



INVITE POOKIE FOR A BEER
BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX

I just happened to be reading Dr. Price Cobbs autobiography as commentary swirled about Cambridge happenings and the President's involvement in them. Dr. Skip Gates was arrested in his own front yard for disorderly conduct by police officer James Crowley, who apparently didn't like being called a racist by Gates. President Obama correctly said the arrest was stupid (if you can't be disorderly anyplace else, you ought to get a pass in your own front yard), and then he backpedaled a bit and invited Gates and Crowley to the White House for a beer. Gates accepted, but there is no word from Crowley.

What does this have to do with Dr. Price Cobbs? Cobbs, an octogenarian San Francisco-based psychiatrist, is one of the wisest men I know. He wrote the book, *Black Rage*, in 1968, to attempt to explain the anger that so many African Americans were feeling then about the slights they had swallowed personally and historically. In his new book, *My American Life: From Rage to Entitlement*, Cobbs examines his own life and its race matters in context, examining the anger, expressed and swallowed, that so many African Americans felt. I wasn't on the porch with Skip Gates and James Crowley, so I don't know exactly what was said. And as a veteran of police encounters (I could tell you about the time a white man tried to break into my home in DC and because I was "bellicose" and would not settle down, the police tried to arrest ME), my sympathy lies squarely with Gates. If he raised his voice, and he says he did not, it is certainly understandable. And obviously officer Crowley is an arrogant white man who had the discretionary power to arrest Gates because he didn't like his attitude. Somebody so fully disagreed with his decision that charges were dropped before, not after arraignment.

The Newsweek journalist Ellis Cose updated Price Cobbs' work with a 1993 book, *The Rage of a Privileged Class*. He wrote about the black folk who were literally seething at the micro inequities they experienced, the racial slights they encountered as a matter of course. Going to work on a Saturday and being challenged by a security guard. Hearing locks turn as an expensive store is approached. Being followed as you shop. Being accosted, rudely, by a white police officer on your own-self porch after returning home from an international flight and simply wanting peace. Dr. Gates said he didn't yell, but I wouldn't blame him if he did.

Class is written all over this encounter. Years ago, there was a Washington DC statistic that more than a third of all black men had been stopped while driving. Driving while black is an occupational hazard for too many African Americans. If you scratch a brother you will find some kind of a police encounter. Being made to get out of the new Porsche on one's knees and white shirt while the tags are run. Having a car torn up, supposedly in a search for drugs, and then not reassembled when nothing is found and there is no apology, either. Being spoken harshly to, disparagingly to, in front of one's spouse. Remember the movie *Crash*?

My nephew, Anyi Malik Howell, a budding journalist at Youth Radio spent a May weekend in jail because he "resembled" a robber whose description was simple – black and over 6 feet. The robber's footprint revealed a man with a size 10 shoe. Anyi wears a size 16 or 17. No matter. He spent the weekend in jail, no apology, because he "resembled". In another instance, he was stopped because his 1986 Cadillac (don't ask) was mistaken for a stolen 1996 Toyota – the police officer entered the license plate incorrectly and stopped him at an Oakland BART station, accused him of theft, pulled a gun on him, and had him in tears on his knees in front of his

coworkers. After one of his friends pleaded for the officer to check the plate number again, he did, and abruptly said, it's not the car. Again, no apology.

Skip Gates has access to the White House by virtue of his position at Harvard. Anyi and Pookie and tens of thousands like them don't have access, and nobody wants to hear what happened to them. President Obama was right on time when he suggested the arrest was stupid, and then he reverted to his chosen role as conciliator when he invited Gates and Crowley for a beer. If he really wants to have a beer to talk about the many ways police misuse their discretion and then refuse to apologize when found wrong, he should reach out to Anyi. Or Pookie. Or a brother who lives a stone's throw from the White House and just got pulled over in his new car because race still matters way too much in matters of so-called law enforcement.