John Howard Griffin

BLACK LIKE ME

Foreword by Studs Terkel

Afterword by Authorized Biographer Robert Bonazzi

Photographs by Don Rutledge • Now Indexed

A BOOK FOR OUR TIME

Studs Terkel tells us in his Foreword to the definitive Griffin Estate Edition of *Black Like Me*: “This is a contemporary book, you bet.” Indeed. *Black Like Me* is required reading in thousands of high schools and colleges for this very reason. Regardless of how much progress has been made in eliminating outright racism from American life. *Black Like Me* endures as a great human - and humanitarian - document. In our era, when “international” terrorism is most often defined in terms of a single ethnic designation and a single religion, we need to be reminded that America has been blinded by fear and racial intolerance before. As John Lennon wrote, “Living is easy with eyes closed.” *Black Like Me* is the story of a man who opened his eyes, and helped an entire nation to do likewise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Known primarily as the author of the modern classic. *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin (1920-1980) was a true Renaissance man. He fought in the French Resistance and served in the Army-Air Force in the South Pacific during World War II. Griffin became an acclaimed novelist and essayist, a remarkable portrait photographer and a musicologist recognized as an expert on Gregorian Chant.

On October 28, 1959, John Howard Griffin dyed himself black and began an odyssey of discover] through the segregated Deep South. The result was *Black Like Me*. arguably the single most important documentation of 20th century American racism ever written.

Because of Black Like Me, Ggiffin was personally vilified, hanged in effigy in his hometown, thrreatened with deatd, and – asl late as 1975 – severely beaten by the KKK. Griffin's courageous act and the book it generated earned him international respect as ha human rights activist. griffin worked with Martin Luther King, Dick Gregory, Saul Alinsky, and NAACP Director Roy Wilkins throughout the Civil Rights era. He taught at the University of peace with Nobel Peace Laureate Father Dominique Pire, and delivered more than a thousand lectures in Europe, Canada and the US.

Earlier, during a decade of blindness (1947-1957), Griffin wrote nobels. his 1952 bestseller, *The Devil Rides Outside*, was a test case in a controversial trial before the US Supreme Court that resulted in a landmark decision against censorship. Two of his most important books have been published posthumously as part of a growing revival of interest in griffin' work: *Street of the Seven Angels*, a satiric anti-censorship movel, and *Scatterd Shadown: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision*.

Works by John Howard Griffin

The Devil Rides Outside (1952, Ebook 2010)

Nuni (1956, Ebook 2010)

Land of the High Sky (1959)

Black Like Me (1961)

The Definitive Griffin Estate Edition (2004)

The Definitive Griffin Estate Edition, Revised with Index (2006)

Ebook edition (2010)

50th Anniversary Edition (2011)

The John Howard Griffin Reader (1968)

The Church and the Black Man (1969)

A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton (1970)

Twelve Photographic Portraits (1973)

Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures (1974)

A Time to Be Human (1977)

The Hermitage Journals (1981)

Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton's Hermitage Years (1983, 1993, Ebook 2010)

Pilgrimage (1985)

Encounters with the Other (1997)

Street of the Seven Angels (2003, Ebook 2010)

Available Light: Exile in Mexico (2008, Ebook 2010

Scattered Shadows: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision (2004, Ebook 2010)

"I wet my sponge, poured dye on it, and touched up the corners of my mouth and lips, which were always difficult spots."

- *Black Like Me*, page 119

This photograph of Griffin applying the "dye" to his face is here published for the first time. This and other historic photographs included in this edition of *Black Like Me* were taken by Don Rutledge in 1959 in New Orleans.

Black Like Me

John Howard Griffin

Foreword by Studs Terkel

The Definitive
Griffin Estate Edition,
corrected from the original manuscripts,
with historic photographs by Don Rutledge
and an Afterword by Robert Bonazzi

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In Memory of

John Howard Griffin (1920-1980)

and

Elizabeth Griffin-Bonazzi (1935-2000)

Contents

Foreword

Reading *Black Like Me* 45 years after it originally appeared is much like walking with a ghost. It is a journey through a haunted land with no cicerone to show you the way. Much has changed during those tumultuous years, especially in the South, and yet much has remained the prickly same. The black-white matter is still the Great American Obsession.

What is it like to be the *Other*? A few, very few, thoughtful heroic whites, through the four centuries since the arrival of the first slave ship at Charleston Harbor, have at one time or another considered the idea. It was one man who actually followed through. John Howard Griffin, a white Texan, thought the unthinkable and did the undoable: he became a black man.

Griffin, a student of theology and disciple of Jacques Maritain, a musicologist, photographer and a novelist, decided to become a Negro. (The phrase African-American had not yet enriched our vocabulary).

With the help of a dermatologist, he ingested pigment-changing medicines and subjected himself to intense ultra-violet rays. Though he, in the process, suffered considerable discomfort, he finally "passed." To add the final touch, he shaved his head clean bald and had, indeed, become an approaching-middle-aged black man of some dignity. He was all set to wander across the Deep South, especially Mississippi. His book is in the form of a diary. The first entry: October 28, 1959. That was the day he became possessed by the challenge. The final one: December 15. That was the day he returned home to his family in Mansfield, Texas as a white husband and father.

What follows is an epilogue; a recounting of the firestorm that ensued with the publication of *Black Like Me*. He was celebrated, of

course, in national journals as well as on TV and radio. The vilification came along with it. It was a matter of course. What mattered most, and still matters most, is the difficulty white Americans have in feeling what it is to be the *Other*.

A black woman I know speaks of “the feeling tone.” John Howard Griffin, in his perilous, humiliating, and at times hilarious, yet, strangely enough, hopeful adventure, captured “the feeling tone” as no white man I’ve ever known.

