



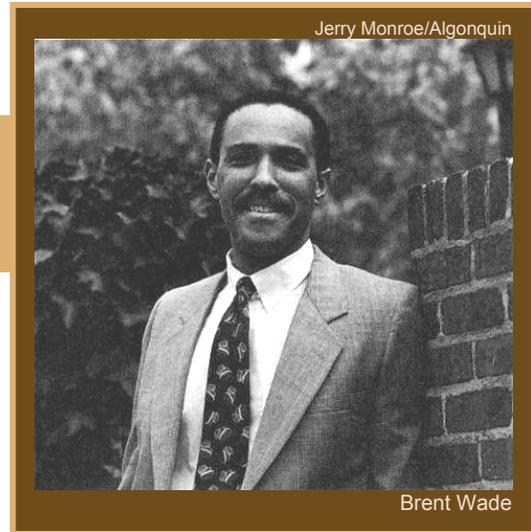
Brent Wade

COMPANY MAN

Novel, 1992

Ch. 3, 10, excerpts

In this scene the novel's protagonist Willie Covington meets, for the first time, Nathaniel and Naomi Bond, the parents of his girlfriend and future wife Paula. He and Paula met while students at the University of Maryland.



At the end of the year, when I met her parents for the first time, she would tell me not to mention anything about wanting to be a writer to her father. “Tell him you want to be a journalist. He’ll be more impressed with something that sounds like a real profession.”

Not that the gainfulness of my intended livelihood would have made much difference to her mother — a honey-colored woman with a bronze tint in her hair and the lease on her daughter’s green eyes. No, Naomi Bond would find me more than suitable, novelist and all, if for no other reason than that her daughter wished it so. But Paula had talked so much about her father that I had almost anticipated her concern over how my ambitions would be presented to him. On our first lunch date, and countless times thereafter, Paula spoke about her father with an almost biblical reverence. I learned that for a time he had been the most prominent physician in black Richmond — a circumstance that had made him respected and wealthy in that community. (Many of the monied local whites knew of him as well.) He ran the local NAACP chapter and had worked a few years earlier to register voters and stage one or two of the sit-ins in downtown Richmond diners. According to Paula, he had even received a congratulatory letter from Dr. King. As the decade grew more tumultuous her father had become so well known in Richmond that for a while whenever whites and blacks got together to talk in small official numbers, Nathaniel Bond could always be found in the eye of the storm.

It might have been argued that even some of the local ministers weren’t held in as high regard as Nathaniel Bond. To his section of Richmond he was as true a prophecy, as much a witness to the justness, power, and promise of believing as the blustery reiterations of any minister.

Here was a man who had grown up poor in the capital of the Old South. At a time when parades were held for Confederate war dead, when the black man’s place was one of unquestioned servitude and inferiority, when the sanctity of the culture demanded that the slightest public expression of dignity or disapproval be met with crushing brutality. Somehow Nathaniel Bond had flourished in that environment. He had managed to find a niche that escaped scrutiny, and he had indeed endured and very obviously prospered. (The Bond home remains a testament to the neo-affluent grandeur aesthetic. You know, Waterford salt shakers and all.) There were always a few like him, men who beat the odds. Ironically, these men would be used by southern segregationists and their soul mates as examples of the separate but equal opportunity that existed under Jim Crow.

“It’s some bizarre form of denial. They minimize and legitimize,” Dr. Bond was fond of saying.

I became well acquainted with the term during my first visit, for he used it often that evening. We had a long, almost lurid conversation about the South and the civil-rights movement and the young Turks he felt were destroying it. This was near the end of 1966, a year that had seen rioting in New York and Chicago and other northern cities.

The precariousness of that time became an extension of Dr. Bond's own experiences. He talked vigorously about his life, his struggle. He emphasized that there was a "right way" to go about things. I did a good deal of listening that evening.

He told me that the most galling indignity of his boyhood had been the knowledge that even the most ignorant, shiftless white man knew he was your better.

