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The Bubble Burst

HOLLYWOOD, 1968

It was my second trip to Hollywood. The first one, seven years earlier to make the film version of *A Raisin in the Sun*, had been far from perfect. Only twenty-five years old at the time, I had arrived in Hollywood for my first movie full of confidence, buoyed by the critical acclaim for my role in the Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and had been caught off guard by any problems. So much had changed in my career since then that I was certain I would now be welcomed far more warmly than I had been received in 1961.

Since my first Hollywood movie, I'd gone on to become a star on Broadway, replacing Billy Daniels in *Golden Boy* with Sammy Davis Jr. I'd hung out with James Dean and studied with Marilyn Monroe, Marty Landau, Steve McQueen, and other up-and-coming stars in an offshoot of the Actors Studio taught by Frank Silvera. I'd learned during those seven years that the only way I could afford my true loves—Broadway, off-Broadway, and summer stock—would be to shuttle back and forth from the East to the West Coast for episodic TV, which could pay a minimum of \$2,500 per episode. The time was now right for me to begin this lifestyle, and the show for which I had come to Hollywood was *Companions in Nightmare*. The first NBC Movie of the Week, *Companions* was paying even more than the minimum, more money than I had ever seen as an actor.

Now that I was being paid more, I was certain I would be treated with more respect than I'd found in 1961. Not only had I changed, but surely Hollywood had as well. During the filming of *Raisin*, I'd been forced to stay in a fleabag motel on Washington Boulevard, one of the very few places that admitted blacks. It had the appearance of a true Hollywood edifice, all fluffy pink and aqua and orange, the way they love to make buildings in Miami and Texas and all tropical places. But the clientele of this establishment had been pure black, and the interior was infested with an army of flying cockroaches. When I arrived, I had no idea where the rest of the cast, including Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee, were staying, but this crummy, dirty motel was my temporary home in 1961. Meeting Bobbie Cote, Sidney Poitier's beautiful, bald-headed leading lady in *Something of Value*, was the only bright light in this dingy hole in the wall. I didn't sleep a wink while I was there, waiting for the cockroaches to land on my prematurely bald head, although I did get a lot of batting practice trying to knock

them out. After a few weeks, some of the other actors I knew from New York realized where I was staying and moved me to the Montecito Hotel on Hollywood Boulevard. That's where the rest of the cast were staying—along with a crowd of New Yorkers that included Yaphet Kotto. Ironically, he would be my brilliant understudy three years later in *Zulu and Zayda*.

Now, as I flew to Hollywood in 1968 for NBC's first made-for-TV movie, I was coming back as one of the top clients of the William Morris Talent Agency. Thirty-two years old, I was sitting in first class of the propeller plane, whose engines would continue to vibrate in my ears for days after the flight ended. How those stewardesses treated us first-class passengers! Top-of-the-line restaurant waitresses, they tossed the salad in front of me and made sure that I was entertained, fed, and rested during the seven-hour flight from New York to L.A. Everything was elegantly prepared and served, with real knives and forks and thick cloth napkins, and the food included potatoes with sour cream and chives, rich coffees, and ice cream. There were no in-flight movies then, but I was never bored. This might not be the way airlines are run today, but it certainly was forty years ago.

In any case, I wouldn't have had much time to watch a movie because I spent most of the flight studying the script. I felt overwhelmed by the thought of working with all of those famous people who would be part of *Companions in Nightmare*. I knew from the first moment that I saw the script that movie mogul Lew Wasserman had taken a giant step. He must have personally given the okay for me to play Lieutenant Adam McKay, the chief inspector of the homicide squad. I could hear him saying, "Give the kid a shot. He's good." Both Lew and my agent, Ed Bondy, along with the brilliant director Norman Lloyd, had understood from the get-go that putting a black man in this role in the first NBC Movie of the Week was no

small deal. In all of my former roles, such as in *The Desk Set*, where I'd played a mail clerk, I had played subservient or supporting characters. But not in *Companions*. Here, my character would be a peer, a police chief telling the great stars Melvyn Douglas, Anne Baxter, and Patrick O'Neal what to do, when to speak, when to come, when to leave. It might not sound like a big deal today, but in 1968, it was.