This is a contemporary book, you bet.

- Studs Terkel
Chicago, 2004

Preface

This may not be all of it. It may not cover all the questions, but it is what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down.

Some whites will say this is not really it. They will say this is the white man's experience as a Negro in the South, not the Negro's.

But this is picayunish, and we no longer have time for that. We no longer have time to atomize principles and beg the question. We fill too many gutters while we argue unimportant points and confuse issues.

The Negro. The South. These are the details. The real story is the universal one of men who destroy the souls and bodies of other men (and in the process destroy themselves) for reasons neither really understands. It is the story of the persecuted, the defrauded, the feared and the detested. I could have been a Jew in Germany, a Mexican in a number of states, or a member of any "inferior" group. Only the details would have differed. The story would be the same.

This began as a scientific research study of the Negro in the South, with careful compilation of data for analysis. But I filed the data, and here publish the journal of my own experience living as a Negro. I offer it in all its crudity and rawness. It traces the changes that occur to heart and body and intelligence when the so-called first-class citizen is cast on the junk heap of second-class citizenship.

—John Howard Griffin, 1961

Rest at pale evening …
A tall slim tree …
Night coming tenderly
Black like me.

—Langston Hughes
from “Dream Variation”

Deep South Journey

1959

October 28, 1959

For years the idea had haunted me, and that night it returned more insistently than ever.

If a white man became a Negro in the Deep South, what adjustments would he have to make? What is it like to experience discrimination based on skin color, something over which one has no control?

This speculation was sparked again by a report that lay on my desk in the old barn that served as my office. The report mentioned the rise in suicide tendency among Southern Negroes. This did not mean that they killed themselves, but rather that they had reached a stage where they simply no longer cared whether they lived or died.

It was that bad, then, despite the white Southern legislators who insisted that they had a "wonderfully harmonious relationship" with Negroes. I lingered on in my office at my parents' Mansfield, Texas, farm. My wife and children slept in our home five miles away. I sat there, surrounded by the smells of autumn coming through my open window, unable to leave, unable to sleep.

How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth? Though we lived side by side throughout the South, communication between the two races had simply ceased to exist. Neither really knew what went on with those of the other race. The Southern Negro will not tell the white man the truth. He long ago learned that if he speaks a truth unpleasing to the white, the white will make life miserable for him.

The only way I could see to bridge the gap between us was to become a Negro. I decided I would do this.

I prepared to walk into a life that appeared suddenly mysterious and frightening. With my decision to become a Negro I realized that

I, a specialist in race issues, really knew nothing of the Negro's real problem.

October 29

I drove into Fort Worth in the afternoon to discuss the project with my old friend George Levitan. He is the owner of *Sepia*, an internationally distributed Negro magazine with a format similar to that of *Look*. A large, middle-aged man, he long ago won my admiration by offering equal job opportunities to members of any race, choosing according to their qualifications and future potentialities. With an on-the-job training program, he has made *Sepia* a model, edited, printed and distributed from the million-dollar Fort Worth plant.

It was a beautiful autumn day. I drove to his house, arriving there in mid-afternoon. His door was always open, so I walked in and called him.

An affectionate man, he embraced me, offered me coffee and had me take a seat. Through the glass doors of his den I looked out to see a few dead leaves floating on the water of his swimming pool.

He listened, his cheek buried in his fist as I explained the project.

"It's a crazy idea," he said. "You'll get yourself killed fooling around down there." But he could not hide his enthusiasm.

I told him the South's racial situation was a blot on the whole country, and especially reflected against us overseas; and that the best way to find out if we had second-class citizens and what their plight was would be to become one of them.

"But it'll be terrible," he said. "You'll be making yourself the target of the most ignorant rabble in the country. If they ever caught you, they'd be sure to make an example of you." He gazed out the window, his face puffed with concentration.

"But you know - it is a great idea. I can see right now you're going through with it, so what can I do to help?"

“Pay the tab and I’ll give *Sepia* some articles - or let you use some chapters from the book I’ll write.”

He agreed, but suggested that before I made final plans I discuss it with Mrs. Adelle Jackson, *Sepia*’s editorial director. Both of us have a high regard for this extraordinary woman’s opinions. She rose from a secretarial position to become one of the country’s distinguished editors.

After leaving Mr. Levitan, I called on her. At first she thought the idea was impossible. “You don’t know what you’d be getting into, John,” she said. She felt that when my book was published, I would be the butt of resentment from all the hate groups, that they would stop at nothing to discredit me, and that many decent whites would be afraid to show me courtesies when others might be watching. And, too, there are the deeper currents among even well-intentioned Southerners, currents that make the idea of a white man’s assuming nonwhite identity a somewhat repulsive step down. And other currents that say, “Don’t stir up anything. Let’s try to keep things peaceful.”

And then I went home and told my wife. After she recovered from her astonishment, she unhesitatingly agreed that if I felt I must do this thing then I must. She offered, as her part of the project, her willingness to lead, with our three children, the unsatisfactory family life of a household deprived of husband and father.

I returned at night to my barn office. Outside my open window, frogs and crickets made the silence more profound. A chill breeze rustled dead leaves in the woods. It carried an odor of fresh-turned dirt, drawing my attention to the fields where the tractor had only a few hours ago stopped plowing the earth. I sensed the radiance of it in the stillness, sensed the earthworms that burrowed back into the depths of the furrows, sensed the animals that wandered in the woods in search of nocturnal rut or food. I felt the beginning loneliness, the terrible dread of what I had decided to do.

