

# The Family Stone

MICHAEL R. LANE

Abraham and Winona Stone are proud owners of Willie's Market, a corner grocery store in a working class community. In nineteen-sixties America, the Civil Rights movement is exploding. Their store provides a vibrant mecca for intriguing personal stories that are poignant and uplifting against a fiery backdrop of civil unrest.

## **About the Author**

Michael R Lane's passions for reading and creative writing inspired him to devour everything from contemporary novels to classical literature. As a high school student, he wrote poetry for his own enjoyment. That joy blossomed into a zeal that would not be contained. Composing poetry rippled into short fiction writing that led to the literary path of creating short stories, novels and screenplays.

Michael studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Point Park College, Sonoma State University, and Portland State University. He has written creatively for more than three decades, and has had poetry and short fiction published in numerous literary publications.

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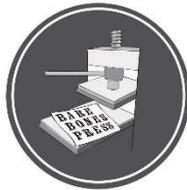
*UFOs and God (a collection of short stories)*

*Blue Sun*

*The Butcher*

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Michael R. Lane



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## CHAPTER FIVE

“Winona called.”

“Is there more, Roberta?”

“I’m just telling you.”

“What she want?”

“Nothin’ special.”

“Humph.” Curtiss turned a page of *The Pittsburgh Press* and scanned it before deciding to read an article about the Civil Rights Act. Roberta grabbed the last sheet from the white heap she had been ironing for the past three hours. They were for a woman in Squirrel Hill. The woman’s husband would arrive at seven a.m. sharp to pick them up before he went to work. Three other Squirrel Hill residents would follow him. Another five hours of ironing due at eight, eight-thirty and nine, respectively. She would have to finish it all tonight, which meant she would be forced to leave her church group meeting early. Her legs ached. She stretched upward with her thin arms, attempting to ease the tightness in her lower back. The alcohol buzz she had earlier had evaporated. She felt sluggish and heavy. When she slowly rolled her neck around, Curtiss glanced up from his reading chair across the room.

He noticed how she had aged twenty years over the last ten; not with elegance, but in hammer and chisel fashion. Age engraved into her forehead, about her neck, under her eyes, and on her hands. Gray hair sprouted enough to be noticed. Fatigue was her constant state.

Roberta turned up a Billy Eckstine song on the radio. Curtiss fidgeted in his chair. She had been a sprite, beautiful young woman when they met, the lead vocalist for the blues band Butterbean. Stars in her eyes and her voice, she alone compared to Billie Holiday. He wondered: had her deterioration been his doing? Had he and their children reduced her to this person? Taking in white folk’s laundry, active only in the church, becoming better friends with Jim Beam than anyone else in her life—she

deserved more. Could he deliver whatever she needed to boomerang her back to the Roberta he loved?

Part of the reason for Roberta's current state could be traced back to the year the Stone family arrived, 1958. Abe Stone had written aunts, uncles and cousins all over the northern part of the country. He had heard good things about the north from his communications with black relatives and friends who had migrated north; less racism and better opportunities being on the top of that list. He knew it was worth a try.

Most said they could stay a week or two. Two offered a month. Curtiss barely knew his cousins. It did not prevent him from extending an absolute welcome. Roberta was not as hospitable. She protested to Curtiss in private, but was polite to the people she referred to as houseguests. Curtiss helped Abe and Winona find jobs and cared for Dwight as if he were his own. Roberta became jealous when she believed Curtiss showed Dwight a favoritism he denied his own sons. This created friction between Winona and Roberta. Sometimes brief skirmishes broke out when one or the other perceived bias; skirmishes that resulted in bad feelings that could last for days.

After Abe and Winona found a place of their own, Roberta and Winona found a safe zone. A level of tolerance emerged that bloomed into courteous friendship.

One day, Mr. Lingle mentioned to Abe that he wanted to sell Willie's Market. It had become difficult for him to manage the store after his wife's death. His three sons, including the store's namesake William, showed no interest in continuing his legacy. Abe and Winona had been saving for such an opportunity. He talked it over with Winona and they decided to make an offer. Through Ron Hightower, they were able to acquire what Abe and Winona believed to be a substantial loan. They offered that, along with all of their savings, to Ralph Lingle. He turned them down. When Mr. Lingle told them what was acceptable, the deal seemed doomed. Abe mentioned his predicament to Curtiss, who loaned him the additional funds.

