

A SAFE PLACE

By Joyce Hansen

Appears here with the kind permission of the author

“Concentrate! Only one hour before showtime, people,” Mr. Walker yells. “You’re out of sync, son. Stand still. Don’t move.” A few people giggle. We know who he’s shouting at as he taps his baton on the podium.

Poor Tommy. His voice wasn’t bad, deep bass like mine. But he couldn’t move in time to the music. I knew he shouldn’t have joined our high school gospel chorus. I tried to talk him out of it. But like my girlfriend Deidre always says, “Tommy’s been around us so long he don’t know he’s white anymore.”

Walker is springing up and down and waving his arms. Tommy stands next to me and I feel him twitch when the altos and sopranos begin to sing “I’ll Fly Away,” his favorite. And I know that by the time the tenors and the bass join in he will move even though Walker told him not to because Tommy is a feeling person. And the music moves you. It was just that Tommy didn’t move the way the rest of us did. For some of our songs we sway from side to side as we sing. Walker is a perfectionist. I call him Perfect Pitch. “We move as one body. We sing with one voice, people,” he’d shout at us.

It’s our turn. As the tenors and bass sing I can’t look at Tommy and he can’t keep still. If I look at him I’ll get out of whack too. “Concentrate,” Walker shouted again. “We move as one body.” I wish I could help Tommy.

‘I’ll fly away oh glory, I’ll fly away.’ Tommy sings with all of his heart. Happy. He breaks loose and moves to his own time. Doesn’t care what anyone thinks. Not like me. I’ve tried to be like Tommy. Not caring. It doesn’t work for me. But Tommy never worries about what people think of him. He’s been that way ever since I first met him.

The first thing I noticed about Tommy when he walked into the auditorium at freshman orientation two years ago was his large round face and dirty blond hair that wouldn’t settle down on his head. *Moonface*. The fact that he was the only white student in the entire ninth grade made him stand out even more—like a big white sore thumb.

I stand out too, but for different reasons—people who like me, mostly my family, call me a “big husky guy.” Everyone else, especially my peers, call me *Fat Boy*. At least my size keeps people away from me until they learn that I’m not a

fighter. I am just a boy who likes to stay to himself.

On freshman day as I watched kids streaming into the auditorium I scanned the room for a familiar face from my old junior high school—not that it mattered. I had no real friends in junior high school anyway. Instead of seeing a familiar face, I saw Tommy, a very new face. I figured that he wouldn't last a week, and wondered why he was attending Lincoln High School. There were only a handful of white students in the school and they were all seniors. My mom called them the remnants—the families who never left the neighborhood once it changed. “Too poor to leave.” She knows everything. I wonder whether she knows why my father left us.

Ninth graders continued to drift into the auditorium and I recognized several faces from junior high school. It didn't take me long to guess who was who and what was what. The boys checked out the girls, except for some of the boys who eyed each other.

The athletes were tall, loud and handsome. Then there were the boys who weren't athletes and they weren't handsome either, but the girls liked them anyway. They knew how to tease girls and put their arms around them without getting slapped upside the head, and they knew how to walk down the hall sideways and make girls laugh. I love girls too, but I am not what the old folks call “a ladies' man.”

And there were the boys like me—closet brainiacs. I tried to see if I could discover any more of us. It was hard, though, because we hide. Some of us hide behind silly grins and others behind bad attitudes. And some, like me, try to disappear completely.

I checked out the girls next. A few of them looked shy and mousy and seemed like they were afraid. Others were boisterous as hell, acting like they were still in junior high school. Next I checked out the fly, pretty girls who God made just for the athletes. Then there was one girl who stood out from the rest. *The Most Popular Girl in the World*.

I noticed her only because she seemed to know everyone. She was thin, small and dark and wasn't much to write home about, I thought, mostly because she was easy to miss in a crowd of athletes and fly girls.

I don't think any of us noticed too much after we left the auditorium, because as soon as we entered the hallway where the real jocks and players ruled, we were little no-count turds and nerds who didn't matter in the great scheme of things. We spun in a whirlwind of students, noise and confusion. Someone yelled “get those toddlers.” A freshman day ritual.

