

Item "i"

Henry Alley

In 1956, our night neighborhood in Seattle was filled with a street of children who enjoyed hiding and screaming and making noise, until the last blue streaks of the sky were gone, and we were sent inside. We loved playing pranks and tormenting the one neighbor on the block who was known to call the cops every time we stepped on her lawn. A huge madrona drooped over it, and one evening, for example, the almost-grown boy from the alleyway took a bullwhip, and, hiding in the bushes, pecked at the leaves, causing them to rain mysteriously down each moment she came to her latticed window. I never got in there but I loved watching and egging on those who had the nerve to make her life miserable. One night, some of us dared little Murray, who later grew up to be a researcher, to go up to her door, ring the bell, and pull his pants down. Murray, who was terribly spoiled and wore hateful Alpine shorts which his devoted mother had bought for him in Europe, promptly went up and, getting the neighbor to come to the door, exposed himself. We, who were hidden in her rocky, made silent screaming motions in each other's direction, unable to contain our happiness.

On this particular evening in April, the tormentable neighbor was gone, and so we found ourselves, momentarily, with nothing to do. The vast spring shadows of the violet madrona tree were covering us now, and I remember, in an exact moment, how Michael came running off his darkened porch, saying, "Hey, guys, great news, Nat King Cole got beat up!"

"He got beat up," I remember saying. "Great! How?"

"He was down singing in the South, and some guys ran through the audience, jumped up from the orchestra and beat the living tar out of him. So then he disappears for a while, and then comes back and mumbles into the microphone, 'I was born on St. Patrick's Day, 1919, in Montgomery, Alabama. I just wanted to be here and sing for you.'"

"He just wanted to sing for them, too bad, too bad."

Actually there are several stories on record about what actually happened. In Birmingham, where it took place, Nat was singing before an all-white audience, and a coalition of four white men—dedicated to wiping out the influence of black and "bebop" music—decided to storm the stage. Originally they had been planning that hundreds would show up at the theater. Instead, it was just six; two others were waiting in a car outside. One man jumped up, knocked Nat down so hard he fell back into a piano bench, splintering it to pieces, and then the hoodlum started twisting his foot. Policemen, warned that there might be trouble, ran in, and one of them freed Nat, clubbed his tormentor with a nightstick, who retaliated by smashing him in the nose. When Nat disappeared backstage after the four were arrested, he said he could not go back on. When the white audience was told this, someone in the front row said, "Tell him to come back out so we can apologize." When Nat finally did show, they gave him a standing ovation. That's when his "I was born" speech arrived. Later, Nat did the full concert for the black audience. He was checked over by a doctor and found to be sound as a church.

All of this is a vivid part of my memory, because, since coming out as gay, I have been bashed myself.

"Great that he got what was coming to him!" I yelled.

"Let's do it ourselves," Michael said.

"What do you mean?"

"Let's play like we're Alabama. I'll be Nat and the rest of you be the four guys, and Murray will be the police."

Murray, the eventual researcher, went out in search of an imitation nightstick.

I was to be one of the hoods.

We used Michael's porch as the Birmingham stage.

Michael, with his flare for mimicry, immediately started singing "Mona Lisa" from the top of his stairs. He put such a throbbing vamp into it, we all burst out laughing. He even tried looking like Mona Lisa at one point of the song, draping his black coat over his head, so it looked like a hood. That did it for us. Roaring up the steps, we all tackled him, and Murray, the policeman, hit me on the head with a broom handle he'd found in the vacant lot. Michael wound up with a bloody nose—worse than anything Nat ever got—and I ended up being knocked unconscious for a few minutes. It wouldn't be the last time a budding researcher would have something to do with darkening my mind.

Our parents were furious with us afterwards, because we had ruined our clothes. Michael hadn't told us the steps had been freshly painted earlier that afternoon. White wash white.