Once Roberta learned of their plans from Curtiss, her behavior toward the Stones changed. She would visit bearing gifts of pies and cakes and advice about anything she believed might interest Winona. They were seen shopping together and taking lunch, arms interlinked like conjoined twins as they went to church and participated in community projects. She became

a second mother to Dwight and encouraged Curtiss to spend more time with Abe.

Curtiss was unaware of his wife's intentions. His only motivation in loaning his cousins the money was the sole fact that they were family who needed help. To Roberta, there were implicit terms of repayment that exceeded formal agreements and transcended subliminal promises. It did not matter to Roberta that they reimbursed them for the time they lived in their home and paid back everything they borrowed.

Roberta invited Abe and Winona over for dinner. The ploy was that it would give them an opportunity to catch up, since everyone had been too busy to see much of each other. Roberta had literally set the table for her impending proposal with a down-home feast: simple, homemade dishes, when done right, made your mouth water and your palate praise the Lord.

Curtiss eyed the spread on the dining room table of buttered mashed potatoes, rolls and cornbread, vegetable soup, turnip and mustard greens, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, red beans and rice, and honey-baked, hickory-smoked ham while Roberta freshened up. He sampled the sweet tea and lemonade that he made to assure they were acceptable refreshments to accompany the meal. They were. He questioned if anyone would have room for Roberta's legendary peach cobbler, still warm in the kitchen.

Abe and Winona could smell the ham when they walked in. Roberta made a big show of their arrival before she escorted their guests into the dining room.

The children weren't a bother. Roberta arranged for Kevin, Marvin and Dwight to spend the weekend with Tina Russell. Tina owed Roberta a favor. Tina was also in on the ruse.

The dinner conversation was light and festive. Roberta was a gracious and hospitable host throughout. When time came for dessert, everyone begged off for the moment. *Hogs fattened for the slaughter*, Roberta thought of Abe and Winona as she cleared the table.

Everyone retired to the living room. They had switched from lemonade or sweet tea to wine. The couples made themselves comfortable. Abe sat next to Winona on the couch. Roberta put a stack of 45s on the record player and then joined Curtiss, who had taken a seat in his favorite chair. Roberta dropped down on the armrest beside her husband, draping an arm around his shoulders.

“Roberta, thank you for doing this,” Winona said.

“No problem; anytime,” Roberta said.

“It feels good to spend time with family,” Winona said.

“That’s for sure,” Abe added.

“Like my baby said, anytime.” Curtiss placed an arm across Roberta’s legs. “You know, we should make this a regular thing.”

“I’m up for that as long as you plan on doing your part in the kitchen next time,” Roberta said. Everyone laughed.

“I will, but that’s not what I mean. It doesn’t have to be all out, all of the time.”

“I understand,” Abe said. “A regularly-scheduled break from the routine.”

“Like movies or the theater,” Winona said.

“Or dancing,” Roberta added. The women smiled at each other.

“Or—,” Abe said, being interrupted by Curtiss.

“Game night!” Curtiss and Abe said simultaneously.

“*Exactly,*” Curtiss said. “Dominoes, cards, Scrabble, Pokeno—whatever we’re in the mood for.”

The women stopped smiling. Their demeanors went from happy to dismay. They both knew why their husbands were not keen on their ideas. Abe was a mediocre dancer who thought everyone made fun of him when he danced. Curtiss was as fidgety as a hopped-up child on sweets when he and Roberta went to a film or play.

“That’s also an idea,” Winona said about the game night suggestion, not veiling her annoyance.

“Yes, it is,” Roberta said, matching Winona’s tenor. The men noticed the tone in their wives’ voices as well as the expressions on their faces.

“Maybe we could do both,” Curtiss said.

“Yeah, kind of mix it up,” Abe said.

“Next time we can have this get together at our place,” Winona said.

“Or a dance club,” Roberta said.

The men smiled and nodded. Winona and Roberta laughed.

