

# PMPP Pleasant Mount Press



**Address:** P.O. Box 26, Union Dale, PA 18470-0026

**Fax:** (570) 300-1706

**Email:** [info@PleasantMountPress.com](mailto:info@PleasantMountPress.com)

[www.PleasantMountPress.com](http://www.PleasantMountPress.com)

## Ariadne's Clew



By J.P. Befumo

### ***Excerpt:***

“Oh well,” she muttered. “Anyone who’s got nothing better to do than look at my black ass at six a.m. needs every thrill they can get.”

She made a face, not at the mirror, which dutifully reminded her how silly she looked, but at herself; at a chronic hurt that never went away.

“People just don’t realize,” she said aloud, before realizing she was speaking to the walls.

*It’s so ingrained—even when you’re talking to yourself you never forget that one pervasive fact . . . Nice day, isn’t it? By the way, you’re black.*

She shook her head, but the tenacious mindset clung perversely, like trying to rid yourself of a piece of tape or a wad of chewed gum, or a booger on your fingertip.



*My father always tipped his hat on Sunday morning—people always looked as if they hoped no other white folks would notice if they smiled back at him. In our town people were polite—oh so polite! I once overheard him telling my mom how he wished, just once, someone would argue with him. He had just come home from the barber shop. The owner always cut my father’s hair himself, not because he was a valued customer, we all knew, but because he wouldn’t make any of his employees touch a black man’s hair. Did they think my father didn’t wash, perhaps? Or maybe feared he had lice or fleas or something? Poppa never said anything like that, but I know it hurt him—a lot. Maybe as much as a flogging. Maybe even more. He was telling my mom how the guys at the barber shop were arguing about sports or something. He was waiting for Sol, the owner, to finish up with somebody, and Poppa was just leafing through Newsweek and smiling at the friendly argument going on among the patrons. They were all people Poppa knew, and they certainly knew Poppa. Somehow, everyone shared a tacit understanding that Poppa wouldn’t be welcome to join in the silly conversation.*

*The other mechanics in town stayed in business just on selling gas and preying on commuters and tourists who might break down between Suffolk County and the city, but everybody in our town took their cars to Poppa’s shop. They knew Poppa was honest.*

*“Good thing old Charley Tatum brought his Lincoln to me,” he once told Momma. “He was buying gas over at Rick Grimcowski’s, and Rick tried to tell him he needed a new transmission—said he heard it clunk as he drove in, and if he didn’t do it right away he might not even make it home alive.”*

*“Oh no,” mother gasped. “Is he okay?”*

*“Of course he’s okay. All he needed was a U-joint. Any fool could tell that. I charged him fifteen bucks and sent him on his way.”*

*“You don’t think Rick Grimcowski meant to cheat him do you?”*

*Father looked at her with that face he always made. It said: ‘How can you be so naive?’ “It’s amazing what some people will do to their own friends and neighbors; to anybody for that matter. Ah well, keeping my own life on straight doesn’t leave much time to be judging anybody else. We each answer to the same court when all is said and done.”*

*It was more than just his honesty, too. Father was respectful—not obsequious, mind you—Poppa was no shuffling ‘Yas massah’ niggra. But he treated people the way he thought every human being deserved to be treated by virtue of being the handiwork of the Lord. First, he always told them what was going on, and never left anybody feeling like he was too busy to take time to explain things. He also kept his garage*

*spotless. Even the high-school kids he hired to help out had to have a clean shirt and tie under the coveralls he provided. "When a customer needs to get a car fixed, they have enough problems without having to walk into a pig sty," he would say. When he bought the place, he and mom spent three days scrubbing down the greasy gray walls, and then the remainder of a week painting them white—it took four coats before they were sufficiently bright for his approval. Each night after closing he would mop down the painted concrete floor with a caustic solution of lye and hot water. He always did that job himself.*

*"It ain't fair to ask anyone else to do that job. It's my shop and my job. They're hired to be mechanics; making them wash floors would be demeaning," he answered when I asked why the boss should also have be a janitor.*

A tear filled Melanie's eye as she realized that she'd been ashamed of him. She choked down a little sob.

*I was humiliated, especially in the summer, when he'd keep the big bay doors open at night while he cleaned. With the whole street dark, it made the garage look like a brightly lit puppet stage—playing some old Amos & Andy show: "Yassah missuh Kingfish. Ahs moppin up da flow rite naow suh."*

She tried again, again without success, to arrest the momentum of her thoughts. She succeeded however, in veering the course somewhat.

*When he wasn't at work, he always wore a shirt and tie, even around the house. He was like Ward in *Leave it to Beaver*, except black.*

*"Hello Melanie," my friends' mothers would say. "How are your parents doing? I saw your father at the bank this morning. Such a gentleman. A credit to his race."*