

HAND-ME-DOWNS

Everyone made fun of the way Clinton dressed, everyone except the few whom knew what the clothing represented. Each time I saw him, I tried to decipher his outfit. I tried to figure out the source of each piece of clothing. I was forced to guess because he would never tell.

One hot summer day, my husband James and next-door-neighbor, Frank sat outside our home and played dominoes. I sat with them, as I often did, and pretended to be interested. I figured that I would see Clinton sometime during that day. He often seemed to appear out of nowhere, never headed anywhere or coming from anyplace in particular.

"Ten-ny shoes, 'cause boots hurt ma' feet!" James shouted when he slammed the domino on the table, scoring ten points. I forced a smile and snorted through my nose as though I were laughing. James slouched in his chair in front of the domino table, which was an old door sitting on milk crates. He had dominoes in one hand and a glass of warm malt liquor in the other. His beard was not groomed and grew wild down his neck. His stomach rested along the waistband of his pants.

While deciding which domino to play, Frank slid his bare feet through the warm dirt beneath the table. Prolonging his next play, he peered over his dominoes and down the street. "Here comes that ignorant fool, Clinton." Frank expressed as he pinched the dirt between his toes and slid his feet back into his dusty, black slippers. The dirt settled in the cracks on the surface of the cheap vinyl slippers. They resembled a road map full of highways and rivers. The backs of the slippers laid flat under his heels. Sweat and dirt accumulated in the hollow space between his ankles and his heels and created a dark film. With the big toe of one foot, he rubbed the opposite ankle making a trail through the dirty film.

"Hey, look here, Clinton. Didn't I tell you I was gonna' whoop yo' ass the next time you came struttin' down my street in all that Ol' Mardi-Gras shit?" James yelled. He leaned over and picked up a rock from under his chair. He threw it and it landed just in front of Clinton. James looked at me for approval, but I bowed my head and stared at the ground. Clinton acknowledged the assault with only the slow cock of his head.

"Yeah, that's right," Frank agreed. "You betta' not come on our street with that shit."

Clinton was used to being persecuted for the way he dressed. It was not the pair of mirrored sunglasses or the black baseball cap that dismayed his community. It was the overall mixture of clothing. On this day he wore a pair of snakeskin boots that were so tight that you could see his toes curled up at the front. The weight of his empty tool belt and pager caused his oversized camouflage pants to hang low on his hips. The bright orange shirt with what looked like a zip code or prison number printed on front really made him stand out. This was common attire for Clinton. He had a piece of clothing that represented every trend for the past three generations. Though constantly harassed, he held his head high and seemed to flow down the street to a steady rhythm no one else could hear.

A few days later, Frank and James sat side by side in the front yard. They leaned back on the two rear legs of their chairs, and drank glasses of malt liquor. They had, what I called, their drinking uniforms on. They wore the same clothes almost everyday. James wore his tattered pair of jeans and my green family reunion T-shirt. Frank wore a pair of black biking-shorts and a tight blue tank-top shirt. I had to almost fight James if I wanted to wash his uniform.

The sun shone brightly and the leaves on the trees hung motionless. Trying to relax, I sat slumped on the couch and gazed out the window in search of some mid-day entertainment. I noticed drops of water that slid from the glass and plopped on James' exposed belly.

Pat, Frank's wife, walked out of their home, got in the car and drove off, not saying a word to Frank. Pat often blamed James for Frank's laziness, so Pat and I did not speak much. I did not understand how she could make that assumption. It seemed as though whenever James would attempt to look for a job or at least do some work around the house, Frank would show up with a complementary bottle of malt liquor and dominoes. I often wanted to pretend that we were not at home.

As Frank gulped his malt liquor, the large cup covered most of his face, leaving just enough room for him to peek over the rim as he drank. Drinking and peeking at the same time, Frank's eyes widened with surprise; then he tapped James on the leg. Both chairs dropped squarely on the ground in unison, and the glasses were tucked between their legs. A champagne-colored Cadillac, trimmed in gold, slithered up the street and stopped in front of the two men. The door swung open slowly, revealing the large man inside. He leaned far back into the seat cushion, then forced his weight forward in order to get his feet to touch the ground. He pushed off the car and stood up, out of breath. After a short break, he started walking toward the house.

