Our Family Walks

N.R. Robinson

“Y’all are hungry,” Mama said, no question in her downcast whispery voice. “I’ll be back quick.” There was something definite behind the distraction in Mama’s careless hair, and in her careless face, and in the blue-veined hands that wandered as she spoke. Too young to understand, Cookie’s puzzled brown eyes darted back and forth between Mama and me. Cookie was weeping that day because I was.

That autumn of 1963 people were walking, and we were among them. But our walks, at the time, seemed purposeless. Or perhaps I did not see then their purpose. I barely knew it, but ’63 was a dangerous time to be wandering the heat- and frost-blazed roads of America. Over the months surrounding what would be our last family trek across D.C., a quarter million folk marched on Washington, protesters were beaten in Birmingham, a U.S. President was assassinated in the street.

When Mama called our aimless ambles anything, they were Our Family Walks. We strolled that September day, just weeks after my seventh birthday, Mama on one side, five-year-old Cookie on the other. It was late afternoon when Mama crooned—face demure, fragile, resolute—“Don’ worry babies, th’ angels are beside y’all,” then walked away. Because I’d learned it was useless to protest, I pulled Cookie to the sidewalk curb. Snarling cars and trucks belched heat and grit in our direction as we watched Mama flicker and fade down North Capitol Street. Before she left, I’d searched her eyes. She was telling the truth, I decided. I promised Cookie, “Mama comin’ back this time.”

October of ’63, just weeks after that last family walk, I turned happy. Partly because of the new comic book addition to Marvel’s line-up of superheroes—“Tales of Suspense #39: Iron Man!” And because Mama, Cookie, and me were back home and I’d convinced myself our walkabouts were part of the past.
“Can I have eight cent, Mama?”
Mama’s eyes fluttered, as if she hadn’t heard my key turning in the lock or the clap-to of the door slamming shut. “How’s that?” she asked.

At twenty-three, Mama was beautiful in an unintentional way, and delicate, like the china display dolls Cookie was forever begging after: skimmed-milk-colored, swan-ish neck adorned with chestnut locks. When she flushed a weary smile, Mama’s eyes narrowed to twinkling slits. Anyone who’d ever met her called her exotic. She called herself mixed: Negro, Caucasian, and American Indian from her mama’s side, Spanish and Filipino from her daddy’s.

“Eight cent, Mama. Please?” Butterscotch-colored beneath my tangle of curls, I was an admix of Mommy and Daddy. Quarter-inch spectacles blew up my eyes to ten times their normal size. “Mister Magoo,” Cookie teased.

“We ain’ got a nickel ta’ spare, baby.”

Same as always, I thought, No money for nothin’ but The Basics. Home was I Street southeast, a welfare neighborhood tucked blocks away from the walled D.C. Navy Yard. 321 I—across from our breadbox chapel, Saint Paul’s—was one of a phalanx of three-story low-rises stretching as far as my bespectacled eyes could see; door-less structures boiling with Negroes: old folks and mothers, mainly, caring for broods with part-time daddies.

As Cookie chanted behind me, “Niiicky le’s play!” I tramped through the living room, into the cubbyhole where she and Mama slept, in and out of my cramped bedroom. My mind wandered back to the day of our last family walk: sleepy morning protests, “Mama, why we gotta’ go?” Afternoon complaints, “How come we walkin’ so far?” And just yesterday, Mama sitting stone-faced as I asked why she’d left us, and where she’d been for a week. Our sun-beaten walks were something she wouldn’t discuss, or even acknowledge. It was as if they didn’t exist for her until they happened. Afterwards, they were erased from the blackboard of her mind.

I wanted to forget Mama’s walking binges as easily as she seemed to. On the days I managed, memories of the voices rose up inside me like a persistent bellyache.

Voices haunted our apartment. None were Daddy’s. They arrived, as he sometimes did, after Mama put us to bed. On those nights, Mama laid Cookie to sleep in my room with me. As soon as we settled in, I’d hear knocks then a voice trailing Mama through the apartment. I woke up hard those nights. Afterwards, I couldn’t make peace with myself. Mama deflected my questions: “You need ta’ be concentratin’ on yur school work.”

