Dark Interlude

Anna Grant Sibley*
They stood close together, one a still dark figure with his jacket thrown carelessly over his shoulder; the other, a tiny image of the first, laughing and playing in the afternoon sun. The father's gaze drifted out over the shambles of wood and paper that cluttered the once serene and untroubled Mall. The March was over.

He had picked up his young son from his grandmother's house where he had been left for the day and together they had started for home. Perhaps if they hurried, they could make it before dark... but in the vicinity of the March, he had stopped the car. With his boy by his side, he had come to stand where he had stood earlier that day.

A sudden breeze, unusually chill as though August had become ally to the slowly approaching winter, caused him to shiver and he bent to button his little son's sweater. "There, you all right now?" The little face looked up at him, the black eyes, round in their innocence, full of love and trust. He smiled down at his son, his hand resting for a moment on the close-cropped head. He straightened and again his eyes took in the scene around him. Broken placards lay abandoned, tossed and scattered bits of slogans lifted for a moment and resettled into place... "We demand...", "We march for...", "... now...".

His gaze shifted, to the solemn, pillared splendor of the memorial where a cold white figure sat in shadows. The shadows lengthened and played across the still water of the pool. The sun, giving way before the steady approach of night, sank lower and lower.

The tall dark Negro shivered again and began to retrace his steps along the route of march, the little hand of his son
tucked warmly in his own, the tiny feet in their shiny new shoes shuffling the ruined papers as they walked. They passed the long troughs where thousands that day had quenched their thirst. Dark unformed thoughts crowded each other, pushing against his memory. He shook his head as though to brush them away, as he would the cobwebs that cling in the darkness of a musty cellar. He looked down at his son, trudging along beside him and warbling in his thin wavering voice snatches of the lullaby with which each night his mother lulled him to sleep.

He thought of the day, of his son’s future, and suddenly the memories came, hot and scorching, overwhelming him until he thought he must weep again, as he had wept that day, so long ago . . .

He had become aware of his thirst, skipping along beside his mother, and the thirst had tickled his throat, making it hard to swallow. Looking around, he saw the fountain, like a silver finger, dancing, beckoning. Quickly he bounded from his mother’s side . . . and oh, the terror of his mother’s cry. “No! no! . . . not that one . . . not there!” . . . her hard, hurting, trembling grip on his arm and the raucous laughter of the men, their teeth gleaming white in the glare, their faces white and featureless in the sun. “That’s right, girlie, you teach him his place now . . . or we’ll hafta do it for ya!” The sun beat down, cruel, without mercy, making his tongue stick to the roof of his gaping mouth.

Even now he flinched as if from the pain as he saw himself, weeping and protesting, being dragged home, his pleasant day brought suddenly to an end. His child’s mind had struggled with the words that had come floating after them. “. . . juicy piece of meat, that one . . . little on the dark side, mebbe . . . hafta try me a hunk sometime . . .” Meat . . . piece of meat . . . mother . . . try a hunk . . . try a hunk . . . The words eluded him, like some sinister form lurking in the dark, waiting to pounce on him.

The tall figure in the gathering dusk stood, motionless, his memory drawing the details of the scene that night within his mind . . . His puzzled “Why?” and his mother’s twisted, bitter mouth from which no words could come, his sudden and headlong propulsion through the dark and dingy hall
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that led to the cracked mirror on the bathroom wall... His eyes, wide and staring. The words, wrung from her in a cry of anguish: "That's why! Oh, don't you see? That's why!"

In the broken mirror, a broken image, a distorted image. Tears, hot and helpless, ran down his cheeks, blurring a face which was suddenly the face of a stranger, a black stranger over whom hovered a shadow that was dark and menacing. And deep inside, he began to feel the crawling, aching fear.

So began his slow descent into nothingness... the growing awareness that was his dark descent into the despair of having lost himself, somewhere, out there...

He awoke now within shadows. His son had left his side and was absorbed in chasing a leaf that had tired of clinging to life and had dropped early to the ground, a brown leaf which the wind had picked up and was carelessly blowing hither and yon across the grass. His son's dimpled hands reached out to grasp... there, almost within his reach... but no, the breeze had whipped it up and carried it on. Laughing, not yet tired, his little one toddled in pursuit, his tiny short fingers reaching out and never quite touching, the leaf spiraling, lifting, falling, ever out of reach... his son, innocent still and eager to pursue, believing that in this game of life, he would in time clutch the fleeting bit of stuff.