They agreed on two weeks from the day to meet at the Stones’ house for dinner and dominoes. Dancing and movie dates were to be planned for later. In either case, no children were allowed.

Once that was settled, the music had a chance to sink in. Roberta snapped her fingers and swayed in time to Fontella Bass singing *Rescue Me*.

“I like this song,” Winona said. Abe agreed.

“Oh yeah,” Curtiss said.

“The way Fontella sings this is like soft butter on hot biscuits. Her voice melts in your ears.” Everyone but Roberta laughed at her metaphor. She was too locked into the music.

“Have you ever heard of Butterbean?” Roberta asked Winona and Abe.

“The food?” Abe said.

“No, the music group,” Roberta said.

“I’ve heard of them,” Abe said. “Never heard any of their music.”

“I used to sing lead,” Roberta said.

“You mentioned that to me before,” Winona said.

“We were mostly a blues band. We’d mix it up with a little jazz, soul, and R & B. Even throw in a little pop and country now and then.”

“My baby can sing,” Curtiss said.

Curtiss was right. Roberta harmonized with Fontella Bass in perfect pitch. The song faded, but Roberta’s voice rang on clear and true.

“What happened to Butterbean?” Winona asked.

“Time, adult responsibilities taking precedence over childish dreams—the usual. You know what that’s like,” Roberta said to Winona and Abe.

Abe and Winona nodded. Abe took Winona’s hand. They glanced at each other. The suspicion passed between them that Roberta might be referring to the realization of their dream: to own a store. Abe detected a hint of resentment in Roberta’s voice. He wondered if Winona sensed the same.

“Refill?” Curtiss asked. Everyone’s glass was near empty. The consensus was yes. Curtiss did the honors as The Miracles sang *The Tracks of My Tears*. Roberta again was in perfect harmony with the lead singer.

“Did Butterbean ever make any recordings?” Winona asked once Curtiss was settled back into his seat.

“Unfortunately, no,” Roberta said. “We’d get close; but for one reason or another we’d fall short. Opportunities and money; that’s the name of the game. They drive everything in business, whether it’s janitorial services, grocery stores, or music. They all dance to the same tune.”

Curtiss sensed that Roberta was falling into one of her melancholy moods. She often did that when she was drinking and reminisced about Butterbean.

“Well, that’s water under the bridge now,” Curtiss said. He gave Roberta a couple of reassuring pats on her legs. He noticed something in the way his wife stared at Abe and Winona. Curtiss did not like the look in her eyes. He knew his wife well enough to know that she was up to something.

“I spoke to Melon the other day,” Roberta said.

“Who’s Melon?” Abe asked.

“He’s the drummer and former manager of Butterbean,” Curtiss said.

“He’s getting the group back together,” Roberta said.

“Why is this the first time I’m hearing about this?” Curtiss asked.

“I was going to tell you, honey, as soon as I made a decision.”

“A decision to do what?” Curtiss asked.

“I want to go back to the band,” Roberta said.

Junior Walker and The All Stars filled the room with *Shotgun*.

“Melon says he found someone who will record us an album on the cheap without cutting corners on quality,” Roberta said.

No one said anything. They sipped their wine.

“All he needs is ten thousand dollars to make it happen.”

“Honey, don’t do this,” Curtiss said.

“Now, hear me out. I’ve spoken to Melon and the rest of the band. We’re ready to make this happen. All we need is a little help.”

“Are you asking us to back Butterbean?” Abe asked.

“She’s not doing any such thing,” Curtiss said.

“We’re good. Butterbean is an excellent band. With me as the lead singer, there would be no telling how far we could go.”

“We can’t help you, Roberta,” Winona said.

“All we’re asking for is a loan to get us going. We’ll pay you back in no time.”

“We don’t know anything about the music business,” Abe said, looking for a way out.

“You don’t have to. Leave that to Melon and me. We’ll handle everything. All we need is a little seed money from you and Winona, and we’ll take it from there.”

“We can’t do that, Roberta,” Abe said.

“Why not?”

“All of our money is tied up in the store.”

“Are you two telling me Willie’s Market ain’t making you good money? Everything on that table came from your store. Just about everything in our cupboards too.”