Me, *Moonface* and *The Most Popular Girl in the World* bumped into one another as we

tried to find our way among the stampeding students.

“Hey, I’m sorry man.” *Moonface* ran into me. “You know where room 211 is?”

“I’m near you, room 212,” a girl’s voice answered.

I turned around and saw *The Most Popular Girl in the World*. I towered over her.

“I’m in room 218,” I said, staring at my program. The girl’s smile dazzled me, so I looked away.

She put out her hand, “My name is Deidre.”

“I’m Lamont,” I said.

Moonface held out his hand. “I’m Tommy.”

We found our rooms together, but I didn’t see them for the next two weeks. I guessed that *The Most Popular Girl in the World* was too busy with all of the people she knew, and that *Moonface* probably had transferred to the predominantly white high school on the other side of town. I was busy surviving. You could survive if you knew how. You had to do things like eat lunch quickly in a quiet corner of the cafeteria, if there was one, and then escape to the library. Instead of riding the school bus or the public buses that many of the kids used, I walked the ten blocks to my house—taking the short cut through Garvey Park.

By the second week of school everyone was settling into their places and we could sign up for extracurricular activities. Nothing interested me, but my mother bugged me about joining a school club. One morning before I left for school, we had one of our usual arguments.

“You need to join a club in your school. You spend too much time alone, Lamont.”

“I like to be alone,” I said, knowing that this would bring on the “Black People Are Not Loners” speech. “It’s unnatural, especially for a black person. Most black people are social.”

“But I’m not most black people,” I said. “How do you know how most black people are, anyway?” I asked, knowing that this would bring on the “You Are Just Like Your Father” speech. I left the house before she dipped into her bag of speeches and pulled out another one.

Why couldn’t she understand that being a loner wasn’t such a terrible thing? Especially when you liked to write poetry. But no one knew this about me—not even my mother, or my father when he lived with us. He probably would’ve said that writing poetry wasn’t a very manly thing to do. In his world only athletes were manly. So, I joined the writing club. Sitting quietly in a corner and writing sounded good to me. I’d stay long enough to keep my Mom quiet, then I’d go back to being my unnatural self.

When I walked into the classroom for the first meeting, who do I see but *Moonface*

and *The Most Popular Girl in the World*. Deidre and Tommy sat together at a large round table. They both grinned and motioned me over to them. They acted like they'd been waiting for me. I had no choice but to sit with them.

I was annoyed, though. I figured Tommy just wanted to goof off or he was afraid of the general population and thought that the kids in the creative writing club wouldn't harass him. And I figured Deidre liked some boy in the club, though there were not too many of us except for a table full of the guys who knew how to make girls laugh and an athlete who must've been hiding out from the real thugs who were majoring in gangsterism 101 and wanted to kick his ass.

Mrs. Mackey, the teacher who ran the club, reminded me of a hippie back in the sixties. Old and young at the same time.

"All of you have something important to say. Search your own hearts and minds. Everything you need to create is right here." She placed her hand on her heart. "No one is wrong here. We're exploring and creating together."

Then we did what she called a freewriting exercise. "Don't edit yourself. Be free. What you have to say is important because you're important. Find the quiet place, the safe space inside of you. There has to be a place where you find peace, love and freedom from your fears. You have to find a safe space that allows you to be strong and to soar." Her voice rose. "Write, don't stop. You can't be wrong or sound stupid." Her silver earrings danced and dangled around the sides of her face as she talked. "Believe in yourself. Trust your voice, your heart."

Tommy pulled a big looseleaf notebook out of his backpack like it was special for the occasion. And he began to write and I wondered why he wrote so fast and furiously. I didn't know what to write. As a matter of fact, I thought that the whole exercise was stupid. Write anything that comes to your mind? Mrs. Hippie had talked about a safe space.

Mama, Papa

Once a safe space in

a boy's life. When did it start?

Muffled sounds in the night.

Cries you can't hide.

The hate seeping into the cracks of the walls

oozing out of ceilings sliding under doors.