"That Colored Only sign didn't say college graduates exempted," he reminded me.

I guess you could say we got along wonderfully, despite the fact that I hadn't had an opportunity to say much. Paula's admonitions were beginning to seem overstated (although journalism had turned out to be a fine profession in her father's eyes).

A little later into the evening, as the women cleared the dinner table, Dr. Bond showed me his library. I understood instinctively that he had allowed me entrance to someplace private — a region of himself as vital and as incontestably real to him as the huge cream-colored door he opened before me. The room was immense, perhaps as large as the entire downstairs of my grandmother's house. The walls were covered with books, neatly ranked on heavy oak shelves. I had never considered that a black man might possess such a thing as a private library. It was an impressive sight. But what he told me next was even more astounding. The entire library had been constructed around a single theme: the repudiation of that substrative belief that the black man had not contributed anything useful to mankind. His library was a kind of personal substantiation.

"They don't want to acknowledge it," he told me, "but the truth is the modern world got its start from Africans — not the Greeks like they would have you believe, but Africans." He showed me some books on early Egyptian culture, photos of wall paintings and statues of dark-skinned Cushite Pharaohs of Nubia mentioned, he told me, in the Bible in the Second Book of Kings as the protector of the Israelites. He showed me books on excavated cities from the interior of Africa, the walls of Great Zimbabwe, and other places from the upper and lower Nile with names like Meroë and Axum. Some displayed architectural features found on Greek buildings constructed much later, he explained. He showed references by ancient Greek authors to the majesty of African civilization and the ingenuity of her people. Some of the passages he read aloud and it seemed that by simply saying the words he was freed somehow.

"Herodotus, from Halicarnassus in 430 B.C., says what was generally known to be true then. He says, 'There is much gold to be found in Ethiopia. . . . [ellipsis in original] The men too are the tallest, the best-looking, and the longest-lived people in the world.'" He looked at me as if expecting some statement of agreement. But I had nothing to say. What did I know of the ancient world? Anyway, the look must have been rhetorical because he continued as if I didn't matter.

"Listen to this," he said, opening another book. "This is from a Sicilian historian from 50 B.C., Diodorus. He says, 'The Ethiopians were the first of all men, and the proof of this historians agree are manifest.'"

I thought I should try to say something intelligent this time. So I said, "Wow, that's heavy stuff. I—"

"That's right, and over here they try to tell us we look like monkeys and that the colored man has never been nothin' — but listen, listen to the rest of it. He says that the Egyptians are colonists sent out by the Ethiopians and that most Egyptian customs are Ethiopian. We're a great people, Billy. We are."

I could do nothing but nod my head. It was clear that any verbal response was really unnecessary. I had become a congregation of one.

"And you know what else?" he said. "The Bible wasn't written in Europe! It's just something else they took over and made their own. They're the world's most parasitic people." He would have shown me every book in the library had I let him. But I made a very polite remark about the long tiring drive Paula and I had made from Maryland. And he nodded, as if he realized he needed to regain himself. He would not mention the library to me again for a long time. But I had seen a part of him that I don't think many

people had.

To say that he simply had pride would not go far enough toward an explanation. There was something much more intangible at the heart of it — although I was blind to it at the time. I came away with a lasting impression of some other clandestine hunger. The house, the stories of hardship and success, the need for a particular level of respect, the political clout, his library of orphaned history — it was all a testament to cultural estrangement. His wealth had given him the opportunity to explore what for most of us is an unarticulated musing, the anomie of a stranded people. But having faced it, he disguised it as some new cosmology he was trying to create. Another affectation of a man with money. It was the way he sublimated his anger; I understand that now. His library was a universe of possibility, a universe where legitimacy and full-scale acceptance could exist for him unconditionally. It was even deserved. In the mandala of Nathaniel Bond, Jesus was not the blue-eyed sandy-haired Son of God of the white Christian world. He was a dark-eyed Jew from North Africa, broad nosed, thick lipped, as brown as old sandalwood.