On this day, over Cookie’s droning, the alley beckoned: children shrieking and clattering over transistor radios blaring WOL, D.C.’s soul channel, The Marvelettes, Playboy get away from my door, I heard about the lovers you had before . . .

“Mama, can I go?”

“Change out’a yo’ uniform, an’ stay where I can see you.”
I escaped into the I Street alley, a concrete horseshoe littered with rusting automobiles and overflowing trash bins and, after 3 p.m., with kids riding bikes and playing tag and cheering on the afternoon fight. The alley was a whirl of every-shade-of-brown beanpoles hauling rock-loaded Radio Flyers, and fire-engine-red pogo sticks springing over broken glass; a blur of nappy-headed girls skipping double-dutch and playing hopscotch and hipping hula hoops in the garbage-laced afternoon wind. At twilight Mama beckoned, a portrait set in brick, her thin voice calling, “Nicky, get on in this house.”

On Mama’s good nights, she prepared our favorite meal, creamed eggs over toast: flour, water, salt, and pepper all whipped together in a heavy, cast-iron frying pan, two hardboiled eggs crumpled in last. She poured this concoction over bread snatched hot from the broiler, crispy tan on one side, white soft on the other. After dinner she permitted thirty minutes playtime, time when a thin sheet tossed over our kitchen table made for a transmutable playhouse: the tower where The Monster (me) and Frankenstein (Cookie) battled to the death; the cave where Superman (me) defeated the evil Lex Luthor (Cookie) and rescued Lois Lane (also Cookie); the spaceship where Flash Gordon (me) pursued a host of space invaders (all Cookie).

“Nooooo, lay down. You suppostabe dead!”

“I’m tired of dyin.’ Why can’t you be th’ alien an’ I be Flash Gordon for once?” Cookie pouted.

My sister, Karen, was called Cookie because all the block said she looked good enough to eat. I used truisms to describe her: “pink-skinned” and “straight-haired” (like Mama), “rock-stubborn” and “biscuit-y-smelling.”

“Cause Flash Gordon’s a boy, stupid,” I shot back with a shake of my head. Because I did not, back then, consider Cookie clever, I put the mystery of the voices to my first-grade buddies at Saint Peter’s. The four of us—Timmy, Bebe, Stinky, and me—elbowed our way across a schoolyard crowded with recess. We conferenced in our favorite brick and asphalt corner.

“Swear,” I insisted.

“Honest to God” and “Cross my heart, hope to die,” they declared, hands blurring in the sign of the cross. We formed a protective circle against the schoolyard din and I described the late-night visits: voices sliding behind Mama to her bedroom, bedsprings groaning in complaint.

“Then what?”

“Then them voices disappear.” We stood staring at each other until those boys burst into laughter. They laughed in that hard, knee-slapping way that three boys laugh at another one.

“Stupid, dem voices is men, visitin’. Yo mama’s havin’ sex!” one of them cackled. First those three friends, then every kid in the schoolyard was catcalling, “Nicky’s mama’s havin’ sex!”
I felt something fry behind my eyes. Running did not help. I was taunted for weeks until some new escapade bulldozed my own. I still felt fried. Maybe because I was bewildered by the so-called sex my mama was having.

Sex happened in private, I knew, between adults. Sex was a sin and the people who did it had babies. What I was desperate to know was, What happens during sex? Was Mama going to have a baby? And was Mama a sinner because she was having sex with men that were not Daddy? During this muddle is when Darlyn and Sondra appeared, full-sprung out of thin air.

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The night before their abrupt arrival, Mama called it an early evening. Cookie and I forced down our choke sandwiches (thick slabs of peanut-butter-and-nothing-else on government bread) then drifted off in front of the television. When Mama stroked our sofa-creased faces awake the next morning—Saturday, it was—the night had spawned new voices that penetrated, along with the cold and the gray, the thin walls and frosty windows of my bedroom:

“This th’ place!”

“Help Uncle Butch unload the van,” a second voice shouted. “Stack the furniture in the hall.”

A smaller voice, “I wanna help, too!”

A bumping and a stomping, a squealing and grunting flooded into our apartment. When I yanked the front door open, two barrette-ed heads were racing up and down the stairwell, around the tall and medium-sized boxes blocking the hallway landing, under a pancaked stack of wall-leaning mattresses. When the barrettes spied me standing in the doorway, they stopped and stared.