“We’re doing all right, but we’re not pulling down the kind of money you’re talking about.”

“All it would take is ten thousand dollars to make this happen. Like I said, seed money: we’d get it back to you before you know it.”

“Roberta—,” Curtiss said.

“Let me finish, Curtiss.”

“I think you’ve already said enough,” Curtiss said.

“Maybe you’re right. Abe, Winona—what do you say? Are you willing to loan us the cash?”

“Roberta, we don’t have the money to loan to you,” Abe said.

“You mean, you *won’t* loan us the money.”

“He means,” Winona said, “that we don’t have that kind of money to spare. Most of what we make goes right back into the store.”

“We’re solvent, but our average profit margin is less than a quarter of what you’re asking,” Abe said. “To give you the money you need, we’d have to take out a loan.”

“I see,” Roberta said.

“Roberta, honey,” Curtiss said.

“Don’t ‘Roberta, honey’ me. So that’s how it is.”

“How what is?” Abe said.

“We take in you poor, backwoods, sorry bumpkin asses—”

“Now, wait a minute, Roberta—,” Abe said.

“Feed you, clothe you, welcome you into our home, and you can’t even show a little reciprocation when one of us is in need.”

“They don’t owe us anything,” Curtiss said.

“*This ain’t about us,*” Roberta screamed at Curtiss. “This is about me. This about the music career I’ve always dreamed of having. The music career that I deserve.”

“I think we should leave,” Abe said, more to Curtiss than to Roberta.

“Get the hell out,” Roberta said. “Get the hell out of my house!”

The music had stopped. Abe and Winona got up and made their way to the front door. Roberta blocked their way.

Bitterness like Curtiss had never before heard from his wife spewed into the faces of his cousins. The pity Abe had felt earlier for Roberta dissolved into anger. Winona wept with apologies as Roberta cursed and slashed their characters. Curtiss could see the fury in his cousin's face. Abe would have knocked her flat if Roberta were a man; not as much for what Roberta said to him, but for having made Winona cry. Abe led his wife away without a parting word; only a dissenting look that told Curtiss that while Abe appreciated what they had done, things between them had reached a continental divide—a breach only an epic earthquake could unite.

Curtiss and Roberta argued for hours about her behavior after Abe and Winona left. Almost five years had passed since that time and still her anger burned red.

Roberta flexed her right wrist several times. She sprinkled water from an aqua-colored water shaker onto the white sheet, then set the hot electric iron in motion, smoothing out wrinkles.

“You gotta work tonight?” Roberta asked.

“Yep.”

“When's Melon coming back?”

“Next week.”

“You the boss; why you got to be the one to make up his time?”

“Because I'm the boss.”

“Don't seem right.”

“Right or wrong, that's the way it is. That reminds me. Kevin!”

“What you bothering that boy for?”

“Kevin! Get down here! Did he do his reading today?”

“I don't remember.”

“How can you not remember, Roberta? We have to stay on this boy. Kevin!”

“Yeah,” Kevin shouted down from the upstairs hall.

“Yeah? Bring your butt down here!”

“Why you so hard on the child?”

“Roberta, hard on him ain't hardly what I am. All I want is an education for our son.”

“You doing all right without one.”

“Educated men doing better.”

“Like Abe Stone?”

“Like Abe Stone.”

“He got lucky.”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“That man’s smart and ambitious—did you do your reading?” Curtiss’s eyes moved from his wife to level on his son’s face.

“Yeah.”

“Sit down.” Kevin sat in the chair to the left of his father. “Teach me something.”

“What’d you want to know?”

“Tell me something about what you read.”

Roberta looked at her son. He seemed perplexed. With an earnest nod from his mother, Kevin returned his father’s stare. Curtiss patiently waited for his son to speak.

“In 1773,” Kevin began, “some American colonialists—I mean colonists—dressed up like Indians and threw some tea into Boston Harbor. They called it The Boston Tea Party.”

“Why’d they do that?”

“Because they were mad.”

“About what?”

“What the British did to ‘em.”

“What’d they do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think.” Curtiss tapped Kevin’s forehead with his forefinger.

“They were helping some tea company.”

“What was their name?”

“Whose?”

“The tea company’s?”

