Transfer of Courage  
(1968)

To the teenage boy who had grabbed my hand and pulled me to a secluded place in the park, I said, “I’m no lover.”

“Well, you’re gonna be today,” he commanded, sniffing my neck and squeezing my hip. I squirmed and tried to get away.

He forced me behind high, dense bushes, then pinned me to an ivy-covered stone wall. Fourteen years old that week, I had never before been kissed by a boy.

He moaned, “Desne, Desne, Desne—it’s all I think of,” hoarsely in my ear. I struggled with him. His sweat, his panting and heavy trembling as he rubbed his body hard against me were beyond my experience. I thought he was sick.

I stood frozen, wondering what to do? How to get away? I beat on his back and willed the growing panic from my voice: “If we miss the bus for the camp’s beach trip, we’ll be left here all day with no way to get home. You know it’s true. It’s an all day thing. Is that what you want—to get left?”

He finally released me, and we ran to the caravan of cars already loaded with the kids of the day camp. Dry leaves stuck in my hair. I felt kids’ eyes on me and was ashamed. Everyone must know that I had been in the bushes alone with an urgent boy.

That night, I tucked myself under my mother’s arm and told her I was afraid to face the panting boy again, afraid to return to camp. The two-week session had just started.
My mother, father, and I had battled racial and cultural alienation in lily white Palo Alto, California, for two years, each in our own way. My mother had hoped sending me to a camp in East Palo Alto, for black kids—even for two weeks—would help me regain a sense of belonging.

My mother stroked my shoulder and began her stories. Just the sound of her voice comforted me. A sound like riffs of alto sax, the curling phrases deep and mellow, seemed to rise from her toes.

“It was back in 1950,” Mom started low, “when your father and I were first married and living in Nashville.... Your grandfather was weak from a heart attack, and everyone—including me—was worried sick he’d never recover.... He came to see us in Nashville. Made the trip from Cincinnati. Said he had to. Had to see our new home.... And to top it off, Des, he had a bad, bad case of the flu.” She turned inward for a moment, letting memory wash over her.

“My mind was set on making Papa’s visit memorable. A tour of the impressive old mansions of Andrew Jackson and the rest of them—that was the ticket! You know, Papa and I loved everything old, and a Sunday drive would take a minimum of effort. I bundled him up warm in a coat, tucked a blanket around him, and we headed for the countryside. As we drove off, I reminisced about the Sunday outings of my childhood when we rode in the hearse with a bud vase on the dash.”

My youthful imagination conjured some huge, lush cemetery dotted with mansions when she’d tell the part about finding their way to some gated community of preserved palaces on an expansive semicircular drive.

“The afternoon light was thinning,” Mom continued, “and Papa and I thought we had the place to ourselves. He was shaky and damp with chills from fever, but interested in the imposing columns of Greek Revival and whatever else folks back in the mid-1800s thought was grand.”
My mother’s voice rose, signaling alarm: “All of a sudden, a car bumped the rear of our car.” Her hands made a sharp crack as she clapped them hard. “Then it bumped the side rear of our car. Again and again. This was no accident. My eyes shot back to the rear window to look dead into the faces of two white men in the car behind us, each with a fist hammering into the air.

“‘Niggers! You niggers! Hey, you black niggers! You’re gonna die today, you ugly motherfuckers! You picked the wrong goddamn day t’ be caught out here all alone, you stupidasses!’ one of them yelled out.

“I jerked around to Papa on the seat beside me. He had been a strong and fiercely protective father. But in Nashville—in the South—he was out of his element, and sick on top of it. He was slumping almost into a faint, his face drained of color.”

My mother never mentioned what she and her father must have been thinking. She never had to tell me what they were afraid of. Billie Holiday’s song, Strange Fruit, played on as background music in my head, as it must have in hers and my grandfather’s. I imagined their fear that day of becoming strange fruit hanging from a poplar tree. I saw my grandfather beaten, choking on his own blood, strung up and swinging, eyes bulging, mouth twisted. Castrated. Testicles stuffed in his mouth.

“I can’t let these men kill my father,” was my mother’s refrain. “I can’t let them do it.”

She must have felt me shudder in the circle of her arm because she shifted to another story with seamless timing.
“Papa had once hauled a black man from a neighborhood barber shop into the street to beat him within an inch of his life. You see, Des, I had been on my way home from babysitting and taken a shortcut by the railroad tracks late at night.” She shook her head, acknowledging a teenager’s bad judgment. “From out of nowhere, a man grabbed me from behind, by the hair and neck, and pushed me into a boxcar. Hay needles and dust flew up as he shoved me down. I struggled against him, but couldn’t break away. He hiked up my skirt and tore at my panties. I was losing. I was about to be raped.