Gray outside light mixed with the harsh yellow from the hall’s single naked bulb.

“Hey,” I said to my two neighbors-to-be.
“Hey t’you,” the taller one replied.

I looked the girls over. The taller one—the one as skinny as a hat rack and black as soot—had a double row of short white teeth. She, the tallish girl, was almost as tall as Mama. The other, the milk-chocolate-skinned one, was bulldog-ish, from her wide face and flat broad nose down to her squat torso and stubby arms and legs. Both girls had plump-cherry lips and hair done up pickaninny style with a dozen or so sections parted, like tilled rows of farmland within which short shrubs of steel-wool were gathered then plaited and rubber-banded and clamped at the ends with an assortment of those butterfly-shaped barrettes I’d seen.

“Got eight cents?” I asked them.

The girls looked me over as long and as hard as I’d looked at them. The tallish
one asked, “You Injun or sompin’?”

“Nah, I ain’t no Injun.”

“What are you then?”

“I’m Negro like y’all.”

The tall and the squat one looked at each other and broke down laughing, as if what I’d said was the funniest thing they’d ever heard. Through snorts, the tallish girl giggled, “Wit’ that high yella’ skin and straight-curly hair, you ain’ no Negro. Lookit them skinny lips of yoa’s.”

“Say it agin’ and I’ll punch you,” I said without thinking.

The two girls stopped giggling. When they looked at each other, serious, I knew I was in for it. I was about to get jumped, get whipped, right there in the doorway of my apartment. Instead, the tallish one, digging deep into her dungaree-ed front pocket, came up with a shiny dime squeezed between the thumb and knuckle of her forefinger. “Ain’ got eight cents,” she said, then flipped the coin my way. **Holy Mary!** I thought, **How’s that for luck?**

That same morning, I introduced the two to the I Street alley. Not long after, I dragged them and Cookie to the J Street Market where I purchased *Iron Man!* and a cluster of black-licorice sticks that the four of us shared. The tall one, Darlyn, was eleven. She took to me immediately. Sondra, nine, took to me too. Within hours, the four of us were playing. Within days we were wrestling and tagging in the I Street alley, hiding-and-seeking in closets and under beds. Much of our play took place beneath the kitchen table with adapted-for-four fantasies of Superman rescuing Lois Lane triplets.

It was beneath that table that it happened one night. During a daring rescue of those three damsels in distress, Darlyn exclaimed, “You saved me Superman!” and kissed me full and long on the lips. I mean, Darlyn really let me have it. I remember chapped lips and her syrupy, clear-tasting spit in my mouth. Then Sondra took her turn. During those long seconds of smooching, I wasn’t sure if I should say or do something. So I just took it. Cookie, puzzled by this turn of events, turned and ran, screaming, “I’m a tell Mama!” The three of us tore off after her, shouting, “We gonna git you!” and kissing devolved into a game of let’s-catch-Cookie.

I didn’t think much about those kisses until they happened again. Then I contemplated how best to exclude Cookie from our play. Darlyn, meanwhile, had shed her damsel-in-distress role, trading it in for a sooty-sexy Wonder Woman routine during which she led Sondra and me into new and exciting adventures. It occurred to me that she had done this before—kissing, I mean. But I was no innocent. There had been occasions—after an especially difficult rescue, for example—when I’d grabbed Cookie and kissed her the same way Clark Kent kissed a surprised Lois Lane under the mistletoe at the *Daily Planet’s* Christmas party. Cookie, I think now, considered our kiss, but not Darlyn and Sondra’s, a
natural conclusion to a rescue.

Lip kisses turned to tongue kissing. As we grew more daring we grew more circumspect too, looking for opportunities to kiss when our mamas and Cookie were napping or grocery shopping. Next came dry-humping and it was Darlyn, not me, who decided to take it out and put it in.

“Nicky, stop moving.”

“Owww! It hurt when you bend it like that.”

“Wait a secon’!” Darlyn cried. After sitting her Ka-Boom on my Shazzam, she moved her bony hips until Sondra, with an “It’s my turn,” pushed her sister aside.

By this point, our play was off-limits to Cookie. When she sulked and circled us, I hissed “Beat it.” When my sister complained, Mama shooed her, “Outchoo-go.”