"The lord sure has blessed us with a beautiful day, hasn't He, gentlemen?"

Reverend Walker asked as he sidestepped the half-full beer bottle. James nudged Frank but never lost eye contact with the Reverend as James continued to squeeze out a smile. The Reverend wore a champagne-colored suit, and his two front teeth were capped with gold. There were words engraved in the gold caps. One read JESUS and the other read SAVES. He matched the car perfectly. I did some sewing on my days off for extra money while James was unemployed. It helped ends meet but it also brought some unwanted company from time to time.

"I just cam to pick up the suit I asked your good wife to alter. Is Sister Cooper inside?"

"Yeah, she in there. Just go on in Revin' Walker." James directed. Reverend Walker waddled up the sidewalk. The crisp breeze created by the sputtering window unit made me drowsy. I forced myself off the couch and into the den at the rear of the duplex. I heard him open the door, but he never entered the den. I looked across the den and into the dining room to see him crouched and peeking around the corner as if he had hoped to catch me half dressed. When our eyes met, he eased out of the crouched position and rubbed his shoe across the carpet, pretending that he had dropped something.

"Sister Cooper, Sister Cooper, how has the Lord blessed us today?" he bellowed. "Oh, He let me get up this morning, that's blessing enough," I replied, straightening up my clothes and double checking the buttons on my shirt.

"Your suit is hanging on that chair behind you." I retrieved my purse from my hiding place, under the couch. James had a tendency to help himself to my cash. Reverend Walker walked forward, meeting me well beyond halfway. He retrieved his wallet from his back pocket and took out some cash. He held the bill between his first two fingers and waved it in front of my face making sure I was aware of its denomination. It was a one hundred-dollar bill. He stroked my arm from my elbow to my hand with the bill. His breathing increased, his eyes dropped lower, and his mouth fell open wider and wider as the bill moved down my arm. I snatched the bill from his hand with no plans to give him change. "Thank you, Reverend Walker," I snapped, putting emphasis on the word Reverend. He smirked and headed toward the door, almost forgetting his suit.

He retrieved his garment and headed toward the front door. I followed closely behind him to make sure that he did not get lost on the way. Reverend Walker exited the door a few steps ahead

of me. Once I got to the door I had to squint to avoid the bright sun that I had been avoiding that day. When my vision cleared, my eyes were filled with a familiar sight. It was Clinton. The black baseball cap was pulled tightly over his head. Today, he complemented the hat and mirrored sunglasses with a spiked leather vest. It had a hand-painted skull on the back. His bell-bottom jeans were tight in the hips and flared out at the legs, which dangled inches above the leg warmers. On his feet he wore a pair of dusty black slippers that resembled the ones Frank once wore.

Frank and James bit their lips; gripped their vinyl seat cushions, and hooked their ankles around the legs of their chairs, as they fought the urge to verbally attack. The tense but quiet air was disrupted by the robust voice of Reverend Walker as he yelled down the street.

"He's evil. He needs the Lord. Rebuke, rebuke, rebuke that demon!" He shook his fist and ranted at the top of his lungs.

"A-men Revin' Walker," the two men cheered, just before toasting their glasses and taking a swig of their favorite beverage. Clinton gave no acknowledgement except the usual slow cock of his head as he continued to flow down the street to that unheard rhythm.

The next week Frank found a job. That left James without a drinking partner, so James was forced to watch soap operas. I had hoped that James would also find a job, but I knew he was content with my supporting the both of us. It really upset me to come home each day and find James in the same spot on the couch and wearing the same pair of jeans and green shirt. At least he could have moved to the chair when I came home. After another frustrating day of emptying bedpans and assisting cranky patients, I rushed home from work. I entered the house, dropped my purse to the ground and scurried to the bathroom where I noticed a plunger protruding out of the center of the commode - just the way it was when I left for work that morning. I peeled the shoes from my tired feet in mid stride as I walked into the den. James was lying on the couch with the remote control resting in his hand. His thumb hovered over the buttons that awaited their next command. As usual, the malt liquor was less than an arm's length away. I stood before him, shifting my weight from one leg to the other. I felt as if I was going to explode.