“Give him a chance, Curtiss.” Curtiss ignored Roberta. He continued to press Kevin for an answer with his stare.

“East something, ah...East Indian...East In-dee-ah, East India Company; they were a private company. The British wanted to help ‘em not go broke. They figured a way to make money and that made the colonists mad, because they were making less money. That’s why they

dressed up like Indians and got on those ships and threw their tea overboard.”

Curtiss nodded his approval. Mother and son smiled.

“That didn’t hurt any, did it?”

“No, sir.”

Curtiss leaned in close to his oldest child. “When you study something, Kevin, you need to know it backward and forward, inside and out. Make it yours. That way, no matter what the teacher asks, you’re ready. That’s what education’s all about: preparation, same as life. The more knowledge you get, the better prepared you are, the more you can achieve.”

“That’s right, baby,” Roberta chimed in.

“When you apply yourself there’s nothing you can’t do.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s all the questions I have tonight.”

“Did you get your clothes ready for school?” Roberta asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Can I go over to Dwight’s house after school tomorrow?” Roberta’s face soured. She rested the iron on its heel.

“You still on punishment,” Curtiss answered. “If you keep up the good work we might cut it short.” Roberta glared at her husband.

“Tomorrow’s out of the question,” Roberta said. Kevin hung his head.

“What’s Marvin doing upstairs?” Roberta asked.

“Nothing.”

“I can’t hear you with your head down.”

“Leave the boy alone, Roberta.”

“I’m not talking to you, Curtiss.”

“Marvin not doing nothing, mama; reading some comic book.”

“What were you doing before your daddy interrupted you?” Curtiss glared at Roberta.

“Studying,” Kevin answered. Curtiss sucked his teeth, something he only did when angry or in deep thought.

“Go on back upstairs,” Curtiss said. “We’ll talk later.”

Roberta waited until she heard Kevin shut his bedroom door before she spoke. “I don’t like Kevin hanging out with Abraham Stone’s boy.”

“Dwight’s a good influence on Kevin.”

“He’s just like his daddy.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the Stones.”

“How can you say that after the way they treated us, after all the hospitality we showed them?”

“They owe us nothing. They’re family. And let me remind you, Abe’s a big reason I’m boss. They wanted to give him the job, remember? He talked the owner into making me supervisor.”

“Big deal.”

“You used to think it was.”

“They can do a lot more.”

“We’re comfortable.”

“Not as comfortable as the Stones.”

“They earned it.”

“Why you so protective of them?”

“I’m finished with this conversation. And what’s this I hear about you and Mabel and Tina not goin’ pay what you owe Abe Stone?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking ‘bout.” Roberta stared down at her ironing.

“Mark Brown overheard Mabel talking to Tina Russell at Bible study about some stupid plan you three have cooked up not to pay your grocery bills.”

“What if we did? It’d serve him right.”

“Forget it, Roberta.”

“We should be getting our groceries free.”

“If I find out you’re not sending the money ‘round to the store to pay our grocery bill, I’ll start paying it myself.”

“You do that and you’d better find yourself another wife.”

Curtiss stood, folded his newspaper, and placed it under his right arm.

“One more thing, Roberta. Kevin’s been getting a little accident prone lately. I walked past the boys’ room Sunday just after he’d taken off his shirt. There were bruises on his back. He said he got them playing football. Is that true?”

Roberta lifted the iron and made a couple of deft passes over the sheet. “If that’s what he said.”

“They didn’t look like football bruises to me. Seemed more like somebody took a strap to our son’s bare back.” Curtiss waited for Roberta to respond. Roberta continued ironing.

“Make no mistake. I love you, but if I find out you’re abusing our kids, my sons and me are gettin’ the hell out of here. Understand?”

Roberta and Curtiss unflinchingly stared at one another.

“Bye,” Roberta said, holding the hot iron above the sheet.

Roberta assumed Curtiss would go into either the living room or upstairs bedroom to finish his newspaper. Nancy Wilson crooned *Gentle Is My Love* on the radio. Roberta did not hear the closet door open and close or the front door gently snap shut. She pressed the hot iron harder on the final sheet, steaming away spots of water and an occasional tear.