Left alone, Darlyn, Sondra, and I romped under our cotton sheets where we, with grubby fingers and nails, swiftly shed our clothing, reveling in trapped-in odors of ammoniac sweat and hot bubblegum breath, of sneaker feet and soft farts, touching and feeling with fingers and lips, arms and flanks thrashing and flailing; then, as abrupt as we began, jumping up and throwing on our musky garments as fast as we’d discarded them.

I told myself we were doing nothing wrong. Adventuring, is all. And, truthfully, there wasn’t much to it, certainly not as much as the schoolyard talk had led me to believe there would be. There was no falling in love or birthing of babies, no searing rages or bloody jealousies. There were not even groans of pain or moans of pleasure. The only sounds I recall are workmanlike instructions to “kiss this,” “lick that,” “lay here,” “push there,” “no, like this, not like that,” and so on.

Still, I was aware from the beginning, back when Cookie ran off yelling “I’ma tell!” that I did not want Mama to know what we were doing. As our antics continued, I began to feel a general anxiety about the prospect of getting caught. It even crossed my mind that we were committing a sin against the Church and God Himself. But I told myself we could do it, because Mama did. If I was a sinner, Mama was a sinner too. Not only had I heard her, I had crept in her bedroom and smelled it—sex—a moist, cloying odor. Maybe this was my excuse for having sex, too.

When our front door came alive one night with an explosion of knuckle knocking, it moved me from one level of exploration to the next. It was January of 1964 and every radio station in the city seemed to be spinning back-to-back Beatles. Months of more-than-kissing Darlyn and Sondra had done nothing to
dampen my curiosity about sex. If anything, I was more curious than ever. I needed to see for myself what Mama was doing.

It was black o’clock in the morning when I awoke to the banging at the front door. After Mama moved sleeping Cookie from her room to mine, the door lock turned and Daddy’s voice moved with hers through the apartment. We hadn’t seen him in months.

I eased my door open to furious dancing sounds coming from Mama’s shut bedroom—shoeless shuffling, dry-leather scuffling. Telling myself to Do it, do it, I shouldered the door and put my eye to the line of light.

They were in profile, Daddy’s crooked smile pulled down in what I recognized as a drunken grimace; Mama’s back against the wall, arms extended, her thin palm, fingers spread, against Daddy’s broad chest. She managed to tear away. Free hand tucking a loose strand of hair behind an ivory ear, she whispered, “Earl. Please. Calm. Down.”

When Mama put those words on Daddy, he shot back in one long slur, “Oh-I-gotta-beg-for-it-now?” His face was as hungry looking as the hungry sounding voices. Body lean and strong, he was a tan Lex Luthor.

“Come back tomorrow an’ we’ll talk. An’ you can spen’ time wit’ th’ kids, too.”

“Yeah, and I’m a dumb nigger,” puffed Lex Luthor with Daddy’s crooked smile. He folded his arms around her and they toppled to the bed.

What I remember from that night are Mama’s eyes fixed in a glare of sad terror. Her pleading, “We can’t, the children—” then lying motionless as her face began to jerk and twitch the way Cookie’s did when she was about to cry. Her mouth opening in a small, round, hopeless expression, then stretching wider as if to yawn, and when Daddy’s hand clapped over the yawn, Mama’s eyes growing huge, platter-like, like some wrestled-down calf about to be branded; and me feeling sick to my stomach. I did not understand the black dots dancing before my eyes, why thunder and lightning raged in my brain. I came-to with Mama bending over me wailing, “Wake up, baby—” tears in her eyes, me startled by the smell of fresh urine and warm wetness in my Fruit of the Looms. And seeing Daddy’s face, not Lex Luthor’s, behind Mama wearing a wrinkled look, as if to say, “What kind of boy faints and pisses hisself?”

At seven, I did not know my father well. I did not know my father and mother had been tenth graders at McKinley High School when they’d met in September of 1955—she sixteen, him not quite. I did not know Mama had become pregnant with me two months after, or that Dad had falsified his birth certificate in early ’56 to join the Army, to support his future wife and unborn child (the paratroopers, because they paid a dollar extra per day). I did not know my parents were children of sixteen when I was born. By all accounts, that boy who would
become my father was someone I have never laid eyes on: a loving, thoughtful, committed boy-man who put the welfare of his child and bride-to-be before his own. A model soon-to-be dad.

