

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON?

By Caryn Cross Hawk

Carlton was pleased with himself. It was 1963 and he was doing well for a Negro. He and his wife Evelyn had recently purchased a two-story brick house in a nice neighborhood, with a front and back yard and a garage. All the neighbors were professionals: teachers, accountants, lawyers, realtors or had good jobs with the city or the federal government.

It was a Saturday morning and Carlton was drinking coffee at the breakfast nook and looking around his home with a pleased grin on his face. He nodded his head as his gaze moved from the new living room and dining room furniture to the record player and television they had bought for their new house. He was home alone and was enjoying the quiet solitude while his wife and daughter were out doing some errands and the weekly grocery shopping at the Kroger Food Mart just a few blocks away. They would be gone for a while, so he was taking time to reflect on his life and how pleased he was with the outcome so far, especially given his rough start in life.

He felt like the luckiest man in the world. His daughter Athena was five and people said she looked just like him. People said that it seemed like his wife Evelyn had nothing to do with Athena at all. They also said a girl who looks like her father is born to have good luck. He didn't have anybody in this world except for his little family and he was going to make sure he took care of them, and they had a good life. He was determined he wasn't going to be anything like his old man – at least not any of his undesirable characteristics.

His Dad, Harold, died from lung cancer while Evelyn was still pregnant. Even though Harold didn't get a chance to see Athena, Carlton was glad that Harold at least got to see them get married. His Dad approved of his choice of a wife and always said she was the kind of girl he

should marry -- she was pretty, smart and college educated. She was a teacher and not a low life woman.

Carlton's mother Lisa was still alive but as far as he was concerned, she might as well be dead. He hadn't seen her in years and had no idea where to find her. But then again, he wasn't really looking either.

Carlton thought about how far he had come from his childhood reality. He was light years away from the cold water flat that he shared as a child with his Aunt Mary. His Dad had dropped him off at Mary's house, when he was a baby and never came back to get him on a permanent basis. Harold would drop in periodically to give Mary money to take care of him, but he never stayed long. It wasn't until Carlton was in high school that he found out that Mary wasn't really his aunt. She was fifty years old when Carlton came into her life. Her husband died when she was 40 and she had never had any children, so she was happy to lavish all her love on him. Mary was the only true mother he had ever known.

Carlton's biological mother was an alcoholic, and his Daddy was a hustler. Lisa was one of his Daddy's many women. When she told him she was pregnant, Harold had no more use for her. After he dumped her, she spent most of her days in an alternate state of consciousness, trying to forget the pain that Harold had caused, just because she was pregnant. She had never wanted to get pregnant, but once she was pregnant she thought perhaps it would solidify her ties to Harold, make him slow down and make her his only woman, maybe even marry her. She could not have been more wrong! She was not even one of his women now. When that reality hit her, she didn't even want to see her baby boy -- he was the reason that Harold didn't want her anymore. So, when Carlton was only a month old she packed up his few things and dropped him off with Harold and spat out, "Since you don't want me anymore, I don't want your baby -- you

take care of him!” and left. After that day, when she saw Harold riding around in his big car with all of his women, she would go and get another drink to dull the pain. She was a broken woman.

Harold was a lady killer. He was handsome, dapper and always had a few crisp \$100 dollar bills in his pocket. He always wore tailor made suits and shirts, Florsheim shoes with a high gloss, silk scarves and a cashmere coat. He got a lot of attention in the neighborhood as he cruised around in his big, black Cadillac. The people in the neighborhood thought he had class and style.

Harold liked his women like he liked his clothes. He never let them get too old. When they got too old, he bought some new ones. Even though he had a reputation for being cruel, the ladies loved him. They all wanted to ride in that fine car, with that fine man. Many of them were willing to sell their souls for a ride with Harold Crown. The men envied him and tried to emulate him.

As he sipped his coffee, Carlton studied the framed picture that he had put on the kitchen table. It was one of the few pictures he had of his father. The photo was taken when he was three years old. He was dressed in a new blue suit that Mary had purchased for him, and he posed with his Daddy in front of his shiny black Cadillac. His Dad stood casually with one foot on the running board, his blue suit jacket was flung over his shoulder, and he was wearing a fedora, cocked to the side. He looked as smooth as the silk scarves he always wore. Carlton stood next to him with his foot on the running board and his arms folded with a big grin on his face. His dad was so big, and he was so little. He always kept this mental picture in his head, even when he grew taller than his dad. His dad was always a larger-than-life figure in his head.

Carlton had a ruddy complexion and sandy hair with hazel eyes. People always wanted to call him 'Red'. His dad had jet black wavy hair that he combed straight back and skin the color of brown sugar. Carlton was good-looking but didn't think he was as handsome as his Dad. Carlton lamented that, in fact, he looked like that drunken mother of his. Carlton didn't quite know how to feel about this man who was almost legendary in the neighborhood. Nobody messed with Harold Crown. Sometimes when Carlton got into a jam in the neighborhood, people would say, "That's Harold's boy, you better not mess with him, unless you want trouble". Then the offender would back off and quick. On those occasions Carlton gladly claimed his Daddy. Even if he didn't come around Mary's house that often, at least he was good for something.

