "Coffee? You guys want some coffee?"

"No thanks Smith."

"No thanks."

"So tell me Speed. What was she like?"

"What do you mean?"

"The pussy." Speed was silent.

"Aw come on. I know you're not saving yourself for marriage. You got yourself a girlfriend?"

"No."

"Then what, a whore? You went to a whore?" Speed was silent. Smith took his silence to mean Yes.

"Goddamn Speed, that's great. I get me some of that sometimes. Long Beach. They like to hang out where there's sailors. Any kind of port. That where you went?"

"No."

"No? Shoulda gone there. Just go down to a bar down there. Lots of working girls, part timers too. Those are the best. Not so mean. Know what I mean? Nice clean girls. Lots of fun, long as you show them a good time. Hey, you didn't fuck a black whore did you?" Speed was silent.

"I mean, I know you guys don't make any money, and

they're cheap. I never fucked a black whore. I just wouldn't want to do it. They're dirty. You'd never do that, I know."

Speed's vertigo had descended during the dreaded lunch break, whirling ever faster, accompanied by unbearable screeching. Somehow it all seemed right. He didn't care any more. He was somewhere else. He heard a familiar voice in his ear: "You are a pathetic, racist son of a bitch." Speed repeated the words in a near whisper at first.

"You know something Smith. You are a pathetic, racist son of a bitch." Smith couldn't quite take it all in.

"What was that?"

"You ... have no idea ... who I am ... or what I'd do."

Speed stood, trembling, and walked toward the truck as in a dream. Smith jumped up.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Speed reached the truck, turned, a grimace on his face, his stomach twisting up his gut, his balls tightening, his head swirling. He picked up the shovel that was leaning on the truck, "I'm going ... to do the fucking ... MAMBO," screaming "mambo." Holding his shovel swordlike behind him, he rushed Smith. In four long strides he was within shovel range of Smith, who stood frozen and wide-eyed. Speed held the shovel behind him on his right side as he ran. He closed on Smith bringing the shovel around in front of him and feinted left with the shovel, then planted his foot and spun completely around, swinging the shovel full circle, striking Smith on the side of his left knee, dropping him to earth. Then he turned back and spun around the other direction, would have caught Smith, on his knees now, full on the side of his head had not Harvard rushed inside the arc of the shovel, grabbed Speed in a bear hug and carried him away. In the spirit dimension raucous laughter, familiar laughter, Free

Monkey laughter.

Carrying the shovel Harvard hustled Speed back toward Crenshaw, silent and grim over the dozen blocks they covered quickly. Exhausted, they stopped to catch their breath. Harvard saw a Japanese restaurant, pulled Speed in, sanctuary. They ordered tea and miso soup, pickles and hot rice. The owner, a talkative sort, noticed the shovel Harvard was carrying, started to joke about it but when he saw the hard looks on their faces he said, "Been working hard I see." Harvard replied, "Yeah, working hard." Speed grunted. The dusty warriors held off the shopkeeper with only a glance. He left them alone after that.

By the time they got back to Victoria Ave. it was dark. They went to Hidekazu's. Speed was miserable: the affront to honor, the fact that Hidekazu had warned him about Billie. Hidekazu's response surprised Speed: He burned incense and chanted a sutra at the family shrine. He was not concerned about the car. He was worried about Speed, about the Mambo Girl's power over him. Speed couldn't figure it. Speed and Harvard parted then, each to his home, promising to meet later that night to continue the search for the Model A.

"Where have you been? You stay out all night and expect to come home and just act like nothing's happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it Mama."

"Are you in some kind of trouble? Did you get in trouble with the police? That's all we need!"

"No Mama, I'm not in trouble. I'm tired. I been working. I want to go to bed."

"Aren't you going to eat? What's the matter with you? You look angry. What are you mad about?" Speed ascended the stairs

to gain sanctuary. His room seemed small now. He knew the family was sitting around the dinner table talking about him. He didn't care. He didn't feel squeezed tonight. It was a strange feeling. He nodded off exhausted, resting up before the night's mission of honor.

In his dream he carried a special weapon, a battle axe of tempered steel, slightly curved and dished, set on a hardwood pole so that he could thrust the blade deeply into the earth, the basic element, and reconnect with its vitality and spirit. The earth was the source of his strength. The weapon became part of his legend. He named it Killing Root, because it drew its strength from the ground, like the root of a great tree that connects Heaven above and earth below.

An innkeeper once asked after the Killing Root, wondering if they had encountered much work for Killing Root. Harvard replied that Killing Root had slaked his thirst already that day.

The exhausted young master and his loyal companion parted ways temporarily that evening, each with family matters to attend to in that region. They resolved to meet again that night, when they would resume their mission of honor.

A Model A rolled up to the curb a full two blocks from Pauline's Pantry. It was the car that Speed and Billie had driven from Arkansas, now turned into a gardening jalopy. His father and brother had filled it with rake and shovel, loppers and catchers, disk and weeder and edger and canvas, all the things that made gardening an exercise in carving, as though the yard were a huge turkey and the well-to-do family was hungry for a magnificent spread, well trimmed. Speed would have been ashamed of this ride even a day ago but tonight he was past that.

He was on a mission to find Hidekazu's Model A and bring it back.

Harvard had come along. Harvard was turning out to be a good man in a tight spot, like Hershey. Hidekazu too had surprised Speed, didn't want Speed to go looking for the car. He was more concerned with Speed's well-being than his car. As they walked to the alley the rancid smell of the car gave way to pure air. The sidewalk was wet and satiny. Streetlights. Speed looked up. *Half moon. Fading fast. Lots of stars. So many. Like creatures.* The half moon was like a vessel swept by blown-out clouds, the stars were like creatures glowing and sparkling in the shoals of clouds. For some reason he felt free. Mission of honor.

The rain had stopped, the joint was jumping. They approached the alley, heard the band riding the "A-Train" to Harlem. Not a person there had been to Harlem but they all knew about Ellington's A-Train. For Speed the "A" could have stood for Arkansas, the train that took him there, its windows blacked out, speeding through miles of desert and now heading on up to Crenshaw.

A screeching of monkeys echoed faintly over the music. The pair turned into the alley. People outside enjoying the fresh air and the cool: *Look at them staring at us, like we're aliens. Mission of honor. I belong here. Tonight I do. Glad I wore the good jacket, better to look good. Too much smoke, hard breathing, joint be jumpin'. A-Train.*

*Everyone dressed to the nines. Dance floor crowded. Big night. Harvard taking a stroll in the park, like it's no big deal. "Harvard. Over here Harvard." Get his attention. Lucky it's crowded, fade in better. Big woman. Big big woman. Same one from before the war? Man, this place hasn't changed. Whiskey*

*tonight. Dollars. Whiskey. Soda. Double. Strayhorn. Billie.*

"Long time no see. You must like my place." Pauline had noticed them as soon as they entered, recognized Speed immediately. She was not surprised to see him.

"Yeah. It's jumping," said Speed.

"Well, it look like everybody havin' a good time." She waded across the club to the stage, said a few words to Preacherman, bantered with Chuckie, the band just coming back from break, and put another record on. Chano Pozo. The sudden mambo shocked Speed. He had forgotten what had drawn him into this world in the first place. Not the words, he didn't understand the words, but the feeling. He pictured Billie mamboing:

*Maybe it's just sex. Billie and mambo and sex ... the rocking back and forth ... There we are and there we are and there we are, like at the beach. Reason enough, mamboing back and forth, hands all over each other. It's a drive, grabbed her, squeezed her with both hands, she pushing back and screaming and babbling, pleasure to mambo at the beach with the wind in your face, pleasure to be a dog and rubbing Miss Billie and rubbing and making it squishy ... that mambo feeling ... so long as we're pumping we're flying, pumping and flying, like Cuba or heaven, anywhere but here. Like you said, we could name him Machito if it's a boy.*

End of the mambo. A few couples had danced:

*Billie would have taken over the club ... like before. She can really move. Maybe it's the way you move, the way you mambo, maybe that's the purpose of life, the rest is filler: the car, what kind of house you live in, who you're with. It's how you move, you are how you move. Style. Not a very Japan idea, how you move. Life's a dance. Some people dance the foxtrot. Some waltz. Or*



*folk songs. Some people dance mambo. It's not fair. Why couldn't Rei dance like that? Why can't I dance like that? Some people born to dance and some people born to suffer. Japanese born to suffer.*

Something snapped Speed out of his reverie. He looked up as Billie and Virgil entered the club. His heart beat like a drum. He was still in love with Billie. It was a different love from what he felt for Reiko, but unrecognized love has its honor. Though smiling and beautiful as ever Billie looked frail. She was being pulled along by Virgil, who stopped at each table to manifest his abundance, his cool, his power: his smile of a Conqueror, his How Could You Ever Doubt Me?ness, his puissance and his skill. He was broad, he took his time showing off his fine and mysterious prize, which was after all his due, and she seemed all meek and proud to be with him. Pauline the Lionness noticed some of the women staring with malice. Virgil had the knack of keeping peace among his women, a fragile peace. He was a fool but he had the knack, even a kind of genius at it. They all knew about each other, more or less, each one fantasizing that she's the *most* special one, the one who truly owns his heart, and even if he is a bad boy who's got to go out with other women, it's only his rogue nature not his heart of hearts that drives him to those other women. But now he's gone and broken the fragile covenant, gone public with the Mambo Girl. It was an insult, an indignity, a slap in the face. Pauline imagined the shattering of champagne glasses at several tables, each glass representing a betrayal. And he did it the most humiliating way possible: at home, Pauline's, with him waltzing in all puffed up, with an outsider. Virgil had broken the rules, gone out of character. Pauline saw through the swagger to the fact that her Champion was smitten. She didn't like it, didn't like it at all.

Virgil took the front-most table and ordered champagne. Billie was wearing her green dress, to remind those that cared to remember that this was the infamous Mambo Girl. The champagne arrived in a battered ice bucket that didn't get much use, the two looked into each other's eyes – Mambo Girl's eyes had those flecks of yellow – and they toasted each other. The entire club knew a King had chosen his Queen and the Coronation had begun. One woman angrily stood to spurn the invitation – no way she was going to sit there and watch this spectacle. There were others that stayed – masochists or else the drama was too fascinating. The proud woman glared at the royal couple as she left.

Virgil leaned forward to kiss his Queen, then drew her up and looked over at Familyman, the tenorman, who knew: "Stardust," Virgil's song. This was the song with which he romanced one lucky woman each week, the one that played as he sat her down on her throne and sang to her. The one he requested now, to rub salt in the wound of any woman who still doubted. No one got up when the music started. Everyone knew it was their dance.

Speed's stomach twisted with the ballad, but the thing with Billie had become a matter of honor that overshadowed emotion and judgment: *She can go out with who she wants but the car, that's Hidekazu's car. And my responsibility. My honor.*

Speed walked as in a dream to the dance floor, walked up to Virgil and tapped him on the shoulder. No one could believe what they were seeing. A full head taller than Speed, Virgil looked down at him in astonishment, not sure what he should do. It would be unseemly to smash the little Jap, but how could he let the Fool interrupt his Coronation?

Billie spoke softly to Virgil: "It's okay. Let me dance with

him." Virgil had been here before. This time he went with the flow. After all, he had won. He could be magnanimous. He was the King. He got the girl. This guy's a Loser. A Fool. He smiled and sat down but made visible to the crowd his mocking, his can-you-feature-this? attitude about it. Speed and Billie danced. "Stardust."

Speed spoke first. "I'm worried about you."

"I'm ... okay. Don't make a scene Speed, okay?" She spoke gently, calming him.

"Sure." They danced.

Familyman let his ballads run in phrases of slow stops full of air, like the human voice when the throat is not clear and catches a moment before the voice resonates.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. I just needed to get away." Billie began to weep. This was too much for Virgil. He stood and grabbed Speed by the shoulder. Speed stopped dancing and simply looked at Virgil. There was no fear in his eyes, only screeching monkeys in his ears, louder and louder. Harvard saw it coming and rushed forward but he was too late. Speed simply took a step back to the cocktail table, grabbed the bottle of champagne by the neck, drew his arm back in a backhand and then he suddenly kicked Virgil in the side of the left knee, spun completely around like a discus thrower and smashed the bottle into the opposite side of Virgil's face, crumpling him. It was the same move he did on Smith, but this time he finished it. The heavy bottle did not break but Virgil went down. Billie stood there, eyes on Virgil. Speed spoke to her as Harvard reached in to grab him.

"Where's the damn car?" That's all Speed managed to get out before Harvard had him in his sumo grip and was rushing him outside. Once they were in the alley a load of young men

exploded out the door and swarmed the duo. They proceeded to beat the living crap out of them. Before they could get to serious work on internal organs Pauline came out with a couple of bartenders.

"That's enough boys. We don't want 'em dead. They had enough." She nodded and the bartenders took to pulling apart the huddle. But these were Virgil's boys and wouldn't quit easy. Pauline screamed. "Get off! We don't want no police around here. Get off 'em 'fore you kill 'em!"

Daedelus appeared from nowhere and waded into the crowd, Ella Maya right behind. The beating stopped. Harvard was in poor shape but they were able to sit him up. Speed was in worse shape, bloodied, not moving. They got there just as Pauline was calling off the troops.

"Why didn't you call off your boys, they had enough," yelled Daedelus.

"I did what I could. I don't want no trouble. Boy here just smashed Virgil's face. Might've broke his cheek."

Daedelus got up, went into the club with Pauline. Ella Maya stayed with the duo, trying to get them up, keeping a fierce eye on a couple of young bucks still standing around looking sullen. Virgil was slumped on a chair, a bag of ice on his swollen face. Billie was sitting as though nothing had happened. Others were tending Virgil, bragging about how they took care of the Japs.

"C'mon Billie, let's go home."

Billie spoke in a whisper. "No Daddy. I'm staying. Don't worry. I got something to take care of." Daedelus just looked at her. A bloodless complexion but it wasn't the night's violence that made her pale. Something was eating her. Daedelus didn't like the setup.

"You belong with me, Billie. You need a place to rest. Ella

and me, we'll take care of you. C'mon baby." Billie didn't move.

Ella Maya entered the club, checked out the scene then searched out Pauline. She was seething.

Pauline, cool-with-attitude, started right in: "It's show biz, honey. Don't even have to pay them," she laughed. "They all just went at each other! I don't know what they got going behind the scenes but it's cooking!"

Ella Maya: "What kind of circus you runnin' here?"

Pauline, giving back: "Hey, they want to come in here and fight, I can't stop them. All I care about is running a saloon. And staying away from the police."

"Anything happens to Billie, I'm going to shut you down."

"What you talking about? She the one making trouble. We got ourselves a nice little neighborhood bar till she show up. Nice and quiet. Take her away and never come back for all I care. She's trouble."

Ella Maya glared at Pauline and turned. She joined Daedelus.

"Billie's going to stick around here for a while," said he, "with Virgil." Ella Maya looked at Billie, looked at Virgil, looked at Daedelus.

"Billie honey, you got to rest. Come with us." Billie wouldn't talk but she was thinking. She didn't move, didn't reply. All Daedelus could do was lean over and kiss Billie and whisper. "Take care of yourself baby."

Daedelus's Ford carried Speed back to his home. Harvard was able to drive the gardening jalopy back to Speed's house. Once there Ella Maya took the Ford and dropped off Harvard and returned to Daedelus's house to stay the night. It was midnight when Daedelus helped Speed climb the steps of his house. Neither man looked up to the sky. The basin's haze had been

exhaled to the freezing deserts, the great eye of sky had finally opened. The currents were sweeping the dusty phosphorescence on its nightly round.

