I was about to make a feeble effort at protest, but then, in a rush, she said that she had been standing inside a store that afternoon, buying some buttons for a Sunday dress for me, when, on looking up, she observed me making a spectacle of myself in front of four boys. She went on to say that, after all the years she had spent drumming into me the proper way to conduct myself when speaking to young men, it had pained her to see me behave in the manner of a slut (only she used the French-patois word for it) in the street and that just to see me had caused her to feel shame.

The word “slut” (in patois) was repeated over and over, until suddenly I felt as if I were drowning in a well but instead of the well being filled with water it was filled with the word “slut,” and it was pouring in through my eyes, my ears, my nostrils, my mouth. As if to save myself, I turned to her and said, “Well, like father like son, like mother like daughter.”