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THE LOST CHILD



CARYL PHILLIPS



ONEWORLD

A Oneworld Book

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For Tatiana

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I

SEPARATION

She likes to sit down by the docks in a place where sunlight can discover her face. Once there, she leans back and listens to the monotony of seawater lapping against the quayside, and she has no concept of the hour. She disturbs no one, but she hears footsteps passing in each direction. She is a woman in debt who can no longer find anyone willing to employ her at the loom; she is a diminished woman who, before her time, has yielded reluctantly to age and infirmity. They call her Crazy Woman, but she smiles and forgives them. It is spring, but winter is still in the air. She puts on a sad demeanour and fumbles at the hair buttons on her dark worn coat, and then she hears a penny drop into the box and she looks up and offers a toothless grin to the tall frock-coated man who is now walking away from her. She wants to tell the man that it hasn't always been like this, truly it hasn't. She wants to tell him, but to what purpose? The man wears a tight smirk of derision, which signals that he imagines himself more ingenious than anyone else, and who is she to argue? These are busy men. She hears the stiff wheels of a carriage turning laboriously against the cold flags and the noisy tattoo of horses clipping diligently towards their destinations. The incessant blasting of a ship's horn disturbs her reverie, but the sluggish rhythm of burbling water eventually begins to lull her into the receptive arms of slumber.

The seven-year-old boy stands over her and can see that she is asleep, but not at rest. The woman's body startles, then settles, and it is clear to the boy that pain has again established residence and has no desire to quit his mother's body. His has been a good day, and his box sings half full with a medley of coins, but he knows they must now leave, for soon it will be dark. He reaches down and takes her hand, which she snatches away from him. (I will kill you.) When she opens her eyes, the boy can see that she is suffering from an awkward upsurge of shame, for her harsh words have been misdirected, and her haul is woeful. The unblinking child stares back at her in a manner that suggests that the requirement that he bear responsibility for her well-being sits surely on his young shoulders, for after all, neither of them has any other companionship. People continue to walk by in both directions, and unable to disguise their loathing for the skeletal woman who is slumped against the ground, they simply avert their gazes. The poor boy hovers protectively over his afflicted mother, for she looks now as though she might, at any moment, abandon this discouraging world and attempt to gain access to the next.

She remembers long days in the West Indian fields digging with a rod of pointed iron under the burning sky; she remembers restless nights as black as soot listening for the sound of footsteps approaching the door and wondering whether tonight it would be her turn to be covered. But Master never came to her. (A Congo woman, too dark.) In the morning a skillet of Indian corn, or yams seasoned with peppers, would be thrust into her hut, and together with the others, she would leap up and tussle for the food like a wild beast. Having eaten, they would commence the march (Quick! Quick!) out to the fields for more digging, and weeding of grass, and gathering of stones until one day she was hoisted onto the back of a wagon full of sickly property and carried to the town square. The least of the female litter, she mounted a wooden platform and waited until all the others had been taken. She stood alone now, but the ship's captain eventually nodded without enthusiasm, and her short time in the Indies reached an abrupt conclusion.

On her journey to the Indies it was the rats that had inspired the greatest fear, for they fed with conviction and grew huge and profited handsomely from their passage. The human cargo was chained and manacled in the hold, where they rolled to the left and then back to the right, their rotations determined by the undulating waves, but on each occasion that the vessel dipped, the cargo received the blessing of a libation of slime. Soon they were too nauseated to eat, and most were too grief-stricken to cry, and she lay surrounded by the doleful mourning of those who rotted in the darkness. They whispered in plaintive tongues that were beyond the comprehension of her half-chewed ears, and they composed themselves for their own private journeys. During the second voyage she remained anchored to the splintered floor of the captain's cabin unless he had business with her. A crude depravity marked this man's crumpled brow, and she soon perceived that her captor was fired with a lust for unconditional obedience. His brutish appetite rose and fell like the ship, and at the termination of his cowardly attacks he would reshackle her and then reach for his pipe and smoke the tobacco that appeared to offer him some vestige of peace in mind and body. Moving even a little caused the chains to bite urgently at her wrists and ankles, and so she would simply curl up in her corner and watch as he began to blow plumes of smoke. It troubled her that the lengthy crossing was making her dull, and so, trembling like a palm leaf, she tried hard to recall the simple dignity of a bowl from which one might eat or the long-forgotten pleasure of a few breaths of clean, pure air.