Mas and Yoshi woke to the struggle of Speed and Daedelus scaling the long and narrow staircase. Speed's room faced north toward the big Washingtonia, glowing dully outside the window, fronds arcing like huge friendly petals in the cityglow. Mas helped the two up the last steps, then Daedelus spoke.

"I don't think he's busted up inside. They got in one or two good kicks though. Might've cracked a rib."

Yoshi had already gone to the bathroom for hot water and towels. Speed was still out cold. Mas looked grim. "Who did this?"

"Bunch of guys at Pauline's. It's a night club over by Crenshaw."

"What was Speed doing there?"

"That's a long story."

Yoshi was wiping the blood off Speed, who groaned occasionally. Mas and Daedelus watched her from the doorway of the tiny bedroom, then Mas nodded to Daedelus and they went downstairs to the kitchen. Mas got out a couple of glasses and a bottle of whiskey, poured the pale liquor.

"Water?"

"No." They sat at the kitchen table and drank for a minute. Daedelus began. "I don't exactly know what they were doing there but I know it had something to do with my daughter Billie."

"They?"

"He was with Harvard. We took him home. He came out of it in better shape than Speed. They mostly wanted some of

Speed."

"Who wanted him?"

"Guy named Virgil. He's the big dog down there. Speed smashed him in the face with a champagne bottle. His boys are the ones got to Speed and Harvard."

"I don't believe this. What were they fighting about?"

"Most likely Billie, my daughter." Mas had to think about that one.

"They were fighting over your daughter? Well ... she certainly is pretty ... but I never thought ... Speed ... I mean...."

"You mean because she's colored?"

"Well, yeah."

"Neither did I at first. I think he's lost her though. She's staying with Virgil, at least for now. I'm pretty upset about it. She's not well. She should be home."

"Not well?"

"Her nerves are bad, needs a rest." Then, "I think she's having some kind of nervous breakdown."

They sat and drank a minute beneath the lone bare bulb overhead, each to his own thoughts.

"Speed's never fought before," said Mas.

"How well do you know your brother?"

"Not that well I guess. But he's never done anything like this. Oh he was a hellraiser at camp, used to sneak out and go swimming in the river with his girlfriend. But he never fought. Got a chip on his shoulder now. Don't know why. He's always ... you know, pissed off about something."

"About what?"

"I don't know. Reiko died in Arkansas. His girlfriend. She drowned herself. He took it real hard. But we all went through that kind of shit. Why should he be any different? He's the only

one that gets into trouble."

Daedelus laughed softly, "Yeah," and tossing off the rest of his drink, said, "Yeah. We all go through it. I get angry too."

"But you don't get into fights."

"I got too old Mas, I'm tired."

"Yeah. Well I hope he finds what he's looking for before he gets himself killed."

"Let's hope so. I got to slide. Thanks for the drink." Daedelus turned to go, then, "But I used to fight. Your brother reminds me of myself, when I was young. I was a hothead."

Mama was in pain as she leaned her hand against the staircase wall. In her other hand she held a small teapot, the cup was in her apron pocket. She stopped halfway up the stairs but didn't reflect on her arthritis. This morning she was thinking about her younger son and how he had lost his way in this world.

When she reached the top she breathed hard for a while, thinking: *He's got no practical head. Running around with a black girl. What an idiot.*

She looked cautiously into his room. He was still asleep, but when she saw how swollen with bruising his head was she melted. She sat down in the lone chair, held the teapot between her legs and cried. She did not see a cloaked and hatted figure with long nose standing in the other corner, smoking invisibly at a cigar that could be smelled only in another world. It was a world she had believed in since she was a little girl, when she had seen the Temple Guardians for the first time. Tengu had come to visit. She could not smell the smoke from the other world. Lucky for her, who hated smoking.

"Where's the car?" Speed is restless, groans while Mama



fumbles in her apron pocket for the teacup.

"Shigema, are you okay?"

"The car, what have you done with the car? damn it."

"Shigema, wake up. Have some tea. You'll feel better."

Speed opened his eyes. He replayed the last scene of the dream. Sadness. She's gone. *Okay but where's the damn car?*

"I got to get up." He moved to sit up and searing pain cut through his ribcage. "Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhrrr."

"Don't move. Have some tea. It'll make you feel better."

Speed slumped back exhausted. Mama placed the empty cup on the bedstand and carefully poured the steaming tea. It made a hollow gurgling sound. Speed was relaxed by the sound and the absence of pain, as long as he didn't move. The sound.

Frightened and awed, young Thomas had been standing by the doorway. "Grandma, what's the matter with Uncle Speed?"

"He'll be alright. He just needs to drink tea."

**SATURDAY NIGHT**

The girl still had mambo left in her. She looked stunning in the moonlight, refreshed, as though her recent troubles had left her light as a feather. She sat in the Model A, resting her arms on the steering wheel, staring at the Washingtonia in front of Speed's house. Light as a feather. She had not noticed the palm before, huge and shaggy, its fronds swaying in the breeze. It was nearly midnight. The mambo dress was satin grey in the moonlight.

Speed too had been watching the palm from his bedroom, his eyes envisioning an underwater scene in the blue-silver moonlight, the palm undulating like a sea anemone: *Moondrift. Tide coming in. Catch bits of food, swirling around in the waves. What a life, just sit there, rooted to your rock, waiting for lunch to drift by. Then some guy comes along, sticks a knife in you, feeds you to the fish. Life of leisure till the man comes. Damn things don't die easy, just heal up.*

He imagined a shark cruising through. *Not like sharks. Sharks got to keep moving. Big tubes of leather with teeth at the front, water flowing through you, keeping you pumped up and alive. Every year they bring in a big one at San Pedro, people come out to look, newspaper sends a photographer, leave it out on the pier till it smells too much, shove it back on the outgoing tide.*

Speed heard the car pull up in front of the house and watched Billie as she sat there. Ribs shooting pain, he crawled out his bedroom window onto the small roof that covered the front porch. He watched her staring at the palm. She was staring straight at Speed but didn't notice him, as though she was

debating what to do, till she snapped out of it and left the car, approached the house. She did not see him till he spoke quietly.

"Nice night for a joy ride."

Billie looked up and whispered urgently, "Speed, come down. I got to talk to you."

"We're talking."

"I know you're mad at me, but I need your help. They're after me. Please come down and talk to me. Please Speed."

She stood in the moonshadow of the Washingtonia. Speed replied in an angry, low voice:

"You broke the rules."

"Please Speed, I need to talk to you." Speed thought a moment then made his way ever so slowly through the window, ribs shooting pain, then painstakingly down the stairs. He walked like an old man out to the Model A. They sat in the car, Speed on the passenger side. Speed's bitterness was set. His ribs were throbbing.

"The police came to Pauline's. Asking about us. They found Mojo's body! Somehow they tracked us back here. Pauline hid me out. Put me up for the night at her place. Upstairs from the club. She's all right. Then this morning I drove out to the coast, spent the day there, just thinking. The Sandwave. I've made a mess of things, I know. Things got out of hand. They found Mojo's body Speed! That night ... at Mama's ... I was ... like I was in a dream. Like it took me over. Like it was pulling on me. I pointed the gun at him. I pointed the gun. I don't remember anything else." She started crying.

"You were pretty much out of it," Speed whispered. But Billie acted as though she hadn't heard him.

"The police were over at the club again tonight. I drove by and saw them. They'd be on me right away if I showed up

anywhere around there."

*Police*, thought Speed. *Mama's gonna love this.* "What did you have in mind?"

"We gotta run! Let's go to Mexico till this blows over."

"Mexico! Shit. Jeez." *This woman really is crazy.*

"Mexico's just down the road."

"What about a passport? They'll grab you at the border."

"There's a little town called Mexicali. I looked at the map. It's inland from Tijuana. I'm sure we could get across without showing a passport. I mean, if worst comes to worst there's miles of open desert. I saw it from the train coming out the first time."

"Oh that's brilliant. Just drive across the desert. Haven't you had enough of the desert? And whose car were you planning on using?"

"Well, I thought we'd use this car."

"Figured as much. Do you always take whatever you need?"

Billie was silent for a few heartbeats, then, "They might be looking for you too, Speed."

Speed knew they were the prime suspects. But how would anyone know about him? What did he have to fear? All at once he knew: *Goddamn. I'm a Jap. I stuck out like a sore thumb. Over there in Arkansas, yeah, they noticed me all right. This crazy bitch has got me in deep. I was crazy to get mixed up with her, crazy as she is. Already spent a fucking year locked up, Reiko melted away. Hah, maybe they'll send me back to Arkansas. Goddamn Rohwer. Fucking goddamn Rohwer. I'll die before I'll let 'em put me away again.*

The grainy photos rested against the stomach of Swanton, plump from too many chili dogs eaten in the front seat of his car.

Ordinarily a black man found floating in a swamp in Arkansas wouldn't arouse his interest. Detective work was a combination of hunches and politics, and on both scores the death didn't count for much, especially as far away as Arkansas. It wouldn't go down for much at the stationhouse either, the solving of this crime. Black man kills black man, not much to go on, not much repercussion. The only thing about it was the report an Oriental had been involved. Why would an Oriental get mixed up with colored folks? In Arkansas of all places. They kept to themselves, never made trouble. Especially now, after the war. It didn't add up. He looked at the photo of Mojo's body, full of bullet holes and partly eaten by swamp creatures. The thought that an Oriental could have done that and later sunk the body in a swamp was discomfiting. He didn't like it, didn't like it at all. He tossed the photos to Solomon.

"This is the place they say the girl hangs out."

Solomon just nodded and opened the door. Coming out to Pauline's Pantry was Swanton's idea. It was one of the nicer colored clubs, but checking it out on Saturday night didn't set well with Solomon. Too much potential for trouble. Even though Swanton had explained it was possible the killer was there. Solomon didn't like the idea of entering the black club with a partner who liked to swagger, who relished his power and wasn't shy about throwing it around.

Miss Pauline didn't become mistress of her domain from misplaying her devotees. She was pleased as she surveyed her swinging realm and felt the generous waves of music spreading powerful manna over her empire packed with gyrating and stylish boppers. She made a space for the style, the drama, even the

tragedy if there wasn't enough in their lives already. She provided a service, sustaining the intangibles. She never counted on anyone. She had seen them come and go, all the players who came in looking for a game, like sharks come in from the open sea to cruise the shoreline, ending up in her little tidepool. Pauline's Pantry, where you come to find something to eat, but watch out you don't become the eaten. It's a dangerous game if you fall for the wrong kind, the kind that don't play by the rules. The police were looking for Virgil too. Miss Pauline reflected un sentimentally: he didn't see it coming, didn't see it at all. Now he's under suspicion. Just for hanging out with the Mambo Girl.

She felt an extra hard edge of partying to this Saturday night, so our hostess was in an expansive mood. The drinks were flowin', the joint was jumpin'. She was happy till she felt the ripple in energy when the detectives entered the club. Nothing you could hear of course or even see, but there was a subtle sea change even the extravagant good spirits of our hostess could not overcome. There was no hostility in the manner of the crowd, only a perfected nonchalance. Flashing white skins for badge, they were cops, everyone knew. They stood at the doorway and stared for a while. Our hostess was coy and feigned indifference. As they entered the waves parted for the Pharaoh's men. Refreshments appeared. They watched the entertainment, which was live, the Chuckie Bones quartet, who haven't missed a beat, but then, only gunfire would've sent them diving. This clanking of chains, just part of the show. A fight would just make them play louder.

Swanton checked out the room, Solomon checked out the band.

"These guys are good."

"What?"

"They're good, the band."

"Who gives a shit about the band? On second thought, the guy he got in a fight with was a singer. And wasn't the girl a singer? We should talk to the musicians, see what they know. Make a note of it."

Solomon didn't like the situation, knew his partner was ready to explode.

The band had finished its instrumental and was about to introduce the female vocalist, young and skinny and inexperienced, nervous about the presence of the detectives. Perhaps she thought an arrest was about to be made. Maybe it was stage jitters. Swanton got up and approached the band.

"Which one of you's in charge?"

They looked at Preacherman. He stood casually and came out to the floor. In an instant he had changed from the good time rollypoly emcee of the club to a short, fat hipster with an attitude.

"Let's go outside. I need to ask you some questions."

"I me got a show to put on."

"You want me to shut down the whole club?" The Preacherman glanced at Pauline on his way out to the cool air of the alley that fronted the club. He was cool, affected the hipness of Harlem, goatee, shades, the whole bit. Swanton disliked him instinctively.

"What's your name?"

"Thelonious Monk," replied Preacherman.

"You a friend of Virgil Fulsom?"

"Yeah."

"You know where we can find him?"

"Can't imagine."

"He run with a fast crowd?"

"No. Only us."

"You know the Oriental guy he got in a scrape with?"

"Don't know any Orientals."

"You know where he came from?"

"I don't know. China maybe."

"Don't get smart."

"Hey I got a show to put on."

"It'll have to wait. Or maybe you'd like to come downtown to answer our questions." Silence.

"What happened to Fulsom after the fight last night?"

"He left." Swanton glared at him. "With his girlfriend."

"What's her name?"

"Billie Holiday."

"This Billie Holiday, she a regular around here?"

"Oh yeah. Comes around all the time. We call her Lady Day. You know, for Holiday. That's H-O-L-I-D-A-Y, one L."

"Where can we find her?"

"You might try the Savoy Ballroom."

"Haven't heard of that one. Is that over on Second Avenue?"

Solomon looked uneasy. "He's jerking you around. Let's go in and talk to the owner." Swanton looked hard at the young emcee.

"I'll remember you," and gave him a shove. The back of his head cracked against the wall.

Preacherman didn't miss a beat.

"Thank you sir. Can I go now?"

The detective nodded and followed him back into the club. The shiny redness of the vinyl door flashed through the smoke swelling out from the subterrain of the nightlife. Machito's great "Tanga" countered the lawmen. The dance floor was filled with angulating bodies. Preacherman nodded to Chuckie, not bothering to turn off the mambo playing on the phonograph.



Preacherman took the stage. He spread his arms wide and smiled, but suppressed anger emanated from him.

"Don't our Pauline put on the greatest show on Crenshaw? *[hoots and yells]* Don't she shine her spotlight on the best? We play our music hard, our dancers move loose and sassy, and everyone has a good time. *[yells and whistles]*.

"Don't ask how we do it, Ladies and Gentlemens, but some nights it's hard work, real hard work, know what I mean. Nice work if you can get it, Wham bam thank you ma'am kind of honest show biz kind of work. *[snare hit]* Like the Duke says, *[cymbal crash]* "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing," *[drum roll]* and we are *swingin'!* *[kick and crash]* *[Chuckie Bones instinctively lays down a swingin' ride cymbal]* *[Preacherman is yelling now, anger and resentment bubbling to the surface.]* We been swingin' since we lef' home, ain't that right Bones? *[double snare hit and crash]* It's a swingin' show, that's all you got to know! If you gotta ask how we do it, *[Bones goes into a drum solo]* you ain't *never* gonna groove it *[solo builds and MC is shouting]*. The world's a stage ... the night is callin' you ... so play on Mr. Bones."

The solo quickly climaxes in a flurry of crashes, then Chuckie launches immediately into a blistering fast bebop to discharge the anger and fuse the energies swirling loose in the room. No one danced but a few of the hipsters nodded as Familyman the tenor tore into "Cherokee," the notes cascading aggressively over the audience. Chaos and dissonance. The detectives waded through the crowd as though crossing a swamp, disoriented by the bebop. Swanton thought, *Why can't they play Glenn Miller?*

Pauline caught them at the bar, led them back to the office, took her seat behind the desk. There was barely room for the men

to stand. The walls were covered with shiny 78s, most of them signed, none of the names familiar to the detectives.