My family lived as a small Southern transplantation in Seattle. My father, hailing out of southeast Missouri, was a traveling window trimmings salesman whose home office was back in Birmingham, Alabama. He could, just as well, have been selling Bibles. My mother was a Southern belle out of Tulsa, with a soft accent and a mesmerizing coiffure. The word "nigger" was alive and well in our house, and was bandied about like a favorite, talismanic tennis ball. My father, during his sojourn in St. Louis, had worked for Tennessee Williams' father, C.C., and liked to talk tirelessly of him, in full-blown imitation of the Southern voice, creating little Erskine Caldwell vignettes. When, every now and then, one of Tennessee's plays or film adaptations would show, Mom and Dad would do a night out, coming home with enticing hints of what they had seen—a woman in a slip, a bare-chested man with a tattoo—and saying, "It was Southern, very Southern." In my mind, it was a world of scandalous black and white.

They had been delighted as we had been that Nat King Cole had been beat up—for after all, what was a black man doing on a white stage in the first place? The "bebop" conspiracy they dismissed, because by this time, myself, Murray, and Michael were all fans of Little Richard and the Coasters, and our parents were more or less resigned to hearing their music in our rooms, night and day.

The next morning you could feel the change that the beating had caused—both in us and our city. Racism was given an extra edge, as if we could anticipate, for example, the light sentences the men would be given in the Alabama courtroom 2000 miles away. On the walk to school, though, I had a moment—I was crossing through the alleyway which saved me a full ten minutes—when I saw the back of the house where the kid with the bullwhip lived. The passageway was still lined with the rains we had been having, and the fences all accentuated the huge, spangled rose bushes. I had a sense, as I was standing there, watching the blue sky roll, in reflection, over an oiled puddle, of being a sideliners and coward, that what I had said and done last night—my head still ached—had not been myself at all. The wind was rattling me as it was rattling the forsythia in the back of Bobby the Bullwhip's house, and I remembered a time, in summer, when I had deliberately sauntered through here, when the hollyhocks, maroon and yellow, were crackling in the cement-cracking heat, because I knew that Bobby was likely to be out back with his shirt off, showing off his tan as though it were an expensive, tightly tailored sealskin. He had been there all right. He had

been even a little sweaty, and his muscles had the gloss of an oil painting. He was so dark, he was almost black. Admitting this to myself at this moment opened a window into my history with Nat King Cole, a man I had loved and admired ever since I could remember. My grown sister had even bought me, as a birthday present, a 78 rpm set of *King Cole for Kids*, with a crowned cartoon figure of the king himself playing on the cover—but instead of a piano he was leaning over an ice cream sandwich, three-stripe Neopolitan— with his bass player plucking at the top of an all-day sucker, which looked lemon or lemon/lime. Capitol Records (purple dome on the label) had turned whimsical. My favorite was the song about magic words, "Kee-Mo, Ky-Mo." The shame over the almost naked Bobby and my "he got beat up—great!" came over me almost simultaneously.

The end of the alleyway brought me to Hawthorne, my elementary school just a year ago. I wished to be back there. My sixth grade teacher, Mr. Franklin, had taught us all our subjects in a portable for the entire year. He was a man with a thunderous brow but a smiling face—a man who was lean and dapper with a mustache—and, I acknowledged now, was black. Of course Mr. Franklin was Negro. I just never considered it much. He did, in fact, look like Nat King Cole. As I saw the familiar portable at a distance, white in the spring sun, with the rain making it look like a block of quartz, I had the strongest desire to run in there—he was always at his desk by 7:30 in the morning—and confess. To what I wasn't exactly sure. Maybe I just wanted to see him again, and be in the presence of the Rock, as we used to call him, and because I was desperately nostalgic for my grade school years, which seemed, at this point, centuries away. And now Mr. Franklin was black and so was Nat King Cole.

I got into Seward Junior High about 7:20, and with the Nat Cole news flying around, already I could hear the students getting geared up for the Project Kids to arrive. It happened every morning anyway. There was a kind of electric wave up and down the hall. The Project Kids were from Fort Lawton just about five miles away, and some of them were black. Through the glass entrance, I watched the stairs where I had come in; there were accents of rhododendrons, pink flowering, all the way up to the top, with blue jays flying into the dark-green leaves. An orange bus was pulling up, and five boys, including Michael, were yelling—

"Projects, Projects are here."

And as two of the black boys, Quentin and Ronald, descended the steps, the group chanted, "Mammy's little babies love shortenin, shortenin, Mammy's little babies love shortenin bread."

The two boys, who were brothers, pushed past us, and, sun-struck from behind, appeared as though they were ready to be rocketed out of a cannon. They also looked extremely handsome. At church, they were friends of mine.