I could think of few films and plays during my time, and before, where the African American actor was considered an equal to his white counterpart. There were exceptions, but, for the most part, we were psychologically and subtly given roles secondary to the white star, not allowed to confront a white actor as his equal. I'd seen Canada Lee do that to a small degree as a sailor in *Lifeboat* with Anne Baxter and as a boxer with John Garfield in *Body and Soul*, but that was it.

Of course, I would never forget *Blackboard Jungle* in 1955, when Sidney Poitier played the tough high school kid who saves Richard Kiley's life when Vic Morrow tries to kill him. Ironically, at age eighteen, I'd been in consideration for that same role, but MGM decided to use established mature actors who could play young for the students' roles. Sidney, who was twenty-eight at the time, turned in an extraordinary and flawless portrayal of Gregory Miller. Yet despite the fact that Sidney saves a white man's life in the film, his role as a juvenile delinquent was far different from my role as the homicide chief. Sidney had just played a Philadelphia homicide detective in *In the Heat of the Night*, where the significance of his role came close to that of my role in *companions*.

I cannot credit Lew Wasserman enough for all that he did for me in entrusting me with the role of Adam McKay. Lew, the last of the creative heads of studios, was raised in the tough city of Cleveland, where he'd always held his own as a Jewish kid. He was also a businessman, a tough man

you'd never want to cross. He was the creative mind behind the Universal Studio Tour, along with the Universal Studios theme park. When Lew retired in the late 1990s, that innovative artistic dimension left with him. He was one of the last to hold out before the computer whizzes took over. He died in 2002 at age eighty-nine, but if he were still in charge today, the whole industry would be different.

Lew and my agent had arrived in Hollywood via New York. I believe it was a conscious decision on both of their parts to change history when they made up their minds to have a black man play a character who is equal to, if not more important and powerful than, the established superstars in the film. I have always seen this act as a tribute that should not be left unspoken.

From the moment I got that role, I wanted to be certain that I proved myself worthy of this opportunity. If I was going to shout down the superstar who played the psychiatrist, I would make my voice heard clearly and firmly. There would be no hesitation in my step as I loosened the knot around this doctor who wanted to keep his records sequestered. I would act strongly and with no signs of self-consciousness as I investigated all of his psychotic patients and found the killer in any way I could.

But before I could even begin to try to deal with these concerns in front of the cameras, I had to get to the studio itself, a journey I had never expected to be a nightmare of its own. As with the first-class plane ticket, the journey had begun in style, for this time—unlike in 1961—I was registered at the glamorous Beverly Hills Hotel in a bungalow that was equal to the presidential suite. I was the first black man, other than a diplomat, ever to stay in that suite. To make the pot even sweeter, Universal had rented a white Ford 500 Galaxie hard-top convertible for me. As soon as I checked into the

hotel, a magnificent pink castle gleaming like a fairy-tale mountain of luxury, I put on my sexy, colorful Hawaiian shirt and, feeling like a million dollars, grabbed a cab for the short ride to the nearest Budget Rent-a-Car, where my car awaited me.

“This is yours,” the guy at Budget told me, as he handed me the keys to the white convertible. “Watch this.” Then he pressed some buttons, and the hard top disappeared into the back of the car. Feeling fabulous, my head all puffed up, I turned on my favorite R&B radio station and blasted the music, as I would have done in New York. With one elbow out the window, leaning back into the bright red interior and beaming for all to see as the music pumped away, I headed proudly onto Sunset Boulevard. I had no idea there was something wrong with this picture of a large black man, dressed fashionably, swaying to the music in a shiny white convertible with the top down. So I just began to drive, slowly, eager for everyone out there to see who was behind the wheel of this magnificent automobile. I was sure I was the only other black actor, besides Sidney Poitier, to be treated like this. I had made it. I just had to make the performance perfect to prove I was worthy of all this attention.