How many years have I? She unseals her eyes and sees the boy trying once more to pull her upright, and she smiles. It is true, there is no dignity in lying slumped among a sea of masts. But look, vessels at anchor! Still, like her, and she feels grateful that her child is helping her. Now she is startled by the warm water between her legs, but she welcomes the sudden flush of heat. She knows this pleasant feeling will soon pass and only the stench and irritation will remain. (I'm sorry, my child, but tribulation is upon me, and I must sleep some more before standing. Please sit with me and keep

me company for one hour more, this is all I ask. Just one hour, and then we two shall leave together.) She deeply resents the fact that these people look pitifully upon her son, whom she has ruined by the example of her own indolent misery. Their foolish tongues used to ask: Can the boy speak English? Can he dress hair? Is he sober? Is he fit to wait upon a gentleman? But no, no, no. She has seen the other boys, ornately attired in silks, with silver collars and satin turbans, walking behind fair ladies so they might attend to their mistresses' trains, or quickly administer smelling salts, or take charge of their fans. But other boys, not her child. Her son will never walk behind a fair lady. He looks down at her, his wide eyes brimming with a concern that threatens to spill over into tears. She can, however, detect that a strong and tenacious heart beats in his tiny body. This being the case, all is not lost.

✦

As the pale sun sinks beneath the watery horizon, filth-encrusted sailors, ready to roister anew under the cover of darkness, appear from all directions. She never evokes any compassion from these men, who lurch confidently past her, their aura of superiority fed by excessive familiarity with rum and other strong liquors. The boy helps her to her feet, for they must leave before the quarter descends into violence. They stagger off, her feet clad in mismatched shoes that skid through fetid puddles of waste. (The sailors don't see me; they never see me.) Suddenly, the shoes are temporarily held captive in the unforgiving mud of an unpaved road, but she nevertheless struggles to remain womanly in her deportment. They press on and twist and turn through a tangled nest of cobbled streets, avoiding yawning doorways where slops may unexpectedly be thrown out, climbing laboriously up worn stone steps, ducking under low-hanging tavern signs, and averting their senses from the narrow entrances to cellars. The people who have buried themselves in these hovels will venture out only after nightfall to sit around a bonfire and drink and sing before retreating to

their damp and crowded burrows, where body heat alone, surreptitiously stolen from a stranger, feeds the pulse of life.

Having reached their destination, she lies down on a handful of straw in a tiny room under the low roof. The broken windows are stuffed with brown paper and scraps of besmirched fabric, but the cacophony of noise still penetrates. She receives the drunken tidings of night, and she understands that the doglike howling and yelping from the Flying Horse Inn, which at all hours teems with degraded humanity, will persist until dawn. But what can she do? The wooden stairs that lead to this bleak attic room begin to creak, but she is not expecting anyone. (Is someone there?) Her son lifts a small finger to his lips and encourages her to be quiet. The dank wall is made visible by candlelight, and extended across its full breadth she can see the shadowy image of the boy's furtive gestures, but the intermittent rubbing of her irritated eyes now results in her closing them tight.