Appearing even more immense than usual in that closet-sized room, Pauline had gone to red, had fashioned herself head to toe in red, red cowboy boots, red fringed cowgirl skirt and red fringed shirt, red stetson hat, red vest. She had a red bandanna tied around her neck. She took off her hat, got out a bottle and three glasses and placed them on the desk. Her hair was shiny and slicked back, tied back in a bun.

"How you fellas doing tonight?"

"No complaints."

"Found anything?"

"What's with the Oriental? You know him?"

"Nah. All these years I never seen a one, then this guy come in and all hell breaks loose. It don't make sense. I think he's a Jap."

"What about the girl?"

"Name's Billie. She been staying with Daedelus Verrette, I think she's his daughter."

"You wouldn't be hiding her out, would you?"

"Hey, I got me a nice little snap here, took me years to put it together. Think I'd throw it away for someone I hardly know? Some girl come to town and turn my place upside down and I'm a supposed to be hiding her out?" Her imposing arm reached for one of the glasses, the fringes swaying, she filled it half full with whiskey and looked at the men, implacably. They made no motion, she downed the glass. She filled the other two glasses.

"After the fight she clean up Virgil real nice. Then some cops come by asking questions about some murder in Arkansas and they skedaddled out the back door. Haven't seen her since." Pauline reached for her red stetson and put it on. The bar owner

just looked at the detectives, then gently took one of the two glasses that were untouched, drained it.

"Well gentlemens, I've tol' ya all I know. I got me a business to run." She put her hands on the desk.

"Just one thing. What's the connection between the Oriental and this Billie Holiday?"

Pauline's eyes were fixed on the far horizon. *Who's been messing with these guys? Preacherman.* She looked up from under the stetson.

"I think he was sweet on her."

Solomon spoke for the first time. "You mean a Oriental guy comes into your club and gets in a fight over a colored girl?"

"That's about the size of it." Pauline stood as if to punctuate her last statement. Swanton had one last question.

"We're not done yet."

Pauline sat down and looked sideways at Swanton, bemusement on her broad features. Swanton noticed.

"Where do I find Verrette?"

"Don't know where he lives." Swanton glared at her. Her barely concealed contempt twisted inside him, even if she was telling the truth, and he lashed out, smacking her hard on the side of the head with a sap he always carried. Her head dripped sweat and blood onto her red outfit as she struggled to hold her stomach.

As the cops left, the young vocalist was singing "Love Is Here To Stay" in a shaky voice. The Pantry crowd was getting on with the serious business of partying while Preacherman was well into getting fully smashed. Ella Maya and Daedelus were coupling in his bed on Victoria Ave., Hershey was pounding into his girlfriend in Long Beach, Billie and Speed were walking over to Hidekazu's place, and demons of all colors were out plotting mischief.

Two figures went through the gate next to the empty garage, tapped on a bedroom window by a cherry tree in the backyard. Hidekazu took it all in: Speed and Billie in faded moonlight. He was at the back door in less than a minute.

Billie spoke sweetly, "I'm sorry about keeping the car so long. I just needed to use it a little longer than I expected."

Hidekazu was unemotional. "Hey it's cold. Come inside." They followed him into the living room, which was full of knickknacks much like Daedelus's, except they were Oriental: the hanging painting from the Sung Dynasty that Mr. Yamashita cut out from a magazine on Oriental art and glued to an old scroll, the glossy black wood of the family shrine with its *ihai*, the small memorial tablet with the family name on it, the vented blue and white incense pot, the Buddha figurines, the jeweled bonsai tree growing from white sparkling pebbles in a rectilinear dark blue pot, the woodblock print of Hokusai's "Wave" from an old calendar.

Speed did the talking. "Billie's in trouble. The police think she killed a guy. Or else they think *I* killed him. Anyway we got to lay low."

"Did you kill him?"

Speed lied, "No."

Hidekazu didn't need to hear everything, Speed decided. Hidekazu thought for a moment: *This is for Speed.*

"So you want to borrow the car."

"Yeah. That's what we ... after we ... there's no telling what's going to happen.... We need to hide out."

"Where you going?"

"We thought we'd head south."

"Mexico?"

"Yeah, maybe. We don't have a exact place in mind."

Hidekazu sat silent for a full minute: *Speed's in trouble. It makes no difference what I thought before, going around with a colored girl. He can go around with who he wants. He can take the car. He's in trouble. What's mine is his. But Mexico? We can do better than that.*

He stood and went to the secretary, took out a pen and paper, wrote for another minute. He handed the paper to Speed.

"Take this. Take the car, go to this address, give the note to Santoku-sensei."

Speed took the paper, looked at it. Aside from the address it was entirely in Japanese. He couldn't read Japanese, other than the simplest kanji. "What does it say?"

"It says, This is my friend Miyamoto, and his friend Billie. Please hide them out. I am obligated to you."

"Who is he?"

"He used to be a Buddhist monk. Now he lives above a bar in Li'l Tokyo."

"I don't know how to thank you."

"It's nothing."

Hidekazu went into the kitchen, Speed followed him with Billie close behind, whispering as she took in the Oriental ornaments. "I love all these things. Are they heirlooms?"

"What are you talking about? We don't have heirlooms. No one's got heirlooms. It's just junk."

"Well I think it's interesting."

In the kitchen Hidekazu was busy putting together food for the pilgrims. Rice balls [*nigiri*] wrapped with seaweed [*nori*] with a pickled salty plum inside [*umeboshi*], pickled yellow daikon radish [*takuan*], a little marinated chicken [*teriyaki*] and a

thermos of hot tea [*genmaicha*]. He packed it up in a tin box, wrapped it in a cloth tied Japanese style, and handed it to Billie.

"We call this bento. It's not much. You carry it here, by the knot."

"Why are you helping me? I took your car. I stole it."

"Speed needs help."

"Speed may be crazy as me."

"Yeah. Maybe."

Hidekazu was embarrassed by the attention. "Don't worry about the car. It's time the car was put to good use. We hardly drive it. It needs to be used."

As they left by the front door, Billie on an impulse kissed Hidekazu on the cheek. *What sort of woman is this? She's pretty. I can see why Speed likes her, even if she is colored. I don't understand. Shigataganai. Can't be helped. Fate.*

"Speed, I want to visit Daddy."

"The less he knows about us the less he has to lie." Billie simply crossed the street diagonally, retracing Hidekazu's steps of that afternoon. Speed shrugged his shoulders and followed. The moon in the western sky, like a tilted bowl, had nearly settled. The buzz was mostly gone from the night.

Listening to Billie Holiday, Daedelus was awake in the living room. Ella Maya was asleep in the bedroom. He did not seem surprised to see them. His voice was nearly a whisper. "Hey Billie. Speed." He hugged his daughter for a long time, then shook hands with Speed. His eyes were full of feeling.

"You alright baby?"

"I'm fine Daddy. We're not staying long. I'll just get a few things. We got a car, Hidekazu's car, he said it was okay. We'll

be okay." She hesitated, then, "I guess you heard about Arkansas."

"Yeah. Speed told me." Billie saw the question in his eyes.

"I didn't do it Daddy. I don't know who did."

Speed thought: *How could she not know I did it? She was there. She saw me. Why is she trying to cover for me?*

Everyone was silent for a minute. Then Daedelus asked his daughter, "How you feeling? You know."

"Better. I could use a little rest."

Daedelus was silent again, regretting that she couldn't stay with him, that she had to flee, that Speed got mixed up in it. Billie slipped into the bedroom to grab her suitcase. She didn't have many things, but she made sure to take the red Chinese dress. Daedelus limped into the kitchen, took out a large pot and filled it from the stockpot on the stove. There had been no party at Ella Maya's that night but she had cooked up a huge potful of gumbo anyway. Her way of making things better. The okra was still firm and somewhat green. He wrapped the pot in newspaper, tied it with twine and handed it to Speed.

"This'll be better tomorrow. Where you headed?"

Speed replied, "Ask Hidekazu. Somewhere in Li'l Tokyo, at least for now. Friend of his. Some kind of zen monk. I don't know him."

Daedelus nodded. "Be careful," he said to Speed.

Father and daughter hugged, Speed watched, then they left. Driving a shiny Model A, they carried bento, gumbo and mambo to mambo-less Li'l Tokyo.

Even a zen monk must sleep, and at 2 a.m. Santoku was dreaming scenes from koans: The forest where the one hand

claps, and the zen echoes through the trees. Or sitting zen on the hard wooden floor of the meditation room when the young monk replies to a koan and the Master gets angry at his answer and smashes him over the head with a sake bottle. Enlightenment follows. Enlightenment *always* follows. Zen happy dreams. It was the continued pounding he couldn't bear: *Didn't I drink only one bottle of sake? So why this crashing? Did not the young monk become enlightened after one sake bottle smashed on the head? Someone pounding.*

He woke up angry, reached for his slippers and stumbled down the stairs, his robe curling behind him on the breeze that trickled up from the rattling downstairs street level door. He flung open the door but said nothing, just stared at the unlikely couple in front. He looked like pot-bellied Hotei, the Buddha-like figure that was found around Oriental businesses as a sign of good fortune, always smiling but not tonight. Speed spoke first.

"Santoku-sensei. Please forgive the late hour. We need your help. Hidekazu sent us." He handed the monk the note from his friend.

Santoku read the note, grunted, turned and walked up the stairs. When they didn't immediately follow, he crankily motioned them up. Speed had a small satchel and Billie's suitcase, which he carried painfully up, his ribs aching, Billie carried the bento and the pot of gumbo. It was a shabby studio apartment, stove, table, bed by the window, separate bathroom. Santoku grabbed his pillow and blanket and threw them on the couch. He pointed at the bed and grunted. Speed took care of setting them up in the bed, but felt bad about displacing him. Billie set the still-warm pot of gumbo on the stove.

Santoku made straight for the stove, sniffed the pot, cut the twine, unwrapped and unlidded. He sniffed deeply and exhaled



slowly through his mouth, eyes closed, as though he were meditating, then grunted, got down a bowl and ladled it full. He brought the bowl to his lips and with chopsticks slurped it down like a starving man. Soon beads of sweat were forming on his nose and on his bald head, but he looked happy. He looked like he had entered Nirvana. He noticed the bento, unwrapped it and took out a couple of rice balls, which he threw into his gumbo, complete with the seaweed and pickled plum, and swamped it around real good. He got up and poured himself a sake in a regular water glass, drank it down like it was water, poured some in a cast iron skillet and turned the heat up. He got out a couple more bowls, filled them from the gumbo pot, and motioned for Speed and Billie to eat. Soon there was nothing but the sound of three mouths slurping. When the sake was hot he poured for the young folks, directly from the pan into teacups. After finishing off another bowl and glass of sake, he burped loudly, went over to the couch, curled up and was snoring in a minute. Speed and Billie, also spent, were asleep soon after. On the small mattress they slept spoon-style. Just before he slipped into sleep Speed felt his penis stir against her buttocks.

A dark figure exhaled. Smoke filled the space but no one stirred.

## SANTOKU

Sunday morning sutra. The caped figure sat in a corner of the kitchen, his snout just visible beneath his pork pie hat. Santoku was warming himself some sake, trying to ignore the caped pedant and his droning sermonizing. It was 5:00 in the morning, the sky just beginning to lighten, soon the lemon-colored light would pour over the warehouse district east of Li'l Tokyo. The caped one intoned sutra-like:

"Be not attached to the East or wait for the West to reveal itself. Be grateful for the Center. You must rise before the sun, bathe, chant the morning sutra, eat just a little. You must be empty to see your path clearly. Your name means you are the one who plows and plants the field of his heart. You are a Voyager of the Heart. You must open your heart to the path of suffering and joy. You must open your heart to all kinds of weather."

The zen monk replied mentally as though in casual conversation with the former Temple Guardian: *I know what my name means. Leave me alone. Go bother someone else. I'll chant sutras in the evening.*

He breathed in a gulp of sake, the sweet warmth spreading into his torso: *Voyager of the Heart. Who does this guy think he is anyway? No one talks like that anymore. He's an old spirit. Must have come in with the tide. Fresh Off the Boat. Or with those other two. Pesky spirit. Demon of longing. Coming out of woodwork. Started as woodwork too, hehhh. Is he smoking? My karma, stinky demon comes around, I've really sunk low when strangers like those two come looking to me for help. Strangers who bring their own smelly demon. Hah. Haha. Hahahahah.*

*Come to party, bring your own demon! Ha! Demons and Buddhas!*

Santoku giggled uncontrollably at his joke. Tengu intoned from his corner, "Each day demons and Buddhas come near our hearts. Says Tengu of the Temple of Kannon."

*Hah. Hahahahah. Okay. Okay Mr. Tengu. You're a funny guy. I like funny guys. You think you're teaching me zen? Or do you think you are the Buddha himself? You're a simple-minded demon! You're supposed to scare off evil spirits and stir up longing. That's all you're supposed to do. So leave me alone. I should tell you there's hardly any temples left to guard. Around here you'd get more action if you were a Commie instead of a Kami. Hah. Ha hahaha. Commie instead of Kami, hoho. Get it?*

The zen monk ran the water for a bath, very hot. He relieved himself and reflected: *Most pleasurable to piss in a field of tall grasses. Just you and the wild grass, quiet except the breeze moving the stalks, susumu, zasso the old word, the buzzing of insects, a warm morning after a night of sake and poetry. Maybe a woman? Hah. Been a while since that. I was thin those days. Look at this belly. I look like Hotei. Or the Buddha himself. Ah. Hot. Ahhhcchhhhccchhhhhchchcshsssss. So hot. This is good. Sake goes right to my head. Cheaper this way.*

*The great Po Chu-i could not have imagined sitting here in a tub in America with a beautiful woman asleep in the next room while some old fart demon prattles on in the kitchen. I sound like a crank. Mad. She is beautiful though, quite striking. "Don't go singing a Song of Love, little dancing girl, when there's no one here with a heart for you to break." Ha, but look, my weed stalk rises in warmth. I am not dead after all! Unpredictable he is. My dried cuttlefish is swimming now. Chimpoko. Ososo. Such*

*beauty. Oh such beauty! What a shame, there's no one here for you, no one here with a heart for you to break, no one here to appreciate you but myself. Here is my wild weed stalk. He has been cut down many times, but you can make him green again, my little dancing girl. Yes you can. Perhaps he will enjoy your Song of Love, your Song of Willow Branches, the kind we lay down on, springy in the Spring floodtime with boughs of green overhead, our willow room by the stream, it is fragile but it will last long enough for what we have to do: making joy! That is true, little dancing girl. He's known you forever and has been waiting for you. He will dance to your song. See, he dances now. Look at him. Dancing zen man, wild weed stalk man. He begs for the killing of selfish desire. Self pride. He begs for the killing of self pride. He begs for the killing of himself. He begs for the killing of desire. His pride. His desire. His ... ohhhhhh. His desire is. His desire is like a kiai. His desire is like the sudden, aahhhhhh, like the sudden resonant, sudden ... shout ... of a ssshhhhh ... swordsman. Ahhhss. Ahh. Haahhe. Ohhhhhhhmmaaa. Ki-ahhhhhhheeeeeeeeshshshs. Hail to the Bodhisattva of Compassion! Hail to the Bodhisattva of Compassion!*

The zen man steep, his semen strings out in the water like spittle of cow in the wind. His eyes are closed but a film is playing: A train is coming. The saltwind-disheveled black hair of night streams back from the eye of compassion, the train's eye, the bright eye that's seen him on the tracks of life, and wants to take him back to her, all the way back to her. He is standing in the bright light of the onrushing train. He cannot hear the screech of brakes and the screaming of men. The eye of compassion stares ever larger down on him, and he is happy and scared and excited to be going home. The eye of compassion is bright, but

shadows still twist inside it like ghosts. It is a scene he has replayed since childhood: a figure being pulled lifeless from water. It is his mother, death from drowning, suicide, despondent, his father's drunken womanizing. He is about to enter the light forever, and reenter the shadows of his past, and witness life flowing back into the lifeless body, to finally join his life with hers. The train's eye is nearly upon him. But he is jolted awake by a rap on the head with a stick. "Where is the Buddha?" asks the pesky demon who has invaded his dream, just before he is able to reunite with the eye of compassion.