But things did not work out the way I had planned. When the first policeman stopped me, it was almost funny. “Where do you think you are going, boy?” he asked me. He was not chewing tobacco, but he could have been the twin brother of Rod Steiger’s bigoted police chief in *In the Heat of the Night*. For a second I almost laughed, but when I noticed the deadly serious look in the man’s eye, I quickly changed my mind. I read on his badge that he was a sheriff of L.A. County and got a little more worried. “You turn that radio down and put up your roof,” he ordered me. Then, taking what seemed like an inordinate amount of time, he checked my license and registration. Finally, after giving me the standard response

that black drivers who are pulled over hear all the time, “You answer the description of someone we’re looking for,” he let me go. No ticket. No warning. I let out a sigh of relief and drove really slowly, roof up, radio off, arms inside the car, grateful the ordeal had ended.

But it didn’t take me long to realize that my troubles were just beginning. My “welcome wagon” policeman must have radioed ahead: “He’s coming down Sunset Boulevard between LaCienega Boulevard and Doheny Drive. He’s passing in front of Ben Frank’s in a rented white Ford with red interior.” Within minutes, eight of LAPD’s finest flew out of the woodwork. Each would repeat the same routine: tell me to lean against my car or the curb, make me open up the trunk, call the car rental office, pretend they were checking me out on the radio, matching my description against the guy they were supposedly looking for, and finally, having pulled me down one more notch, let me go. This army of sheriffs turned what should have been a twenty-minute ride from the car rental agency into a four-hour ordeal.

As I endured the phalanx of nasty policemen who got their jollies from putting me down, I had a sudden memory of a confrontation I’d had years earlier with my great-grandmother Bertha. I’d been no more than sixteen at the time, but I’d been all puffed up that day, too. Thanks to my role in *Take a Giant Step*, I’d been making more money than any other black man in our Brooklyn neighborhood. Dressed in my Thom McAn shoes and my Robert Hall suit, I spent way too much time strutting down the streets, a girl on each arm, reveling in my newfound position as the center of attention.

When I walked into the house one night, Bertha called me over. “You sit down here, Junior,” she said in her no-nonsense tone, wagging the remaining half of her right index finger in my face. I’d never forgotten the story of that misshapen

finger. She'd been around six when the accident happened. She was walking down the road on the plantation in Georgia, where she'd been born into slavery. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a horse-drawn wagon filled with slaves who'd just learned they'd all been freed hurtled toward her. Terrified that the wagon would run her over, Bertha raced along the road and fell down. One of the wagon wheels struck her hand. Luckily, only one finger on her right hand was smashed. To me, that finger was her badge of honor, proof of the life she had led as a slave.

"And let me tell you something," she continued. "God was here before you got here. He is going to be here while you are here. And he is going to be here long after you're gone. So you might as well calm down and let Him handle things now." I had never forgotten those wise words, which had taken me down a notch or two that night. When Bertha wagged what was left of a finger at you, she might as well have been Sergeant Emil Foley, whom I was to play years later in *An Officer and a Gentleman*. But somehow, that Hollywood afternoon, the memory of her words soothed my deteriorating spirits and helped me endure this maddening experience.

Still, there was no way I could make any sense at all out of what was happening to me that day. Though I understood that I had no choice but to put up with this abuse, it was a terrible way to be treated, a humiliating way to feel. Each policeman seemed adept at finding a new way to demean me, to make me feel violated. I realized this was happening because I was black and had been showing off with a fancy car—which, in their view, I had no right to be driving. I quickly understood that I could not do anything else to draw attention to myself. I had to put up with it. I heard my mother's words loud and clear: "Be careful, son. Don't make any waves."