I stopped, even though she said to keep writing. I glanced at Tommy, who had written two full pages. Deidre had either drawn something, or created her own alphabet.

"Now I want us to share," Mrs. Mackey said after ten minutes, "but only if you

wish to.”

Everyone looked everywhere but at the teacher. No one wanted to stand up and read the crap they’d written. Then Tommy raised his big white hand. *Why?* I thought. *Why would you open yourself to ridicule?*

Tommy cleared his throat and I heard some snickers. They’re going to make chicken liver out of this kid I thought to myself. He began to read and Mrs. Hippie’s face grew long and stern as she gazed around the room. Giggles grew like humming insects on a hot summer day. But Tommy kept reading. He read some kind of sci-fi story about an alien on another planet, and I wondered was he writing about himself and us? Suddenly the snickering stopped and we all listened to his wild story of lost worlds. This kid has seen one Star Trek episode too many, I said to myself.

But when he stopped reading just before his character is about to be crushed by a crazed robot, and announced, “I didn’t finish yet,” everyone groaned.

Then the athletic-looking kid says to Tommy in a deep voice that could be considered threatening if you were the scary type, “Man, don’t leave me hanging like that. Finish the story the next time.”

Deidre laughed and it sounded like a song. “I’ll help you finish the story,” she offered. “I have some ideas.” Then she turned to me. “What did you write?” “Nothing,” I said.

Her smile brushed my face, like soft hands. “I bet you’re a real good writer, Lamont.”

I let her read it. “Don’t show anyone else,” I said. I don’t even know what made me show her. Her smile, I suppose. I had never let anyone read my poetry except a few teachers who promised not to make me read before the class.

Tommy leaned over Deidre’s shoulder. “Can I read it too?”

I figured if he had the nerve to stand up in front of us like that, then I could let him read what I’d written. It was just an exercise, anyhow. But that was the beginning of our friendship. The three of us became best buddies and Deidre ended up being my girl.

Deidre wasn’t *The Most Popular Girl in the World*. That was her way of surviving and keeping people off guard. Making them think that they knew her—always helpful. She’s a brainiac too. She knew she couldn’t fit in with the cheerleaders, or the fly girls, and the mousy girls were boring. She really wanted to be in a math club, but Lincoln High School has no math club. So she joined the writing club, and decided to stay because she liked me. (Is the girl crazy?) She never had a boyfriend and confessed to me that most boys frightened her.

Tommy turned out to be a brainiac too. He survived so well he doesn't stand out anymore and refused to go to the white school when his father wanted to transfer him out of Lincoln. He is totally and completely unselfconscious. Impervious to ridicule. Determined to fit in. And he does. He's not the big white kid anymore, but merely Tommy.

Our writing group shrunk. Those of us who stayed really like Mrs. Mackey, even me, who isn't easy to please. She's one of the few adults I ever met who treated you like a person and not a lump of clay to change and mold in their image. The athlete remained—said he wanted to hear the end of Tommy's story. Tommy said he was creating a sci-fi soap opera. And Mrs. Mackey said that a story isn't finished until it's finished. And she'd tell Deidre that it was okay to visualize her stories through drawing. She let the boys who knew how to make girls laugh create rapping, rhyming stories. And she accepted me.

"I wish you would share what you write with the other students, Lamont. It would help them, because I know that they have the same feelings. You have so much talent." Then she'd smile. "But I understand if you don't wish to read before the group." The other day I showed her "A Safe Space." I keep fooling around with it. Adding things, taking things away. I showed her a few lines that I'd added to it.

*You know everything,
yet couldn't make him stay?
And You. Did you have to leave?
Do you detest the sight of me and her?
Is that why you hide?
But you filled the house and
made it a home too.*

Mrs. Mackey clasped her hands to her chest and almost looked teary-eyed. "You have a poet's soul. This is so moving."

"I'm not finished with it," I said. And left it at that. Each time I went to the club I promised myself that I'd read in front of the class. As I tried to raise my head and my hand I'd break out in a cold sweat, then I'd feel like I was blowing up like a helium balloon. I couldn't do it.