“More like us than them,” he had said, and I didn’t understand then why he needed to believe it.

Some things are clearer to me today. Nathaniel Bond suffered from the disease of the deferred. So he had given himself histories. One of these was a history of his life in Richmond, which he embellished with Dickensian detail. The other history was the one of his people and it stretched back further than the written word would allow. It was all an attempt to put distance between what he was trying to be and what he knew he still was. As if every dollar he made, every speech he gave, every committee he chaired, every trip into his library took him further and further from where he began, from where he was, from where he had never really strayed.

His daughter was of a similar mind, having been nurtured in the humus of her father’s reputation. Unlike him, though, she didn’t have much to seek restitution from. His lead gray memories (which could never be hers) stood in blind substitution to her own true desire to duplicate what she had known all of her life. She had grown up comfortable and happy, the only child of an important man. She had been insulated from the harsher realities of segregated Richmond. Her run-ins had been minor. She had gone to private schools in New England. She’d spent many summers traveling abroad. No insecurities for Paula Bond; she had grown up a secure fixture in a prominent family who moved within the stratum of black Richmond like a sepia imitation of old Dixie gentility. What she inherited from her father was the expectation that her life should be filled with nothing but nice things and comfort. . . .

In this scene Covington confronts Carl Rice, one of the three other black managers in his division of Varitech. The company’s plan to send some of the work of its machinists to a new plant in Mexico threatens the jobs of many black employees. Rice is organizing a strike to stop the outsourcing. To publicize meetings of the black machinists, he distributes fliers that say only “CPT SEE QUARTER TILL.” Here Covington recounts the scene in Rice’s office when they argue over the strike, corporate racism, and the allegiances of middle-class African Americans.

He has the body of a sprinter. In fact, that’s the most lasting impression I have of Carl — the aging athlete. He moves like a sprinter. There’s this curious precision in his walk. Perhaps the swagger of an aging man who knows he still looks good. It always reminded me of the way Ali would walk into the ring toward the end of his career, before the brain damage became apparent.

We were both born in September, Carl on the twentieth — two days and two years behind me. And so we share a house of sorts, if you follow the stars. (Donna tells me that such things are important.) Most of the time, I was never sure where I stood with him. Once, after he had tried unsuccessfully to persuade me to join in the condemnation of the company’s hiring practices, he angrily called me a “house nigger.” On other occasions I had been an “Oreo,” and once a “lackey.” (A running argument at that time was over African names — Carl was considering one for himself.) Still, at other times we spoke with that casual familiarity black people share among themselves. He would compliment me on knowing how to “play the game” or kid me about what a “corporate brother” I had become. I can’t really say we were friends, though.

Our relationship was in some ways a matter of proximity. There was this terminal awareness of each other's presence. In a business unit of twenty-eight hundred, Carl and I were two of four black managers. We also had the added distinction of having similar high-visibility positions. We ended up working together a lot. At a distance people would sometimes even mistake us for each other. He's also tall, and he shares my affinity for Italian clothes — the Ungaro suits, Armani ties. But of course for Carl it's more than that. He explained to me once how our style of dress is suited for the executive who does not (or cannot) truly aspire to the "pin-striped anonymity of the status quo."

There are other things you should know about Carl, a few telling foibles of the proud brother. He has a fourteen-year-old daughter named Kenya and a twelve-year-old son name Haim, both by his ex-wife, the daughter of an orthodox Jewish printer from New Jersey. Yes, Carl Rice had crossed the color line! I always told myself that one day I would confront Carl with this incongruity. But after the divorce, it didn't seem appropriate. The children now live in California with their mother, the former Marcia Siegel, in a comfortable apartment in West Hollywood. Carl and Marcia have been divorced for six years now. I've never been told just what happened. Carl never let on that they were having problems until the very end. I remember asking him how Marcia's parents had felt about the marriage from the beginning. All he said was, "Well, it wasn't no synagogue wedding." Marcia now works as a publicist for MGM Studios. In Baltimore, she taught contemporary fiction at Goucher College.