In first period science, Mr. Colt, who was known as a "cool head," even though he was a teacher, had caught the drift all the way from Alabama. And from the hallway. He distributed the quiz sheets, which were on classifying animals by genus and phylum, and as one of the items, he had put the name of Quentin Hudson, who sat behind me. Here was a full list of sea creatures which we had, in fact, encountered on our field trip to the beach, and there, added apparently for fun, was the name of the boy I had seen every day for twenty weeks. Stealing a glance behind me, I saw that he was cowering behind his desk. The other students were laughing as each of them read down the list at a different pace and caught the name at last. Mr. Colt, blondish and stylishly balding in his attempted crew cut, just smiled in his bronze suit and said, "Let's not have any noise while everyone's trying to concentrate."

"But, Mr. Colt," Michael called out from the back—and never before, it seemed to me, had his face seemed more puggish—"this quiz is unfair."

"Why is that, Michael?" Mr. Colt asked.

"Because who in the world can classify Quentin Hudson?"

The class went into a roar.

"It's not fair," Quentin said in tears, "it's not fair that you laugh. Nobody else's name is on this quiz."

"You're just lucky you're here," somebody else called out, "and not in Alabama!"

"Sing for us, Nat!"

"Now that's enough," Mr. Colt said. "Just remember, Quentin, we're laughing with you, not at you. And everybody," he went on, raising his voice, "I want you to cross out item 'i.' Just forget it's there."

Once again, faces were bent toward the paper in front of them. The April sun came out again, and toiled in the room. Quentin wiped his eyes and finished just half of his quiz the way he always did.

My mind struggled with the easy questions. But the crustaceans and the mollusks were all crushed together. On the field trip, our walk had been beneath the sheer bluffs, with the marvelous madronas hanging over, this time in droves, and when, separated at last from Michael and his friends, I had sat beside a tide pool alone, and drawn up the slate-black shell that would become a part of my identifying collection. I looked up from the mobile life in the water; I saw Quentin and his brother sitting on a log by themselves, pulling at the sea grass and fixing their eyes on the sand. I had been too aware of my friends to go up and say something. Had I been at church, where Quentin, Ronald, and I were in the Youth Education program, I wouldn't have hesitated for a second. In fact, we sang "Do Lord" together and "Pray the Clouds Away."

I was Mr. Colt's pet because of my grades, and so all the quizzes were passed to me, as monitor. I was always excused from the next lesson and I went to one of the long lab tables at the back and on the mirrored surface, struggled over the key I had been handed. It was, as usual, in red ink. This was an operation which gave me plenty of time to cheat on my own quiz if I ever fell short of an "A," but today I felt rattled by the ditto sheets, with the windows and table flashing my face back at me.

Item "i," not crossed out by many, had a space filled with comments like, "That's a good question!" or "monkey" or "gorilla" or "Nat King Cole." Quentin's quiz showed item "i" marked out not only in pencil but in pen. At the bottom of the sheet, he had written, "You are wrong!" Meanwhile, as the cadet—someone as brazen as Mr. Colt himself—took over, I saw Mr. Colt talking to our Language Arts teacher/school counselor, Miss Phiffer, at the front door. Her profile was a favorite in our boy's room graffiti. Her breasts were usually made a burlesque 38. For some reason, she was motioning towards me, blonde and lovely in the parted hall light.

I felt important as I followed her to the main office, having left my quiz project on the lab table. I wondered, for a moment, if I had won an award for the poem I had written a few months before and submitted through one of her contests. I had been inspired by reading *Julius Caesar* in her class last semester, especially when Brutus bares his breast for Cassius and insists on how much he loves him. I imagined that happening in a white toga tent, with a lamp swinging and their Roman muscles, in shadow, on silken walls. My poem, however, had not been about this at all. It had been a grand discourse on "Duty."

In one of the counseling rooms at the back, she showed me a chair, and said, "I just need to talk to you about one of your tests."

"You mean one of my grammar tests last semester?" I asked disingenuously. I knew what was coming.

"No, one of your personal profiles. The head reviewer was a bit upset by one of the questions you answered, and we just wanted to be sure that you meant what you marked."

"Which question was that?"