By the time I arrived back at the hotel, I was struggling to remind myself that it was the city of L.A., not Universal Studios, that had humiliated me. But I was not about to give up. I was here to do a movie. I was a Broadway star and was on my way to becoming a Hollywood star. So I handed the car keys to the hotel valet and walked into the hotel's fancy dining room for dinner—and what a meal it was! Prime rib, sliced at my table, with mouth-watering horseradish condiments, freshly baked bread, delicious asparagus, and strawberry shortcake. It was equal to the most perfect meals I had ever eaten, the dinner I always ordered at Sardi's on opening night, what I call “my favorite rich man's meal.” And, most important, the frustration and anger I felt about the car ride had dissipated into a confused and silly memory.

My appetite sated, it was now time to get some exercise, to explore this famous Beverly Hills. It was ten o'clock, and I was not the least bit sleepy. I walked up the street into the canyon, passing the most beautiful and sumptuous homes I had ever seen, all of the movie stars' homes. I had not walked more than a block away from the hotel when the first policeman found me, and I was thrust back into the same scenario I had experienced that afternoon. He was only the first one. These policemen might not have been from the crew who had verbally assaulted me when I'd been sitting behind the wheel of my white chariot, but, despite their air of sophistication, they were cut from the identical cloth as the L.A. sheriffs who had taken such good care of me on their beat.

“Who the hell do you think you are, boy, walking around loose in this neighborhood!” the first one shouted at me. After I exhibited my license and hotel reservation receipt, he got out of his car, told me to stay where I was, and made a call. As I stood there, I wondered whether I should just run back to the hotel to protect myself from any mistreatment I was going to face.

“Officer,” I asked politely, “should I call someone who will identify me?”

“You stay right there,” he told me. “Don’t you move.”

“I am a registered guest at the hotel,” I tried to explain.

“We know you are not,” he said. “Now just shut up. You match the description of someone who stole a car in this neighborhood. Now you tell me how come you don’t have a California license.”

“I’m from New York,” I said, getting more nervous by the second. “I have a New York driver’s license. And I’d be glad to call . . .”

“I told you to be quiet,” he said and went back to his car.

Convincing myself that this was yet another weird Hollywood custom, I forced myself to remain calm and keep smiling. Before I knew what was happening, a second car pulled up. A policeman got out and pushed me into the backseat as the first policeman took the passenger seat. I tried to make small talk, assuming this was all a ridiculous mistake, but there was silence in the car as we drove around the area. A few minutes later, the car stopped and the first policeman pushed me out. “Hug the tree,” he ordered, shoving me again, this time toward a giant tree on the sidewalk.

Maybe I’m being welcomed to the neighborhood this way, I told myself, struggling to keep calm, to try and make a joke out of this. Maybe the police do this to all newcomers, make them look at the local vegetation.

“There’s a law that says you’re not supposed to be walking around residential Beverly Hills after nine o’clock at night,” that policeman explained, ending my confusion. “You broke the law.”

Yeah, but you decide when you are going to enforce and use this law against a private citizen, I thought as I listened quietly. Then the policeman—restraining what I would have bet was

an impulse to strike me—pulled out a pair of handcuffs from his pants pocket, along with a long chain. At that point, I knew this was serious. It was not a joke of any sort. “This will teach you,” the policeman said, handcuffing my hands together as my arms stretched around the tree.

A second car pulled up, and another cop got out. He suggested that the three of them head into his car to discuss the matter. He was quickly outvoted and told to go back to his car and “stay out of this.” He offered me a look of embarrassment, got back in his car, and drove off.

In time, I came to understand that this was just the way it was. Like so many of the guards and the crew at the studio whom I was about to meet, these men were the second or third generations of those who had left the South to come to California during World War II to work in airplane factories and war machines. They had inherited their families’ sense of the status quo, and that status quo found the idea of a black star a hard pill to swallow. Unlike the progressive East Coast that I had just left, this West Coast permitted little tolerance for an “uppity” black man.