It hasn't always been this way. Before, having pushed back her wooden chair and swathed herself in a moth-eaten shawl, each evening she would set forth and leave behind the rattling and clacking of the looms. And each evening she would assume that this must be the day on which the lonely man has had to return to his inconvenient wife and children, but for almost a week her suitor has confounded her expectations and waited patiently by the gates with a small bunch of freshly picked flowers, which he presents to her with more extravagance than is necessary in the hope of gaining her approval. He walks with her and talks, and he understands that she is not blessed with pretty features, and he suspects that she would most likely freely admit this, but he knows that she possesses elegance, although undoubtedly some men see only a harlot as common as the dirt under their feet, a lamentable object they might use for either commerce or humour. He has seen these men, the desire for entertainment gleaming in their faces as they greedily watch the commotion of her dress against her hips. She steps back out of range as a large carriage

with heavy wheels carves its way through the busy street and awakens clouds of dust, and then she walks, and he walks with her, and again he tries to solicit conversation, and finally, after a five-day campaign, she reluctantly agrees to accompany him to the back room of the Queen's Head tavern for supper.

They sit. There is no linen upon the table, and a narrow bed stands in one corner, but mercifully no eyes are upon them. (You must dine heartily, and I promise you will soon reap the benefits of doing so.) She accepts oatcakes and a little boiled mutton, and the serving boy brings chicken pie, beans, and a glass of Burgundy for her host, before ceasing his capering and once again closing in the door. (I am a man of some influence who has not yet entered the evening of my mortal span, yet I confess to being bedevilled of late by unpredictable bouts of melancholy.) His breath is unsavoury, but this aside, there is an inoffensive fragrance to the man in whom she discerns goodness. He is endowed with courtesy and displays a great delicacy of manners, and he seeks to engage her with his wit and not tax her with wearisome tales relating to his own standing. He admits to being puzzled by her situation but essays an observation. (A third homeland in one lifetime, and now you are intoxicated with liberty and perhaps thirsting for enlightenment? Does this represent your predicament?) She smiles. Not entirely. She admits to having been discarded by a sea captain and living without daylight in a place where to draw breath is to risk ruination, and he immediately offers her money with which she might obtain decent lodgings, but she refuses. (But you reside among whores and ruffians in the vile courts of this sometimes pestilent town.) She sees the frustration rise in his body, but she continues to smile.

She opens her eyes, for she can hear the rasping voice of a drunken ballad singer competing with that of a deep-throated pie vendor, both of whom congregate below in the echo chamber that is the narrow courtyard. The boy has squeezed himself against the wall, and the wood groans as the landlord now lumbers across the crooked floor. A simple scrap of carpet would have assisted

with the chill, but it is too late. She watches the animated glow from the man's swinging lantern as the light searches for her figure. (Have you heard from your gentleman?) The landlord's slovenly wig has slipped sideways, and his forehead wears a circumspect frown. Her child crawls to her side and holds her arm. He looks defiantly at the man with ill-disguised scorn lighting up his young eyes, but his mother reassures him. (It's alright.) Seven bitter winters have passed since her son shouldered his way into the world on these grimy, uneven boards. Her gentleman paid for the doctor, but she worried that her child's father might now uncouple his affection as a result of the taint in his offspring's breeding. The landlord moves his lamp to improve his view of her face, which is coated in sweat as thick as oil. This man once radiated understanding, but his disposition is now much altered. He asks her, How many weeks must I wait? She no longer possesses the strength to draw her tongue across the speckling of blood on her mouth; she no longer enjoys the ability to smile.

✦

The first time she saw the ghost quietly leaving her body she shook with fear, but he quickly reentered her. The ghost appears and disappears stealthily, like a halo of breath on a looking glass. She knows that soon the ghost will leave her frail body, and this time she will utter a series of long, shallow gasps and fall silent, and then follow him and begin her final voyage. But not yet. A single candle gutters in the draught, but its shimmer illuminates the obscurity allowing her to watch over her sleeping child, and again she feels her consciousness slipping away and the worrisome present subsiding into a peaceful dream. She lowers her heavy lids and abandons vigilance.

During their first apprehensive dinner her gentleman had been careful to admit to her that as far as ardent passions were concerned he was something of a novice. But by their second meal together she could observe it in his aspect that he felt emboldened.