October 30

Lunched with Mrs. Jackson, Mr. Levitan, and three FBI men from the Dallas office. Though I knew my project was outside their jurisdiction and that they could not support it in any way, I wanted them to know about it in advance. We discussed it in considerable detail. I decided not to change my name or identity. I would merely change my pigmentation and allow people to draw their own conclusions. If asked who I was or what I was doing, I would answer truthfully.

"Do you suppose they'll treat me as John Howard Griffin, regardless of my color - or will they treat me as some nameless Negro, even though I am still the same man?" I asked.

"You're not serious," one of them said. "They're not going to ask you any questions. As soon as they see you, you'll be a Negro and that's all they'll ever want to know about you."

November 1 New Orleans

Arrived by plane as night set in. I checked my bags at the Hotel Monteleone in the French Quarter and began walking.

Strange experience. When I was blind I came here and learned cane-walking in the French Quarter. Now, the most intense excitement filled me as I saw the places I visited while blind. I walked miles, trying to locate everything by sight that I once knew only by smell and sound. The streets were full of sightseers. I wandered among them, entranced by the narrow streets, the iron-grill balconies, the green plants and vines glimpsed in lighted flagstone courtyards. Every view was magical, whether it was a deserted, lamplit street corner or the neon hubbub of Royal Street.

I walked past garish bars where hawkers urged me in to see the "gorgeous girls" do their hip-shaking; and they left the doors open sufficiently to show dim, smoke-blue interiors crossed by long rays of pink spotlights that turned the seminude girls' flesh rose. I strolled on. Jazz blared from the bars. Odors of old stone and Creole cooking and coffee filled the streets.

At Broussard's, I had supper in a superb courtyard under the stars - *huîtres variées*, green salad, white wine and coffee; the same meal I had there in past years. I saw everything - the lanterns, the trees, the candlelit tables, the little fountain, as though I were looking through a fine camera lens. Surrounded by elegant waiters, elegant people and elegant food, I thought of the other parts of town where I would live in the days to come. Was there a place in New Orleans where a Negro could buy *huîtres variées*?

At ten I finished dinner and went to telephone an old friend who lives in New Orleans. He insisted I stay at his house, and I was relieved, for I foresaw all sorts of difficulties staying in a hotel while I turned into a Negro.

November 2

In the morning I called the medical information service and asked for the names of some prominent dermatologists. They gave me three names. The first one I called gave me an appointment immediately, so I took the streetcar to his office and explained my needs. He had had no experience with such a request, but was willing enough to aid me in my project. After taking my case history, he asked me to wait while he consulted with some of his colleagues by phone as to the best method of darkening my skin.

After some time he stepped back into the room and said they had all agreed we would attempt it with a medication taken orally, followed by exposure to ultraviolet rays. He explained they used it on victims of vitiligo, a disease that causes white spots to appear on the face and body. Until this medication was discovered, the victims of this disease had had to wear pancake make-up when they went outside in public. It could be dangerous to use, however. It usually took from six weeks to three months to darken the skin pigmentation. I told him I could not spare that much time and we decided to try accelerated treatments, with constant blood tests to see how my system tolerated the medication.

I got the prescription filled, returned to the house and took the tablets. Two hours later I exposed my entire body to ultraviolet rays from a sunlamp.

My host remained away from the house most of the time. I told him I was on an assignment that I could not discuss and that he should not be surprised if I simply disappeared without saying good-by. I knew that he had no prejudices, but I nevertheless did not want to involve him in any way, since reprisals might be taken against him by bigots or by his associates, who might resent his role as my host once my story became known. He gave me a key to his

house and we agreed to maintain our different schedules without worrying about the usual host-guest relationship.

After supper I took the trolley into town and walked through some of the Negro sections in the South Rampart-Dryades Street sections. They are mostly poor sections with cafés, bars and businesses of all sorts alongside cluttered residences. I searched for an opening, a way to enter the world of the Negro, some contact perhaps. As yet, it was a blank to me. My greatest preoccupation was that moment of transition when I would “pass over.” Where and how would I do it? To get from the white world into the Negro world is a complex matter. I looked for the chink in the wall through which I might pass unobserved.

November 6

For the past four days, I had spent my time at the doctor's or closed up in my room with cotton pads over my eyes and the sun lamp turned on me. They had made blood tests twice and found no indication of damage to the liver. But the medication produced lassitude and I felt constantly on the verge of nausea.

The doctor, well-disposed, gave me many warnings about the dangers of this project insofar as my contact with Negroes was concerned. Now that he had had time to think, he was beginning to doubt the wisdom of this course, or perhaps he felt strongly his responsibility. In any event, he warned me that I must have some contact in each major city so my family could check on my safety from time to time.

"I believe in the brotherhood of man," he said. "I respect the race. But I can never forget when I was an intern and had to go down on South Rampart Street to patch them up. Three or four would be sitting in a bar or at a friend's house. They were apparently friends one minute and then something would come up and one would get slashed up with a knife. We're willing enough to go all the way for them, but we've got this problem - how can you render the duties of justice to men when you're afraid they'll be so unaware of justice that they may destroy you? - especially since their attitude toward their own race is a destructive one." He said this with real sadness. I told him my contacts indicated that Negroes themselves were aware of this dilemma and they were making strong efforts to unify the race, to condemn among themselves any tactic or any violence or injustice that would reflect against their race as a whole.

"I'm glad to hear that," he said, obviously unconvinced.

He also told me things that Negroes had told him - that the lighter the skin the more trustworthy the Negro. I was astonished to see an

intelligent man fall for this cliché, and equally astonished that Negroes would advance it, for in effect it placed the dark Negro in an inferior position and fed the racist idea of judging a man by his color.