They met at NYU, where Carl had gone after being booted out of Howard University. He had protested what he thought was the then elitist mock-white curriculum of the school, by occupying the dean's office in whiteface and a three-piece suit.

Maybe the most important thing you should know is that while I was liked and generally respected at Varitech, Carl was tolerated. The topic, no doubt, of many a hushed discussion. During a meeting I'd heard Len Townes once call him an agitator. (I think he forgot I was there, for as soon as he made his comment and saw me sitting at the back of the room he quickly added a few words about the great job Carl was doing in graphic arts.) Carl is perhaps what a lot of whites would describe, artlessly, as a militant. In truth, though, he had the same fervent views on the failings of the social and corporate worlds of white America that many blacks shared. Only he made no effort to conceal these views whenever the subject arose, although he never invited such discourse. I refused to discuss such things in the plant, but Carl and I would often talk off-site. What had really given Carl his reputation was his well-publicized dissatisfaction with the company's hiring practices. In the end I think it was only the fear of litigation that kept him employed. He was ultimately dispatched to a position of visibility with no chance of advancement. The details of his particular exile are lurid and numerous, but why go into that? You'd never get your question answered, and besides, I've procrastinated enough.

Now, I think I *had* told you a little about Carl two days ago. Let's see, where had I left you? Oh yes, I had started to tell you about the afternoon I confronted Carl with the CPT fliers. Do you remember? I found myself standing in his office with one of the damned things in my hand. Did I tell you he had known about them all along? Before he even opened his mouth, I knew that. It was the way he looked up at me when I laid the sheet on his desk. He beamed with his old self-satisfied smirk.

"I had expected you to call me as soon as you saw one of those," he said. I told him I hadn't understood the message. He just shook his head. "You knew what CPT meant. That should have told you right off."

Things came back then, in color and sound. The voices first. My grandmother's voice, laughing with Mrs. Francine after church one Sunday.

"Lawd, here they go agin talkin' 'bout choir practice, startin' promptly mind ju, at sebum o'clock. They mean sebum o'clock CPT. I ain't neva seen these Nigros here started nothin' on time."

And there was something I heard your mother say one morning as I waited for you to leave for school "Paul, you betta step it up. School don't run on colored people's time."

When the voices toggled off, I was aware of just what I had forgotten. How many years had I not known? I couldn't decide. It was such a requisite thing, a little cultural joke among ourselves. I stood there wondering when it was that I had stopped remembering.

"It's mainly a bulletin," he said. "We want to make sure everybody comes to the meetings. Man, how

could you forget CPT? I just don't under—”

“What meetings?”

“Billy, you do work here, don't you? Haven't you been following what's going on? But you don't get out in the shop much, do you? You have to stay close to Mr. Haviland and that nitwit Lloyd Harrow.”

“I work for Haviland and I work with Lloyd,” I flared. “Why should I be in the shop?”

“Tell me, Billy,” Carl asked, “what work does Lloyd Harrow do? There's no job description for his position. He's been down here almost every day this week, wasting my time with his bullshit. You know what he wanted to talk about today? How he believes that Jimi Hendrix was killed by the CIA for playing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ like he did at Woodstock. Says his father has a friend who knows for sure. Can you believe that? Everybody knows it was the FBI that did it.”

“The fliers, Carl, what about the fliers?”

“Haven't you heard anything?”

“Believe it or not, my own problems require most of my attention.”

“Well the rumors have been rolling around here for the last month. I'm surprised Haviland or your boy Lloyd hasn't asked you about it.”

He was about to continue, but someone entered the room. A young man I was sure I recognized, but I couldn't recall from where. Carl greeted him casually, introducing me only as “a brother from executive row.”

“Yeah, I seen you around,” he responded.

