

Martin chuckles. "Check him out, Nino. He's going to try and beat the best nine-ball player in the city. Good luck, my brother. Hey, say hi to Frankie for me, and tell him I said his jump shot's flat!"

Malcolm laughs. "Will do."

As they drive down Broadway, Nino can't take his eyes off Martin. Martin is equally intrigued with his passenger.

Martin speaks in his normal voice, saying, "Nino, I agreed to be a part of your tour for one simple reason. I don't like what is happening politically in this country. More personally, I don't like the direction my civil rights movement has taken."

"Why? What went wrong?" Nino asks.

Martin shakes his head with disappointment. "I simply wanted equal rights for all people. I wanted a society in which people were judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. I wanted our minority children to have an opportunity to get a college education and pursue the American dream. My dream was to bring an end to all types of discrimination in our country, and I wanted it so desperately and believed in it so strongly that I was prepared to die for it. When I first returned to Forever and looked back on my life, I was content. The country and my movement seemed to be moving in the right direction. But now when I look out at the world, or when I am driving these cabs through the inner cities of America, I am starting to think that in many ways I died in vain."

Nino feels bad to see his hero doubting himself. "What is it that has you so downhearted? You accomplished most of what you set out to accomplish. Your dreams are now a reality!"

"That is exactly why I am troubled. I had always said to myself that once I was able to achieve my goals I would go back to Alabama and get on with my normal life. I would go fishing, have a garden, sit on the porch with my wife, and drink lemonade as we watched those beautiful Alabama sunsets. I know now that I was probably naive, but no one wants to embark on a journey or fight a battle that they feel will be endless. I believed that during the course of my lifetime I would achieve the goals that I had set for myself and our movement, and that would be that."

“So what prevented things from working out?” asks Nino.

“After I died, the civil rights movement I started gradually became a business—a business that consisted of thousands of employees, and one that has made most of its bosses rich and powerful both politically and socially. These people did not see the movement as I saw it. As I said, nobody wants to undertake a journey that has no end, but that doesn’t seem to be their mind-set.”

“But won’t there always be issues of prejudice and racial equality that will need to be addressed?” asks Nino.

“Yes, but not to the extent that they existed before we had equal rights! Nino, don’t get me wrong; I’m not saying that these new leaders are malicious or people with poor character. I just think that life goes by, and all of a sudden you realize that if this movement doesn’t continue to be important to your people and the country, then your way of making a living will come to an end.”

“I think I see what you mean. For them to acknowledge that they have achieved most of your goals would mean that there would be a diminished need for their services. The political attention, dinner parties and fund-raisers would gradually come to an end. The newspaper articles, television shows, and cheering crowds would eventually dissolve. I see.”

“They went from wanting equal rights to wanting special rights.” Martin’s voice takes on an angry tone. “I never wanted to be treated differently because I was black. I just wanted the same chances that everyone else had. Nothing more, and nothing less. The affirmative action program has good intentions, but it is a program that rewards based on the color of people’s skin and not on the content of their character!”

Nino cringes. “It’s true; you would never have stood for that. I see it now . . . But should they get rid of these programs altogether? I mean, it has done some good, hasn’t it?”

Martin thinks for a moment. “This is true. However, they should only reward minority people for reasons of academic merit or financial need. If they reward for any other reason, then the program is hypocritical, and we have become what we have despised. Don’t temper my words on this, Nino. Our people have got

to awaken to the truth!" Martin looks out over the city and speaks in a majestic, powerful voice that gives Nino goose bumps. "A movement that asks for special rights for any minority is insulting because it implies that we need more than just a level playing field in order to be successful. It says that if we are not given special rights, then we will continue to struggle because we are inferior in some way. This very type of thinking is what I died trying to overcome."

Nino looks at Martin with pride and admiration. "I never thought of it along those lines, but you are absolutely right. Anyone who supports programs that treat African Americans as a group of people who need more than just a level playing field, no matter how good and honest their intentions might be, are exhibiting one of the worst types of prejudice. Their sincere beliefs prove that they see black people and minorities as inferior to the Caucasian races."

Martin smiles and grows excited. "Yes, Nino. You tell my people that I died trying to give them the same chance as everyone else, and nothing more. I believed that God created all men and women equal. When the United States government finally gave us our equal rights, they also robbed our ambition by implementing an overgenerous welfare system. It is time for our people to refuse special treatment of any kind. We must recognize it for what it truly is—an insult! No matter how nicely it is packaged, or how financially or socially profitable this federal gift may be, it must be refused. In my opinion, all special-rights programs should be banned on the grounds that they are socially and morally unethical—the brainchildren of well-intended, but blind, guides."

Nino wipes imagined sweat from his brow. "Are you saying that people who believe that minorities need special treatment, and who develop special rights programs, are racists?"

Martin scratches his chin. "Racists, prejudiced . . . yes, but not necessarily malicious, or even aware of their prejudices. The bottom line is that all minorities must refuse to be treated as people with special needs. These kinds of programs are politically designed to keep minorities dependent upon the government in one way or another. They also cause tension between the races. Worst of all, they keep our people from recognizing their true potential. Even those who should be proud of their accomplishments have this cloud of doubt in their mind—this tiny voice that says, 'Did I really get this position because I studied hard and was the best qualified applicant, or did I simply get hired because the company needed another

minority?’ It is a sad state of affairs, but not a hopeless one. The solution is actually very simple.”

“The solution?” Nino asks.

“Well, Nino, one of the problems is that there are some minority people who look for racism in everything. They could be going fifty miles per hour in a fifteen-mile-an-hour school zone, but if they get a ticket for speeding, they feel it is because they are black. If they get fired from their job for repeated tardiness, it is not because they are habitually late; it’s because they’re black. This kind of oversensitivity to racism is what I believe creates prejudice and perpetuates racism in your modern society. All people of color must try to go the other way. Take racism out of everything. If somebody calls you lazy, maybe you are! Maybe that is just one person’s opinion, but it probably has nothing to do with the color of your skin.”

“But what if you get unjustly fired from a job and you think it’s because of racism. What should you do? Just let it go?”

“Racism and prejudice are very hard to prove, especially in the workplace. When you take a job, make sure you work hard and ask for periodic written evaluations. Make your boss put in writing any specific complaints about your work performance, and then keep a daily journal of how you have tried to make changes. Racist or not, a boss will have a hard time firing an employee who has a good work record. And if your hard work is unappreciated, then go and find a new job. Why would you want to work for someone who doesn’t appreciate the best you have to offer?”

Nino nods. “That seems like good advice. Is that it?”

Martin smiles broadly. “No. You tell my people that the prophet of faith has my full support, and that if they listen to him they will be able to overcome once again.”

“Martin, please don’t put all this on me. I’m not the charismatic preacher you are, and besides, they are not going to like what I have to say.”