When not lying under the lamp, I walked the streets of New Orleans to orient myself. Each day I stopped at a sidewalk shoe-shine stand near the French Market. The shine boy was an elderly man, large, keenly intelligent and a good talker. He had lost a leg during World War I. He showed none of the obsequiousness of the Southern Negro, but was polite and easy to know. (Not that I had any illusions that I knew him, for he was too astute to allow any white man that privilege.) I told him I was a writer, touring the Deep South to study living conditions, civil rights, etc., but I did not tell him I would do this as a Negro. Finally, we exchanged names. He was called Sterling Williams. I decided he might be the contact for my entry into the Negro community.

November 7

I had my last visit with the doctor in the morning. The treatment had not worked as rapidly or completely as we had hoped, but I had a dark undercoating of pigment which I could touch up perfectly with stain. We decided I must shave my head, since I had no curl. The dosage was established and the darkness would increase as time passed. From there, I was on my own.

The doctor showed much doubt and perhaps regret that he had ever cooperated with me in this transformation. Again he gave me many firm warnings and told me to get in touch with him any time of the day or night if I got into trouble. As I left his office, he shook my hand and said gravely, “Now you go into oblivion.”

A cold spell had hit New Orleans, so that lying under the lamp that day was a comfortable experience. I decided to shave my head that evening and begin my journey.

In the afternoon, my host looked at me with friendly alarm. “I don’t know what you’re up to,” he said, “but I’m worried.”

I told him not to be and suggested I would probably leave sometime that night. He said he had a meeting, but would cancel it. I asked him not to. “I don’t want you here when I go,” I said.

“What are you going to do - be a Puerto Rican or something?” he asked.

“Something like that,” I said. “There may be ramifications. I’d rather you didn’t know anything about it. I don’t want you involved.”

He left around five. I fixed myself a bite of supper and drank many cups of coffee, putting off the moment when I would shave my head, grind in the stain and walk out into the New Orleans night as a Negro.

I telephoned home, but no one answered. My nerves simmered with dread. Finally I began to cut my hair and shave my head. It took hours and many razor blades before my pate felt smooth to my hand. The house settled into silence around me. Occasionally, I heard the trolley car rattle past as the night grew late. I applied coat after coat of stain, wiping each coat off. Then I showered to wash off all the excess. I did not look into the mirror until I finished dressing and had packed my duffel bags.

Turning off all the lights, I went into the bathroom and closed the door. I stood in the darkness before the mirror, my hand on the light switch. I forced myself to flick it on.

In the flood of light against white tile, the face and shoulders of a stranger - a fierce, bald, very dark Negro - glared at me from the glass. He in no way resembled me.

The transformation was total and shocking. I had expected to see myself disguised, but this was something else. I was imprisoned in the flesh of an utter stranger, an unsympathetic one with whom I felt no kinship. All traces of the John Griffin I had been were wiped from existence. Even the senses underwent a change so profound it filled me with distress. I looked into the mirror and saw nothing of the white John Griffin's past. No, the reflections led back to Africa, back to the shanty and the ghetto, back to the fruitless struggles against the mark of blackness. Suddenly, almost with no mental preparation, no advance hint, it became clear and permeated my whole being. My inclination was to fight against it. I had gone too far. I knew now that there is no such thing as a disguised white man, when the black won't rub off. The black man is wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been. I was a newly created Negro who must go out that door and live in a world unfamiliar to me.

The completeness of this transformation appalled me. It was unlike anything I had imagined. I became two men, the observing one and the one who panicked, who felt Negroid even into the depths of his entrails. I felt the beginnings of great loneliness, not because I was a Negro but because the man I had been, the self I

knew, was hidden in the flesh of another. If I returned home to my wife and children they would not know me. They would open the door and stare blankly at me. My children would want to know who is this large, bald Negro. If I walked up to friends, I knew I would see no flicker of recognition in their eyes.

I had tampered with the mystery of existence and I had lost the sense of my own being. This is what devastated me. The Griffin that was had become invisible.

The worst of it was that I could feel no companionship with this new person. I did not like the way he looked. Perhaps, I thought, this was only the shock of a first reaction. But the thing was done and there was no possibility of turning back. For a few weeks I must be this aging, bald Negro; I must walk through a land hostile to my color, hostile to my skin.

How did one start? The night lay out there waiting. A thousand questions presented themselves. The strangeness of my situation struck me anew - I was a man born old at midnight into a new life. How does such a man act? Where does he go to find food, water, a bed?

The phone rang and I felt my nerves convulse. I answered and told the caller my host was out for the evening. Again the strangeness, the secret awareness that the person on the other end did not know he talked with a Negro. Downstairs, I heard the soft chiming of the old clock. I knew it was midnight though I did not count. It was time to go.

With enormous self-consciousness I stepped from the house into the darkness. No one was in sight. I walked to the corner and stood under a streetlamp, waiting for the trolley.

I heard footsteps. From the shadows, the figure of a white man emerged. He came and stood beside me. It was all new. Should I nod and say “Good evening,” or simply ignore him? He stared intently at me. I stood like a statue, wondering if he would speak, would question me.

Though the night was cold, sweat dampened my body. This also was new. It was the first time this adult Negro had ever perspired. I thought it vaguely illuminating that the Negro Griffin's sweat felt exactly the same to his body as the white Griffin's. As I had suspected they would be, my discoveries were naïve ones, like those of a child.

The streetcar, with pale light pouring from its windows, rumbled to a stop. I remembered to let the white man on first. He paid his fare and walked to an empty seat, ignoring me. I felt my first triumph. He had not questioned me. The ticket-taker on the streetcar nodded affably when I paid my fare. Though streetcars are not segregated in New Orleans, I took a seat near the back. Negroes there glanced at me without the slightest suspicion or interest. I began to feel more confident. I asked one of them where I could find a good hotel. He said the Butler on Rampart was as good as any, and told me what bus to take from downtown.