*Your timing is impeccable, little shit.*

"Are you the one who plows and cultivates the field of his heart?" asks the Trickster with a sneer.

*Hah. Who cares? I'd rather be one who plows and cultivates the field of women. Who asked you to the party? You're a demon of longing. I no longer wish for death. It's just a dream. Get lost!*

Santoku rose dripping from the water like an ascetic who chants sutras in the coldest water of winter. Misogi. Without drying he put his robe on, turned the heat on the black skillet and poured it full of sake. He got out his mokugyo, a small wooden drum to accompany the chanting of sutras, his haiku notebook, brush, inkstick and inkstone. At the kitchen table, while the sake heated, he rubbed the inkstick on the inkstone with a couple tablespoons of water. When he had made enough black liquid, he turned the heat off and poured off enough sake to fill a coffee mug. He warmed his hands on the cup, breathed in the sweet vapors, then drank down about half the cup. Then he inked up his brush, took a deep breath, closed his eyes and waited. He breathed his long-practiced zen-mixed-with-intoxication, letting the sake and the breath fill his being and become what they

become. He heard jazz music echoing up through his back alleyway. Last night, Saturday night, he felt the neighborhood swelling to life after the war years when Li'l Tokyo was ghostly and flat, all the Buddhaheads having been taken in trains to deserts and swamps. He had chanted evening sutras while a sax played. He took his brush and sketched this haiku:

Chanting the sutras –  
but not drowning the echo  
of jazz in the streets.

He looked at the writing a moment, raised his eyebrows, then wrote quickly on the side of the page:

Chanting sutras  
can't drown the sound of jazz.

"Ah. Close enough for jazz," he whispered. These were the first ordinary words he had spoken aloud in a week. His conversation with the Trickster had been entirely in his head. He was chagrined. But with guests in the house he knew he would have to communicate in the ordinary way. He took the small drum, mokugyo, and went up to the roof. He faced the sun in lotus position, then took up the drum and accompanied himself on it. Makahannya Haramitta Shingyo. The Heart Sutra. All form is emptiness. Thus is there space for us. We inhabit emptiness.

It was nearly 6 o'clock when he swept down from the roof, pulled on beat-up wingtips, descended stairs and emerged. He walked three blocks with the stride of a man who had walked thousands. First and Central, the brick temple. In a small courtyard they had erected scaffolding to hold their temple bell,

like an iron teacup facing down onto a wooden resonator. Santoku paused to give a blessing, then swung the hanging post horizontally, meditating as he did so. The wood thudded into the heavy iron and created waves to inspire Buddha consciousness. *Namu Amida Butsu.* It pleased Santoku to swing that log and capture the sound. To stand in the field of energy. He recalled the jazz echoing up the narrow alley: *Same thing. Yes. Of course. The sound captures us. The sound heals. The field of sound. We don't really capture the sound with our ears. It captures our spirit. It surrounds us. It captures us. Is that not a Sutra? Are we not surrounded by Sutras? The jazz music. The children's voices from the playground. The sound of waves. Are we not surrounded? Yes, for those who allow themselves to be captured.*

*The forms are empty in themselves. Even a form such as the Heart Sutra. In itself it's empty. It needs a suffering heart to quicken it.*

Speed was hard against Billie's backside, both of them lying leftside down. Half asleep he smelled her hair, earthy pungent. He reached over and stroked down her frontside till his hand rested on her belly, touching her hair he pulled gently, then moved up to the point of her hip, he pulled her then, crushing himself tighter against her, unavoidable in the single bed. Not fully awake Billie pulled up her slip, which was all she was wearing. She reached down and placed his penis between her legs but not inside. She licked her hand and reached down to stroke his knob as he lurched in her split. He held her right breast as she played with him. He kept hold of her breast as he came. Billie sighed a bit and receded into sleep. Speed was up in a

flash, afraid Santoku was up, had heard them, and might consider them rude for carrying on.

*No one's here. Smells like sake. He's a drunkard! Not the first drunk zen man in history. What's the difference. Hot tea would be nice. That bitch is hot like a teacup. Gets me in trouble with the police but just as easy as you please brings me off in the morning. Still asleep. Does it in her sleep! I must be crazy. But calm between the legs. This time not inside her. But how does she know to not have a baby? Let's see, after the first time we went swimming in the ocean, right after, and it could've swished around in her, like a douche, the seawater. Little sperms released in seawater. Like salmon to spawn. Anadromous sperm. Going up the creek. Looking for home water.*

*Strange to hold such brown skin. Same shade as me but still strange. She's beautiful. I'm exotic. No. The women are exotic. I'm invisible. Invisible immigrant. Life's a war and we always get whipped. Yeah. Inmates. Just don't be born black.*

Speed got up from the kitchen table from where he had been watching Billie. *Make mambo or make love. A Cuban. Billie. A wild ride but at least we got a head start this time. We're not waiting like sheep to be loaded onto the train, like during the war.* The studio apartment was a dump. There were few things in it, only two chairs, a few plates and spoons, chopsticks ohashi, a water glass, two teacups and one coffee mug half full of sake. Empty bottles of cheap sake filled an orange crate by the stove. *Some people are kings and others are thrown into the flood – no sense in it – what remains? The beauty of the struggle?*

A small refrigerator kept foonyu, natto and umeboshi, and a half full bottle of sake, jumbo size. The tiny bathroom held a bathtub. Speed's eye was caught by the tub. He ran the water, hot. He noticed the bento box and took a nigiri wrapped in wax



paper. He thought of Hidekazu and the car: *Only when the chips are down do you know who your true friends are. Harvard and Hershey at the Pantry. It's like war out there. Can't even go home.*

He took a cool spoonful of gumbo and slipped into the bath. The heat of water merged with heat of gumbo. The silky okra, chewy, filé heat, sweat poured down his head into the hot water, his mouth burning, the taste of gumbo: *Never tasted gumbo till this room in Li'l Tokyo where a crazy drunk zen man lives. Life's a crazy stew, a flooded creek.*

Suddenly the hot bath was intolerable. The dark swirling water, emotions submerged but coming up, the fear, the grief, the shame. *Rei never got away with anything. I could have said something.* Speed got out, rubbed himself raw with a towel. He was restless. He had to see people walking around. Li'l Tokyo was the perfect place for it, for his purpose. He roused Billie. "Billie, get up. I've got to go."

"What's going on?"

"I got to get outside. Get some air. It's too stuffy in here. I need to take a walk."

"Okay."

She untangled herself from the sheet, stretched her beautiful frame. "Okay if I take a bath?"

"Yeah. Sure. There's hot water ready for you. I hardly used it. Make it quick. I got to get outside."

Billie was delighted to find a hot bath ready for her. Watching her shimmy out of her slip only put an edge to Speed's inner urge. Billie was washing her hair, enjoying the bath. Speed paced the kitchen. He grabbed the coffee mug and drank the cool sake. He inspected Santoku's kanji of the early morning. He couldn't read it. He noticed a large cast iron bowl about the size

and shape of a gold panning pan and wondered what it was for. Too shallow to be a wok. He forced himself to sit and listen: The happy chatter of children from the Methodist church. The traffic of cars. A lone sax player faintly from the back alley. The ripple of warm waves in the sea of Billie's bath. The hollow hiss of the water heater. The distant submerged sound of the temple bell. End of the morning service. The restaurants soon filling. Water dripping from a brown body. Billie walked naked through the kitchen. The sound of her feet was flooded by the sight of her form: *Billie's form, sexy alive. Was it just death or sacrifice? Death by drowning, what's the lesson? I'm not sure. But the forms are empty.*

As she was dressing she called out to Speed, "Yeah, let's go out. I can't stand being cooped up either. I gotta get out. I'm going crazy in here."

Billie was in a good mood, as though an explosion of evil manna had cleansed her. She was lighthearted, unaware of the danger she had put Speed in. He didn't have the heart to not be charmed. Once again he felt a little in love. She came out in her red satin cheongsam that she had bought in Chinatown a lifetime ago. Speed's gut surged with conflicting emotions: anger, lust, fear, excitement.

"You look good," he said gruffly.

"Thank you Speed," she replied sweetly.

"Well, we can go downstairs, isn't there a bar below us? No one'll be looking for us here."

## TEA CEREMONY

Sunday afternoon. They stepped into the old Floatin' World of Li'l Tokyo. It had reopened as Michi's after the war. A lone sax player sat nursing a drink at the far end of the bar. Drunk and nodding off, sax at his side, silent, Charlie Chan looked like he had lost the sweetness of life.

Speed called out to him: "Charlie! Is that you?"

Charlie looked up. "Do I know you?"

"Yeah well, I don't know. I know you. Before the war. Remember Billie?"

Charlie looked over at Billie in her red cheongsam and a glimmer of recognition flashed in his eyes. "Hey, it's the mango-colored dragon lady herself, come to show us the blues." The words were slurred. He picked up his sax and started in slow and easy. "I'm gonna love you ... like nobody's loved you ... come rain or come shine." The notes of the song flowed unevenly from the bell with fervent emotion but little precision. Speed and Billie took a table nearby.

"Man, what happened to him?" Speed said to no one in particular.

"He's a drunk. Happens to the best of us," said Billie.

"No, it's not just that," replied Speed. "He was drunk when we saw him before. He still played great. It's like he lost his spirit."

Chan's repertoire had shrunk, his bravado had faded. Like Chan the mood of the place had changed. The war was over but something, a certain touch, a sense of play, had been lost.

Just then Hershey walked over with a big grin on his face.

He had a white woman with him, hanging all over her man.

"Speed! Hey man, how you doing?"

"Hey Hersh." Speed looked up at the woman. "What are you doing here?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing. Oh, this is my friend Priscilla." Then turning to Priscilla, "This is my buddy Speed ... and Billie. Hey Billie you look great!"

Priscilla replied with a slight drawl, "Hi, how ya doin', nice to meet you."

The couple sat down and ordered drinks. Hershey appeared to be high already.

"Well, it being Saturday and all, Harvard and I were heading out to the Sandwave and we went looking for you and found out you had taken a powder. Hidekazu didn't want to spill the beans. We had to work on him, ha ha. We drove out to the Sandwave but all we talked about was you. He told us everything. Swore us to secrecy though."

Hershey laughed, clearly pleased with himself. Speed looked at Priscilla. "Looks like you already broke your vow."

Hershey didn't flinch. "We didn't stay long out there. It wasn't the same without you. The card game was flat. You don't even play most times but it wasn't the same. So I took the guys home and went down and picked Priscilla up and came looking for you." Hershey smiled. No one else said anything.

Hershey was on a high. "Well isn't this great! What a crazy place. Where's this zen monk Hidekazu told us about?"

Speed was annoyed. This was supposed to be a hideout. And secondly, Hershey brought his chippy.

Billie wasn't going to keep silent. She liked Akemi, considered her a friend. "Shouldn't you be home with your wife?"

"Hey we're just out having a little fun. It's harmless," Hershey laughed it off.

Speed: "Anyone ask Akemi if it's harmless?"

Hershey for the first time got his back up. "Hey I don't go around telling you who you can run around with." He looked at Billie. "Why don't you get off my back."

Billie stood and spoke coldly, "You don't even know what you got at home. You don't deserve her," and walked away. Speed jumped up and caught her.

"Where you going?"

"I'm not going to sit here drinking with Hershey and his bitch." She spoke loud enough for Hershey and Priscilla to hear.

Speed said to his buddy, "It won't work out. You shouldn't have brought her," and turned to go.

"Yeah. Okay man. Whatever you say. We just wanted to have a drink with you."

Sensing the drama the zen man stumbled over and began a drunken, angular dance to the music of Chan, who stood and joined the dance, shuffling while playing. Santoku's belly flexed in front of him while Chan's notes slurred and splintered. The two men were like scarred bulls circling each other, comically inept. As Speed and Billie were leaving Santoku reached for a bottle of sake, emptied it in a gulp and brought it down hard on his head. The crack on his skull was nutlike and loud. Blood appeared on the crown of his head. Billie came over in a flash, sat him down, dabbed at his bleeding head with a cocktail napkin.

Santoku had a blissful look. He had found a zen moment, the room revolved around him, he was the belly button of the universe. The Trickster Tengu materialized before Santoku, looking disgusted, his eyes narrowed to a slit: "Some fools will do anything for show." Santoku just smiled. Billie helped the

zen man stand, guided him out the door. As she passed Hershey and Priscilla she spat out, "We were just leaving anyhow."

Speed didn't notice the ugly look Hershey flashed and couldn't feel the anger that blossomed in his old buddy's gut. And he didn't see Tengu, long-nosed, caped and smoking a cigar. Trickster. The troublemaker, whispering in Hershey's ear.

Once outside the club Speed opened the street door to the apartment, and they helped the zen man home. They laid Santoku on the couch, and he fell immediately to sleep. Billie went to the window and stood staring at the sky. The new moon had opened a grand stage for the River of Heaven; starlight flowed through the slits in the curtain. Speed could see she was crying. In her red dress, turning dark in the bluish light flowing through the bay window as she cried, Billie was deeply alluring to Speed.

"I don't want to ruin the dress." Billie raised her head. Her voice was high pitched, girlish. Her face twitched as though a low current had gone through it. Speed noticed it right away. "Hey Billie, you okay?" She didn't answer but looked up at him. She began to undress, not weeping now. Speed helped her with the zipper.

Billie laid the red dress across a chair back. She stood in her slip. She looked bedraggled and desolate. "Can you make tea?" She was speaking in her little girl voice.

"Sure. Coming up." He had heard the voice before. It was not the voice of the Mambo Girl.

As Speed fussed with the stove and water, Billie washed up and took her hair down. She laid the Chinese comb on the chair with the dress. She picked it up again and looked at it in the streetlight. "High as a mountain ... deep as a river ... come rain or come shine." Chan was still holding forth, the floor vibrating with song energy from below.

She moved to the slow pulse from below. "Happy together ... unhappy together ... wouldn't it be fine." The saxophone slurred the words drunkenly.

"Mama used comb her hair all the time." She spoke in her little voice as she picked up the comb. "She was beautiful once. She would comb it then put her hair up, before her troubles, before she flew away."

She moved, she swayed, but not to the beat. She swayed to waves of a flood, her arms moving out from her body at an angle, the tempo increasing till she started a spin. Her eyes half-lidded, flickering. Sometimes she would slow down and almost stop till she began again. Sometimes she would say a word, or cry a little, or even laugh, playing with her hair. She paid no attention to Speed or the tea brewing on Santoku's stove.