When Dad returned from paratrooper training, he accused Mama of having an affair with his army buddy, their next-door neighbor. He told me later that he’d beat her then because she’d cheated on him. He’d beat her later, because, separated or not, she was still his wife and she was still cheating. “He hits me cause he can’t find work, and cause I won’t go back wit’ him,” Mama told her mama, Grandma Alvarez.

My father, Earl Robinson, was a proud second-generation Washingtonian. He and his father, Preston, had seen D.C. grow, change: They’d seen the spectacle of tens of thousands of Negroes tumbling into our nation’s capital from The Deep South, only to find the same Whites Only signs, the same historical terrorizing of brownness. Dad’s disciplinarian father was the product of his up-from-the-South-but-no-longer-hopeful street-walking Negro mama and one of her regular johns, a slick Italian import. My father’s mother, Grandma Robinson, had shared the family history with Cookie and me: Granddad had left her and their passel when Dad was just a boy, too.

My father loved us, his two children, I want to believe. He would have been eaten up by love, and by rage as, undereducated and unemployed, he faced the prospect of plunging through life choiceless while wrestling with the legacy of his father and his never-known father’s father. As I think back on Dad drunkenly pounding our door, I imagine him grown to hate every living soul in America including us, his kids whom he could not feed or clothe, and who despised and loved him, too.

Awakened by Dad’s pounding, Mama must’ve known that if she let him in, she was in for it. But she flung the front door open. The day after Dad’s rampages, we’d sometimes head out for a family walk. At the end of the walks Mama would sit us down and walk away. She might or might not swallow a fistful of pills. When she did, she’d be hauled off to D.C. General, the poor folk’s hospital. Someone would take notice of Cookie and me and they’d call the cops, who’d drop us off at 57 Randolph Place. (Grandma Alvarez’s address was a scar on my brain. She hated me, because I wasn’t white, like her. In my desire for clear heroes and bad guys, I felt hatred for her, also—alongside my hatred for those Royal Ass Whippin’s she delivered.) Within weeks Mama would bus herself back home to I Street, damaged but on-mend. She’d call Grandma, who’d bus us home, too.

I watched my mother collapse under all th’ providin’ she had to do. Raising two young children, alone and sick, diagnosed unfit for her typing job at the Navy Yard. As inevitable as rainfall—three or four times a month—I marched with her across the street to Saint Paul’s; sat with her in the gloomy womb of

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the chapel looking up at the crucified body of Christ, looking at anything but her as she apologized, “I shouldn’ be askin’ agin so soon—,” then begged young Father Patrick for food or hand-me-downs or a spare dollar bill or two.

Mama, Cookie, and I all went about our business that morning after Daddy’s visit. I knew from the marks on Mama’s face and throat that I had not been dreaming; I had not been dreaming because Mama was in her familiar fugue-like state. In an after-haze of my own, I tried to identify the feeling following me around. It was shame, I know now. I was *shamed* that I’d stood, watching, as Daddy hurt Mama.

I tried to put that feeling out of mind. What I could not forget, what I could not figure out was Daddy calling himself “A dumb nigger.” Mama always said Daddy was “Too smart fo’ his own good.” But since he had called himself a dumb nigger, I couldn’t but wonder back then if that made me a dumb nigger, too.

That very night the world shifted. Mama stubbed out her Salem Light that night and shuffled off to bed. She didn’t mention dinner. After Cookie and I choked down our choke sandwiches, Cookie wandered off to bed, too. And I had the apartment to myself.

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Cookie is spitting little sleeping sounds. Mama’s breathing is soft and regular. Darlyn’s knock at the door is a caress. Truth be told, I had long since given myself up to those two sisters, Darlyn and Sondra, as one does to the warmth of a hot bath. This night we three convene under the sheet-covered kitchen table, our bodies splayed, an oval of flesh.

“Nicky, lie between Sondra’s legs. Open yoa’s.”

“It’s uncomf-table.”

“Lay yer head on her leg while you do it. Like on a pilla’.”