His name was Everett Peale and I had seen him, I suddenly remembered, in the cafeteria. He was one of the people in the kitchen. I'd seen him serving food at the steam tables. But he had another job. As Carl explained, Everett was responsible for distributing the CPT fliers around the shop floor. He had in fact come to Carl for more fliers. Carl took out his desk keys and opened the last drawer on the bottom left side. As he did, Everett turned to me.

“So,” he said, “we gonna see you at Fridee's meetin'?”

Before I could answer, Carl quickly interrupted, handing over a stack of fliers as he did.

“He'll be there. Look, you better get out of here before you're seen. And remember, put those up in the morning before six and only in the shop. We don't want to spill this until we're ready.”

When he left, Carl poured himself a cup of coffee and lit another Salem. I sat down beside his desk. I couldn't help feeling that Carl had set me up, because now I was involved.

“That boy,” Carl said, taking a drag from the cigarette. “I swear, I don't know about him. You know the CPT See Quarter Till thing was all his idea. I had to bite my tongue over that one.”

“You lost me, Carl. What do you mean bite your tongue, why?”

“The CPT part was probably a good idea — no white person knows what that means — but the See Quarter Till stuff . . . I hate to hear us talking like that in this day and age.” I still didn't know what he was talking about and he must have seen it in my face.

“The fliers,” Carl went on, “are a good way to let everyone know when we're meeting. See, we can't be too open about announcing meeting times and places, because that will tip the hat. So what we do is post the fliers when we're going to meet. That way everyone knows we're going to meet, but not when or where. Now, to let everyone know that, we have one person everyone can go to for specific times and places. That person is supposed to be different each time, but this machinist named Earl Gaines has pretty much ended up with the job. I wanted to use a code name or something for Earl, so no one reading the fliers will know who he is. At one of the early meetings, Everett says why don't we use Earl's nickname, Quarter Till. They all thought it was funny. There was nothing I could do.”

“Quarter Till?” I said. “So what's that supposed to mean?”

“They call him that because they say he's blacker than quarter to midnight — get it?” He shook his head. “What do you think white people think when they hear us saying things like that? It just saves them from making the insult.” He shook his head again. I sometimes believe that Carl cultivated his image with as much care as I did. He pandered to them more than he wanted to admit. He was the angry black man they anticipated.

Having now finished the cigarette, he took a Hershey's bar from his desk, which he ate like a Danish

along with the coffee. He still hadn't told me what was going on. What were the fliers and meetings for?

"There's going to be some trouble, Billy. Big trouble. All the brothers in the machinist's union want to walk."

"Walk? From the union, or from the company?"

"Both! A few months ago the union got wind of the new plant the company's building in Mexico. I'm not even going to ask you if you knew about it. But when the union found out, Jack Dulaney goes up to Haviland's office and apparently after a few days of discussion they made a deal. I don't know the specifics of what was said. The bottom line is we got shortchanged. There were some guarantees made about what jobs would be secure and how that would be decided. It's a flat seniority scam, which leaves us high and dry. When the union made the announcement a couple of brothers even went to Dulaney. Here they thought the union was representing their best interests and they get screwed. To top it off all Dulaney does is go into this song and dance about how this deal will be good for everybody. I've dealt with that Irish son of a bitch before. Man, those people are the biggest racists around — you ever notice how many of them belong to these ultra-right-wing political groups? It's them and the Mormons. Now those people, the only thing they want to see black is nightfall. Who is that one glassy-eyed saltine from Utah? I saw him on—"

"Carl, Carl; are you telling me there's going to be a strike?"

"I'm telling you that every black machinist at this company is going to get real loud, real soon. They want to split off from the union, and they want to strike."

Lord, how I wanted to grab Carl and shake him silly. It was such a niggerish mess he'd gotten himself into. I wanted no part of it.

"Who is orchestrating all of this? You? Man, I hope it's not you! They could get rid of you for that. The little piece of a career you have left would be shot."

