



Bridges

by Walter Dean Myers

illustration by James E. Ransome

There are dreams to which we will always cling, which will always define the being we recognize as self. What we know of others are gathered memories, collages of events that live within us. In my life passages I remember the bridges that were my adoptive parents.

I was two and a half when the young woman who gave birth to me died, and not much older than that when I was sent to another family to be raised.

I have no memory of the bus trip from West Virginia to Harlem, or of my first meeting with Herbert and Florence Dean, the only parents I have ever known. What I have known of these people, who I remember them to be, has changed over the years, coming most sharply into focus upon my father's death in 1986.

The last winter snow had finally melted and the tops of the trees were showing the first signs of new life when it became clear that he was failing. Each day my wife and I coaxed our old Maverick out to the East Orange Veteran's Hospital, the silence in the car was heavy with grief, for we knew that any visit might be the last. My wife had grown to care for my father, accepting his irascible ways and worrying about his diet much more than I ever did. Her visits to the hospital were selfless, filled with sympathy for both me and my father. My own concerns, viewed through the prism of distance, were not as pure. I, too, cursed the disease which had

consumed his strength, which had destroyed this Black man from within as nothing had been able to do from without, but there was also something that I needed from him, one last gift before he went on his way. I needed his final approval, his blessing if you will, of the man I had become.

From my own maturity my father was an easy man to understand. Hard times were normal for Blacks in Baltimore, where he was born in 1907. By the age of 10 he was working full-time. His father was a tall, Bible-willed man who ran a horse and wagon hauling business, and when my father was a child his grandfather, in Virginia, still worked the land on which he had once been enslaved.

Like other poor children his age in those pre-World War I days, he found that good times and full bellies were few and far between. He developed a clear, useful wisdom. If you weren't willing to work for something, you really didn't want it. It was a philosophy, imprinted on him as he hauled wood through the streets of Baltimore, that both colored and shaped his life.

My Dad wasn't a man to take a lot of nonsense. He found himself in court as a teenager for knocking down a White southerner who ordered him off the sidewalk as the man's wife passed. He found himself in jail for shooting at a man who tried to cheat him out of a day's wages.

My adoptive mother had to be the best looking woman he ever met. Or is that my memory? Half Indian, half German, from a little community near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Florence Gearhart had worked as a cook's helper from the time she was 13. What they had in common, I think, was the understanding of what it was to be poor in America, and the ambition to do better.

The decision to move to New York must have been an exciting one for them. My mother talked of her early days in Harlem as overwhelming. My father had done some work on the docks in Baltimore and quickly found the New York waterfront. It was easier for Blacks to get night work and he worked the docks when he could in the evenings and worked on one of the mobster Dutch Schultz's moving vans during the day. Mama did days work, cleaning homes. She used to tell me about the first years of their marriage with an excitement that escaped me. I didn't understand why my father would get mad because some piano player named Fats Waller paid Mama too much attention, or why she would get mad if he lost money gambling with a tap dancer by the name of Bojangles.

In my family there were no psychological inducements to behave properly. There were simply standards one learned by a tone of voice, a raised eyebrow, a significant pause. You respected all adults you met. You did not associate with anyone unwor-

thy of respect. In the home you refrained from backtalk—and backtalk included sucking one’s teeth, rolling one’s eyes, and fixing one’s mouth as if one wanted to say something fresh.

When my mother wasn’t out working she was working around the house. She seemed to be always washing, dusting, or ironing something. I would follow her from room to room, as she never seemed to tire of talking to me. In the afternoon, the work done and the dinner started, she would read to me from *True Romances*. The heavy bosoms didn’t mean much to me, but the sound of her voice in that spotless, sun-drenched Harlem kitchen did.

There was never a moment when a light bulb went off and I announced to the world that I could read. But somehow, by the time I was five, I was reading. I could handle *True Romances* all by myself.

By the time I reached Junior High School 43, I was officially listed as “bright.” The reading that had begun with *True Romances* and comic books expanded. I read voraciously. I had begun to write. I had also begun to grow farther and farther away from my parents.