As Chan's sad notes looped and twisted through the smoky bar, Billie was claimed back to the sound of children's voices like the chirping and squawking of birds. She was 11 and had been double dutch jumping with her friends, all girls. A group of boys was kicking a can according to ancient and flexible rules. Like a perfect scene it glowed with proportion. A city park where colored kids played on the swings, an aura of rightness enveloping the squawking and chirping voices and the serious business of play until a scream crashed down on them. Everyone looked up from what they were engaged in. Billie spoke dreamy-like:

"She looked to be about 30. She was white. She wore a frayed cloth housecoat and ragged dress and beat up shoes. She ran around the playground, flapping her arms like a gull, till she settled on the swings. All the kids scattered. She made ugly

birdlike sounds, she got on that swing and bounced on it, laughing her scary laugh but she couldn't make it swing. Then her mother, grey-haired and skinny, came up and gave her a push. That girl shrieked with joy, and that shriek frightened the bravest of us. The boys were sullen, but they kicked the can away out by the edge of the playground. She was scary like that, being adult-sized. I had seen the girl and her mother before. The mother saw me looking and yelled at me.

"What you lookin' at girl?" She stopped swinging her daughter and came toward me.

"Nothin' ma'am. Ain't lookin' at nothin'." I turned away.

"What you lookin' at? You lookin' at her like she's some kind of freak, ain't you. You think you better than she is?"

"No ma'am, I don't think nuthin'."

"They were poor folk, but even poor folk were allowed an attitude when it came to colored folk – if they were white.

"Then why you lookin' at her?"

"I just ... wonderin' ... what ... she dreams about."

"She flicked a glance back at her daughter who was bouncing on the swing yelling to be pushed. As she turned back to me years of pain flashed across her eyes. The awful weight of it, her daughter's life. I saw it and flinched. She saw me flinch, more a change of breath than a movement.

"She's ...," the mother began.

"What's her name?"

"Her name's Billie."

"Billie, that's a nice name."

"We were speaking softly to each other now, as though we were two mothers discussing our child.

"What's yours?" she asked me.

"Osbeth."



"Oh that's a pretty name.'

"How old is she?'

"The mother paused a few seconds.

"She's thirty-three.'

"We turned to watch her daughter who was now lying on her stomach in the sand making swimming motions.

"I worry about what's to become of her when I ....'

"More silence while we watched the daughter.

"You want to know what happened to her?'

"I nodded. The mother spoke without emotion, staring off into the sky. 'We had gone down N'Orleans. Went to the zoo. She was just six year old. She saw the elephont and pushed right on up to the fence, had no fear. Before you know it that elephont reach down over top the fence with his trunk and snatch her up. We watched her strugglin' and screamin' but there was nothin' anyone could do. He held her up in the air, waving her around like he was playin' with her. It seemed like she was up there forever. Everyone was screamin'. Finally that elephont grew tired of her and threw her down on the ground, hard as you please. She been like this ever since.'

"I was speechless. I kept seeing the small child smashed to the ground by a rogue elephant. The mother turned toward me. 'Mind you stay away from elephont.' Then she strode away, her grey hair snatched loose-ended by the air."

"Mind you ... stay away ... Mind you ..." She mimicked the mother's admonition in a scary, old lady's voice.

Then sniffing, she turned her head, eyes still closed. "That smell ... like boiling leaves ... that used to fill up the house, bitter like walnut. That smell from the swampy wood." Billie stopped and inhaled deeply. Her face softened. "Who are you? You ain't my Mama. Your smell come sunshiny. Let me taste it. Where

do you get such leaves?"

"Billie it's me, Speed."

"What's that you got smellin' green-like?"

"Tea. Here, have some."

"I don't want to stain the dress."

"It's okay. We got it hung on the chair."

"You got your mojo on me?"

"What?"

"The elephont girl, she's up in the sky. She's beautiful when she wears her hair up."

Billie opened her eyes and picked up the tea, then closed her eyes while she sipped.

Still in her little girl voice: "It scares me, all that screaming when someone goes ... swingin' 'round in the air. She was never the same after that. You know that, don't you? But I can't stand the screaming. I *had* to run away. You see that don't you?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Daddy couldn't stop the screaming. He got on a train and never came back."

"What are you talking about?"

"Her name was Osbeth. She's lucky. She lives in Cuba now. I'm going there to meet her. No screaming there, only music and flowers. Mama's teas were bitter and dark and cold. I like these green weeds, they're sunshiny. You won't leave me again, will you Daddy?"

Speed didn't know what to say.

"No. I won't leave you."

"Good. Because I'm going to have a baby," she whispered to herself.

Santoku's voice came loud from the couch: "Tea. Who makes tea? I smell tea."

Billie opened her eyes all the way when she heard his voice. Speed replied, "I made tea, Santoku. Come have some."

Santoku shuffled over to the window area where the bed was located, sat on the straight-back chair next to Billie and Speed.

"Ah. Thank you for making tea." The zen man bowed to Speed and Billie and the tea, holding his bow for a moment. He reached slowly for the teapot and watched as though mesmerized by the stream of hot tea dribbling into the cup. He was listening to the sound it makes. Puhtuhphupuhppth. He held the cup in his hands, stared into the steam, smelled it, breathed deep for long moments, and only then sipped. He looked up, said to no one, "Hold sadness in your heart, hold warmth of sun in the pit of your belly, hold these things bitter and warm in one cup." The warmth spread through his sake-soaked flesh.

Billie's hair was combed out, frizzy and spread out like a mane. Tears had dragged the skin below her eyes. The coolness of evaporation. Her mane of hair and the whiteness of her slip glowed by the light streaming through the window. Santoku slurped loudly, inhaling the slurry mix of tea and air, hot and cool.

"Billie-san. I dream you are singing. Very sad song."

"No, that was Charlie Chan playing his sax."

"Ah, so so. Now I listen. He is playing sad song. He always plays sad song. Over and over. He has much sadness."

Santoku spoke wisfully, sadly. "When I was young man I stand in front of train. I want life to end. Just before train is hitting me, zen monk pull me off that track. He come running from monastery, next to tracks. He look up from his meditation. Not pay attention, like a bad horse. Not very good zen man.

Hahaha haha ha, hee hehe." Santoku rolled back on the floor and laughed like a hyena till he hit his head on the wall, blinked.

"So he save me from train. I don't know why. Master says Stay long time. Study. Work. Sit zen. Breathe. So I stay long time. Study zen. Breathe. After many years Master says Return to ordinary life. Go to America. Breathe. Go on pilgrimage. So I go." He sips tea. "Some days I still see train."

Billie looked up. "Me too. Something ... like a train."

Santoku, still lost in listening to the song, said, "So when I came here, America, I was on pilgrimage for sadness. As the Abbot said, go back to ordinary life, in America. Breathe. So I find myself one time in Visalia town, farm town. You know that place? I have no money. I chant sutra on sidewalk, begging. Hot day that time. Have not food to eat for two days. I meditate on hunger."

Santoku rose, went over to a shelf and came back with his begging bowl, a shallow iron bowl. "Man stops, listens to my sutra. He is wheelchair man. He cannot walk. He tells me his story, how he has broken heart. From woman. Getting drunk every day. Every day same. Listen to song. Jukebox. Same song. Same same. Drinking drunk and crazy drunk and sad drunk. One day cowboy comes riding into bar, riding his horse into bar. Crazy place, America. Cowboys go to bars, ride horses. Everyone always drinking, having good time, my friend drinking too, drinking too much, crazy drunk. He slips on piece of horseshit, falls hard. Breaks the back. Never walking no more." The zen man paused and for no reason put the begging bowl on his head, hatlike.

"After that everyone call him `Horseshit.' He laugh when he tell me this, out there on sidewalk. Very funny. Very joking. That guy Horseshit was funny guy."

Santoku paused again, lost in memory. "He tell me this, then he say, 'Let us go now, Mr. Beggar Man, we go to that bar. Cool in there, we can listen to my song, we can have drink.' I tell him I have no money. But he say, 'Shit, man, don't worry no money.' So I push him to bar. We go in, cowboys there shout, 'Horseshit! Here come Horseshit.' Then they laugh. They buy him drink and laugh and laugh. 'Here come Horseshit.' He laughs. Everyone buys drink for Horseshit. And me too, that time. 'Good luck,' they say, like offering, I think. They don't want his luck. So everyone buy us drink. We listen to his song. Over and over. I feel for him. He is sad but I think he is getting little happy too."

"What kind of song was it?"

"Very sad song. His song is sutra ... for his broken heart."

"Sutra?"

"Ah so so. He is brave man for love."

Santoku got up and poured water into the tea kettle, turned up the heat, the begging bowl still balanced on his head. In a minute he returned with the teapot. He sat on a cushion next to the chair. As he spoke Santoku stared at Billie's red dress hanging on the straight-back wooden chair, glowing in the streetlight.

"For breaking the heart love is very useful. We need heart to break up. Break open," he said gently.

Billie looked up. "I think he just wanted a drink."

The zen man persisted, "Yes, he want drink. He want sutra too."

Billie replied, "He just wanted a drink."

"Ah so so. Drink sutra. Like tea, bitter and warm."

Billie said loudly, "He just wanted a goddamn drink! Why would he want to be broken more than he already is?"

"Song breaking heart better than train breaking body."

"But it's just a song!"

He sipped his tea. "Sutra breaking heart to bits so tiny, like atom. We are atom. Everything is atom. Buddha say, Compassion for everything. So that kind of heart is compassion, broken to tiny pieces, is big heart."

"If it's broken to tiny bits, how can it be big?" Billie asked.

The zen man had not spoken this much English in a long time. He thought of his Master's haiku: *Everyone is telling lies, Spring has been chased away.* He shrugged, saying,

"I do not talk so much since I came to America. Too much talk. Spring has been chased away." He took off the begging bowl, got up, took the pot from the stove, now empty of gumbo, washed it in the sink. Memory of delicious ooze.

Billie shook her head. She thought: *The song breaks your heart to little bits till you drink it up? He's crazy. What does he know about elephants? Something coming. Up in the air.* Her eyes fluttered and closed and she drifted off against her will.

In a moment she was deep in sleep. Santoku came over, knelt next to her, picked her up and laid her on the bed. He whispered in her ear, "Hold sadness in your heart." Then he stood, looking at the Mambo Girl, knowing she had troubles beyond tea and maybe beyond sutra. *Ah hell. Maybe it is just a song. Maybe song is telling lies. Maybe Spring not come for her.*

The zen man turned, a look of deep suffering on his round face, went straight to the stove and dumped the tea from the kettle. He rummaged purposefully around the orange crate full of sake bottles, poured leftover splashes from half a dozen bottles into the kettle, put it to the burner and shook the container. Once it was steaming he brought it over to the window, sat on the floor and offered Speed a cup. The tea kettle was nearly full and Speed

knew he intended to drink the whole thing. Billie was asleep on the bed. They drank deeply and said nothing. Then,

"Many years ago when I was feeling bad ... that time I stood in front of train ... I see my mother's face ...," he took another deep drink of sake," ... when I was a boy. Her face was white ... from drowning. She threw herself into the well, father was womanizer ... is that the word? yes? ... and when they pulled her out her face was white."

Speed's stomach twisted. He saw Rei's face shimmering through spring water, and it too was white from submersion. He could not get the words out. What words were there? Santoku went on,

"At zen place I learn to take in her sadness, and give her joy."

Speed looked up. "But she's dead. How could you take in her sadness? She's dead. How can you give her joy?"

Santoku looked deeply into Speed. He spoke forcefully. "Who do you love?"

Without thinking Speed replied, "Rei."

"Then give her the love." Santoku took another swallow of sake. "Take in her pain and give her your love." Speed just looked at him. Santoku went on. "I take in pain. Stranger, friend, living, dead, it makes no difference. Like that guy, Horseshit. Everything happen to him. But he is alive, big heart. That is purpose of living. To make the big heart." Santoku downed his cup. He was well on his way to getting smashed. "Maybe he drink too much, that drunkard Horseshit, that is true ... but nobody perfect hahahhahhh ahahdnndfassfff," he laughed and snorted, nearly choking. Suddenly he stopped.

He looked up as though he had seen Buddha. He grabbed his begging bowl, put it on his head and said seriously, "We

cannot forget the dead. They are the ancestors. Their spirit lives in us. If we do not honor them we will suffer, we will lose the Path. They are all around us ... to help us. Even now. Perhaps ... you have felt ...." He looked directly at Speed, then took the tea kettle, shook it next to his ear and grinned as he heard the sound of sake sloshing.

"Let me tell you about the spirits. We come from island of mountains, forests, wilderness. No one lives deep in wilderness. Gods live there. They are wild, they are irritable, they are tricksters. We honor them, make sacrifice to them. Then they will protect us when we must go through the forest. They can make bad trouble if we ignore them."

Now he spoke boisterously, drunkenly, "Same with the ancestors. We are drinking now but we forgot to put out cup for the dead. Your Reiko, my Mama. We must remember to give out love, like sharing sake. Like the Mexican way, Day of Dead. You know this custom? Very wise. Dead ones come home and have meal. Family makes food, puts out dishes and food. Like this. Watch." Santoku laid out imaginary dishes and cups and chopsticks, plenty of sake, pretended to eat, noisily.

"I like this idea. They have party. Pictures of skeletons all around. They drink to the dead ones. Let us drink to Rei and my Mama." He poured himself another cup of sake, drank deeply. "If you see with clear head, you see we are all skeletons. Already we are skeletons. Already we are the dead. We have come back for a few years. Hah ha ha ha ho ho hah haghghghghg nngchch. Last meal. Better to share." Santoku laughed so hard he knocked over the pot of sake, watched it gurgle out for a moment, a worried look, uprighted it and poured for Speed and him, his eyes now wide, raised his cup and shouted in a fury of drunken satori,



"To cherry blossoms  
falling through ribs; Spring breeze. Ha  
hahhaaaaa ghgh hhhnnnnn."

Speed grinned at Santoku's foolish wild haiku laughter. He didn't understand the zen man but he knew he was on to something. He looked at Billie asleep on the bed. *She's so alive and troubled*, he thought. *Rei's dead. Life and death. Cherry blossoms falling through ribs. Just like that.*

The pot rattled. A banging at the door. Santoku grumbled, then yelled without turning, "Not lock. Come in."

The skinny sullen waitress from the club. She came over to Santoku still sitting on the floor, whispered in his ear, then turned and left. Billie and Speed looked at him.

"She say police man, two men, asking questions downstairs. Plain clothes man, as they say. No one knows anything downstairs. Maybe good time to hit the road."

As the two detectives sat at the bar a drunken Nisei ex-GI stumbled over, not yet home from the war, ready for action.

"I shoulda died in France, all my buddies ...."

Solomon tried to ignore the drunk but Swanton thought: *What the fuck is he talking about?*

"What the fuck you talkin' about?"

"I shoulda died in France. We saved the Texans. You musta heard about that."

"Sorry buddy, don't know what you're talking about."

"We died by the hundreds climbin' that fuckin' hill, just to save a bunch of white guys. I shoulda died too. We shoulda all died." He was yelling and crying.

Swanton turned to Solomon, "This guy's nuts."

The Nisei put his hand on Swanton's shoulder, yelling, "No, we're not nuts, we died ..." Swanton grabbed the hand and cranked it around behind the Nisei's back, twisting hard.

"You're fuckin' crazy, Jap."

Charlie Chan, drunk himself, walked over from his table, still blowin', walked right up to Swanton, put the bell of his sax up by his face and blew as loud as he could. Swanton dropped his hold on the soldier and was about to smash Charlie but Solomon got hold first, dragged Charlie out the door into the wet street.

"What the fuck, you tryin' to get yourself killed?" Solomon had a soft spot for musicians. Swanton burst out the door and was about to knock Charlie cold but Solomon held him back. "Let me handle this."

"Fuckin' Jap's got a death wish or something," Swanton seethed but held himself back.

"Listen," Solomon looked into Charlie's eyes, "you answer straight or we're gonna lock you up."

"Straight no chaser," Charlie answered. Solomon ignored the remark.

"What you know about a Jap boy and a colored girl on the run?"

"Buddhaheads don't run with colored."