At that moment, as the policeman tightened the cuffs around my wrists, I had little understanding about who these men were. “I’m under contract to Universal, for a television movie,” I tried to explain as I winced in pain. “It’s called *Companions* . . .”

At that moment, I did not think of myself as naive or a weakling. I’d grown up in Brooklyn during the race riots that had threatened my hometown of Coney Island. I’d seen *Blackboard Jungle* kids tearing up the streets and one another. And I’d nearly been killed myself when I’d put on a cousin’s gang jacket and wandered unwittingly into enemy territory. That day, if it hadn’t been for my cousin’s vigilant protection, I might have been killed by the leader of an opposing gang. During all of my

childhood, I'd felt as if I'd been the chosen one in my extended family, the one who would be better than the best, the one to be kept safe at all costs. Since those days in Brooklyn, though, I had learned how to take care of myself. In 1968, while working on men-at-war training films for the Army's Signal Corps, I had mastered martial arts and could have easily taken down both of these policemen, along with a few of their buddies, but I understood that skill was of no help now.

Violence had always sickened me; the scene of the three white men surrounding my father and our car after a small fender bender many years earlier was imprinted in my mind. My father had walked away from the confrontation, tire iron in hand, the knuckles on his right hand bruised and bleeding, but I'd seen the three white men staring at him with eyes full of hate, screaming obscenities. Alone in the backseat, I'd felt my mother's fear as she kept her eyes locked on the scene outside our window. Even at age six, I'd understood as we drove away that this terrifying encounter was not over. My fears came to life that night when Georgie Terra, my father's best friend, came to our house and used words like *mafia*, *contract*, and *big trouble*. Minutes later, my mother was taking me to my grandmother's house "till the trouble passes." When my father came to get us two days later, I saw the looks on both my parents' faces and knew we were safe again. For most of my life, I'd always recoiled from violence and done everything possible to avoid it.

Now, here I was, a grown man of thirty-two, my arms chained around a tree, my hands trapped in handcuffs. At 6'4" and 200 pounds, I towered over the short, stubby policeman, but I knew that to resist would cause even more trouble. He could have shot me there, and no one would have doubted his motives. An unwelcome black man creating a disturbance on the quiet Hollywood street, I had been resisting arrest. There

might have been a small blurb in the papers about this rising star's unfortunate end, but I would merely be one more statistic. One more black man punished for disobeying the rules. My parents' hearts would have been broken, but the planet would continue to revolve. And the policeman would never feel a moment's regret or see a day in jail. Yet the truth was, I was so petrified I could barely think as the police car disappeared into the night.

For the next three hours, I stood there, miserable and humiliated, as passersby stared, some whistling, some with looks of revulsion, others with amusement. People shouted obscenities and threw bottles of beer at me, while police cars, their sirens blazing and horns honking wildly, passed by. The drivers shouted, "You stay there, boy!" or "Don't you move a muscle, boy!" The hideous images of lynchings that had filled so many newspapers and magazines, pictures of bloated corpses and burned bodies hanging from branches, flashed before my eyes. What was going to happen to me? What had I done to earn such viciousness? What kind of place was this city? My questions unanswered, my pants soiled from the urine I could no longer hold, I was finally freed when the original police car returned.

The policeman who had chained me to the tree took one look at me and said, as he released my arms and hands, "You smell too bad to put into a car. Get out of here. And make sure you don't make the same mistake twice." Despite my anger and confusion, I heard his words clearly. They were spoken with no venom or distaste. These Beverly Hills policemen appeared better trained and more educated than the eight I'd met while driving in my rented car. Those guys had been the L.A. county sheriffs. Their Beverly Hills counterparts were responsible for protecting rich folks from people like me. Somehow it seemed all the worse that at the end of my

ordeal, these policemen were now acting civil, as if they were simply doing their job, like I'd made a mistake and they'd punished me for it. "Have a good night," the officer told me as he walked calmly away.