I got off and began walking along Canal Street in the heart of town, carrying one small duffel bag in each hand. I passed the same taverns and amusement places where the hawkers had solicited me on previous evenings. They were busy, urging white men to come in and see the girls. The same smells of smoke and liquor and dampness poured out through half-open doors. Tonight they did not solicit me. Tonight they looked at me but did not see me.

I went into a drugstore that I had patronized every day since my arrival. I walked to the cigarette counter, where the same girl I had talked with every day waited on me.

"Package of Picayunes, please," I said in response to her blank look.

She handed them to me, took my bill and gave me change with no sign of recognition, none of the banter of previous days.

Again my reaction was that of a child. I was aware that the street smells, and the drugstore odors of perfume and arnica, were exactly the same to the Negro as they had been to the white. Only this time

I could not go to the soda fountain and order a limeade or ask for a glass of water.

I caught the bus to South Rampart Street. Except for the taverns, the street was deserted when I arrived at the Butler Hotel. A man behind the counter was making a barbecue sandwich for a woman customer. He said he'd find me a room as soon as he finished. I took a seat at one of the tables and waited.

A large, pleasant-faced Negro walked in and sat at the counter. He grinned at me and said: "Man, you really got your top shaved, didn't you?"

"Yeah, doesn't it look all right?"

"Man, it's slick. Makes you look real good." He said he understood the gals were really going for bald-headed men. "They say that's a sure sign of being high-sexed." I let him think I'd shaved my head for that reason. We talked easily. I asked him if this was the best hotel in the area. He said the Sunset Hotel down the street might be a little better.

I picked up my bags and walked toward the door.

"See you around, Slick," he called after me.

An orange neon sign guided me to the Sunset Hotel, which is located next to a bar. The drab little lobby was empty. I waited a moment at the desk and then rang a call bell. A man, obviously awakened from sleep, came down the hall in his undershirt, buttoning his trousers. He said I would have to pay in advance and that he didn't allow men to take girls up to the rooms. I paid the $2.85 and he led me up narrow, creaking stairs to the second floor. I stood behind him as he opened the door to my room and saw over his shoulder the desolate, windowless cubicle. I almost backed out, but realized I could probably find nothing better.

We entered and I saw that the room was clean.

"The bathroom's down the hall," he said. I locked the door after him and sat down on the bed to the loud twang of springs. A deep gloom spread through me, heightened by noise of talk, laughter and

jukebox jazz from the bar downstairs. My room was scarcely larger than a double bed. An open transom above the door into the hall provided the only ventilation. The air, mingled with that of other rooms, was not fresh. In addition to the bed, I had a tiny gas stove and a broken-down bed stand. On it were two thin hand towels, a half bar of Ivory soap.

It was past one now. The light was so feeble I could hardly see to write. With no windows I felt boxed in, suffocating.

I turned off my light and tried to sleep, but the noise was too much. Light through the open transom fell on the ceiling fan, casting distorted shadows of the four motionless blades against the opposite wall.

A dog barked nearby and his bark grew louder as another tune from the jukebox blasted up through my linoleum floor. I could not shake the almost desperate sadness all this evoked, and I marveled that sounds could so degrade the spirit.

I slipped into my pants and walked barefoot down the narrow, dim-lit hall to the door with a crudely lettered sign reading MEN. When I stepped in, the hollow roar of water beating against the wall of a metal shower filled the room, along with an odor of cold sweat and soap. One man was in the shower. Another, a large, black-skinned man, sat naked on the floor awaiting his turn at the shower. He leaned back against the wall with his legs stretched out in front of him. Despite his state of undress, he had an air of dignity. Our eyes met and he nodded his polite greeting.

“It’s getting cold, isn’t it?” he said.

“It sure is.”

“You talking to me?” the man in the shower called out above the thrumming.

“No - there’s another gentleman here.”

“I won’t be much longer.”

“Take your time - he don’t want to shower.”

I noted the bathroom was clean, though the fixtures were antique and rust-stained.

“Have you got a stove in your room?” the man on the floor asked. We looked at one another and there was kindness in his search for conversation.

“Yes, but I haven’t turned it on.”

“You *didn’t* want to take a shower, did you?” he asked.

“No - it’s too cold. You must be freezing on that bare floor, with no clothes on.”

His brown eyes lost some of their gravity. “It’s been so hot here recently. It feels kind of good to be cold.”

I stepped over to the corner washbasin to rinse my hands.

“You can’t use that,” he said quickly. “That water’ll run out on the floor.” I looked beneath, as he indicated, and saw it had no drainpipe.

He reached beside him and flicked back the wet canvas shower curtain. “Hey, how about stepping back and letting this gentleman wash his hands?”

“That’s all right. I can wait,” I said.

“Go ahead,” he nodded.

“Sure - come on,” the man in the shower said. He turned the water down to a dribble. In the shower’s obscurity, all I could see was a black shadow and gleaming white teeth. I stepped over the other’s outstretched legs and washed quickly, using the soap the man in the shower thrust into my hands. When I had finished, I thanked him.

“That’s all right. Glad to do it,” he said, turning the water on full strength again.

The man on the floor handed up his towel for me to dry my hands. Under the dim light in the tiny room without windows, I realized I was having my first prolonged contact as a Negro with other Negroes. Its drama lay in its lack of drama, in its quietness, in

the courtesies we felt impelled to extend to one another. I wondered if the world outside was so bad for us that we had to counter it among ourselves by salving one another with kindness.

“Do you want a cigarette?” I asked.