Why? What happened between us? I had changed, had grown through books and reading in ways unfamiliar to my parents.

High school brought new opportunities, and new problems. My tenth-grade reading included Thomas Mann, Honoré de Balzac, Eugene O’Neill, and Dylan Thomas. Reading was excellent to me, and so, increasingly, was writing. Dealing with ideas became an overt part of my consciousness. But there were other influences, viewed now from adult understanding, which affected me greatly. My father was working as a janitor/handyman. Everyone in the tenement in which I lived worked with their hands at menial jobs.

My parents began to represent to me what I did not want to be. I began to find my identity in the books and in the concept of myself as an “intellectual.” Being “smart” became the refuge from the notion of the Black inferiority that was being offered to me in school and in the general society and which I had, unconsciously, accepted. I was crushed when I discovered that I would not be able to go to college.

It had been a sacrifice for my parents to maintain me in high school, and they simply could not afford to keep a growing young man in school, without help. In a fit of teenaged angst, I dropped out of school. I welcomed the trouble to be found in the streets of Harlem, deliberately defying the family tenets, rejecting the values I felt had rejected me. In effect, I dropped out of my father’s world.

My father and I became cautious friends when I reached my mid-20s, and closer friends after my mother died. But still there was a gap between us, a distance between us that I couldn't understand. I had overcome my juvenile hostility/rebellion, and it was my father who now seemed distant. In particular I felt that he wasn't pleased with my writing. Yet, as I began to be published, that's who I was, and how I identified myself.

Still, we got on. He seemed to enjoy my company. We spent holidays together, and he helped me with a hundred house repairs. But he never mentioned the books I wrote.

Then he was ill. Then he was dying. Then I was sitting by his hospital bed, seeking the last approval, seeking the last blessing.

I brought my new books to the hospital room. I brought him stories of what I was doing. I said the words "I love you," and punctuated them with my tears. When he returned my declaration of love, I wanted to ask him if he also loved my books, if he also loved the writer I had become. I never did. Words seemed inadequate. What did "I love you" mean when the words were so expected? What did they mean when they echoed from antiseptic hospital walls but missed the uneasy contours of our relationship?

Sitting in my father's empty house after his death was hard. There were a thousand reminders of special moments gone by. The old cowboy belt he let me play with as a child but would never give me. The New Testament he had given me when, on my 17th birthday, I had joined the army. But it was his papers that fascinated me most. As I went through them I was shocked. I looked at them over and over, turning them in my hands, wondering why I had never guessed his secret before.

I remembered him coming to my house, asking me to read some document to him, saying that he had misplaced his glasses. I recalled him sitting at a table asking me to check if an insurance form was "filled out right" or if he had "signed in all the right places." My father couldn't read well enough to handle my books.

When I was a child my father talked to me, told me absurdly wonderful stories. It was these stories that allowed me to release the balloon of my imagination, and to let it soar. It was his stories, and those of my grandfather, that gave me permission to tell stories myself, to think it was the thing I wanted to do. I was allowed to take the world of the imagination and make it my own. It was my mother, reading her magazines, that furthered that imagination, gave it order, defined it more in words than pictures.

Herbert and Florence Dean were bridges I have crossed over. Bridges from the harder time they knew to the better time they did not know. They were willing to take me to the shores they weren't able to manage themselves, and bid me Godspeed.

I wish I had known my father couldn't read while he was alive. I would have told him my stories. I would have *read* to him the stories I had written, the same stories that he had once told me. But those times have passed and I'll take from them, and from what I have learned from them. That I, too, have stories to pass on and advice to give

and a critical eye grounded in my own time and space.

My youngest boy was going for an interview recently. He's quite the young man now and fairly sure of himself. Despite my best intentions not to, I gave him all the advice I had promised myself I would withhold. "I think you're getting old," he said smiling. "You're sounding a lot like Grandpa."

It was one of the nicest things he's ever said to me. ■