"I see you didn't get a chance to fix that toilet today," I said very impatiently. "I'll get around to it later," he grunted. He uprooted himself from the couch and headed outside as if he was interrupted while balancing his checkbook or something.

With sweat dripping from my brow and anger in my throat, I picked up James' cold glass of malt liquor. In the middle of den, I raised my dress above my knees and squatted above the cup. As I urinated into the glass the contents swirled, but the color did not change much.

I could see James out at the mailbox, sorting through the mail. He didn't seem to notice the chocolate figure getting out of a car that was parked across the street. Red polished toes grasped the single strap of thong sandals. Shapely legs extended from the disgusting cheeks that hung from the very snug, cut-off shorts. When she closed the car door, James looked up with a grin and studied her legs. On one shoulder, she carried a huge purse that swung against her hip with every other step. James peeked at the window to see if I was watching him. Her hair was kept yet it appeared wild. It was pulled back into a ponytail

with several strands escaping into the wind, blowing freely, visiting each other, fighting then separating. She was Mrs. Ellis, and her husband was known as Mr. Ellis, even to his few close friends. I think the Ellis couple got their titles - not so much out of respect - but so their lovers would know who to return each of them to when they were finished cheating on each other.

"Hey James, is Mesha inside?" The words rolled off Mrs. Ellis' tongue as she stroked James' ear with the back of her finger.

"Yeah, she's in there complaining about something. So I hear Mr. Ellis has a good chance at beating them charges he got pressed on him," James rattled quickly, trying to get the neighborhood news scoop from Mrs. Ellis before she entered the house.

"Oh, you can believe that. What could Mr. Ellis want with a little boy when he's got a full-grown woman at home? I got proof right here," she said, patting herself on the behind.

"Well, I suspect that the judge will want to drop to his knees and *thoroughly* study *all* that proof," James said as he scrunched up his nose, inhaled deeply, and stuck out his tongue. "I rest my case," she giggled and staggered with glee towards the duplex. I hurried to the kitchen and stood looking aimlessly into the refrigerator as if something new was going to appear if I stood there long enough.

"Girl, your husband has a nasty mouth and probably an imagination to go with it. I bet he's an animal in the bedroom once he finally puts them dominoes down, huh?"

"James hasn't been doing shit! He can't take care of himself. Why should I expect him to fulfill any of my needs, the no-good ... ? Oooh, he just burns me up." I clenched the dishrag until it was almost dry then slammed it back into the dishwasher.

"There was a time when James would come home from work, slip a Marvin Gaye cassette in the stereo, and have a glass of wine waiting for me. He'd start off sucking my toes, then the next thing you know we'd be ... well ... He used to be a *wild* animal in the bedroom, now he's just a possum, always hangin' around and sleeping every damn where!" I fished around in the murky water for the abused dishrag.

"Don't let these men get you down; they'll drive you crazy every time. A little change of company has always seemed to relieve my stress." Mrs. Ellis was staring at me for a sign of agreement. I looked back to the clean plate that I kept scrubbing, hoping that she would change the subject. Not seeing the desired expression, Mrs. Ellis moved on to the purpose of her visit.

"Well, anyway, I just came by to see if you could put some more buttons on this blouse for me." She pulled the blouse out of her purse and held it up by the shoulders with both hands. It was a natural colored silk, almost see-through, with matching, off-white lace around the sleeves and collar. Beads of thread stood where buttons once were. Just under the collar, one brown button still dangled by a thread.