“Please, sir - I believe I will.” He leaned his heavy body forward to accept one. His black flesh picked up dull highlights from the bare globe overhead. I fished in my pants pocket for matches, and lighted our cigarettes. We talked of local politics. I told him I was new in town and knew nothing about them. He refrained from asking questions, but explained that Mayor Morrison had a good reputation for fairness and the Negroes were hoping he would be elected governor. I sensed the conversation made little difference, that for a few moments we were safe from the world and we were loath to break the communication and go back to our rooms. It gave us warmth and pleasure, though we talked formally and showed one another great respect. Not once did he ask my name or where I came from.

When the man in the shower finished and stepped out dripping, the larger man hoisted himself up from the floor, tossed his cigarette into the toilet bowl and got into the shower. I told them good night and returned to my room, less lonely, and warmed by the brief contact with others like me who felt the need to be reassured that an eye could show something besides suspicion or hate.

November 8

The dark room. The streak of pale light through the transom. I woke to it several times, thinking it a long night. Then it occurred to me that there were no windows, that it might well be day outside.

I dressed, took my bags and walked down the steps. The sun glared brilliantly on Rampart Street. Traffic pushed past the lobby window.

“You coming back tonight, Mr. Griffin?” the man at the desk asked pleasantly.

“I’m not sure.”

“You can leave your bags here if you wish.”

“Thanks - I need what’s in them,” I said.

“Did you sleep all right?”

“Yes - fine. What time is it?”

“Little past eleven thirty.”

“Damn. I think I did sleep.”

The world looked blurred through the window and I waited for my eyes to accustom themselves to sunlight. I wondered what I should do, where I should go. I had a few changes of shirts, handkerchiefs and underwear in my duffel, about $200 in traveler’s checks and $20 in cash. In addition I had my medicines and a month’s supply of the pigmentation capsules.

I stepped out into the street and began to walk in search of food.

No one noticed me. The street was full of Negroes. I ambled along, looking in store windows. White proprietors who cater exclusively to Negro trade stood in doorways and solicited us.

“Step right in - nice special on shoes today.”

“Come in just a minute - no obligation - like to show you these new hats.”

Their voices wheedled and they smiled in counterfeit.

It was the ghetto. I had seen them before from the high attitude of one who could look down and pity. Now I belonged here and the view was different. A first glance told it all. Here it was pennies and clutter and spittle on the curb. Here people walked fast to juggle the dimes, to make a deal, to find cheap liver or a tomato that was overripe. Here was the indefinable stink of despair. Here modesty was the luxury. People struggled for it. I saw it as I passed, looking for food. A young, slick-haired man screamed loud obscenities to an older woman on the sidewalk. She laughed and threw them back in his face. They raged. Others passed them, looking down, pursing lips, struggling not to notice.

Here sensuality was escape, proof of manhood for people who could prove it no other way. Here at noon, jazz blared from jukeboxes and dark holes issued forth the cool odors of beer, wine and flesh into the sunlight. Here hips drew the eye and flirted with the eye and caused the eye to lust or laugh. It was better to look at hips than at the ghetto. Here I saw a young man, who carried in his body the substance of the saint, stagger, glass-eyed, unconscious from the dark hole, sit down on the curb and vomit between his feet.

“Man, he can’t hold his a-tall,” someone said.

I saw the sun caught in sweaty black wrinkles at the back of his neck as his head flopped forward.

“You okay?” I asked, bending over him.

He nodded listlessly.

“Yeah, shit, he’s just gassed,” someone said. “He’s okay.”

An odor of Creole cooking led me to a café at the corner. It was a small but cheerful room, painted baby blue. Tables were set with red-checked cloths. Except for a man at the counter, who nodded as I entered, I was the only customer. A pleasant young Negro woman

took my order and fixed my breakfast: eggs, grits, bread and coffee - forty-nine cents - no butter and no napkin.

The man at the counter turned toward me and smiled, as though he wanted to talk. I had made it a rule to talk as little as possible at first. He noticed my bags and asked me if I were here looking for work. I told him I was and asked him if there were any better part of town where I could get a room.

“Ain’t this awful?” He grimaced, coming to my table.

“You live down here?”

“Yeah.” He closed his eyes wearily. Light from the door struck gray in his temples.

“The Y over on Dryades is about the best place. It’s clean and there’s a nice bunch of fellows there,” he said.

He asked me what kind of work I did and I told him I was a writer.

He told me that he often took the bus into better parts of town where the whites lived, “just to get away from this place. I just walk in the streets and look at the houses … anything, just to get somewhere where it’s decent … to get a smell of clean air.”

“I know …” I sympathized.

I invited him to have a cup of coffee. He told me about the town, places where I might go to find jobs.

“Is there a Catholic church around here?” I asked after a while.

“Yeah - just a couple of blocks over on Dryades.”

“Where’s the nearest rest room?” I asked.

“Well, man, now just what do you want to do - piss or pray?” he chuckled. Though we talked quietly, the waitress heard, and her high chortle was quickly muffled in the kitchen.

“I guess it doesn’t hurt for a man to do both once in a while,” I said.

“You’re so right,” he laughed, shaking his head from side to side. “You’re so right, sir. Lordy, Lordy … if you stick around this town,

you'll find out you're going to end up doing most of your praying for a place to piss. It's not easy, I'm telling you. You can go in some of the stores around here, but you've almost got to buy something before you can ask them to let you use the toilet. Some of the taverns got places. Yo u can go over to the train station or the bus station - places like that. You just have to locate them. And there's not many of them for us. Best thing's just to stick close to home. Otherwise sometimes you'll find you've got to walk halfway across town to find a place."

When I left him I caught the bus into town, choosing a seat halfway to the rear. As we neared Canal, the car began to fill with whites. Unless they could find a place themselves or beside another white, they stood in the aisle.