I write stories and plays too, and I've come up with some pretty good rhymes also, but my deepest feelings can only be expressed in a poem. Mrs. Mackey always shows us different forms of writing, so we'd try new things.

I still only share what I write with Mrs. Mackey, Tommy and Deidre. Deidre has offered to read my poems to the rest of the group, but I won't let her. I joined the

gospel chorus because I thought it would help me. But it's not the same as me standing alone. In the chorus, I am one of thirty people.

I feel so ridiculous because I still can't bear to hear my words read aloud. Yet, last week I did something real crazy. Mrs. Mackey is always telling me how moving my words are. Pumping me up. My mother had been bugging me all last week, telling me to let my father know about the concert. "Did you tell *your father* about the concert?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know what he said."

"You act just like *your father*." She shook her head. "You can't go through life sticking to yourself like that. You can't talk to your own father? It ain't natural."

I played with her words:

*She misses you, but never speaks your name,
or tells me why you left us alone.*

Your name is now, "Your Father."

Your Father hasn't called.

Your Father isn't here.

Your Father doesn't care.

You act just like Your Father.

I didn't answer her because I don't think she wanted an answer. I wonder what she would say if she knew I sent him "A Safe Space" along with a note: *I'll be singing at a concert in the high school auditorium on Wednesday night at 7:30. Lamont.*

I'm wondering how I had the nerve to do that? Anger? Maybe. Spite? Maybe. If my poetry is so moving perhaps it will move him to show up at the concert tonight.

As I stand with the others and watch people strolling into the auditorium I begin to feel nervous. Then I feel anger creeping up in me as I see more and more parents, especially fathers. He won't come and he'll call me a big sissy for sitting around writing poems instead of getting my fat ass out on a football field. I let Mrs. Mackey turn my head. I let her pump me up for two years and ended up doing a stupid thing like sending a poem to my father. A man of few words. I can't believe I did that.

Mr. Walker bangs the baton startling me. "People, the time is drawing nigh. Get it together, Mr. Tommy, I told you not to move. Concentrate."

Tommy wipes his forehead. "But, Mr. Walker, I didn't know I was moving."

He pulls Tommy to the side and talks with him privately, so we take a break.

Deidre walks over to me. “Lamont, we have to help him.”

I have my own problems. “How? Give him rhythm? I told him not to join the gospel chorus.”

“But he likes it. Walker should give him a break.”

“Some things you can’t help people do. It’s impossible,” I said. *Just like you and Tommy can’t help me to stand up before the writing club.*

Tommy walks over to us and his round face is sagging.

“What did Walker say?” I ask.

“He’d pull me out if I don’t keep still.” I feel sorry for him. His father and mother walk in. It would be embarrassing if he got thrown out of the chorus while his parents are watching.

My father is nowhere in sight.

“I have an idea, but I have to ask Mr. Walker,” Deidre says suddenly and runs over to him. Walker’s face stretches into a long frown as he nods impatiently and throws his hands up in the air like he’s so frustrated he’d agree to anything.

Deidre dashes back over to me, her face a dazzling smile.

“Walker said I could stand on the other side of Tommy and you and I sway him in the right direction when he goes off.”

“Walker’s letting you sing in the boys’ section?”

“It doesn’t matter. I know my part. I’ll sing when the sopranos do.”

“Dee, this ain’t gonna work.” “Trust me.”

“Why do you always have to be so helpful? We’re gonna look like Big Black, Big White and the Little Spasm.”

Deidre throws her head back and laughs. Any other girl would get angry.

The audience is full and Walker springs up to the podium like he’s on a pogo stick. I start to sweat when I see my mother walk in. She’ll have plenty to say—especially about Tommy swaying in the wrong direction. I take a last look around for my father and decide to forget it. I hope the note and the poem got lost in the mail.

We sing “Oh Happy Day,” then we belt out “Joy, Joy.” and if Tommy even twitches Deidre pulls his robe. He’s motionless. We don’t sway in those, just a slight rocking back and forth. “I’ll Fly Away” is next and my heart beat speeds up. Thanks to Deidre we’ll end up looking like three jerks.