Mama snatches away our cotton walls. In the brittle silence she stands, examining us. “Y’all get out from unda’ thea,” she whispers. As we scramble for shirt-skirt-pants, Mama looks at me as if she has never before seen me; Darlyn and Sondra scuttle out the front door; Mama—pulling pants over slip, shoes over bare feet, coat over bra—mumbles, “Get dressed, we walkin’.” When I hesitate, she shrieks, “Get movin’!”

Without intending to, I shout back, “Me an’ Cookie ain’ goin’ on no more fam’ly walks!” The words radiate in the open brittle space—the way I said them to Mama, the fact that I said them. I could not have taken such a chance if I’d known then what I know now: that Mama, thereafter, would never again live with Cookie and me.
The next day the bells of Saint Paul’s pound me awake, I yawn, still sleepy, real-
ize it is morning, Mama is not back from her walk without us, I wait, though I
know she does not come home from walks so soon, I wait and know that we
cannot stay at 321 I. Peanut butter on dry bread. Milk sour. “Come on, 
Cookie.” 57 Randolph Place Northwest is the address—Grandma’s house. We
have walked with Mama the three miles to Grandma’s before, it’s one long 
zigzag, I can find it, can find Grandma. Cookie and I quit 321, we warm as we 
walk, down I Street, right on the next block, What’s that sign say? Third Street,
“Cookie, hold my hand. An’ don’ be no crybaby!” across Virginia Avenue, un-
der the freeway, past Garfield Park, across E Street, there’s the liver-colored 
brick of our school, Saint Peter’s. School’s starting. “Run Cookie. Don’t let ’em 
see us!”

I remember growing up with Mama and her jawing at thin air.
“Who you talkin’ to Mama?”
“To th’ angels, baby,” as if they were plain as a doorknob.
Those were times Mama hardly got up from bed, barely bathed and cooked, 
rarely talked—to us, at least; I liked when we started getting the monthly dis-
ability checks, I cashed them at the J Street Market, bought food. I did not like 
Mama swallowing pills, I did not like Mama at D.C. General. I liked when we 
were all home again, even if Mama was still sick; sick Mama had moods, 
personalities, we knew them: the frantic one, who took us on family walks, the 
sexy-flirty one, who got ready for the visiting-voices, the weeping one, the wail-
ing, the constantly sleeping, the calm one preparing creamed eggs, the Mama 
broken after Daddy’s visit. Cookie and I lived with all of Mama’s selves.

We cross North Carolina Avenue, still a ways to go, the wind whistles as we 
dash across Pennsylvania then Constitution, string-straight avenues populated 
by banks and blocky federal buildings, the neighborhood is changing, from Ne-
gro to white, almost all white, a Negro or three mixed in, like the odd dark 
kernel on a pale cob of corn. The uniform is suits, suits marching all around 
us, uh-oh, a suit asking; “No! We don’ need no help, Mama waitin’ across th’ 
street.” We run, walk, turn left on Massachusetts Avenue, close on marbled 
Union Station, flags whipping and flapping in the wind, Cookie does not cry.
“I’m cold, Nicky.”
“We gettin’ closer.”

Here is the white dome, Our Nation’s Capitol they call it on Channel 5; the 
city does not feel this day like our nation, turn right, walking up North Capitol 
Street, getting closer to Grandma’s, nowhere to go but Grandma’s, across H 
Street, no more white folk, Negroes everywhere, Negroes gathering outside the 
check-cashing joint, in front of the liquor store, inside of the Gino’s on Florida 
Avenue, is it lunchtime? I’m hungry, I want a Gino’s Giant, a KFC chicken box!
Keep walking, plodding to 57 Randolph.

On this walk, as on our last family walk September past, we start in a measured cadence. As the day wears on and we grow tired, we lean forward, as if by leaning forward we’ll get there quicker; Cookie and me slogging through a black-and-white world altering itself, a comic book world of narrow streets turned wide, squat tenements transformed into tall buildings, whole neighborhoods moving and morphing as we tread-lope-scuttle as the world changes around us, Negro to white and back again, from one variation of ghetto to another, surrounded by faces: smiling faces, thoughtful faces, distracted faces, hard faces, concerned, sad, abject faces not noticing us walking; all things—objects, people, the earth even—rising and flowing past, changing.