“Then it came to me. I quieted as if I were going to let the foul thing happen. I let my body relax and dropped my arms. My attacker relaxed, too. I became aware of our breathing. Huffing, the man raised up enough to unzip his pants and pull out his penis, a fully erect weapon. I was horrified by the sight of it, his snarling face, the power of his body that I couldn’t overcome. As he moved above me, his features would come clear in the open moonlit doorway, then dissolve into the shadows of the dark interior. I compelled myself to slow down, to stay quiet enough in my head to think.

“He was about to bear down hard on my thighs to force me open. With a loaded exhale of breath, I growled in his face like a mad animal and gouged his eyes with my prized fingernails, lacquered blood red. I dug them in along the hollows of his eyes, my hands like two steel vices, and held on. He lurched back, groaning. Ejaculated immediately, semen squirting all in the middle of my peasant blouse. I looked down at my chest and just writhed in disgust.”

Watching my mother’s expression, I winced. She told stories with her whole body, even as we lounged on her bed. Her voice, complete with sound effects, changed to fit every character, every mood. Her hands illustrated each scene. Her face was animated. She could have been on stage.
“His hands flew up to cover his scratched eyes,” Mom said, holding her own face, now contorted and weaving. “Scrambling, I anchored myself and shoved him back hard. I leapt from the boxcar, running, never looking back, never slowing until my foot touched the first step to the porch of our house. I entered the foyer, stooped over panting, trying to catch my breath. Looking up the front stairs, I saw Mama, staring at me, her hand gripping the banister on the landing above. She was taking it all in—her baby daughter’s horror—my ragged gulps for air, disheveled hair spiked with hay needles, clothes half torn off, my stained, wrinkled blouse....

“The next day, Papa piled us—me and my three older brothers—into the flower truck. We drove around and around, surveying streets and searching shop windows.

“I pointed toward a barber shop window and said, ‘That’s him.’

“Papa pulled the truck to the curb, and the five of us approached the barber shop. Papa and my brothers were casual, cool. The man I had pointed to glanced up from a reclining barber’s chair, a white sheet draped around him neatly. He could have been anybody, he looked so ordinary. Papa walked easily to him, put his hand on the man’s shoulder.

“‘Is this him?’ Papa questioned as I stood in the doorway.

“‘Yep, Papa, that’s him,’ I murmured. Didn’t the man in the chair recognize me? I was looking dead straight into his scratched up face.

“‘Good enough. Go back to the truck and wait for us.’ Then he added, ‘Don’t get out, now.’ The man in the chair looked apprehensive. I had pointed him out. A stranger’s sure, heavy hand was still on him.
“I walked outside and sat high in the truck. I squinted into the glare of the afternoon sun, then back into the shaded doorway. Papa dragged the man, squirming like a caught bug, out to the street. Papa held the man’s jaw in his cupped hand. With a hard slap, he jerked his face to the truck window.

“You see that girl in there, you sorry son-of-a-bitch? That’s my daughter. My young-lady daughter. If you ever put your filthy hands on her, or on anybody who looks like her, you’ll be sorry to see me again.’

“Papa and my brothers took turns beating my attacker—in broad daylight, on the street right beside Papa’s truck, its scripted gold lettering, ‘Sherman’s Flower Shop,’ glinting in the sun for everybody to see. Papa, Dallas, Key, and Jack punched and kicked the man. They left him in a heap. Shop customers rushed out—some to gape at the beat-up man lying in a tangle of blood stained sheet, others to watch Labe Sherman and his family pull away. This public revenge was meant to quell threats to family safety before another one could occur. To do this, the Sherman men had almost killed somebody.”

My mother paused a moment to stroke my arm. She looked at the ceiling, then to me.

“Papa had beaten a white man once, too—had beaten him for saying nasty things to his studious daughter, Tippy, as she passed by on the street, a complete innocent.”

Aunt Tippy had thought the language so lewd that, even decades after the incident, she nor my mother would reveal to me what the white man said. His words must have been unforgivable because, once again, my grandfather sought his own justice. My mother said he did this, certain no white justice would take a wronged colored man’s word over a white man’s, let alone some colored girl’s.
“Your grandfather was charged with assault and had to appear in court before a white judge.

“‘Your Honor,’ Papa started in a measured tone, bowing respectfully, ‘I know there should be an alternative to violence. I know that justice should prevail for all, that a man shouldn’t seek his own justice. And I know the price of a colored man assaulting a white man. Yes, I’m a colored man, but like you, Your Honor,’ he held the judge eye to eye with the steady gaze of shared responsibility, ‘I’m a father and, colored or white, a man’s a father first…. You’re a father, Judge.’ Papa paused. ‘What would you have done if some grown man of any color whispered nasty things—that he might actually do—in your young-lady daughter’s ear? Things she’d never heard before. Things no girl should ever hear…? A man has to protect his family. He is responsible for making sure no harm comes to those under his care, especially his girls. Isn’t that right, Your Honor?’

“The judge leaned across his high bench. To everyone’s disbelief, he said, ‘Yes, Mr. Sherman, that’s right. A real man is a father first.’