"It was my favorite blouse, and I would hate to throw it away," Mrs. Ellis stated in a begging voice. I hardly ever charged Mrs. Ellis for my work. She was the closest thing that I had to a friend. I told her of a cute set of brass buttons that would go nicely "with

her blouse. I led Mrs. Ellis to my sewing corner to show her the buttons. Suddenly, the window unit air conditioner let out a high-pitched whine as it rattled, causing the walls tremble. Water ran out of the corner into a small tin can sitting on the floor. Startled by the commotion, Mrs. Ellis jumped.

"I've got to get that damn thing fixed," I said somewhat embarrassed.

We both stood in the corner digging through a wooden box full of threads, bobbins, and buttons. James dragged in, but we paid him no attention. He walked over to his faithful glass of malt liquor and picked it up. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him raise the glass to his lips. With his lips on the glass and his tongue flared to receive a nice big swallow of his favorite beverage, the amber glowing liquid flowed up the glass.

"James, don't drink ... " He did not hear my halfhearted attempt to stop him. As the mixture touched his mouth, the aroma of the extra contents seemed to register in James' brain. His lips puckered and his body quivered.

"Uuugh - shit!" Screamed James. Mrs. Ellis stood dismayed. Now wishing that I hadn't spiced up James' drink, I scooted slightly behind Mrs. Ellis. James dropped the glass and raced for the kitchen but detoured toward me. He grabbed me by the front of my shirt with one hand, forcing me to stand on my toes. Mrs. Ellis squealed, then backing herself into a corner, swung wildly at the air, afraid that she might be the next victim. I pulled away from James and scampered outside.

I felt safe when I got outside, as a child would feel as they stood on base in a game of hide-n-seek. But James was not playing this game by the rules. I turned to face James and he continued to charge toward me. My eyes widened and the breath was sucked from my body: I attempted to scream "help," but I forgot how to say it. Instead, the word "Mama" came out, and I shuffled behind the domino table. Warm pebbles poked at the soles of my feet with every step. Mrs. Ellis ran outside and ducked behind a neighbor's car and offered no assistance except for shouting for someone to call the police. In a rage, James kicked one of the stacks of milk crates, and the domino table crumbled to the ground, leaving only a pile of rubble between the two of us. I covered my head with both arms and tucked my body into a ball, like I was on a plane that was about to plunge into the ocean. James grabbed me by the back of my neck and attempted to pull me out of the ball I formed with my body. His fingers jabbed into the sides of my neck, causing the pain to run from my ears down my back, making my fingers tingle. Surrendering to the pain, I unfolded my body. James released his grip.

Opening one eye at a time I searched for James above me but saw only the bright sun peeking from behind the clouds. Careful not to turn too quickly, I scanned the yard slowly. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two shoes fly into the air, with their soles facing the clouds. I turned quickly to find Clinton towering above James' unconscious body. The baseball cap was pulled down tightly on his head. The mirrored sunglasses still prevented his expressions from being revealed. His Cole-Haan loafers swallowed his feet, leaving a large amount of space between the heels of his feet and the backs of his shoes. His bright red warm-up pants rode inches above his ankles. The sleeves of the Reverend's champagne colored suit coat rested halfway between his wrist and his elbow, yet the huge body of the coat hung off his shoulders exposing the nicely sculptured features of the victor.

Still sitting on the ground, I stared almost unconsciously at Clinton. I was quickly brought back to reality by the screeching of tires as the police car came to an abrupt stop in front of the duplex. The car door sprung open, releasing the small-framed officer as he dove on the ground and rolled across the yard. It looked like something that he had been practicing in the academy or had seen on television. With his weapon drawn, he attempted to aim in on Clinton in spite of his dizziness.

The officer screamed as his voice cracked, "Freeze - goddammit! Get yer' hands up. Ya wanna get yer head blown off, then make a move. Come on, make a move buddy!"

Clinton stood motionless with his arms fully extended into air. The sleeves of the coat gathered below his elbows.

I helped James to his feet as he regained consciousness. His nose was swollen and red, and his nostrils were flaring. The blood dripped to the ground and made bright red indentations in the dirt. James bent over and cupped his hands under his nose as if he were attempting to save the lost blood. A second police car arrived. A bulkier officer got out and approached the scene more calmly.