"That you are 'sometimes' attracted to boys."

I didn't know what to say. It was clear, now, why Miss Phiffer had not spoken a word to me as we had gone down the hall. In fact, she hadn't since I had done the profile last semester. Meanwhile, I could hear the bell going off, as well as the race in all parts of the building which told me that second period was at hand. All I could see was the stylish cut of her D.A. and the dimples she was making to put me at ease.

"I'm not sure," I answered at last. "Inside the locker room or outside the locker room?"

Believe it or not, she wrote that down.

"Just in the locker room?" she asked.

"Just in the locker room. I'm a towel boy"

All of this was rushing out of me like the creatures out of the tide pools. Orange crabs and rainbow sea urchins and snail-slow starfish the color of sunsets.

"The reviewer will not be happy to hear this," she said. "He'll be quite upset."

Again, I couldn't answer.

She smiled again. "Let's try this from a different angle." And she pulled out a Rorschach-like ink block, which held a Mona-Lisa-like figure in it, in a black gown, all dolled up the way Lana Turner was for Fernando Lamas in *The Merry Widow*.

"Most boys when they see this," she told me, "see a ship. Most girls see a dress. Now what do you see?" She smiled, prompting. "I don't see a dress," I said. "Good," she said. "I see a gown."

After remaining absolutely still for a moment, she dismissed me with a wave of her hand and a pink admit slip into the next period.

Later that afternoon, on the way home, I couldn't help but stop outside Mr. Franklin's portable. The playground area which sloped below was quiet, the straps on the tetherball poles hanging free, flying every now and then in the breeze and coming back to rest. I remembered how, in sixth grade, my girlfriend had been able to beat me at every single sport we ever tried together, even that girl's game, tetherball. And I felt sure that if she ever looked into the blackness of that inkblot, she would see not only a ship but a fantastic clipper or, even better, an aircraft carrier. My drooping jeans felt like skirts, as I went up Mr. Franklin's bare-board steps, and I imagined myself as some kind of snail (of unknown gender) pulling itself out of a tide pool and slithering out on to a greened-over rock.

I knocked. Things had gotten so much more complicated since sixth grade.

"Why, Nathan," Mr. Franklin said, coming to the door. "You don't have to knock. Whatever brought you here?"

"I don't know," I said, hanging my head. "I just wanted to come in."

Mr. Franklin was in his shirtsleeves, and without his usual sports jacket, he looked even more like a "cat" than ever. He had marvelous sapphire cufflinks. "Well, then, come in and sit down. Looks like you have something that's troubling you."

I sat down at my old desk, in the front row.

"I wish I was back here, Mr. Franklin. I wish I could just sit here, and when

I talked out of turn, the way I sometimes did, I'd have to do my multiplication tables, elevens through twenties."

He smiled, like he had heard this many times before. "Nathan, it's just part of life that we grow up. That we have to graduate from grade school to Junior High. Don't you remember that great ceremony we had here, when we had a dance and punch—the first dance the school's ever had—and we promoted you out of here. What would that have meant if—"

"Today, in Mr. Colt's science class, he made fun of Quentin Hudson, right in front of everybody."

Mr. Franklin made himself sit down. I realize now it would have been easier for him if he had known me to be the kind of kid to exaggerate or lie. Although cheating was part of my life now, to him I had never distorted the truth.

"How did he make fun of Quentin?" Mr. Franklin asked. "I know the family."

"He made us categorize him"—the first time I can ever remember using that word—"or he was going to, before he crossed it out, but he put Quentin's name on a quiz along with the mollusks and crustaceans, like he was some animal. And then I corrected the quizzes"—and I felt like an accomplice as I said this—"and most of the kids didn't cross his name out but wrote down all kinds of mean things."

Mr. Franklin's face had gone into its Rock pose. "You know you can expect more of this, Nathan. You know that. More of it will happen."

"That's why I want to come back here." I said. For I was sure that here I would not be asked if I liked boys or whether I saw gowns or ships in black inkblots.

He came up and squeezed my shoulder. "All right, Nathan, my man, I'll look into it. Tomorrow. We'll get to the bottom of it."

"Thank you, Mr. Franklin," I answered, energized by his touch.