And he did. Suddenly, the little brown leaf was in his stubby dark hand and just as suddenly, as he clutched it to him, it crumbled in his hand, a dry bit of nothing.

His son stood still for a moment, gazing at his open palm where traces of the leaf still clung. Then slowly, his large and questioning eyes lifted to those of his father. "Daddy, all gone? All gone?" Anguished, the father stooped and lifted the little figure of sorrow in his arms, holding him close and warm. How to tell his son... that the pursuit was worth it... that his prize would not always crumble in his hand.

Clutching his son to him, his eyes focused on the Washington Monument, and suddenly, he hated that monument, thrusting white, powerful, virile into the helplessly darkening sky. He gritted his teeth against the aching, bitter sense of impotency that dragged him down...

"No, I won't, I won't," he had heard himself scream. The white man looming above him had finished speaking and he
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had heard his voice respond, "Yessah, right away, sah." Oh, Lord! Silently, he had groaned and clenched his fists until the nails bit into his flesh. When would they ever be one, those two? The one who screamed and rebelled inside and the one who answered "yessah". His inward cry had been a cry of despair, the cry of one who had lost his way. Hurrying along to do the white man's errand, he had wept dry tears that no passer-by would see if he had bothered to look at the cute little "nigger-boy" scurrying along in the shadows...

"Daddy, Daddy, down, Daddy... me want down!" His son's voice was shrill, and he squirmed angrily in the confining embrace. His father bent and set him on the grass. "Daddy's sorry, son. Daddy didn't mean to hold you so tight or so long." But his son, once free, toddled away from him toward the monument. To the father's ears came the sound of the gleeful laughter... a spontaneous laughter that bubbled forth out of the sheer joy of being.

And with the sound of the laughter, something happened within the father. He saw his son, no longer a toddler, but a man in full stride. What would he be, that man? In his mind, he heard again the words of that afternoon: "America has given the Negro people a bad check. It has come back marked 'insufficient funds'"... "We'll go away feeling we cannot turn back." He saw the thousands of marching men and women, black and white, the white placards with their bold black lettering gleaming in the sun—black and white—black and white...

No, he could not turn back, for no matter what happened now, he would never be the same again. He felt the evening breeze in his flaring nostrils, and as if it were the breath of God Himself, it seemed to recreate in him the image of the man he could yet be, and the future man that his son could be.

He walked over to his son who squatted now, hands on knees, intently studying a busy group of red ants building a place for themselves on the green carpet of the Mall. He stopped and with a firm, yet tender grip, lifted his son to his feet. "Come, son, it's time to go now. Let's go find the car."

Once again, they passed the long troughs of the water fountains, the spouts still dancing and beckoning in the dusk
of the day. “Daddy, dink . . . dink, Daddy.” Laughing, 
his teeth flashing white in his face, the father lifted his son. 
“Well, now, son, there are lots of fountains here. Which one 
do you choose?” His son’s laughter bubbled up, joining in 
the game. He pointed a confused mixture of stubby fingers: 
“Dis one, an’ dis one, an’ dis one . . . ”

So they played the game. Lifting his son to each leaping 
jet of water, the tall stooping figure of the man moved on 
down the line, and as he moved, the face above the little 
laughing wet one was set in a strange and sober quietness.

And Then There Were None

by Alice Roberts

THE RABBIT stared back unblinking. The dry brown 
weeds, split and broken and angled against the snow, did not hide the rabbit as well as it imagined. Jimmie bent over 
for a handful of the dry white stuff and pressed it together 
within his mittens. Once flung, the ball never reached its 
destination, but disintegrated in mid air, sifting and settling 
back to the ground. The rabbit started and blinked, eyes 
widening, but did not run. Jimmie turned away from it and 
got on. There were no marks ahead in the smooth new 
snow which contoured the ground and edged and piled upon 
the branches. Snow crystals floating in the air glittered in the 
light of the just-past-full moon and the bright dust was cool 
as it touched and melted on his face. Shadows stood out 
sharply violet against the snow. He stepped over a clutter of 
broken brush in his way. A long-thorned plum branch caught 
at his sleeve. He pulled aside and moved along slowly, keep­
ing the road at his left in constant sight. It was easy to get 
lost in these woods. He remembered the tales his older 
brothers told of the old wood-witch and wondered if she was 
still out in the wintertime. On his right the tree-filled ravines 
all looked alike and it wasn’t very far in before the forest 
grew thick and wild, going on for miles, back into really 
rough country where only a few trappers still went. He some-