"So you never seen 'em?"

"We seen a dragon lady tonight. Half black maybe. Oriental. Rain or Shine."

"Half? Half Oriental? What was her name?"

"Billie." The cops looked at each other.

"Where is she?"

"She's flyin'. Up there." He pointed up at Santoku's room.

Swanton couldn't take it any more, elbowed his partner

aside. "Let me at him. What's your name?"

"Charlie Chan." Swanton snapped, smashed Chan in the face, Chan went down like a sack of rice. Swanton stepped over him and stomped on the bell of his sax. Charlie Chan yelled, sounding like a crow. The detective turned on him, yelling "Shutup, shutup, shutup" as he pulverized Chan with a sap till Solomon pulled his partner away.

From the upstairs window overlooking the entrance to the bar Billie and Speed watched the scene play itself out. The detectives left Chan bleeding and silent on the wet sidewalk while they reentered the club in a foul mood. In place of jazz music there was the sound of smashing and glass breaking below, mixed with the sound of thunder from the ring of mountains. Someone came out to the alley, rushed over to help Chan.

Tengu stepped up to Speed as he turned from the window, whispered in his ear: "You got to go home. Take Billie home."

"Billie, we got to get out of here. Let's go home."

"What about the cops?"

"They're still smashin' up the club. They won't see us. Let's go now."

"Where are we heading?"

"Let's go to Ella Maya's. They'll never look for us there."

So Speed and Billie fled to Ella Maya's. They put Billie to bed, her exhaustion written on her face and in her shifts of persona.

Swanton swaggered into the Pantry looking for Pauline, Solomon followed. She knew it wasn't a social visit. She laid out

a shot of whiskey.

"Seen 'em lately?"

"You mean Billie Holiday and the Jap boy?"

Swanton just glared at her.

"Nah. Ain't seen 'em."

"Seems like a little club in Li'l Tokyo got busted up tonight. After them two were spotted there. Be a shame to shut this place down."

"Hey, if I knew where they was ..."

"Cut the crap. Give me something."

Pauline didn't blink.

Swanton took the shot of whiskey, downed it quickly, smiled ever so slightly, gripping his sap.

Tengu whispered in his ear, "This little pisshole ain't worth bustin' up."

Swanton slammed the shotglass down, saying, "This little pisshole ain't worth bustin' up," as he got up. Tengu smiled, his bulging eyes narrowing.

## THE BIRTH

A demon is a thing of human longing. A demon has blown in from Arkansas where a seed was planted, a longing for home, a true home, a place where they will take you in, a sanctuary. Or is he the one that flew across the ocean directly from the Temple of Kannon, a Guardian for the Compassionate Goddess/God? Or maybe he came in from the desert, a wandering soldier looking for redemption. Maybe he is all of these. It's beyond knowing. Somehow the alien has come, unexpected and eccentric. To answer the call of a Mambo Girl.

He comes as a dragon, sacred and powerful, Billie's demon, twisted and morphed by her imagination for the task at hand, lumbering down a back alley behind Ella Maya's at dusklight, God of the Road, clattering of thick scales and smoking a cigar, thick-winged, clumsy and cartoonlike, not up to his standard of fierce aspect, and thus he is angry with the Maker. Still, he must answer the call. He must bring the newborn.

Billie heard the rattling of scales as she lay in Ella Maya's bed. The sun had been squeezed out, but there was still a faint pastel buzzing in the sky. She feared the rattling. She did not know what it was, but she knew her fear. Why aren't the dogs barking, the scruffy dogs that lay about the alley? The smell of sea salt and smoke came drifting in through the window. As the rattling got louder, ancient fear came into her, roaring like a maelstrom, relentless and gaining speed: *He's got the wrong girl. I'm not Osbeth. Osbeth is dead. Elephont done took her. I am Billie. I must make myself known. I don't want the dragon.*

"My ... my name .... my ..." The others in the kitchen could

not hear her whispered terror. "... name ... is Billie. Billie."  
*Louder. It needs to be louder. "Billie."*

She screams, "BILLIE!" Her body is rigid and wet, her eyes uncomprehending. Daedelus and Ella Maya rush into the bedroom. Speed is in the doorway.

"Billie. Are you all right baby? What's the matter?"

A whispered plea, "Pray for me."

"What is it Billie? What do you want us to pray for?"

"Pray for ... the little girl ... Osbeth."

Ella Maya jumped in. "Alright honey. We'll pray. Dear Lord, we pray ... for the little girl. We pray that You will come help her ..."

"I'm afraid."

"You're going to be all right. We're here with you. Your Daddy's here. I'm here. Speed's here."

"Speed's here? Yes. Of course. He's my Angel. I love Speed."

The green scales were each about 6 inches thick and seemed to have been loosely attached, so they clattered on his back as he walked. It was unnerving to hear the creature move, more tortoise than dragon, awkward. Only Billie heard it. It was her demon, object of her longing. When it reached the back gate it reared up with surprising grace, leaned on the fence. Its face was leathery and magenta. A snake-like tongue flickered constantly. It had human-like hands, oversize but fingered, cartoonlike. It reached back for its tail, stuck the end of it in its mouth and pretended to smoke, with a sick smile it exhaled and smoke came out, a large cloud that smelled like sweet incense. Ah, the Hollywood Trickster. But the smile faded, he reached back behind his head and twisted and grimaced and pulled a thick scale from out of his hide and flung it like a pie plate at Ella Maya's

second floor bedroom window. "Have another platter, po'girls," he said, as the dragon scale crashed through the glass and landed on the bed. "My calling card. Hope you like the tune." He tore off the gate and lumbered two-legged toward the stairway. Billie screamed. No one else saw the green scale or the broken window.

"Honey what's happening. It's alright. We're all here. Nothing's going to happen to you."

"Get him Speed! Get him. He's coming! He's coming up the stairs." Speed was frozen. Billie screams "No!" The green-scaled dragon laboriously chants, "Red red the blood is spread" over and over as he climbs the stairs. The thick green scale he has thrown on the bed begins to throb like a chrysalis. Billie kicks at it. Daedelus holds her. She screams, "Let me go! It's alive!" No one can see the thing, only Billie.

"What is it honey? What's alive?" Billie points at the throbbing scale she has kicked to the floor. The flicking tongue appears at the door, then the green head with the sickly smile, then the cartoon body fills the doorway. She cannot scream. He smiles his sick smile and takes another puff from his tail, blows the smoke, incense-like and clotting. "I see you got my calling card. I never formally introduced myself. How thoughtless of me. I am Tengu. Guardian of the Temple of Kannon." A bell rings. So it's Tengu. Flakes of green are ticking off the throbbing scale, now jumping violently on the floor. Billie begins to shake and twist violently too. "Ah, I see you have the shakes. Seems to be going around. Something must be borning," says Tengu.

"Something's born? You don't care. You don't care about anything."

"We care about you Billie. We love you. It's going to be alright," says Ella Maya. The throbbing scale makes one last

convulsion and splits, like a tart in a too-hot oven. Out of its steaming vulva comes a magenta lizard. Billie screams.

"Get him Speed!" She jumps out of bed and runs to the lizard, stomps on its tail. The lizard runs off toward Tengu, breaking off at the tail. Billie screams again. Daedelus and Ella Maya grab her and carry her to the bed. Tengu reaches down and picks up the lizard tail squirming between his thumb and index finger. It turns quickly from magenta to emerald green to magenta, then black, squirming and wiggling. Tengu smiles, "Quite a souvenir, wouldn't you say? What do you make of it, my little Osbeth?" Daedelus and Ella Maya are holding her but Billie won't scream. The dragon called her Osbeth! Tengu takes a step toward her, still holding the squirming tail, now a bright yellow. Billie tries to move but Daedelus and Ella Maya hold her to the bed. She can't speak, she can't scream. She starts kicking but Daedelus and Ella Maya hold her ever stronger. Billie is ungodly strong.

"Speed, come over here and help us!" The stunned Speed unfreezes, moves over to help hold Billie down. Billie trembles. There is nothing she can do. The snake enters her. She passes out.

Spidery legs twist among each other weaving a glistening web into a blanket. "For your new baby," Tengu opens his palms to her, and spiders and web blanket spread before him. His long snout is collie-like. The spiders disappear, the blanket settles on her. She cannot move under the web. "You like snakes that like to dance?" Billie is naked on the bed. There is absolute silence. Tengu leans over her, his tail once again in his mouth, his lips curled into a sneer. He takes the tail out and blows incense smoke



at her. It smells like smoke from a Chinese restaurant. "You like snakes that like to dance?" She realizes it is a question, and she must answer. She cannot speak. Tengu frowns, takes his tail out of his mouth, his tongue fluttering, dips the tail back into his mouth a moment to wet it, it comes out dripping of blood. He leans close to Billie's abdomen and draws with the dripping end of his tail a kanji, an Oriental pictogram. Billie looks down, paralyzed. Tengu turns his head to her. "Now you may answer."

She finds her voice. "You ain't Mojo," she whispers, scared.

"I'm Guardian of the Temple of Kannon," he booms.

"Did Mojo send you?"

"I brought you your baby."

"I didn't ask for no baby."

"Of course you did. I can only bring what you long for."

"What did you write on me?"

"Can't you read it? Oh yes, silly me, it's upside down, it says `Sacrifice.'" Billie's blood turns cold: *Sacrifice. He means to sacrifice me. I am the sacrifice. Like Mojo used to ... but he's made a mistake.*

"You got the wrong person. I ain't the one. I ain't Oriental."

"That puzzled me too. Must be you're going around with an Oriental."

"He's just a friend. I'm Cuban."

"Is that so?"

"Speed's a friend, just a friend. It's Speed you're looking for."

Tengu yells, "I heard you say you loved him. I heard you say he would protect you. Where's your slant-eyed warrior now? How come he's not protecting you?" There was nothing she could say. The others overheard her replies to Tengu, a one-sided conversation.

"Speed," she whispers urgently.

"I'm right here Billie."

"Speed, come get me. He's got the wrong person. He's made a mistake."

"Who has?"

"Tengu. He's Oriental. He thinks I am too. Tell him Speed, tell him. I'm Cuban. I'm not Osbeth. She's dead. Elephont got her. Tell him. Tell him anything. Get him away." Speed looked at Daedelus and Ella Maya, but they could tell him nothing.

"Tengu? You mean the guy in the desert?"

"No. He's green and got big scales and fierce eyes and smokes his tail and writes with it. He wrote 'sacrifice' on my tummy. I'm scared Speed. Do something."

"Okay. Okay I'm here. I see him. You're right, he's green ... and big. I know that kind. He looks scary." Speed sees nothing.

"Make him go away Speed."

"I'll ... talk to him."

"He's a dragon. Make him go."

"Oh. What are you doing here Tengu? Leave Billie alone. You have the wrong person. Leave her alone. I'm the one you're looking for."

"Speed watch out, he's turning toward you. He's talking."

"What's he saying?"

"Sacrifice so strength ... may fill the empty ... space. Sacrifice ... so the screaming ... in your ears may ... cease. Sacrifice ... so the baby ... may find its ... MAMA!" Billie screams. Pain sears her belly but dulls to a throb. She can see her belly swell. Her eyes are full of fear. Daedelus, Ella Maya and Speed have their hands on her, she twists against the pain. She goes limp into the swirling.

"You never answered my question. You like snakes that like

to dance?" Tengu sneers. Billie is afraid to answer. The little magenta lizard has climbed into the slot from which Tengu tore the scale. He looks down from behind Tengu's neck at Billie. "Oh, I see you like my pet. You are a nasty girl, aren't you? You would have killed him if you could. You like to kill, don't you?"

"No! I didn't kill him! The Angel killed! It wasn't me!" Another throb. This time she sees Tengu dancing for a split second. Silence. Then BATA-GAM, another contraction. Billie groans. The drums continue. BATA-GAM. Tengu starts shaking, then dancing. It's an old-style, shuffle type of thing.

BATA-GAM. Billie moans. Another contraction. They're coming faster, more painful. BATA BATA-GAM. She squeezes someone's hand painfully, it's Speed. BATA BATA UNG BATA-GAM UNG UNG GAM.

"Make him stop!" But there is nothing Speed can do. BATA BATA BATA-GAM. Daedelus jumps in. BATA UNG BATA-GAM, BATA BATA-GAM, BATA UNG UNG. Billie moans.

"What's going on Billie, tell us."

"He's got a mask on. He's blowing smoke, he's brushin' feathers on my face. It's Mojo. It's him. I'm scared. Make him stop dancing! I got to make him stop. Get me my gun. I got to stop the dancing. I got to stop the dancing. He's gonna pick me up. I know he's gonna pick me up. Don't let him pick me up. I got to stop him. I got to stop the dancing. Get me a gun." Daedelus looks up at Ella Maya.

"Well, get the girl her gun." Ella Maya doesn't move. Daedelus stands and gets Ella Maya's pistol from the drawer, a .38, slowly removes the bullets, puts the bullets back in the drawer, spins and checks the chamber.

"Here honey." Daedelus presses the empty gun into her

hand. "I got your gun. Here's your gun." Billie, lying in the dim room, eyes closed, slowly lifts the gun and squeezes. The hammer clicks deafeningly in the quiet. Daedelus watches her face. Her eyes remain closed. She goes calm, answers him in a dull voice.

"What happened Billie? Tell us what's happening."

"The Angel come killed him."

"Who came?"

"Angel."

"Who'd she kill?"

"Mojo."

Everyone looks at each other in the silence that follows.

Then Billie starts kicking and screaming, and immediately a contraction hits her like a wave. She doubles in pain.

"Help me Kannon!" Ella Maya grabs her hand. Another contraction. *Kannon?*

"What's going on Billie?"

"I'm having a baby."

"It's okay Billie. It's going to be alright. I want you to breathe. Breathe fast and hold onto the bed. That's right."

Billie complies. She and Ella Maya enter the ritual, ancient as the demons, of mother and midmother. They enter the rhythm, recognizing the necessary thing, whatever it is, that must emerge.

The bond of passage. The room flashes angelic. A baby is being born, after all. Speed cannot help but notice how beautiful Billie, in her suffering of childbirth, is.

"Okay, now push, push hard, squeeze, push. That's right girl. You can do it. Good. Now relax. Try to relax. I know it hurts. Just wait. It won't be long. Just a little more."

Billie opens her eyes and smiles as though the light of the night sky were heaven. "It's coming out." Then she groans again

in pain, her body twisting with it.

"We're almost there Billie. I see the head. I see it. Here it comes. I've got it Billie. I've got it. Oh it's beautiful." Ella Maya's looking right at Billie, sadness and worry in her eyes.

Billie looks up with a smile on her face, angelic: "It's a ... girl, a beautiful baby girl. And she's not black. Can I hold her?"

"Of course. Here she is. She's so tiny." Billie, completely calm, accepts a bundled blanket from Ella Maya. She looks lovingly at the bundle.

"She's beautiful. She's not black. She's not Mojo's baby. She's not Mojo's! She's our baby, Speed. She's got your eyes. I'm going to name her ... what shall we call her Speed?"

"Uh, well. Let's see ..."

"I know. We can call her Reiko. That's it. Reiko. What do you think Speed? For the one that died."

Speed was stunned. "Yeah. Reiko. That's a beautiful name."

"She's got your eyes Speed."

"Oh. Yeah, that's right. She's beautiful."

"We're going to be so happy. Now we're a family." Billie starts sobbing, then crying. But not the sort that comes from dreams. It seemed like a release, like the rain that had been trying to break through the evening's marine layer. They were exhausted. In the darkened room, lit only by the fuzzy phosphorescence of the night sky, Billie dropped off to sleep. They tiptoed out. But Billie was not quite asleep.