A small fire was her gentleman's gift of comfort to her, and they both studied the tiny flames as the serving boy added fresh logs and then raked up the loose waste from under the grate. After the boy closed in the door, her gentleman friend stood and crossed the room and drew the bolt. She could see that he was nervous, and some crumbs clung stubbornly to his chin, but he had forsaken drinking while he still remained in full custody of his sensibilities. She looked favourably upon him, convinced that integrity and kindness were lodged in his bosom. He removed his satin vest and lace ruffles with impeccable dexterity, which helped to soothe her own nervous condition. Then he came to her with the honest ardour of youth, and she made an earnest attempt to return his interest.

Although the considerate man took his time and let his fingers gently explore the soft curves of her body and whispered to her throughout, she was unable to prevent her mind from collapsing under the stress of memory. She found herself back on the ship with the captain stirring himself to quick, frenzied spasms, after which she was confined to her corner, where she prayed that he might now leave her alone. A civil frigidity entered the captain's voice as he commanded her not to submit to sulkiness, and then one morning the exasperated man ushered her to the foot of a steep staircase and then to the upper level, where she experienced a change of air. He pressed a guinea into her palm and, the ship having docked in the night, he pointed to the great port that lay spread out before them and turned her loose to find an occupation and seek shelter. It was some while before she moved off from the docks, being unsure if she was at liberty to walk abroad, and after a few hours of edging her uncertain way along bustling streets, a forthright workingwoman, with a fine white cloud of hair, came to her aid and made it her objective to help this lost soul reclaim her grit and establish a new home in this clamorous town of ships and sailors.

It was later, after she had accommodated her gentleman's devotion on a half-dozen separate occasions, that she discovered

herself with child and, thereafter, her circumstances declined. (We've no work in this place for a woman with child.) She felt bereft of mettle in her increasingly tattered clothes, and shame began to regularly flicker across her face. (No, miss, we've no work for you.) No longer a bewitching presence, her reduced self aged a year with each dismissive glance, and she wept bitterly at the thought that she would most likely never reestablish herself in employment. Occasionally he still came to her with tender warmth and a charitable heart, and he appeared to look upon the child with genuine regard, but she could see it in his eyes that despite her attempt to maintain some grace to her natural movements, his zeal for her had been extinguished. Mother and child were now little more than a burdensome secret, and although her benefactor continued to press money upon her, it was manifest that he was growing progressively detached. And then meetings with the gentleman ceased, and other assignations commenced as the curse of destitution began to pollute her life. (No, please, no! No!) These scowling men revelled in improper conduct and were prepared to pay to have brisk knowledge, and once their joyless noises were at an end they dropped a coin on the way out as they stepped over the pile of tatters that was her child. Her poor son, who lay with his body curled tightly and his desperate hands clasped over his ears. (My child what have I done to you in this place? Will you ever forgive me?)

At dawn he appears before her and can see she is enduring a resurgence of distress. He looks across at her sleeping child but knows that there is little to be gained by waking the boy. The stench of decay torments the room, but it is illness and misfortune, not idleness, that has enabled this malodorous atmosphere to flourish. Her cheeks radiate heat like tiny twin furnaces, and blood leaks steadily from her nose. He sees the yellow tarnish to her defeated eyes and listens to her breathing in low, labored gasps. It is clear that the conflict will soon be at an end, so he will not reenter her delicate body. The woman is powerless to rise and meet the

day, and it is time for her to pass safely over the threshold and be on her way. The woman opens her eyes and looks lovingly in the direction of her peaceful child. She taught the boy how to walk, and now she must walk away from him. She must go. A skeleton hung with rags. Another journey, another crossing.