"Is that concern I hear, Billy? Don't worry. I'm just helping out. You know, supporting my people. All I do is make copies of the fliers and attend the meetings."

"Yeah, so who runs the meetings?"

"You're not collecting information for da massa are you?" He was only half kidding.

"You just laid a lot of shit in my lap, Carl. I want to understand what's going on."

"I guess I'm just overwhelmed by all this concern. I remember last year when the black professionals' association wanted to put together that letter to Haviland decrying this company's piss-poor record of promoting blacks you didn't want any part of it. Is that the same Billy Covington who wants to know what's going on?"

"You're damned right I didn't want any part of it! It wasn't the association that put that letter together. It was you and Curt Reed. And where is he now? He had to leave the company after being stuck in some dead-end job in planning. Your letter did his career a lot of good!"

"That's only because we didn't stick together. There was no show of strength."

"That's because there was no strength in writing that letter. How can you work in a corporation as long as you have and not understand that? It's like changing your name, Carl, it's not going to change anything."

"I'm not even going to get into that with you again. But are you denying that there's a different hiring system for *us*? The system here is not fair, Billy! There are whites in management who don't even have college degrees. They have a job because some white man likes them. They fuck up; they make mistakes — everybody knows we lost that contract with IBM because Jerry Flynn mismanaged the whole project. He had no experience in what he was doing, hadn't even worked on a major winning project since he came to the company, but what do they do? They promote him to contract-development manager under Howie Frost. None of *us* would ever get that kind of break. They'll scrutinize your every credential and still pass you over! And look, they get their children hired in here, their friends, in jobs that don't even get advertised unless they're already filled. And then they complain about affirmative action! And if you have the temerity to mention how racist it all is, they look at you and say, 'Racism? Where, I don't see any? Prove it.' And of course you can never prove it because they control the information! There's always enough of them to form a consensus on anything they want to disbelieve, regardless of fact. I don't

understand how you can look at that and not get mad!”

“I don’t understand how you can stay in the same job for five years without any real promotion! I don’t understand how you can work in a place where you have no credibility. Don’t you think that some of these white boys are pissed off too because they got passed over for Flynn? And I’ll tell you something else, Carl, if I had a kid you’d best believe I’d get him in here — the same way they do! And the difference between me and you, Carl, is that I could get it done. They’d do it for me. They own the system, Carl! They made it all up just for them; we weren’t even a consideration. Can’t you see that? You can only work in it! So I don’t get into arguments with Len Townes about how sick I think the Elvis cult is and how he wasn’t the king of anything, how all he did was rip off a lot of black music and mannerisms and repackage it like it was all his idea. It might have made you feel better to say all that stuff but all it does is piss people off. They don’t want to have to know how you feel.”

The argument I referred to took place last year in the AV [audio-visual] room, where Len, Carl, and I were reviewing slides for a presentation on company operations that Len was to give to an investor review board. Len came as close as I’d ever seen to losing his facade of control, for he truly loves Elvis.

“Billy, what is this problem you have about pissing white people off?”

We both just sat there, silent, having exhausted the limits of what we could say. A truce. Then Carl took another Hershey’s bar from his desk drawer. He offered me a piece, and when I declined he took a big bite. I don’t understand how anyone who eats as much junk food as Carl does manages to stay so slim.

We didn’t say anything else about unions, fliers, or strikes. We talked around it; we talked about the sales meeting coming up in two weeks, about the wonderful job Meeting Planners (the company I hired to set the conference up) was doing. I told Carl I’d never been to Atlanta. He was from Athens, Georgia, and had been to Atlanta many times to visit family. For him it was a city that offered no mystery. He showed me the bluelines I’d originally come to see. It would be a nice piece when printed. Carl was a good writer, and while not a graphic artist, he had a fine aesthetic sense.

After I’d approved the bluelines and discussed the print schedule, I left — but not before Carl reminded me again of the Friday meeting. More than anything I was scared, scared that events would overtake me and that I would find no safe haven.