Sometimes Harold would just show up at Mary's, usually with a lady on his arm when he was on his way out for the evening headed to places like the famous Club Delisa on Chicago's South Side. His Daddy would tell him about some of the entertainers that performed there that he'd seen; people like Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughn and many other great negro entertainers from all over the country. During these brief visits, Harold's women would always try to gain Harold's affection by saying what a fine boy Carlton was. The ladies were always pretty and usually wearing bright red lipstick and fur stoles around their form fitting evening gowns. The scent of their sweet-smelling perfume and liquor would hang in the air long after they were gone. Harold would breeze in and charm Mary for a while, leave a few hundred-dollar bills on the table and say, "it won't be so long, until the next time I come. Maybe we'll go out for a ride next time. I would take you now, but it's too late for a young fella like you to be out. Get some sleep so you can go to school and get your lessons. I want you to go to college, so you won't have to make your money like your Daddy does. It's a fast life son. It's not good for you. Don't be like your old man." This was one thing he agreed on with his Daddy. Carlton wanted

the respect and money that his Daddy had, but he did not want to get it the way his Daddy did. He believed in the American Dream, and he was going for it. Things were changing in the country for Negroes, and he wanted his piece of that American pie.

He wondered what his Daddy would think of him now, a big-time federal agent for the government in the US Treasury Department. Wasn't this ironic? His Daddy had been wanted by the government for myriad schemes. And now he was working for the government, busting people like his Daddy, who didn't pay their taxes.

He had been busting folks for three years for things like tax evasion. He had been so good at it that he was recruited to move to a different branch of the government – the Secret Service. It was going to be a big promotion and he might even get to be on the detail for the President Kennedy. This was really something; this was unheard of for a Negro. He was going to be among the first negro Secret Service Agents. He was so proud, but the funny thing was he couldn't even tell anybody. He was going to be undercover at first. And that was going to take half of the pleasure out of it for Carlton, because Carlton liked to brag; sometimes he really exaggerated and he had gotten a reputation for embellishing a story. So now, even if he could tell someone, nobody would believe him. But he didn't tell anyone, but he planned to tell his wife Evelyn since he would be involved in some dangerous operations. He would have to be gone for weeks at a time sometimes. He knew she would be nervous, but at least she should be happy about the big raise that came with the promotion and he would even have the use of a government car. He was going to tell her about it this evening during a fancy dinner he had planned.

He thought to himself, “all my hard work has paid off.” During high school and college, he didn't hang around the fast crowd. That is how he had met Evelyn in high school. She was in

many of the activities he was involved in -- the groups that the smart kids were in: the honor society, band, service club. Also all that training he did in the ROTC had paid off when he went to work for the government.

He still remembered vividly the night he and Evelyn graduated from high school. He had wondered if his Dad was going to show up. He was late and of course he made a grand entrance into the assembly hall. He came in and walked slowly along the aisle from the front to the back, so everyone could see him. The girls went crazy, and the boys just stared in awe. They rarely saw a man, especially a Negro, dressed liked him. He was tall and confident. He strolled in like he was a celebrity. He'd had a gray silk suit tailor made for the occasion. His shirt and tie were also silk and everything including his Italian made shoes fit like his own skin. He flashed smiles around to everyone. He was the talk of the auditorium.

The graduates were whispering loudly.

"Who IS that?"

"Is that Carlton's father?"

Some girls giggled and whispered to each other, "He is so fine! He looks like a movie star!"

The boys said things like, "When I get a job, I am going to get a suit just like that and all the girls will be after me."

Again, Carlton didn't know how to feel. His dad was stealing the spotlight at his graduation, and he was graduating with honors! He was glad his dad showed up and forgave him everything when Harold took him and Evelyn to the Club Delisa that night and it was just as exciting as Carlton had imagined. They saw Ella Fitzgerald. After they left the Club at 3:00 a.m.

they went to Gladys' for breakfast, a well-known 24-hour local restaurant that stayed open all night. It was not a fancy place, but it was the spot that everybody from the high rollers to regular working folks went to because the food was just that good. Gladys served soul food and served breakfast all the time. You might run into anybody there. Evelyn was really impressed with the whole evening and Carlton felt a twinge of jealousy. He hoped that Evelyn wasn't comparing him to his Daddy and thinking he didn't measure up. His Daddy did know how to live well and have the best things.

Carlton made a vow to himself that night that he was going to have it all too. He wanted to travel and have nice clothes and cars, but he was going to get his money the right way. Everything would be strictly 'legit'. Carlton also made up his mind that night that he would marry Evelyn if she would have him; and if she did, she would never regret it.

Just then he was catapulted back into reality, when he heard the front door open and the sweet voice of Athena saying- "Daddy we're back home. We need you to help us bring all of these groceries in the house."

"Coming sweetie."

He rinsed out his coffee cup, put it in the sink and walked towards the door and gave Athena a big hug and walked outside to the car with her and kissed Evelyn on the cheek. His mind was still racing with all he had to do over the weekend including packing. He was going for a briefing on Monday and on Tuesday he would be taking his first airplane ride to Washington, D.C. for some special training. He'd fill Evelyn in on all the details at their dinner later that night. It would be a great celebration!

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