II

FIRST LOVE

Towards the end of her second year at university, Monica Johnson listened as her father told her that he had given the matter a great deal of thought, but sadly he couldn't be expected to tolerate her behaviour for a moment longer. He cleared his throat and wondered if he had soft-soaped things by using the word "sadly"; she was staring at him with those large, unblinking brown eyes of hers and waiting for him to continue. He had misjudged things, for he had anticipated tears, but instead of a torrent of emotion his twenty-year-old daughter continued to grimace and wait for him to explain himself. Being a schoolmaster in one of the most highly considered grammar schools in the north of England, he was, of course, used to making advanced concepts intelligible to young people. However, they both knew that this was a subject upon which there really was no need for him to expand any further. After all, standards were standards, and although it disappointed him to have to take such a stance, Monica knew full well that once he'd made his mind up that was it.

They sat together in her room at the top of a narrow nineteenth-century staircase in the back quad of one of Oxford's smaller and less prestigious women's colleges. Between them a fully laden tray sat atop a rickety wooden table, which rose little more than a foot above the threadbare rug. Two untouched pieces of Dundee cake

decorated a white china plate, which was flanked on one side by a bright red teapot and on the other by two ill-matching cups stacked one on top of the other. She had thought long and hard about what to wear and had assumed that her father, who had fixed ideas about how women should present themselves, might even be expecting her to be decked out in her tutorial garb—a nice dark sensible skirt, black stockings, and a crisp white blouse. She had chosen instead to wear a sloppy grey pullover and tan slacks but further confused the issue by tying back her long, straight hair with an incongruously cheerful yellow ribbon. Although she knew full well that she wasn't much to look at, this year men had begun to notice her and even if she couldn't prove it scientifically, she was sure that the more she dressed like a *townie*, the more attention she received. But she certainly didn't want scrutiny from this warped man, who had already bullied his wife into near-mute submission. By the time Monica was a teenager she was fairly sure what type of person she was dealing with, and it was she who had decided to generate a distance between them, which she closely monitored, carefully widening the gap with each passing year.

Having ushered him into her room and hung his overcoat and hat on the back of the door, she directed him to a chair that offered a view, out of the sloping attic window onto the somewhat hideous modern red tiles that crowned the college annexe. The four-hour drive from Wakefield had provided him with the opportunity to reflect and choose precisely the right words, and once he was seated he came straight to the point, which he knew would leave them ample time for debate or, if his daughter so wished, time for debate *and* refreshment. But as she continued to stare at him with that particularly rebellious sneer she seemed to have cultivated in her sixth-form years, he began now to question his tactics and wondered if he should have taken a cup of tea and a piece of cake before easing his way into the assignment.

She looked at him, fully aware of the fact that to open her

mouth right now would only result in her coming out with angry and resentful words, so she bit down hard on her bottom lip. Monica wasn't in the habit of revealing emotional vulnerability to this man, for she knew that the end result of such stupidity was having your wings ripped off. As she tasted the first sting of blood, she reminded herself of her promise to keep things nice and steady.

"So that's it then? You're washing your hands of me?" She swallowed hard but didn't take her eyes from him. "Well?"

He raised a warning finger. "Now then, there's no need to take that tone with me." And then he realized how he must appear, with his finger dangling foolishly in midair, and so he quickly swivelled his wrist and opened his palm. "I could pussyfoot around, but to whose benefit would that be?"

"So that's it then?"

He looked at the pot and imagined that the tea must now be cold. Why did Monica always have to be so bloody wilful? No matter what he did she seemed set against him. She'd been stubborn as a girl, but nothing out of the ordinary—as far as he could tell—until she started budding. That's when his daughter went from diffident to downright disobedient. One day she was prepared to answer his admittedly tedious questions about what classes she liked best at school or if she'd be interested in coming with him to a musical concert at the Town Hall (the answer was always no), and then the next day it was as though all communication between the two of them had totally broken down. He knew that she liked Wordsworth, so he broached the idea of a walking holiday in the Lake District, just the two of them, but Monica rolled her eyes and said, "No thanks." And then after she'd been accepted at university, when he made it clear that he'd love to motor down and explore the place with her, she just laughed and carried on watching a programme on the newly purchased television set.