I felt as if I had been beaten with dozens of blows in a ring where I'd never had a chance to put on gloves. I walked back to the hotel. When I arrived, the bellboy took one look at me and immediately asked, "Are you okay, sir?" I certainly was not, and I told him why. Within minutes, word had spread to the hotel manager. He tried to explain to me that conflicts were ongoing between blue-collar L.A. cops and flamboyant members of the Hollywood scene and how the two mentalities clashed. Perhaps what had happened to me was a result of this conflict. I thought the manager was just being nice, and, only partly believing him but totally exhausted, I thanked him for his concern and went to my room.

Nearly thirty years later, when I had been living in California for twenty-five years, I would be pulled over in my beautifully restored 1986 Rolls Royce Corniche II, the last year of this classic automobile. As I drove down the Pacific Coast Highway on a lovely late afternoon, with the soft top down and music playing on the radio, a police car came up behind me and put on its lights. I took a deep breath as I pulled to the side of the road, and the L.A. policeman approached my car. "You look like someone we're looking for," he told me. Then he smiled, recognizing me. Five minutes later, I was back on the road, the officer's apology still ringing in my ears. But I didn't feel good.

That night in 1968, however, back in my bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel, I felt almost numb. I showered and tossed my clothes into the trash can. Then I called my parents, waking them up, and told them everything that had just happened to me. "I'm coming home," I said. "I don't belong here."

“You get right home, Junior,” my mother answered. My story confirmed all of her fears that my honeymoon with fame was over, that the man had finally figured out a way to harm me. She’d clapped at my Broadway performances, filled with a pride that I could see on her face. But, deep down, she’d always suspected that this pleasure would not last. That trouble was just around the corner. That my safety had never been properly ensured. And now she’d been proven right: my life was in danger. “You get yourself on the first train out of that place and come on home.”

“Do you want me to drive out there and get you, Junior?” my father had asked, his voice filled with the same pain I’d heard in my mother’s words. “I’ll be there in a few days. You just stay right where you are till I get there for you.”

Yet somehow I had resisted the urge to say yes to their suggestions. I wanted to come home, but I could not. Not yet, anyhow. “I’m going to sleep on it tonight,” I told them. “I promise to call you tomorrow.”

So I tried to sleep. But every sound in the hotel terrified me. There were noises in the corridor, shadows on the walls, knocks on nearby doors. The policemen were coming to find me, to finish off the job they had begun. No one could protect me here. Not my father. Not my uncles. Not my cousins. No one.

The next morning I was awakened by Ed Bondy. Ed was the mother hen for all of his clients: Julie Harris, James Farentino, Ann-Margret, Ellen Burstyn, Ed Asner, and so many others of our tight-knit New York family. “Why didn’t you call me last night?” he greeted me.

“I didn’t have your number,” I told him. Obviously, the hotel manager had made some calls on my behalf, to Lew Wasserman, to the people at Universal, and someone had contacted my agent.

“Well, what do you want to do now?” he asked me.

“Go to work,” I answered.

“That’s what I’d expect you to do,” he said. “The best revenge is for you to get out there and knock their socks off with your work. You’re the best I have. You know that.”

I called my parents back and told them I was feeling better, that everything would be fine, and that I was staying in California. I could sense that they were not happy with my decision, but they just told me to be careful. I looked out the window of my plush bungalow and saw that the day was bright and sunny, but I was taking no chances. In the car, I kept the roof up and the radio off and drove slowly toward Universal Studios, telling myself that this was a different day and that last night had been a terrible mistake. Once I arrived at the lot at Universal, however, one guard rudely ordered me to park on the side until he figured out who I was. It took more than an hour, but calls to Lew, Norman Lloyd, the William Morris Agency, and Ed convinced the guard that I was an actor worthy of a parking spot. I never saw that guard again.