“Case dismissed.

“I told you these stories, Des, to say that your grandfather wasn’t afraid of anybody. I had never seen him scared till that day in Nashville. But he had been sick then—near death sick—and old. And those white men out in the countryside saw only ugly black skin, two niggers in need of a lesson, two niggers to serve as a lesson to other niggers.

“This time your grandfather shrank, and I had to be the strong one—for both of us.

“I was just a reed of a woman—looked more like a kid. When those white men threatened us, I pulled over and stopped the car. I quickly brushed my father’s
fevered cheek. I sprang from the car, my rage a fountain of blessing. I shoved my hand in my peacoat pocket and reached hard around the candy bar I knew was there. It would have to be enough. I thought, *I can’t let these men kill my father.*

“I rushed to the black car behind our car, candy bar thrust forward in my pocket like an aimed gun. I saw surprise in their expressions, and it kept me coming at them. I figured the driver was the tough guy, his partner, pure chicken shit.

“‘Get out of the car! Who wants it first?’ I yelled, looking first to the driver, then to his partner.

“The driver was still in the car, leaning his head and arm out of the window. I watched amusement overtake the flinch of fear I had just seen. He was waiting for action. His smirk was my anger’s fuel. His sheer cockiness set my resolve. *I can’t let this cracker kill my father.* His partner looked nervous, his eyes darting between me and the driver. Yes, the driver was the tough guy all right.

“I moved in closer to the driver’s side door and shouted, ‘What’s wrong with you? Didn’t you hear me? Get out of the car. *Now! Do you want it first?*’

I imagined the cold impenetrable gaze that surely went with those words. I had seen my mother angry. No one could out-do her “don’t mess with me” eyes, lit up like a house on fire.

“The driver looked me up and down. *‘Yup, this bitch means business,’* he must have thought, because he carefully climbed out of the car. His partner got out on the other side and waited for a signal. He looked jumpy, like he needed to pee. I knew they believed my gun was real.

“Still appraising me and my potential for harm, the white driver said, ‘Nigger, you don’t seem t’understand what’s goin’ on here. We got you-all out here in t’
middle a’ nowhere, and you thinkin’ you can do somethin’ t’ us?” I smiled at my mother’s imitation of this southern white man.

She continued, “—He’s just bluffing, I thought, standing my ground. I’ve got him now!”

“You don’t seem t’understand that this here’s your un-lu-cky day. We could do any goddamn thing at all t’ you-all. Things to make you fuckers pray for death, out here all alone...,’ the driver threatened.

“I forced myself not to look back to Papa in the car. I had to keep the focus on myself as their target. I found myself minimizing the threat to me, figuring they might rough me up bad, rape me. But my father?—they’d probably relish every minute of torturing him. I can’t let these crackers kill my father.”

As part of the storytelling, my mother’s mouth curled up mean. She was cool and dangerous. When she was really mad, she spoke only the King’s English.

Her voice dropped soft, steady, and deadly: “‘The isolation that covers you, shields me, too,’ I leered at the two men, then paused to let it sink in. ‘We’re out here where no one can see you, that’s true, but no one can see or hear me either, and it’s you who should worry about me. Worry about what I’m going to do to you today.’

“That driver blinked and looked at me hard. I could just hear him thinking, She’s serious. I glared back, my fist around the candy strategically in my pocket. I didn’t flinch. I had murder in my eyes, and this man was my witness. This nigger-bitch is fuckin’ crazy. Yes, I know that’s what he thought. The driver’s eyes shifted. They were totally alone out here in t’ middle a’ nowhere where a crazy nigger-bitch could kill their asses. He made the slightest movement away from me.
“Got him! I thought. ‘You’ve got five seconds to get out of here,’ I hissed through clenched teeth. ‘And I mean it!’ I motioned with my hidden hand. ‘One..., two..., three—’

“The driver cut his eyes away from me to his partner. The white men got back into their car and sped away from your grandfather and me. I was standing in the street, my father still had a blanket tucked around him in the car behind me.

“I listened into the silence for a minute, unable to move. These men had been ready to kill my father. I turned on my heel and ran to my car. I stuck my head in the window and looked at Papa. He raised his bowed head. Beads of gray sweat covered him. He was slumped down so deep in the seat, his head didn’t even show above its back. He trembled.

“‘Papa, you know I couldn’t let them do anything to you!’ I smiled, reached across him for a handkerchief in the glove compartment, and mopped his face. ‘Let’s go home.’

Those three words, like the last phrase of a song, hung in the air. I shifted to look into my mother’s face. She smoothed my hair. “Des, never be anybody’s good victim—that’s what your grandfather taught me. So, tomorrow, when you go to camp, you tell that boy to leave you alone.”

At camp the next day, I found the boy, in-wait for me like before. With my back straight, head high, and my mother’s wisdom still a hum in my ears, I said, “You had no right to do what you did to me yesterday. You just make sure you never touch me again.” END