"Well," she said, breaking off a piece of Dundee cake with her fingers. "Is that all you've got to say to me?"

He wanted to smack the girl, but it was too late for this. As

usual, her attitude was entirely regrettable, but he knew enough about young people to understand that he had to continue to exude assertiveness and control, and so he climbed to his feet.

"So it would appear, Monica. So it would appear. I've no desire to fight with you." He paused, and for a moment their eyes locked. "Listen, I'd best be off before the traffic starts building. And Monica, I'm sorry."

His daughter heard his bumbling apology, but she said nothing and simply unhooked his overcoat, then his hat, and handed them to him. He looked at his child, but for him to say anything further would involve stepping too far outside of himself, and so he simply offered her a weak smile. Then he caught a glimpse of himself in the small mirror on the wall to the side of the door and realized that this afternoon's effort had put five years on him. As she picked up a small bunch of keys, Monica broke off another portion of cake.

"I'll show you the way out of the college."

They crossed the quiet, shadowy quadrangle and then traipsed their way through a narrow archway and out into the sunlit brightness of the front quad, where two clusters of students shared the lawn, playing separate games of croquet in neighbourly proximity to each other. As they walked together, he felt a momentary surge of panic, knowing that this final act of his performance would be improvised. They stepped through the huge wooden door and out onto the street, and then he stopped and gently held Monica's arm through a handful of grey jumper.

"You will keep in touch, won't you?" His daughter looked at him but said nothing.

He let go of Monica's arm and fished in his jacket pocket for his car keys.

"I'm parked just down this road and around the corner. No need for you to trouble yourself. I can find my own way." Why, he asked himself, couldn't he add "love"? I can find my own way, love. But he knew that it wouldn't do to confuse her. Once he turned the corner and passed out of sight, he took a handkerchief

from his pocket and discreetly blew his nose and then dabbed at his eyes. Mission accomplished.

✦

Soon after Monica's birth, his wife had dropped a few broad hints that she wouldn't mind having a second child, but Ronald Johnson had determined that one would suffice. After all, there was a war on, and it was incumbent on all English families to make sacrifices of some kind. Monica had arrived in 1937, when it looked as though Chamberlain, whom Ronald greatly admired, was well on the way to securing some semblance of peace. Three years later, any mention of his affection for the former prime minister caused him to go beetroot red, and so his wife knew full well to avoid this topic. By 1940 the whole country was hunkered down and silently preparing for the worst, so he thought it unnecessary to engage with Mrs. Johnson on the question of a second child, and the idea was quietly dropped.

A teenage bout of pneumonia had left him with a shadow on his chest, and so he was deemed unfit for active duty and therefore able to continue with his career teaching geography to boys, whose only real interest in their studies seemed to relate to troop movements in various corners of the globe. At a time when the duties and obligations of war were causing many families to temporarily break apart and accustom themselves to the novelty of female leadership, Ronald Johnson was able to continue to exercise a benevolent patriarchal authority over his household and therefore take a keen interest in the development of his daughter.

From the moment she was born he had tried to please Monica. During the day he often found himself ignoring the rows of pupils ranged before him, preferring instead to stare out the window and ponder what trinket or sweets he might bring back for her that evening. Even in the most austere of times there were shopkeepers who knew how to track down scarce commodities, and he had forged a good relationship with one or two of them who seemed to be able to get their grubby paws on chocolate or licorice. As soon

as he reached home and pushed his way through the door, there she would be staring up at him and patiently waiting for her goody. When she was a little older, and her school held a VE Day pageant, it was Monica who wore the Union Jack robe and tinsel crown and proudly held aloft the placard proclaiming "Peace," and he almost burst with pride when he read the letter from Monica's headmistress that confirmed that his daughter was one of the three "specially talented" girls chosen for music lessons.