A middle-aged woman with stringy gray hair stood near my seat. She wore a clean but faded print house dress that was hoisted to one side as she clung to an overhead pendant support. Her face looked tired and I felt uncomfortable. As she staggered with the bus's movement my lack of gallantry tormented me. I half rose from my seat to give it to her, but Negroes behind me frowned disapproval. I realized I was "going against the race" and the subtle tug-of-war became instantly clear. If the whites would not sit with us, let them stand. When they became tired enough or uncomfortable enough, they would eventually take seats beside us and soon see that it was not so poisonous after all. But to give them your seat was to let them win. I slumped back under the intensity of their stares.

But my movement had attracted the white woman's attention. For an instant our eyes met. I felt sympathy for her, and thought I detected sympathy in her glance. The exchange blurred the barriers of race (so new to me) long enough for me to smile and vaguely indicate the empty seat beside me, letting her know she was welcome to accept it.

Her blue eyes, so pale before, sharpened and she spat out, "What you looking at me like *that* for?"

I felt myself flush. Other white passengers craned to look at me. The silent onrush of hostility frightened me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, staring at my knees. “I’m not from here.” The pattern of her skirt turned abruptly as she faced the front.

“They’re getting sassier every day,” she said loudly. Another woman agreed and the two fell into conversation.

My flesh prickled with shame, for I knew the Negroes rightly resented me for attracting such unfavorable attention. I sat the way I had seen them do, sphinx-like, pretending unawareness. Gradually people lost interest. Hostility drained to boredom. The poor woman chattered on, reluctant apparently to lose the spotlight.

I learned a strange thing - that in a jumble of unintelligible talk, the word “nigger” leaps out with electric clarity. Yo u always hear it and always it stings. And always it casts the person using it into a category of brute ignorance. I thought with some amusement that if these two women only knew what they were revealing about themselves to every Negro on that bus, they would have been outraged.

I left the bus on Canal Street. Other Negroes aboard eyed me not with anger, as I had expected, but rather with astonishment that any black man could be so stupid.

For an hour, I roamed aimlessly through the streets at the edge of the French Quarter. Always crowds and always the sun. On Derbigny Street I had coffee in a small Negro café called the Two Sisters Restaurant. A large poster on the wall caught my attention:

DESEGREGATE THE BUSES WITH THIS 7 POINT PROGRAM:

1. Pray for guidance.
2. Be courteous and friendly.
3. Be neat and clean.
4. Avoid loud talk.
5. Do not argue.

6. Report incidents immediately.

7. Overcome evil with good.

Sponsored by

Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance

Rev. A.L. Davis, President

Rev. J.E. Poindexter, Secretary

I walked to the same shoeshine stand in the French Quarter that I had been visiting as a white man. My friend Sterling Williams sat on an empty box on the sidewalk. He looked up without a hint of recognition.

“Shine?”

“I believe so,” I said and climbed up on the stand.

He hoisted his heavy body on his crutch and hobbled over to begin the work. I wore shoes of an unusual cut. He had shined them many times and I felt he should certainly recognize them.

“Well, it’s another fine day,” he said.

“Sure is.”

I felt brisk strokes of his brush across the toe of my shoe.

“You’re new in town, aren’t you?”

I looked down on the back of his head. Gray hair kinked below the rim of a sea-captain cap of black canvas.

“Yeah - just been here a few days,” I said.

“I thought I hadn’t seen you around the quarter before,” he said pleasantly. “You’ll find New Orleans a nice place.”

“Seems pretty nice. The people are polite.”

“Oh … sure. If a man just goes on about his business and doesn’t pay any attention to them, they won’t bother you. I don’t mean bowing or scraping - just, you know, show you got some dignity.” He raised his glance to my face and smiled wisely.

“I see what you mean,” I said.

He had almost finished shining the shoes before I asked, “Is there something familiar about these shoes?”

“Yeah - I been shining some for a white man - ”

“A fellow named Griffin?”

“Yeah.” He straightened up. “Do you know him?”

“I am him.”

He stared dumfounded. I reminded him of various subjects we had discussed on former visits. Finally convinced, he slapped my leg with glee and lowered his head. His shoulders shook with laughter.

“Well, I’m truly a son-of-a-bitch … how did you ever.”

I explained briefly. His heavy face shone with delight at what I had done and delight that I should confide it to him. He promised perfect discretion and enthusiastically began coaching me; but in a guarded voice, glancing always about to make sure no one could overhear.

I asked him if I could stay and help him shine shoes for a few days. He said the stand really belonged to his partner, who was out trying to locate some peanuts to sell to the winos of the quarter. We’d have to ask him but he was sure it would be all right. “But you’re way too well dressed for a shine boy.”

We sat on boxes beside the stand. I asked him to check me carefully and tell me anything I did wrong.

“You just watch me and listen how I talk. You’ll catch on. Say,” he said excitedly, “you got to do something about those hands.”

Sunlight fell on them, causing the hairs to glint against black skin.

“Oh Lord,” I groaned. “What’ll I do?”

“You got to shave them,” he said, holding up his large fist to show his own hand had no hairs. “You got a razor?”

“Yes.”

“Hurry up, now, before somebody sees you.” He became agitated and protective. “Down that alleyway there - clear to the end. You’ll find a rest room. You can shave there right quick.”

I grabbed my bag as he watched in agony to see that the way was clear. The shoe stand was in skid row - a street of ancient buildings with cheap rooming houses and bars.

I hurried to the alley and walked down it into the gloom of a cluttered courtyard. A few Negroes, who could not enter the white bar, were served from the back. They stood around or sat at wooden tables drinking. I saw a sign that read:

GENTLEMEN

and was almost at the door when several voices shouted.

“Hey! You can’t go in there. Hey!”

I turned back toward them, astonished that even among skid row derelict joints they had “separate facilities.”