"O.K. people, there's no need to get excited." The civilized officer commanded with a fake smile. "Corporal, you're creating a hostile environment... again." He murmured under his breath.

The feisty officer who still lay on the ground with his gun drawn, shouted. "Sergeant Wilkes, I have the situation under control!"

Sergeant Wilkes approached his partner. "Corporal Hubbard, put your weapon away, please." Standing above the excited officer, he confiscated the gun and helped his comrade from the ground.

"Sergeant Wilkes, you go ahead and call it in while I cuff the guy," instructed Corporal Hubbard as he removed the grass and dirt from around the buttons on his shirt. Hubbard approached Clinton, who stood silent and awaited his next command.

"Put your hands behind your head, slowly. I'm sure you know the routine." He handcuffed Clinton then ripped the mirrored sunglasses from his face. "You're not so tough now, are ya', Mr. Fashion -Fair?" Clinton's soft brown eyes glistened in the sun. The officer then shoved Clinton onto the hood of the police car, face first. By this time a few neighbors had gathered around. The children snickered, and the adults looked and shared their altered versions of the incident. They filled in the part of the incident that they missed and fixed-up the part that they witnessed.

"But sir, he was only trying ..." I tried to explain, but was hushed by James as he stepped on my bare foot. "Clinton didn't do ..." I attempted again. He shifted more weight onto my foot.

"This man walked onto my property and assaulted me, and I would like to press charges!" James protested.

"That's right, I saw the whole thing." A woman's voice came from behind the neighbors' car. It was Mrs. Ellis who stood boldly with her hands on her hips as she scowled at Clinton. The neighbors, who still lingered around the scene, turned to each other in surprise, but no one volunteered the truth, not even Clinton.

The officer removed the billy-club from his belt. He forced one end into the small of Clinton's back. The officer then shifted his weight onto the club. Clinton wrenched his hands

in pain, as the tightly adjusted handcuffs tore into his wrists. As I studied Clinton, I tried to peer inside him, past the oversized jacket, through his sparkling eyes. I wanted to know who he really was. Officer Hubbard forced Clinton into the police car. James stood with Sergeant Wilkes, as James created an incident to incriminate Clinton. I watched the police car speed down the street until the officer and the hero were out of sight.

Controlled by guilt, I called the police and told them that the whole incident was a big misunderstanding and my husband and I would like to drop all charges. They told me that Clinton would be released. James would have killed me if he had found out. I betrayed my husband, yet I still felt I had done the right thing. After all, everyone had turned against Clinton and he was only trying to help me.

The next day Mrs. Ellis stopped by to pick up her blouse. I hadn't had a chance to work on it yet, so we sat and talked for a while. I knew Mrs. Ellis loved to gossip, so I milked her for the latest information on Clinton.

"I wonder what goes through the mind of a person like Clinton?" I said, waiting for Mrs. Ellis to spill her guts.

"His name is Raymond," she snapped. Catching herself, she straightened her skirt and caressed her breasts. "He's a weirdo." She continued.

"Where did the name 'Clinton' come from?" I interrupted.

Mrs. Ellis continued, "I don't know if you remember but, when he first moved into town, he wore the same filthy shirt everyday for weeks. On the front it said 'Vote Clinton for President. Of course he never spoke to anyone to give them his real name, so he was nicknamed 'Clinton.' I *heard* that he is great in bed. He even does odd jobs around the house. You know he tries to take care of all the things you ask your man to do, but never get done. But on the other hand, it is highly unlikely that he will come see you more than once. I guess you can't have everything," she said as her eyes dropped and she gazed at the floor. Anyway, the good thing about it is ... he doesn't ask for money, not even a meal. He only wants an article of your husband's clothing which he will wear the next day in your honor." She became excited and began to speak louder. "Girl, it's like Raymond represents us women!" I thought about what she said for a moment. "It's kinda like everyone who makes fun of the way he dresses is really making fun of themselves, huh?"

"You have a point there."

