

MY FATHER'S AGE

by Don Hannah

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A cot for Hilt. A chair or stool for Allen.

1. Circuses

Allen: Every Saturday morning my brother and I were stuck in the back seat of the old Chev when my parents drove the twenty miles into town to buy groceries.

Hilt: You two knock it off or you'll find yourselves walking home!

Allen: When we passed Sunny Brae and drove over the little bridge at Hall's Creek, I would look out the back seat windows at what was left of the old stadium. It was just a shell, round and grey—it had arches. There had been a fire long before I was born.

Hilt: I wasn't much older than you when the whole thing went up in flames.

Allen: It was a ruin as glamorous to me as the Coliseum in the Encyclopedia. Whenever Dad spoke about playing hockey when he was a kid—

Hilt: With rolled up newspapers for shin pads—none of that fancy equipment like you kids have today.

Allen: I imagined those games taking place in that stadium, my father playing hockey like a gladiator in ancient Rome. Before I was five, my father's boyhood was far away and glamorous. Close by the stadium were the fields where the circuses of my father's boyhood set up their big tents.

Hilt: Circus had its own train back then. We boys'd run down to the tracks just to see her come in.

Allen: The only black man that my father ever talked about came

to town with the circus. Dad and his friends were watching the big top go up—

Hilt: There were lions and elephants—all kinds of animals—and that fella was right in the middle of it all, pounding in those tent pegs with a mallet as big as you are. Boys he was big—must have been six and a half feet tall and he had shoulders on him like a bear.

Allen: There was an ancient city ordinance prohibiting Negroes from being in town after sunset. Did they make an exception for him? Did the circus people hide him after dark? Did he have to sleep in the woods?

Hilt: He just walloped those pegs in—boys-oh-boys, like sticks into butter!

Allen: I don't know the first time I heard this story—

Hilt: Me and the boys watched him from the distance. His arms were like Popeye the sailorman's—as big around as your waist!

Allen: That black man was more exotic to me than the elephants, than the lions in cages, than the ladies on horseback. I had never heard my father speak of anyone or anything with such awe.

Hilt: Boys-oh-boys, he was one *enormous* coon.

Allen: I was taken to my own circus one miserably hot and muggy summer afternoon when I was four or five. I remember being confused and frightened because a fat lady sat on me in the bleachers then she said something mean—she was a stranger and then suddenly she was mad at me because she had crushed the wind out of me. There were acrobats and trapeze artists and wild animals but mostly I remember that it was too hot and it was out by the new overpass and not near the stadium and that somehow this was wrong and I was not being allowed to see the circus of my father. Somehow I had failed him again.

In my father's circus, elephants trumpeted in the air with the silhouette of the old stadium behind them. When I

think of that picture, it is raining violently, animals are straining at their ropes, the air is filled with cries and confusion, and standing huge and in the midst of it all is the only black man I ever heard my father tell a story about. He slams down that mallet over and over bringing order to the chaos. When he is finished, the circus is in place.

2. Margarine

Allen: There was a butter lobby in New Brunswick when I was a kid.

Hilt: What the hell is wrong with the government?

Allen: Dairy farmers would have been happy to totally ban margarine but they could not—

Hilt: Last time I looked this was a free country. When the hell are they going to start looking out for the little guy?

Allen: For awhile, the only margarine we could buy was pale and lard like.

Hilt: Goddam government.

Allen: Coloured margarine was talked about in our house like a miracle substance. Dad pronounced it like this:

Hilt and Allen: Marjean.

Allen: Like an exotic southern girl.

Hilt: That marjean's good as butter any day. No sir, ya can't beat it for the price.

Allen: It was unfair that we were not allowed to buy coloured margarine while the citizens of nearby Nova Scotia could.

Hilt: Let's take a drive over to Amherst and get some of that coloured marjean. Goddam government.

Allen: Back then it was a couple of hours drive. One of the wonders of the town of Amherst was that there were black people living there.

Hilt: They came up from the States on the underground railway.

Allen: I imagined black people crowded into little coal cars like miners, driving for days under a ceiling of stalactites. When can we take the underground railway?

Hilt: Don't talk foolish.

Allen: There were whole families of them living in Amherst. My father would slow down the car and we would look at black children on the sidewalk, playing hopscotch and skipping rope. My mother would say, "You can look at them, but for godsakes don't gawk." Their hair fascinated us.

Hilt: It's bristly isn't it? Like steel wool I'd imagine.

Allen: My mother would brush away his remark with her hand. "Oh, Hilt, it is not! It's soft like a little lamb's."

Hilt: Ye gods woman.

Allen: If one of the children ever looked our way, my mother would say, "Oh, look at that little piccaninny! Couldn't you just take her home!"

Hilt: Ye gods woman!

Allen: Sometimes I would see black people in the supermarket. I remember one large, bored looking woman pushing her cart ahead of us. At the dairy case, I was shocked to see her pick up two pounds of butter. She was buying what we had come all this way to avoid.

Hilt: She must be made-a-money that one.

3. Ice

Allen: The first black person I ever talked to was girl in first year university. Her name was Venise and she was from Trinidad and I told her I would take her for her first walk on ice. There was a little pond in the centre of campus; on Tuesdays and Thursdays as we walked from English 101 we watched it

slowly freeze over. One Saturday morning, we met at the pond. “It will break, I know,” she said. “I’ll fall through, I’ll fall through!” We inched our way out to the middle—both of us were laughing but she was shaking from fear. The surface was smooth and clear, with just a trace of little ripples. “Soul on Ice,” she said, but she was too nervous for it to be really funny. I was thinking that, unlike my parents I was living in a brave new world where I could know black people, where I might even have a black girlfriend. Unlike my father—

Hilt: What’s wrong with getting a Bachelor in Commerce?

Allen: who disagreed with me on everything—

Hilt: What the hell have you got against making money?

Allen *Unlike my father* I would never use a word like “coon.” I grabbed her hand. She was the first black person I ever touched. But then, we didn’t touch, really. We were both wearing mittens.