Ronald Johnson had carefully mapped out a postwar career path for himself that would accommodate only fee-paying or grammar schools, for he was sure that his spirit would wilt in the barren world of the new secondary modern schools that the local council, in keeping with government guidelines, was rapidly establishing to accommodate those who had failed the Eleven plus examination. However, despite his achieving some success and securing a junior master's position at the local Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, money remained tight. Nevertheless, when Monica was ten, he declared that this was the right time for the family to buy their first house, a small terraced affair in a better part of town, but he wasn't prepared to put Monica's future, to say nothing of her happiness, at stake. This being the case, he funded her piano lessons with extra money that he earned giving Saturday-morning instruction to the twin Shadwell boys, who he knew stood absolutely no chance of passing the Eleven plus. Monica, on the other hand, sailed through her examination, and she began to win certificates and the odd trophy at music festivals all over the north of England. The mantelpiece and sideboard in the new living room supported a sequence of expensively framed photographs of his daughter flowering into a beautiful girl, and late at night, after everyone had gone to bed, he liked to sit alone and marvel at the images that showed off her poise and self-belief to best advantage, although occasionally he did find himself irritated by the seemingly nonchalant path that his daughter seemed to be steering between his own indulgence and his wife's silent pride.

"Daddy," she had once asked him, "are you happy?" She was

barely twelve at the time and was balanced carefully on the arm of the settee with her legs dangling over the side. The question disturbed him, for he didn't know just what it was that his daughter was seeing that prompted her to ask such a thing, but he simply swirled the ice in his drink so the cubes tinkled together like the percussion section of a band. Then he leaned over and snaked his hand around her midriff and tried to tickle Monica, but she pulled away, and the unanswered question hung in the air between them.

His daughter seemed to take it in her stride that an Oxford college had accepted her without any stipulation that she achieve a particular set of grades. It had been her own idea that in addition to applying to redbrick universities she try both Oxford and Cambridge, but her headmistress had called him in and warned him that the school had no history with either university. She also reminded him that familial ties appeared to count at both places, and Monica would not be able to point to any relative who had attended either institution. Nevertheless, he let the headmistress know that he fully supported his single-minded daughter in her application, although he never mentioned anything to Monica about going into the school. On the morning she received the letter announcing her acceptance, Monica reluctantly shared the news with her parents over tea and toast and then trotted off to school as though this were just an ordinary day. Her father, on the other hand, drove to work with his briefcase deftly balanced across his knees, and he utilized the whole journey planning how he might break his news to the staff room in a casual manner so it wouldn't come over as though he'd joined up with the boastful brigade. However, by the time he began the long walk down the corridor towards the staff room he realized that it was going to be impossible to contain himself. When Miss Eccles, the French mistress, asked him if he would like a cup of instant coffee, he just blurted it out: "Our Monica's going to Oxford." He immediately felt his face colouring up, for after all, he spent most of his working day trying to exhort boys to speak grammatically correct English, and now listen to him. "Our Monica."

Miss Eccles beamed. "Well, Mr. Johnson, that's marvellous news. Just marvellous. Congratulations."

Given all her advantages and ability, it made absolutely no sense to him that Monica should be throwing everything away by getting involved with a graduate student in history nearly ten years her senior who originated in a part of the world where decent standards of behaviour and respect for people's families were obviously alien concepts. She never bothered to send letters or postcards home to them, and so once again he had been forced to write asking how she was, and by return of post Monica had given her parents the disturbing news, delivered, unsurprisingly, as a fait accompli. Naturally, he had little choice but to share the disconcerting information with his wife, and then he began to make plans to undertake the four-hour drive sometime in the next few days in order that he might lay down the law. When he eventually knocked at the door to Monica's college room, he discovered his daughter, far from giving out any impression that she might be pleased to see him, to be in a particularly truculent frame of mind.