"Ella."

"Yes honey."

"Thank you for helping, you know, with all this craziness."

"Oh Billie. We love you."

Later Billie got up from the bed, put on her satiny red dress, picked up the spirit placenta that only she could see and put it in her purse along with Ella Maya's gun and the loose bullets from the drawer and the keys to Hidekazu's car. She walked out barefoot, down the outside stairs to the modest backyard, stopping to scrape away a bit of dirt and lay the spirit-full placenta down. She mumbled a few words, chanted, inaudible to anyone who might have been looking down from the second floor kitchen window. They, being exhausted and engrossed in talk, didn't see her. They talked about Florida and Arkansas and Mojo and fear. Strong coffee, strong rum, spicy food. Later, Ella Maya went to check on Billie in the bedroom, and when she returned her eyes told a story: an empty bed and a whole cityful of demons, playful and not so playful, benevolent and evil, intersecting along their paths invisible to us.

"She's gone."

*Speed: Goddamn, she took the car again! That bitch! How come we didn't hear her? She's like a ghost the way she disappears. Really fast. Maybe Mama's right, maybe she's a witch. Why don't I learn? What the hell is she.... Damn! Hidekazu is going to kill me. Girl steals his car again. And she's got a gun and thinks she's some kind of avenging angel. Damn. She took the car again.*

Speed scanned the empty street:

*Changed since before. Usually it's hopping. Because of rain? almost deserted outside, just a drizzle, tough to spot the Model A, jet black and shiny in the drizzle. But not invisible. Invisible ... that folk tale about an invisible demon they had to*

*fight. Samurai had to fight. Whoever. Someone had to fight. She's invisible like that demon. Could she do that to a car? Nah. That's Hidekazu's car. It's not invisible.*

Speed had gotten Harvard to drive. It was late, closing time. They drifted to a stop a half block from the alleyway fronting the Pantry. They looked at each other.

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

"Just what do you intend to do?"

"Go in. Look around. Have a drink."

"Ever occur to you they might not be too happy to see us? after the other night?"

"You coming or not?"

They slipped through the drizzle. There was no one on the street, but someone had already rummaged up the night's trash slumped at the end of the alley, hoping for splashes of booze, inches for swaggering drunkenness. The image of her dancing flashed in Speed's gut like sudden pain: *What the hell is going on? BAM! Where did that come from? That's spooky. A baby. She felt pain. Ghost pain, you lose a leg. What's she lost? A baby? I don't know, maybe she has lost a child. Don't know much about her at all.... But why'd we give her a gun in the first place? Daedelus did that. He was crazy to do that. I would have given her a candlestick. She never looked anyway, never opened her eyes, just pulled the trigger. How did she know where the bullets were hid? didn't open her eyes.*

He and Harvard slid into bar-pungent atmosphere. Most all bars smell the same. Someone spills, someone cleans up. But over the years there is no way to clean it all up, not to mention ... what is it? the weight of human desperation? the longing for something lost? the need to dull the pain? Emotions walk in through the door. They impregnate the walls by weight of

passion. Or desperation. A bar like any other bar. A house of demons. At least here, thought Speed, the dancing and the talk and the music and the style was hip and passionate. It was their own. Speed envied them: They had their own music, their own dance, their own style. They had a place to go and this was it. He wanted to tell them: *Hey, man, I'm like you.*

Speed and Harvard glided up to the bar and looked around. A few tables full, people talking, the band packing up. The bartender gave them the evil eye. Pauline came out of the shadows, nodded to the bartender. He went back to his wiping. She moved gracefully to a table with a bottle of rum and three glasses. "What you boys be doing out so late?"

Speed looked at Harvard. Things were moving fast the other times they were in, now they were slow. She nodded towards the empty chairs. Her arms were surreal in their thickness.

"Rum?"

"Yeah, sure." Pauline poured as they eased into their chairs. They drank for a minute, saying nothing.

"You boys startin' to become regulars. Ain't you a little far from your territory?"

"Uh, we just thought we'd come in and check out the show."

"I see. You looking for someone?" Speed and Harvard looked again at each other. Pauline continued, "She was in here a hour ago."

"Yeah. What she do?"

"Didn't do nothing. Looked around, acted kind of gone. Asked about Virgil. Yeah, something strange about her. Probably some unfinish business. Either she want to fuck him or kill him. Hah ha ha." Her laughter was sudden and loud. Pauline took another shot and went on. "Lucky for you he 'as out tonight. Tonight's his regular night to play cards. 'Cept for the rain. Virgil



don't like rain. He might've stayed out 'cause of the rain." Speed and Harvard were silent.

"You know you boys crazy comin' in here. If Virgil was here ... and he usually have his boys with him too ... they'd start messin' wit' you. He could come in any time." Speed sensed concern in her voice.

"Yeah, well, we better be going."

"Wait a minute. Y'all come in here, turn the place upside down the other night. What's the lowdown? What you boys doing hanging round wit' a bitch like that?"

Speed remembered Ella Maya's story about her encounter with Pauline, before the war, after the first time Billie came in and tore the place up. "We're her ... bodyguards." He felt a bit wild saying it, like a trickster would feel. "Look, we got to go. Thanks for the drink."

"Yeah." *Bodyguards*. Pauline downed another shot of rum, slammed the shotglass, angry, watching them get up. *Bodyguards! What the shit does that mean? I could squeeze the piss outa them two with one arm.*

The two Orientals scuttled out, went cruising the wet vacant Boulevard for an hour before fatigue and phantoms overcame. They returned to Daedelus' place near daylight, Speed flopped down on the couch and fell immediately asleep. *Bodyguards.*

Early the next morning as Billie pulled into Akemi and Hershey's driveway in the clean-skinned Model A she came close to running over the tail of a large bluish lizard lying by the hedge, sluggish in the cool rain. She didn't notice the creature. Fingering the bullets in her coat pocket, she sat in the car, windows down and cold, then took out the .38, her fingers dry

and smooth on the steel, spinning the cylinder once again. She closed her eyes for only a moment. The hedge by the driveway smelled like something familiar. *What is it?* She went to the door, knocked.

"Akemi. Open the door. It's me, Billie."

After a minute Akemi, holding the baby, came to the door. Without a word she let Billie in. Billie followed her into the kitchen.

"Can I get you some coffee, Billie?"

"No. Well, okay. Yeah we can ..." Akemi went to preparing the coffee. Without turning to Billie she spoke:

"What's been going on Billie?" Billie fidgeted.

"I, well, I been ..." Akemi turned to her, noticed the slightly bruised cheek and the rummaged look, such a change from the glamorous Billie of the mambo. Her mood softened.

"Are you alright? Did you get into a fight?"

"Akemi, I need to ask ... can you ... can you take care of a baby?"

"A baby? You have a baby?"

"Yeah. I been running around, can't be held back by a baby. I need someone to take care of her. Or she'll die." Billie started to cry. Akemi put the coffee pot on the stove, started the burner.

"I don't want the baby to die. She's just an innocent. She's so little. If I can't take care of her.... You're strong Akemi. I know you are. She won't be any trouble. If you don't take her she'll die. Or I might have to ... take her away."

"Where is your baby, Billie?"

"She's right here. I got her. I been carrying her all night. I was worried for a while. I got in a scuffle with Virgil. But she's alright. Here, take her."

Billie opened her coat and carefully drew the phantom

bundle out, she slowly offered it to Akemi, who accepted in an instant of surreal recognition. "Oh."

Akemi held the bundle awkwardly for a moment, then Billie, watching her, said, "We're a family now, me and Speed and Reiko. Soon we'll be together."

"She's beautiful Billie ... what name did you say?"

"Reiko." Akemi looked up, the slash of horror was fleeting on her face, but Billie, who was looking at the bundle with soft eyes, didn't notice.

"Reiko. That's a beautiful name," said Akemi.

"Thank you. You know how to hold a baby. You're a good mother. She has Speed's eyes, don't you think?"

"Yes ... Speed's the father?"

"You don't think I'm terrible, do you Akemi? I mean, giving up my baby. It's only for a while. Till we leave for Cuba. I don't want her to die." As she said the last she started to cry.

"I can take care of her. Don't worry. She'll be fine."

Billie sobbed, "If you didn't take her I might have killed her. I can't take care of her now. I can't let Mojo get her. She's mine but ... I can't take care of her. Mama can't take care of her either, she only takes care of her weeds. You can take care of her. You're a good mother. You ain't got troubles like me. Them spirits won't mess with you. They only want the black ones. I'm sorry about all this. I got to go. Reiko will be no trouble." Billie fingered the .38 in her coat pocket. "I got to go. I really got to go."

"Don't you want some coffee? It's ready now. Please stay. You look tired. Why don't we sit here and relax, have a cup of coffee. You can stay here. You can lie down, get some sleep. At least have a cup of coffee."

"No. Thank you Akemi. I just had to make sure Reiko's

okay."

Billie got up abruptly and strode to the door, opened it, turned to Akemi.

"You got a nice family. You're a good mother. She'll be safe with you," and left quickly in the shiny Model A.

## GHOSTS IN THE FOREST

Papa's drifting awake at the house on Victoria:

*The barracks were dead for me. Prefer the trees. We are the seed from Japan, come to the forest of Arkansas, miles of forest, so deep, so thick, so green, like Japan, they say the forest covered the whole state before the white man came. We brought our seed from Japan but it didn't grow in Arkansas, our seed, so dense, so heavy, funny to come back to forest, in Arkansas, we can't leave the forest, picture of trees, kanji, three trees, it's in our blood, just like the Army said, Japan is in our blood, Japan is in our blood, but it's not war or the Emperor that's in our blood like they said: it's trees. We came back to trees. We are back to the wilderness, the same kind we worked the edge of in Japan, we feared the demons in the forest, but here we are, loyal to trees not Emperor. In kanji: three little stick trees. Stick figures for trees, three trees for forest. We are a simple people, borrowed the stick figures from China. Three of them. Looks like the Christian cross, where their god was killed. No obligation attached to blessing? just believe? How can that be? Everything has obligation attached to it. Who would I reciprocate to? No obligation, just love? It's too easy. And their god is killed hanging from a tree? Death comes to all. Why does their god hang and suffer before? The Buddha didn't hang and suffer. Easier to worship trees. No one hanging from them. I love trees, the only good thing about Arkansas, the trees, miles and miles of trees, like Japan.*

Mama was already up, making norimaki. The sheet of greenblack seaweed, crinkly, dry, beneath warm rice that her fingers pressed and rolled into an elastic stratum: rice, life and connectedness, holiness, texture, survival. The glue of daily existence, the water-loving reed that binds the village by cult and cultivation, that defines relationships and gods and guardians and gives name to what there is to guard and why we have children, male and female, each to their tasks: to work the water and the mud beneath the bridge of heaven by which our ancestors came down from the sky:

*In Japan we could live and work. Work the rice, grow the rice, the rice will feed you. Our life is in the flooded field, our refuge is the village. Here it is wilderness. We are surrounded by it. The boy tries to live in the wilderness. Tries to be American. He will starve to death. His friends will not say where he has gone but I know. He has made an offer to a black person. He has made himself an outcast. She has put a spell on him. It is like a ghost story. He must purify himself. He will end up like Sakuma in the ancient story, banished to the mountains, starved to death, his body eaten by wild animals. He must work, he must respect the gods. He does not sacrifice to the gods. That is like inviting animals to feed on your carcass. He has angered them. He cannot survive without them, he is a foolish son. Even if he is badly treated he must show respect. There are wild animals and ghost demons. They will feed on him. After he has starved to death they will eat his carcass. He will die. I must make an offering, he will not do it. I must show respect, he will not help himself.*

She put the rice on a little plate and went to the family shrine. She lit the incense, waved it till it smoked, momentary kanji in the air. The space before prayer. She struck the bell

bowl:

*Namu Amida Butsu. This is the norimaki my second son likes so much to eat. I offer it to you. It is unworthy. I don't know what else to offer. He has lost the Buddha light. Let him not end up like Sakuma, who starved and was eaten by formless demons in far mountains. He is a worthless son but I want him. Let him find the cure to his madness. Namu Amida Butsu ....*

For a moment there was holiness about her. Soon the towering bamboo lowered about her inner vision, the sky grew dark and wet and the wind became indistinguishable from the howls of demons that lived in the dark of the bamboo and in her imagination. Fear came out of the forest and settled in beside her, an unwelcome guest like a ghost from one of her stories. She could not quite make out his form. She was alone, no one to protect her. She did not hear the creaking of the stairs.

"Mama."

Speed whispered to the folded figure beside the family shrine. Mama had been crying but composed herself when she saw her son. Her prayers had been answered. She went up to him, embraced him, then stepped back and looked at him, saw his beaten up suitcase. She stepped forward in a swift motion, slapped him as hard as she could on the face.

"Where have you been? Are you in trouble with the police?"  
The words came out harsh and staccato.

"No Mama. I don't think so."

"What do you mean you don't think so. Where have you been?"

"I've been in Li'l Tokyo, staying with a priest. I'm going back there. He says I can stay with him."

"A priest. What kind of priest?"

"He's a zen man."

"They're all fools.... Are you in trouble?"

"No. I just need to be on my own."

"What about that woman, that black woman?"

"Billie."

"What has she done to you? Has she put a spell on you?"

"She hasn't done anything to me. I've been helping her out."

"She's a witch. You'll end up starved and eaten by animals."

*Starved and eaten by animals. That's what she thinks.*  
*Animals.* "I gotta go Mama."

"Where are you going?"

"I told you. I'm staying with a zen man in Li'l Tokyo. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"Running around with a black person."

"I gotta go Mama."

There was nothing left. The fear had emptied from her. She went to the kitchen, came back with the rest of the norimaki. Speed took it and left without speaking. Sagging front steps. The house seemed small, ragged, beat down. The unexplained world loomed about her like a darkness she had only imagined. It was the darkness she had sensed, the darkness that claimed her son. She watched her son cut the street diagonally to Hidekazu's house, the house of the one who had stayed closer to the old ways. *The Temple Guardians are supposed to protect us. But where were they when the evil took us to Arkansas? We had no demons of our own to let loose against that evil. We were helpless against it. And now my son is disappearing into the darkness like a ghost.*

After silently greeting Speed Hidekazu sat on the ragged couch in his living room. Speed began:



"Hey, Santoku's the most. Kind of an oddball but I like him." The cheap statue of Hotei merged with laughing Santoku, grinning and fat on the living room table. Speed turned his head, blinked his eyes. Mirage. He noticed the calendar from Fugu Mortuary. A formal garden with first snow, black pines, stone lantern, bridge over slate water. Each year a different garden, same scene. Cooling.

"He's a jazz nut."

Skinny vase, three stems, small purple flowers stood on a thin Oriental grandnapkin of sorts, a square doily. Speed continued.

"Cops came round. Hershey dropped in too. With his girlfriend. What an idiot." Hidekazu, still silent, started to light a cigaret, then stopped and held it, staring at the ragged carpet.

Speed went on, "They busted up the club, beat up the sax player too. I didn't want to stick around, answer questions. You know. We had to get out of there."

Hidekazu stood, paced around, finally spoke, "I could never do what you do."

*I could never do what you do. What the hell does that mean? I'm not doing shit.... But maybe so for him. He's got his family to think of. Obligation.*

"Where's Billie?" asked Hidekazu.

"I don't know. She took the car. Again."

Hidekazu said nothing.

"Thanks for letting me use it," Speed said, miserable.

"Don't really need it. But I hope she takes care of it."

Speed looked up at Hidekazu, still pacing the small room, not looking at Speed.

"Did you guys have a good time at the beach Saturday?"