On this walk, I notice the people, I mean I notice the difference between people, between the well- and poorly-dressed, the bedraggled, the undernourished living in holes churning with children—all of us dumb niggers is what I think—and the fine people (and when I think fine I do not mean the odd, dark kernels of Negroes), fine folk wearing fine-fitting suits and dresses with fine jewelry at their sleeves and necks and fine-fitting coats and shoes and driving fine cars, and I see those fine people going in and out of their fine homes in their fine communities, and I see the difference between the people who own the fine things and those I now realize are dumb niggers who do not own anything, and I know I have seen all of those people and things before, but I see them, newly, like I was taking a trip back the way I had come, through the same place, seeing the same objects, the same people through a different backward perspective, or maybe that backward perspective was the way I should have seen things from the beginning, perhaps that backward perspective was the only way to look at things; and I see how the fine people look at the dumb niggers but rarely see them, but when they do look and do see them, it is full on, with anger or impatience or with apathy or pleasure or disdain, and I notice, and this is when I get it, in a bright, categorical, unequivocal eruption of insight—I notice how the fine people sometimes look at the dumb niggers but they only begin to look at Cookie and me, and I think back to how they always only began to smile or not smile at white-looking Mama and us, and I suddenly get how their faces changed in the middle of beginning to look and smile/not smile, changed to quizzical or concerned or alarmed, and I re-look in my mind at our little non-nuclear family and I see us anew, maybe the way people have seen us from the start; I see us at a distance—two white kernels with one brown, one nigger with two not—I see our family in a way I never had before; I see our family is mixed; and I re-examine my memories of Mama and her lank, sweat-clustered hair and Mama’s perspiring, astringent face talking to the angels—talking to herself really—teeth gnashing with her pretty slanting eyes wild and her porcelain skin flushed and her swan neck stretched and venous and I know something has not
been right, like those people knew, I know something is wrong.

I think back to Cookie and me left behind by Mama on our last family walk, alone and sitting on the curb, and people not seeing us until a policeman did, and him asking, and me answering, “I don’ know where Mama at,” and I remember the way he looked at Cookie and me, and I know now that we were something to feel sorry for, I know that I have been innocent, I know I have known no better, I know that, in thinking we could tumble about the earth scot-free, I have been gullible, childishly simple, frankly naïve. I remember looking into the mirror after being dropped at Grandma’s following that last family walk and I see now in my mind a magnification of Cookie’s and my dusty, tear-streaked faces and our uncombed hair and passed-down clothing, and I know I do not want us to be almost looked at, or, when we are looked at full on, I do not want us to be looked at in that pathetic way, I do not want to be pathetic anymore, I do not want us—not light-bright-damn-near-white Mama and Cookie nor butterscotch-brown me—to be dumb niggers, and I realize that I have been afraid, more afraid of the future than of the present or the past; afraid of that almost-look, which is why the night Mama caught me and Darlyn and Sondra naked, when she told me to “Get movin’!” I was astonished when my mouth opened and out came “I ain’ goin’ on no more fam’ly walks,” but then I begged, “Mama, don’ leave,” because I was terrified of Mama abandoning us again, but Mama left and I did not know until she did that I was actually less afraid of being left behind than I was afraid of going with Mama.

Sometime in the far-flung future, I will see that my mother had been ill—in the mind, as they say—since before I could remember. During our aimless wanderings, I became aware, in a real and personal way, of an ongoing struggle for humanity, a struggle I’d only caught glimpses of in black and white television images of riot and suffering and murder. Laid over humanity, I will know, is the idea of race, which carries a weight in this world, an asperity that bore down my ancestors, and, in its many manifestations, helped crush my father and mother, and could also crush me.

Across Florida Avenue, we trudge. I do not want to go to Grandma’s, but Mama is gone and Cookie and I are rootless, three more blocks, we walk, dodder, lurch along, in step with nothing and no one: Q Street, Quincy Place, R Street, maybe Grandma is not home, Grandma is always at home, there it is, Randolph Place! Turn left on Randolph. I see number 13. One foot after the other. “Cookie, we almost thea’.” Now 27. Hungry. The sun flays. 43. I wonder where Mama is. I wonder, Am I to blame? Here we are. 57. I put my knuckles to Grandma’s door.