He had stared out of the queerly shaped window that afternoon and listened to Monica's increasingly strident voice as she talked openly of being with this man. Quite unexpectedly, he realized that her flat vowels had, if anything, become more pronounced, as though she were now trying to flaunt her northern origins. In fact, were he to close his eyes he would no longer be able to swear that it was his own child speaking.

"Look, you haven't even met him. How can you judge somebody that you don't even know?"

"I want you to understand that your mother and I are concerned about *you*, not some Tom, Dick, or Harry. I haven't motored all this way to waste time talking about somebody else."

"Okay then, why *have* you come all this way? It's not like you to take a day off school."

And so there it was, she had put him on the spot before any tea could be poured or cake eaten, and it looked as though he was

going to have to tell her that it was either this man or her parents. Monica was going to have to make up her mind. He drew himself upright and began by letting her know that he had given the matter a great deal of thought. Inwardly he was devastated, for this wasn't how he wanted it to go. He had hoped that there might be some preliminary discussion in her room, with perhaps a glass of sweet sherry, and then a walk around the college grounds or maybe down along the banks of the Cherwell. In his most optimistic moments, he pictured her excitedly begging him to hire a boat and smiling at his attempts to punt. That would be something, punting down the river with his daughter, the Oxford student. But now there would be none of this, for things had rapidly collapsed. When she once again insisted on introducing her friend's name into the proceedings, he had little choice but to deliver his prepared statement that contained the word "sadly," and thereafter they both had plunged into an abyss of silence. It had all happened too quickly. He wasn't naive: he knew that girls of her age went giddy over romance and probably talked extensively about the opposite sex; no doubt a small number of young women, finding themselves beyond the parental home, were quite possibly active and prepared to risk the ignominy of landing themselves in the family way. But nothing in Monica's upbringing had ever led him to imagine that his daughter might turn out to be loose.

Whenever he thought the blubbing was over, the tears would come again, each time with a greater vigour. He now found himself clinging to the steering wheel with his gloved hands in an attempt to stop shaking, but he realized that this was no good, and he would have to pull over into a lay-by. He sat perfectly still as a platoon of lorries thundered by and shook the Wolseley, and then he reached for his handkerchief and blew his nose with a loud, messy snarl. He would have to sort himself out, for he couldn't allow his wife to see him like this. Alone in the house, she would be eagerly anticipating some account of their child's situation, and it was his responsibility to report the events of the day with a sobriety

tinged with an appropriate degree of sorrow. He dried his eyes and quickly checked in the rearview mirror to make sure they were not bloodshot. He adjusted his tie and then took one, two, three deep breaths, and each time he was careful to exhale slowly. Then he lowered his head onto the steering wheel and began once more to sob.

✦

After her father left her standing outside the oversize door to the college, Monica decided to go to Julius Wilson's basement flat and tell him what had happened. Having assumed that he would have the whole afternoon to revise the footnotes to his doctoral dissertation, he was clearly surprised to see her, and for a moment she couldn't tell if he was pleased or put out. He was wearing that enigmatic grin she couldn't always read, but he was not the type of man to play games, so she guessed that he would tell her if he needed some more time to himself, and she would happily read until he was ready. However, once she had kicked off her shoes and curled herself up in his cosily padded armchair, he began to relax and carefully placed his papers in a large grey box file and then turned off the desk lamp. He crossed the room and perched on the edge of the armchair before slowly unfastening the yellow bow so that her hair tumbled out across her upper back and shoulders.

"Would you like me to make you a cup of coffee? Or I could go out and get something stronger."

She looked up at him and offered a forced smile, but it was still too soon for her to talk.

Julius Wilson was a tall, gangly man who had spent the greater part of his short adult life cultivating a patina of gravitas that might belie the boyish smoothness of his face. In his private moments, when he felt safe, he was capable of a giggly skittishness that suggested one drink too many, but he would never let this aspect of his personality out in public, having invested too many years perfecting his air of studious severity. "I am not here to play; I am