At home, my Southern mother was put out with me for getting in so soon. She had an idea that if I ran with the boys after school, I would end up much more of a man in the future and not keep flunking the President's Physical Fitness Program. She didn't like me hanging around watching television or following at her heels, absorbing her womanly mannerisms, which were many. I was a little in terror that the school counselor might have called her by now, but evidently not.

So I went to my room and let her roam; she was making a dainty clattering as she moved from house plant to house plant with her elegant watering can, painted with tulips. Against these sounds, I took out *King Cole for Kids* and put on "Kee Mo Ky Mo" and then "Long Tall Sally" by Little Richard. For the first time, I noticed that the cartoon combo on Nat's album was white instead of black. And it wouldn't be long before Pat Boone would try to deck Long Tall Sally out in white bucks and a collegiate blazer. My memory of my year with Mr. Franklin was coming back vividly, and I remembered an incident where Mr. Carelton, our principal at Hawthorne, had suddenly called all the sixth grade boys to the auditorium and, having said, "This is no picnic, so stop the horseplay," went on to state, "I just heard that one of you just used the word 'nigger.' That's not a word we use here. Any boy caught saying that will be suspended. This is a place where we show respect for all, including people like Mr. Franklin. Suppose he had heard someone say that."

Finally I was called down to dinner. Instead of phoning home, Miss Phiffer had gone to the trouble of calling my father at his office.

"So," he said, "I hear you like boys and are seeing gowns. What do you want to do?" he asked. "End up like Tennessee Williams?"

"He could do worse." Michelle, my sister, said. "He's not doing so bad at the box office."

"You're going to end up being called Miss Nancy like Tennessee was back home," he said, ignoring my sister and looking straight at me. "C.C. his father couldn't do anything with him. He'd put him to work back in the shoe sample room in International Shoes, and he'd flirt with the boys right and left."

"I was just answering a test," I said. "They asked me to tell the truth." We were eating beneath an orange 1950s chandelier. The kind where each light looks like a burnished sumac cone, and can be turned off and on by twisting the stem. My mother had fallen, hook, line, and sinker, for General Electric's recent promotion on soft lighting—pink bulbs are flattering to the complexion. Now she said, under the halo, "It's because you don't run with the boys after school. If you ran with the boys, you wouldn't be seeing gowns where you should be seeing ships. That's what your dad told me. Imagine, a son of mine seeing a gown."

"You're wearing one," Michelle said to her. "That's what I see."

"I'm not running with the boys anymore," I said. "They tease the Project Kids. Not anymore. That's it."

"Aren't those Project Kids niggers?" my father asked.

"Yes," I said. "Some of them."

"Well, that's why they're teasing them."

"This is an absurd conversation," my mother said. "We're supposed to be talking about making a man out of Nathan."

"Horse manure," Michelle said. "You're the one who's making absurd conversation."

"I'll thank you to stay out of this," my father told her. "You're not entitled to an opinion at this table. Remember you're back here because you had no other place to go."

(Michelle had been run out of town for being a lesbian, I was to learn later. She had been the celebrated Story Lady on KSEA TV, which had fired her.)

"Ladies do not use the word 'horse manure,'" my mother said.

"Excuse me," Michelle retorted. "I meant 'horse shit.'"

"Mr. Franklin's a Negro," I said. "I wouldn't tease him. So why would I tease the Project Kids?"

"Mr. Franklin is a Negro," my father said. "He's not a nigger. Can't you tell the difference?"

"What about Nat King Cole?" I asked. "Negro or nigger?"

"Negro, of course," my mother said. "He sings 'Mona Lisa.'"

"We're getting off the subject," my father said. "What we're saying is—you need to hang out with the boys more, so you're not seeing gowns. Go to the baseball diamond after school. Hang around the sandlots. Get some sun, too. You look pretty white."

"The sandlots are where all the fights are," I said.

"Well, fight then. Back when I was growing up, you had to fight to go to school."