He doesn’t move for the first few bars, but when we sing “I’ll fly away, oh glory, I’ll fly away,” I feel him twitch and I peek over at him. His eyes are closed, his head thrown back. He’s getting ready to break out. Deidre grabs his arm and pulls him in her direction and I grab his other arm. We sway and rock him through the song. The boy has heart.

Suddenly the audience starts to clap and sing along with us. I see Deidre's little head bobbing on the other side of Tommy as she pulls him toward her. The place is rocking and as long as me and Deidre sway Tommy in the right direction, he's moving in time to the music. Walker indicates for us to take another chorus, and Deidre must have gotten some kind of spirit because she lets Tommy go, starts clapping faster and Tommy jerks away from me and claps in his own time making herky-jerky movements. Walker is smiling and bouncing up and down. Doesn't he see Tommy? I guess all of us are swept up by the smiling, clapping, singing audience.

Tommy is all smiles when the concert ends and everyone compliments us. Mr. Walker is all smiles too. He says privately to me and Deidre while Tommy is shaking hands, "Thank you, Mr. Lamont and Miss Deidre. That was a touch of genius." Walker hadn't even seen Tommy going off in his own direction. Perhaps it didn't matter. People see what they want to see in the end.

My mother is running her mouth to a group of parents and she's pointing in my direction. I don't have to hear her to know exactly what she's saying. "That's my son over there. He's a wonderful singer." I see Mrs. Mackey, but I don't want to speak to her now. I'm not blaming her or anything like that for making me send the poem to my father, but I don't want her gushing over me. I also see Deidre heading for the door with her mother and I follow them so that I can tell Deidre good night. When I push open the door I'm shocked.

My father is standing there in his dusty blue pants and shirt, looking confused, like he doesn't know what to do with himself. "Lamont, I'm sorry I missed the concert. I couldn't get away from the garage in time. I heard the last song. I hear you, son. You know what I mean?" He shrugged his shoulders and looked at me kind of pitiful. Like I said, he is a man of few words.

I thought Mrs. Mackey would faint when I raised my hand. I felt the sweaty beads popping out on my forehead, but I was determined this time. Tommy gave me the thumbs-up sign and a few words of wisdom. "When people make you nervous, just think they go to the bathroom same as you do."

Deidre's dazzling smile dried up some of the sweat on my forehead. I walked slowly to the front of the room and reminded myself that my words, perhaps, got my father to show up even if he missed the concert. And even if my mother said, "Just showing up after everything is over isn't good enough."

The other kids laughed and teased as I knew they would, but it was the kind of teasing that friends do to each other. "I don't believe it," one of the rappers said. "It took two years for you to get up here in front of us?"

The athlete shouted, "Man, sit your big self down, don't nobody want to hear what you have to say now."

I knew that they would goof on me. I deserved it for being afraid to show myself. I felt the sweat popping out again and thought about Tommy swinging to his own time and no one noticing him, because Tommy didn't notice. I smiled at *The Most Popular Girl in the World* and *Moonface*. Though they remained in their seats, it was like they stood on either side of me. Helping me to sway and not feel like a hulk who wanted to break into little pieces. I'd start from the beginning. After I went home the night of the concert, I'd finished "A Safe Space." As I read I began to feel so comfortable in the unnaturalness of me.

Mama, Papa

*Once a safe space in
a boy's life. When did it start?*

Muffled sounds in the night

Cries you couldn't hide

*Hate seeping through
the cracks in the walls*

*oozing out of ceilings
sliding under doors.*

*You know everything, yet you
couldn't make him stay?*

And you

Did you have to leave?

Do you detest the sight of me and her?

*Is that why you hid behind newspapers and
in front of televisions?*

*She misses you too, but never speaks your name,
or tells me why you left us.*

Alone.

Your name is now "Your Father."

"Your Father hasn't called."

"Your Father isn't here."

"Your Father doesn't care—

You act just like Your Father."

But I am me, not really alone.

I have found

A Safe Space of my own.