I asked with a disappointed voice, "So I suppose you have been with him, already?"

Mrs. Ellis became defensive. "No. Like I said before, I just heard it through the grapevine. I don't know why you would suppose something like that." I began thinking of every piece of clothing that I had seen Clinton wearing. I remembered Reverend Walkers' jacket and the slippers that resembled Frank's. I remembered the orange shirt with all the numbers on it. Then I thought about Mr. Ellis, who was in and out of jail so many times. I could count on Mrs. Ellis to do a lot of things, but telling the truth was not one of them. I wondered about the man behind every piece of clothing that I'd seen Clinton wearing. Then, I wondered about their wives.

Weeks later, Mrs. Ellis returned to pick up her blouse. She squeezed between the door and me before I could invite her in. She rushed to the window unit and separated her sweat soaked shirt from her body as the cool wind blew through the fabric. The air conditioner hummed quietly and no longer leaked. I returned to the couch where I was soaking my feet in preparation for a pedicure.

"I see that James has been taking care of business for a change." Mrs. Ellis said as she continued to admire the working air conditioner unit.

"If I would have waited for James to fix this thing, I would have died of a heat stroke," I snapped.

"Where is James?"

"He went to the Jolly Time Club. I'm sure he'll get one of his drinking buddies to drop him off some time tonight."

"Well tell him I said that Mr. Ellis will be released in three days," Mrs. Ellis informed. I handed Mrs. Ellis her blouse. I was proud of my work. The blouse had been transformed. The gold buttons stood proudly on the silk shirt and blended well with the natural colored silk and off-white lace trimmings. Mrs. Ellis thanked me for the work before leaving.

Late that night, as I peeked out my bedroom window. I saw a car stopped at a home, a few doors down from mine. It was left running and the headlights were still on. It was someone bringing James home, but a little earlier than I expected. He could barely walk, because he was so drunk. This night, a woman brought him home. It was dark. I could only see a figure. James made it to the front door as he leaned on his lady-friend for support. With the help of the orange tinted street light, I recognized James' friend. It was Mrs. Ellis. She wiped his mouth, then stood back as though she were checking him over for any more incriminating evidence. With his keys, she opened the door and pushed him in and quietly closed the door. She shuffled back to her car in her high heels as the tight dress constricted her stride. She hopped into the car and sped down the street.

When she was out of sight, I quickly opened our bedroom window. I could hear James running water; probably rinsing off the scent of perfume or something. Raymond crawled out of the window and crept across our yard. He was wearing a pair of gray baseball pants, and a black shirt with a patch on the sleeve that read GEORGETOWN POLICE DEPARTMENT. In his right hand he held a green piece of clothing, a token of my appreciation. I should have felt cheap for sleeping with a man who slept around as much as he did. I should have been mad at James and Mrs. Ellis. Instead, I felt free and sort of relieved.

About a week later, Mr. and Mrs. Ellis came by the duplex. Mr. Ellis sat down to take James and Frank up on a game of dominoes. As the men engaged in a friendly game and cold malt liquor, Clinton eased up the street. James stood from his chair and cocked his arm back. He had unopened can of beer in his hand and he was ready to throw it. "Look at they way this fool is dressed. I bet I can bust that fool in the head from here."

Mr. Ellis, still sitting raised his hand in front of James and spoke calmly, "Don't waste your beer Homeboy. He ain't hurting nobody that hasn't hurt him."

Mrs. Ellis stood with me at the front door. I stood and admired Raymond as he continued up the street. He was wearing a pair of hiking boots, accented by a pair of red coaching shorts and a natural colored silk shirt with gold buttons and off-white lace trimming. The shirt was left unbuttoned and hung open. Beneath the silk shirt, he wore the green shirt. The words COOPER FAMILY REUNION, shown through the blouse. With a frown on her face, Mr. Ellis grabbed me by the arm as she fought to catch her balance. "Ain't that my damn silk shirt!"

There is a saying that goes, "What goes around comes around." Raymond just helped things come a little faster than usual.