

know this: the fact that they were white women added mightily to my father's humiliation. I knew my father felt the sting of their judgment. I knew it because he kept pushing up his cardi-gan sleeve and futzing with his wrist, as if he'd left home without his Timex. But it was not the wrist on which he wore his windup watch. It was the wrist where the plastic bracelet had been affixed at the hospital. His awkward gestures were a silent plea to the satin dolls to notice the hospital bracelet. My heart breaks every time I think of the look on his face that day.

The jut of his chin showed indignation, but the sag of his shoulders and the crease in his brow conveyed something different. Something hovering between anger and shame. There was also, however, a hint of grace. I see that now that I have come to understand my father better, as a man who was always in tight control of his emotions. I believe now that he was trying not just to salvage his dignity but also to absolve the two women from dishonor. A less controlled, more impulsive man might have responded by giving those women the finger to shut them up. My father drew strength from reaching past anger.

The aphorism "Kill them with kindness" might have been penned with a man like Belvin Norris Jr. in mind. By fiddling with his wrist he was saying, "If only they knew," rather than "Shame on you."

Dad boarded the plane early because the flight crew knew he would need extra time to settle into his seat and because they wanted to check his medical release from the hospital. He was flying alone that morning. I planned to drive his Oldsmobile back to Minneapolis and meet him there the next morning, a decision I have spent a lifetime regretting. Before walking down the jetway, he motioned for the nurse and the flight crew

to wait a second. He leaned toward me as if he wanted to tell me something, but he couldn't get words out. He kept looking over his shoulder, aware of the flight crew watching and waiting, and perhaps wondering whether the satin dolls were also taking it all in. He kissed me on the cheek, a loving but clumsy gesture. His balance was off, so it was almost as if we were bumping heads. I didn't mind, and I certainly didn't care who was watching as we locked in a long embrace. My eyes were closed, fighting back tears, so I barely noticed when the flight attendant crept into our circle of grief to gently remind us that they had to stay on schedule. The attendant lightly cupped my father's elbow and led him away. It is disturbing to see your parent treated like a schoolchild, yet amusing to watch a man grin like a lucky teenager when a pretty woman takes his arm.

As I walked away, the satin dolls gazed at me. They must have overheard the chat about Dad's medical release because now they wore pouty, ingratiating smiles. Lipstick contrition. I walked past them and smiled back. It hurts to recall my response; I, like my father, had reached beyond anger to offer conciliation instead. I had every right to throw my father's humiliation in their faces. Spitting at them was, of course, out of bounds, but at the very least I should have served up a scowl. I should have made them squirm. I should have been the black girl that certain white women are conditioned to fear most.

I didn't do any of that. I am my father's daughter, and such caustic gestures weren't in my DNA. I was raised by a model minority to be a model minority; and to achieve that status, certain impulses had to be suppressed. Years later, I understand both the reason and its consequence.

I was almost out of the waiting area when I felt someone