Hidekazu looked down at Speed, shook his head slowly no

and lit his cigaret. Smiled, showing his crooked teeth. He rarely smiled. The smile meant, "No we didn't have a good time but life goes on anyway and it's mostly good."

**ONZEN**

A lizard sleek and nearing extinction in this patch of L.A. moves ghostlike in the shadow of a dusty boxwood, rattling debris. There are not many left of his size. The vacant lots are going the way of the rest of the open space, farmland, orchards. The boys of the neighborhood, trained by nature to hunt and kill things alien and smaller than they, missed this one. Exceeding a foot in length, the miniature dragon, terror of snails, agonist of insects, spies on us from the shadows around the boundary markers – the fences, the hedges – where fuzziness collects, where demons lay their eggs and roost.

The skinny tires of the shiny Model A crunched the loose concrete of the cracked driveway. The dragon of the boundary kingdom turned and vanished into loose leaves of boxwood. A little boy watched the hedge as though to mark the spot. Later he will be drawn to it and poke around with a stick to see if the creature will come out to the sun and croak like a frog king or only shake his spindly tongue in the cool autumn air. His eyes were on the vanished king, the shimmering left behind, that place where he reentered his kingdom under the hedge. Billie wearing the green mambo dress walked unsteadily up to the child George and leaned forward, hands on knees.

"What are you looking at?"

"Big lizard."

Billie turned and followed his gaze. "That's a car."

The child didn't respond, continued to stare.

"Is your mama home?"

"Daddy's gone."



eyed Billie said, "I like the water, it's dream water."

Akemi was puzzled but just asked, "Where's Speed?"

"Hidekazu gave him the car but I didn't have anything to give him." Billie sobbed. Akemi watched, waited.

"What are you talking about?"

"I never paid Speed for the baby. What if he wants her back?"

*Everything costs. Less you have the more it costs. Even if all you got is your life, even if you stole your mojo.*

"You don't have to give Speed anything."

"She's the only thing I want."

"Babies are not bought. They're loved. If you and Speed love the baby ..." Kind-faced Akemi was silent for a moment, then, softly, "Whose baby is it?"

"Speed's ... or Mojo's ... or some ... dragon ... thing ... Every kind of thing comes barkin' at me... But it's *my* baby."

"Oh." Akemi turned toward her, kind-faced, and said flat-voiced, "The baby isn't real."

"But you were just bathing her."

"No. There is no real baby."

"But I ...."

*Hiding her, keep her for herself, she won't give her back. Why did I trust ... does that mean no baby? Tired. I want to sleep. I just want my baby. Why is she hiding my baby? Hurt her. Hurt her myself.*

"Did you know your husband's fucking some little white bitch?"

Akemi looked away. "Yes."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Tears came to Akemi's eyes. Billie held Akemi's forearms, looked into her eyes, softened, melted. *Demons are kinder than*

*men. They tell the truth.* Billie whispered, "Demons are kinder than men," as she hugged Akemi.

"What did you say?" sobbed Akemi.

"They tell you the price."

"I don't understand."

"But she's my baby," still whispering.

Akemi looked up, her face soft with loss. "Billie, there is no baby. It's not real."

"Maybe Charlie Chan would be a good father."

"Did you say Charlie Chan?"

"Oh but musicians are the worst fathers."

"Billie, the baby's gone."

Billie looked straight at Akemi. "You mean she's dead?"

"No. She's gone back to where she came from. She came out so you could meet her. But she can't live here. She's gone back to her place." Something about the words, the meaning or the tone, got through to Billie.

*Where are you baby? Did she hide you? Or are you back inside me? You don't like this world either? Are you lost? Are you crying? I need you. It's breaking my heart not to hold you.*

## DETECTIVES

Swanton rubbed the grease off his fingers onto his pants. Chili dog. Best joint on Washington: *Don't make sense Niggers and Japs hanging out together, Japs hate 'em, always did, livin' next door to each other all those years, hardly speaking, shipped 'em out, the war years, why'd they come back? This Jap boy come into a colored club? that don't make sense. With a black girl? What kind of shit is that?*

He glanced over at his partner asleep in the passenger seat: *Jewboy stays with his own kind, what's wrong with Niggers and Japs, don't know their place anymore? Straighten 'em out. Crenshaw's a nice little beat, we take care of troublemakers. Don't want 'em mixing. Just don't look right.*

They were parked down the street from Ella's Po'Boy Platter Shop, thanks to an anonymous tip over the phone.

Tengu whispered in Swanton's ear, dimly heard: *Looks like one of our own has ratted on us. One of our very own Buddhaheads has ratted on us! Damn! What's this world coming to? Can't even trust your own kind.*

Swanton took a swig from a pint bottle to wash down the chili dog. *Can't even trust your own kind.*

Ella Maya was at the shop, dancing to "Tanga" by Machito and his Afro-Cubans, a hot little groove that almost washes clean her fears: *What's happening to us? to Billie?* It's a groove she knows will get her through, along with the other mambo records she came by to pick up, risking the police. She was worried about

Daedelus. He'd been in a funk since Billie and Speed disappeared, taking it hard, not even eating much. *Maybe the records will cheer him up*, Ella Maya thought while dancing and gathering records.

"Oh hi, Ella Maya. I was looking for Daedelus." Speed entered the Po'Boy looking played out. Ella Maya looked on him with relief, fearing the police had gotten him. "Tanga." The record she played for Speed at the Po'Boy first time. So long ago.

"Speed! Oh honey, where you been? Did you find Billie? Are you all right?"

"Don't know where she is. I know she dropped by the Pantry that night."

Ella Maya said nothing.

"Where's Daedelus?" asked Speed.

"He ain't here honey. But I'm glad to see you're fine." Ella Maya stacked up her records, put them in a bag.

"I have a hunch. Let's call Akemi." There was no answer. Ella Maya grabbed her coat. She stopped a moment and dialed another number.

"Honey, I'm over here with Speed. I think I know where Billie would go ... I think she's at Akemi's."

"Why would she go over there?"

"Because of the baby."

Daedelus was stunned but only needed a second to sense the possibility.

"No answer over there but we're going over," said Ella Maya.

"I'll meet you," said the Bluesman.

They took the streetcar down Crenshaw toward Akemi and Hershey's place. A shiny black late model Ford merged into traffic behind the streetcar. They were too excited, wouldn't have



noticed the cops anyway.

They came to Akemi's house, Hidekazu's Model A was parked in the driveway. The unmarked police car parked half a block away, unnoticed. Speed knocked on the door. Little George opened it.

"She's in the bathroom, won't come out."

Ella Maya and Speed hurried in. Akemi was sitting on the toilet lid, just watching. Billie was on the floor next to the tub, crying. She was wearing only her slip, the green mambo dress lay crumpled next to her. Akemi looked up at Speed and Ella Maya.

"She's been like this for a half hour. Just crying."

Ella Maya got down on her knees and cradled Billie's head. Billie whispered between sobs, "Where are you baby? Where are you baby?"

Speed and Akemi watched, little George hung onto his mother's leg. Speed looked at Akemi, looked back at Billie sitting next to the tub crying, then felt his lungs clutch. He couldn't breathe. His heart was running. The fear was back, the swirling darkness. His lungs were filling. He was drowning. Reiko was drowning.

"Daedelus Verrette?" Swanton stepped out of his car, his coat open, his holstered revolver visible.

"Yeah."

Swanton shoved the black man hard against the car. Solomon grabbed him, held his arm locked behind his back.

"You know where we can find Billie Holiday?"

## CUBA

The cops followed Daedelus into the house, then stood by the bathroom door and watched as Daedelus went to Billie.

Leaning over the edge of the tub Mambo Girl was watching the water as she swirled it with her hand. It was the turquoise Caribbean, warm and clear and salty from tears. Daedelus got down by the tub next to Ella Maya who had Billie's head on her shoulder. She was singing "*Pero te acordaras ... al oir esta canción; Pero te acordaras ... al oir esta canción*" but so weird and quiet you could hardly hear her whisper and you knew she was really gone. Daedelus whispered, "Come on Billie, let's get out of here," but Mambo Girl kept on singing, unmoving. Ella Maya looked sharply at the Bluesman, like a backup singer who don't realize who's the headliner. Then Billie stopped her whisper-singing and said, kinda shakey-like,

"Where we going Daddy? Are you taking me away? Are you taking me on the train?"

"Yeah. That's right. We're getting on the train."

"Is Mama coming?"

"No honey, Mama's not coming."

"Good. I'm tired of smellin' her weeds."

The Bluesman tried to lift Mambo Girl but Ella Maya pushed him away, wrapping a bathrobe around the white-slipped dancer and got her standing. The cops leered at the scene.

"Daddy?"

"Yes honey."

"Can we take the baby with us to Cuba?"

Daedelus held his daughter. He said nothing, troubled.

"My baby she don't like it here, she wants to play in the warm ocean. She wants to smell the flowers. She's Cuban you know." No one spoke.

Ella Maya broke the silence: "Don't let her talk like that Daedelus. You got to straighten her out." She pushed him away. Then Ella Maya with arms around Billie still standing next to the half-filled tub, a robe around her, softly said, "Billie honey, there's no baby."

Billie screamed, "No! Don't talk like that. I know what you want. You want to take her from me. You want her for yourself, she's so pretty. Just 'cause you got no baby of your own."

Ella Maya stepped back as though struck.

"Tell them Speed, tell them it's our baby, tell them we did it at the beach, where the sand goes up the cliff." Billie was yelling, pleading.

The Mambo Samurai looked at his Bluesman with a haunted look on his face. He heard Tengu's voice, looked around but did not see him. The voice was cutting and humorous: "*Ah, the beach. That time before the war. When Billie ran to the water but you wouldn't go in. Afraid you'd drown. Haahahhhhh. Drowning person tries hard to stay afloat. That's why he sinks! HahahahAHAAHHHH.*" Something shifted inside him. He stepped past Ella Maya into the cramped, humid bathroom, embracing his Billie.

He was struggling to stay afloat in dark water, the greasy dark water hiding the rolling beasts of loggerheads, claws out and ready to drag him down by his best suit, his only suit to meet the world with, because he was poor and had nothing and didn't know how to speak or what to say or even that he could.

"Tell them Speed, *please*," Billie urged.

Speed held her tightly. "I'm sorry Rei. I can't breathe. My

lungs are filling. It's flooded and ... I'm afraid of water. I'm drowning." The Samurai paused, eyes closed.

Tengu hissed fiercely: *"She was braver than you. It must have been cold, really cold, that time she went in alone, the last time. She didn't fear death but aloneness. She came back to hear you say something. Don't leave her alone again. Don't be a loser. Say something. Breathe out love for her."*

Speed looked drained, as though he'd been fighting a ghost.

Billie whispered: "We had a baby. A beautiful light brown baby. With eyes like yours. Don't you remember Speed?" The Mambo Girl was smiling and calm. "Reiko," she whispered, "you're *my* baby, you belong with me. It's much nicer where I'm going. We're finally together now."

Speed was struggling like a drowning man. He hardly heard Billie. *How do you breathe out love if you're drowning?*

Speed, still holding her, shut his eyes, trembled a little, breathed with difficulty, his turn to gasp for breath, he shouted as though pleading:

"I'M NOT A LOSER!"

Billie whispered to him, "It's alright Speed. It's gonna be alright. We'll be in Cuba soon. Tengu will protect us. He brought us our baby, didn't he? We're going to Cuba! Don't you remember Speed? We're gonna have a *mambo band!*"

Suddenly his trembling stopped and Mambo Boy opened his eyes and looked at his Mambo Girl. *A mambo band? And baby Reiko? All of us in Cuba?* He looked at Billie looking at him. *She's there now, she's already there!*

Speed stopped struggling. He looked at Billie, tears in his eyes, holding her the way he never held Reiko, breathing smoothly, holding a Mambo Girl. She is calm and happy and breathing freely. She is in Cuba. Love is flowing under the sand.

Speed held her and spoke softly to her. "That's right Billie. We'll listen to mambo ... and swim in the warm water ... we'll swim all day ... and dance all night ... you and me ... and Reiko." Billie smiled through her tears.

Speed whispered into Billie's ear, "Breathe in Cuba." *Breathe in suffering. Breathe out love.* "Breathe out love." *Breathe in suffering.* "Breathe out love." They stood and breathed as one for what seemed like a long time, till Speed said, "Let's go Billie."

Speed turned to the door and Billie followed. He has rescued his beloved. Or else his beloved has rescued him. The cops stood aside. Speed led her to the living room couch where she sat wearing Akemi's robe. The cops stood, looking down at her.

Swanton began, "Are you Billie Holiday?"

"Yes."

"Where were you last night?"

"I was having a baby." Swanton looked annoyed. *Can't get a straight answer from any of these fools.*

"Where you from?"

"Cuba. I went back to visit Mama. She live in a house of weeds. Mojo, he's gone. I heard the chattering and I saw the elephont, but they all gone. Mojo dancer, he's dead, Angel come for him. They all gone but for Tengu, he saved me, he follow me here."

"Who followed you here?"

"There he is, that dragon man." She pointed at Swanton, but she was looking beyond him at the shadowy figure standing in the corner. "Why you make Reiko take a bath Mr. Tengu? Just get dirty again." There was lightness in her voice, like a child's.

Swirling of cigar smoke the cloaked figure was invisible to

all except Billie. With his long nose poking out from under the brim of his pork pie hat like a cigar, which was poking out sideways from the corner of his mouth, he raised his head and grinned at Billie, his eyes clearly visible and fierce beneath their sunbrowned epicanthal folds.

He winked at Billie and whispered into Swanton's ear, "The girl's crazy." Billie smiled at Tengu, who winked at her again.

"The girl's crazy," muttered Swanton, blankeyed, noticing Billie's smile. Solomon nodded. *Something funny going on.*

"Let's get out of here," whispered the Hollywood Trickster, looking ever more birdlike, his nose like a beak. He tossed his floor-length sash over his shoulder and blew long notes into Swanton's ear, as though he had pulled Chan's saxophone from beneath his cloak, an otherworldly instrument blowing cool revenge. The music hit the cop like soul-searing bebop, the kind of bop that clears the head of a hurt hipster but makes a cop queasy. Swanton staggered as though struck and grabbed his partner to steady himself. "Let's get out of here," whispered the Trickster.

"Let's get out of here," repeated Swanton as he held his partner, his face twisted in pain. "The girl's crazy."

As the cops walked down the broken driveway Billie jumped up and ran to the door, screamed at the pair, "I AM NOT AN ANIMAL!" Daedelus held her and whispered, "Let's go home," and she melted sobbing in his arms.

They helped Billie put on the green dress, she singing her song in a swinging whisper, to take her home, back to the mambo palace on Victoria, to drive the four blocks along the Malecon in the fine and shiny Model A, real slow and dignified, where the Bluesman will play mambo, today and every day, where every week they will eat from steaming bowls of swirling dark liquor:

crayfish and okra and rice and Chano Pozo and Perez Prado and great nostril-clearing chunks of Machito.

At the front door Billie stopped and pulled firmly out of her Daddy's embrace, walked back into the bathroom. The tub was half full as Akemi had left it. Just right for a baby. She looked around. There was no baby. *Baby Reiko. Poor baby Reiko. Are you the sacrifice? Where are you baby? Are you taking a bath? Silly baby. Just get dirty again.*

Billie's face was hard with loss. Slowly, mechanically she unbuttoned her green shiny dress, slipped it off, then the rest of her clothes. Her stomach knotted, her head ringing. Naked she stepped into the tub, turned on the water, warm bubbly water, roaring, flooding. Roaring swirling loss. She laid back and immersed her head, flooded her ear passages, lost herself to the roaring.

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