Once inside the studio gate, I was not at all certain I could perform the role. The first day on the set, I took Norman aside and said, “I’ve never had the experience of shouting at Melvyn. I don’t know how I am going to raise my voice to one of the greatest stars of our time.”

Apparently, Melvyn Douglas heard about my worries and wasted no time in getting to me. Putting his finger on my chest, he said, “Lay it on me. Do your job. Don’t be a ‘mamby pamby.’ This is your shot. Don’t lose it.” He, too, had courage and made my work easier by giving me an emotion or a line that I could respond to. As in a tennis match, he kept the momentum of our scenes going at just the perfect speed, while always raising the bar to challenge me as an actor.

When I delivered my speech to Melvyn, I was shivering inside, but I made sure you couldn't see my nervousness on the screen. "Don't you be so brash," I admonished the good doctor. "You're not out of the woods. You're still a suspect here."

Even the listing of the cast members, however, seemed to be an issue, because their names were posted in alphabetical order, and there I was, the only black man in the company, with my name preceding those of Patrick O'Neal and Gig Young. I was probably more sensitive to that fact than the others were. As it turned out, the actor whose name was last on that list, Gig Young, was nominated for an Emmy for best actor.

As the filming rolled on, however, and I continued to play my role with authority and conviction, I could see the frequent looks. Who the hell is this guy giving orders? they had to be thinking. But I kept on doing exactly what my character needed to do. I started to feel that the rougher I was in my role, the more I was included in their off-camera conversations, and I felt accepted. I was aware that one actor, who will remain anonymous, always kept his distance from me, yet I preferred to believe that he may simply have been staying in his role when the camera was off. Today, if that actor is reading this book, I hope he will recognize himself and will find me so that we will shake hands, something I am dying to do.

Lunch at the commissary was often the highlight of my day, as I chatted with Gig Young and William Redfield and Dana Wynter, a gorgeous South African actress, about theater and Europe. More and more, I felt as if the cast members were reaching out and pulling me into their circle. My favorite in the cast was easily Anne Baxter, who blew me away with her ability to follow the instructions to alter her performance and try something diametrically opposed to what she had been doing.

I had never seen an actor do this since I'd watched the great Kim Stanley during our rehearsal for *Taffy*, a play that never

made it onto the Broadway stage. Kim had this extraordinary talent for transforming herself, with no lights, no makeup, no costumes, into a different person. She would walk no more than five steps, do something as simple as remove a sweater, and either lose or gain fifteen years of her life. Imagine what she could do with a full wardrobe and makeup and scenery. Never before or since have I seen an actress that confident. She laid tape on the floor, and, with no lights on, she carefully figured out exactly where and how she would do that walk. I've never forgotten the way she navigated that scene, walking down to the front of the stage to talk to the audience while she performed.

As for me, I was working doubly hard on my first major Hollywood role, not only to be perfect in that part, but to be perfect when the camera was off. I knew the rules well. I'd followed them before. I was the exception, the token black. I could not wear or say or do the wrong thing. I had to be twice as good as anyone else. I knew from experience how agonizing this role would be to play. It was a tightrope. I was acting in one role and being on my best behavior, yet somehow, in the other role, not honestly belonging to my people. It was going to be a lonely position. But it was mine, and I could not turn it down. Too much was riding on my success.

Yet even when I had convinced myself that it had been only the city of L.A., not the creative people at Universal, that had treated me with such disdain a piece of me had been irrevocably damaged. I understood clearly how the world viewed me. Never before had I felt my skin color as poignantly as I did that first day. Never before had I felt that I was less of a person than a white man was. Anything I'd wanted, I'd managed to attain. Now I had come face-to-face with racism, and it was an ugly sight. But it was not going to destroy me. As long as I understood the rules of the game, I would win. The ultimate prize the game had to offer would be mine.