This conversation made me feel light-headed. I wondered what my family would do if they learned I had ratted on Mr. Colt for targeting Quentin. Next morning, I was as tense as a violin all through science period and I looked in Mr. Colt's direction to see if there were any signs of anger. Nothing. I knew the acid test would come during activity period, when I would have to come back and finish marking the quizzes I had left undone. Today was Lab Practical day when we would be making hydrogen from copper filings, so I would

not be excused. I looked over at Quentin's desk and saw that he had not come in. Maybe Mr. Franklin had spoken to the family and told them to keep him home. Suddenly I felt lost without Quentin, because I knew, on instinct, that he would be the only one who would verify what had happened yesterday. All the others would cover for our teacher. As Mr. Colt dropped the metal into a flask and added hydrochloric acid, I snuck over to the monitor drawer just to see if the quizzes were still there. They weren't.

"Nathan, please return to your seat," he said. "The quizzes are gone," he added. "I don't know where they are."

He then placed a balloon over the mouth of the beaker, let it fill with hydrogen (we had to write the formula down), tied it, lit it, to show what had happened to the Hindenburg. The purple flames flew out, in a tame explosion, and were reflected off the window.

At gym, I was told I was no longer Towel Boy, and what was more, there Bobby was, an inconvenient vision, suiting up for ninth grade track team, his beautifully articulated back muscles like the kind you see on carved stone black panthers. He looked as good to me as a showgirl getting ready at Radio City. Who was going to call me in for looking at him like this? Miss Phiffer? Mr. Colt?

It was the end of school at last. I was out of the tortures of gym and free to avoid running with the boys, while still keeping clear of home until dinner.

I would spend most of the time reading comic books at the pharmacy, and then concoct some story about being a winner at the baseball diamond. "Oh, but I'd watch that," Michelle used to kid me, "remember that Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend."

I went to my locker, had trouble with my combination—I was rattled wondering what Mr. Franklin might be doing at this time—but finally took out my Pee Chee. On it, two young white guys were running the hurtles; a sweater gal was turning to her boyfriend who wore a football jersey marked "18."

Up again came the sound, "Mammy's little babies love shortenin, shortenin," as the Project Kids (no Quentin) headed toward the rhododendrons and the orange bus once more. I crossed up toward the office, but just at that moment, out came Mr. Franklin, Mr. Colt, Miss Phiffer, and our principal.

"There he is, right now," Mr. Colt said, "speak of the devil."

Instantly, the hecklers in the hall stopped. The Project Kids were allowed to pass.

"As I said," Miss Phiffer went on, apparently speaking to Mr. Franklin, "this boy's perception cannot be trusted."

All the kids in the hall were still frozen. Michael, Murray, among them. All of us who had done "Mona Lisa" and the beating up of Nat Cole on the Alabama stage. It struck me that Mr. Franklin had been their teacher, too. Michael's face blanched to pure freckles. Bobby just stood there in his trackman's top.

"It's just a little misunderstanding," Mr. Colt said. "Ask any other child in the class. There was nothing to humiliate Quentin on the quiz. Ask Quentin himself."

Mr. Franklin, blue-suited, and severe-looking, turned toward me. Frightened, I was about to confess that I had made a mistake, that I had never seen item "i"—I had made it up—when he said, "What are you folks, anyway? Deaf, dumb, blind?" They stared at him in dismay.

"Didn't you just hear these kids in the hall just as we were coming out?"

The Project students were standing perfectly still at the top of the stairs.

"Those young people up there were being harassed," Mr. Franklin said. "I am in perfect faith," he continued, "that you are covering up something else." I knew he was speaking more than he knew he ought, his shadow filling the hallway of a school he did not belong in. Our black janitor, Mr. Preston (who looked like Preston Foster), had stopped to watch, leaning on his mop, and sweating profusely under his baseball cap. Up through the glass, I could see the bus getting impatient. Quentin's brother hadn't shown either. "I for one intend to get to the bottom of this, because believe me," Mr. Franklin ended, "we haven't."

"What goes on in my classroom," Mr. Colt said, "is my business."

"But evidently you don't know your own business very well, because you can't even locate your own quizzes."

That was his last line, and it was the one that would cost him his job. He nodded at me to follow, and with Murray and Michael and everybody else staring at us, we walked out together.

At the top of the stairs, Michelle, still out of work, was waiting in her purple Nash. Her smile was like its toothy grill. After last night's conversation, she had decided to take pity and rescue me today from having "to run with the boys."

Mr. Franklin, knowing who she was, led me up to car, and then, very carefully, shepherded me in, as though he were shielding some great lady getting into her carriage.