“Where do I go?” I asked.

“Clean on back there to the back,” a large drunk Negro said, pointing with a wild swinging gesture that almost made him lose his balance.

I went another fifty feet down the alley and stepped into the wooden structure. It was oddly clean. I latched the door with a hook that scarcely held, smeared shaving cream on the backs of my hands and shaved without water.

Sterling nodded approval when I returned. He relaxed and smiled, the way one would after averting a terrible danger. His entire attitude of connivance was superbly exaggerated.

“Now there’s not a hitch to you, my friend,” he said. “Nobody’d ever guess.”

An odd thing happened. Within a short time he lapsed into familiarity, forgetting I was once white. He began to use the “we” form and to discuss “our situation.” The illusion of my “Negroness” took over so completely that I fell into the same pattern of talking and thinking. It was my first intimate glimpse. We were Negroes and our concern was the white man and how to get along with him; how to hold our own and raise ourselves in his esteem without for one

moment letting him think he had any God-given rights that we did not also have.

A fine-looking middle-aged Negro woman, dressed in a white uniform, stepped out into the sidewalk a few doors away and stared at me.

Sterling nudged my ribs. “You got that widow woman interested,” he laughed. “You just watch. She’ll find some reason to come down here before long.”

I asked him who she was.

She works there in the bar - nice lady, too. She ain’t going to rest till she finds out who you are.”

I began to get thirsty and asked Sterling where I could find a drink.

“You’ve got to plan ahead now,” he said. “You can’t do like you used to when you were a white man. You can’t just walk in anyplace and ask for a drink or use the rest room. There’s a Negro café over in the French Market about two blocks up. They got a fountain in there where you can drink. The nearest toilet’s the one you just came from. But here - I got water.”

He reached behind the shine stand and brought out a gallon lard can with wires looped through holes in each side to make a handle. A flake of ash floated on the water’s surface. I up-ended the bucket and drank.

“Well, well, we’re going to have company,” Sterling said. “That nice widow woman’s coming this way.”

I glanced down the street. Past the metal upright shoe racks I saw her walk gracefully toward us. She was carefully looking across the street.

She ignored me and asked Sterling if he had any peanuts to sell.

“No, dear heart. Joe’s out looking for some now. They’re hard to find this time of year.” He spoke unctuously, as though he had no idea why she really came down; but all three of us knew he knew and that we knew he knew. But the game had to be played.

Then she turned and saw me, apparently for the first time. She looked startled, then delighted. “Why how do you do?” she said with a magnificent smile that illuminated not only her face but the entire quarter.

I bowed and returned the smile, spontaneously, because the radiance of her expression took me by surprise. “Why, just fine. How do you do?”

“Fine,” she bowed. “Nice to see you around.”

I bowed again, confused. “I thank you, daughter.”

After an awkward, grin-filled pause, she turned to walk away. “Well, I’ll be seeing you,” she sang out over her shoulder.

I looked dumbly at Sterling. He lifted his cap and scratched into the gray hairs of his head, his eyes wise and wide with amusement.

“Did you get that, eh?” he asked. “She liked you. You’re in a fix now.” He burst out laughing. “You hadn’t counted on something like *that*, eh?”

“I sure hadn’t,” I said.

“She ain’t no slut,” he said. “She’s a widow looking for a mate, and you’re well dressed. She ain’t going to pass up a chance like that.”

“Oh Lord - this complicates things,” I groaned. “Tell her I’m already married, will you?”

“Well, now, I don’t know,” he smiled. “That might just spoil the fun. I think I’ll just tell her you’re a widow man, a preacher visiting here in New Orleans. I feel like she’s the kind that would love to be a preacher’s wife.”

“Look - you know I can’t fiddle around with things like that. It’ll be no fun for her when this project gets known and she finds out I’m a white man.”

Customers came - whites, Negroes and Latin Americans. Well-dressed tourists mingled with the derelicts of the quarter. When we shined their shoes we talked. The whites, especially the tourists, had no reticence before us, and no shame since we were Negroes. Some

wanted to know where they could find girls, wanted us to get Negro girls for them. We learned to spot these from the moment they sat down, for they were immediately friendly and treated us with the warmth and courtesy of equals. I mentioned this to Sterling.

"Yeah, when they want to sin, they're very democratic," he said.

Though not all, by any means, were so open about their purposes, all of them showed us how they felt about the Negro, the idea that we were people of such low morality that nothing could offend us. These men, young and old, however, were less offensive than the ones who treated us like machines, as though we had no human existence whatsoever. When they paid me, they looked as though I were a stone or a post. They looked and saw nothing.

Sterling's partner, Joe, returned from his peanut hunt around two. We explained my presence and he welcomed me. Slender, middle-aged, though he looked young, Joe impressed me as a sharp but easygoing man. He lamented the lack of peanuts. Sterling told him many drunks had stopped by wanting to buy some and that they could have made a pocketful of change had they been able to supply them.

Joe began to cook our lunch on the sidewalk. He put paper and kindling from an orange crate into a gallon can and set it afire. When the flames had reduced to coals, he placed a bent coat hanger over the top as a grill and set a pan on to heat. He squatted and stirred with a spoon. I learned it was a mixture of corn, turnips, rice, seasoned with thyme, bay leaf and green peppers. Joe had cooked it at home the night before and brought it in a milk carton. When it was heated through, Joe served Sterling and me portions in cut-down milk cartons. He ate directly from the pan. It was good, despite the odor of rot that smoked up from it.

Joe leaned over to me and pointed with his spoon to a man across the street. "Watch that wino," he said. "He'll sit right there - he wants some of this food, but he won't come over till I tell him to."

Sitting on the curb across the street, the man stared feverishly at us, tensed, ready to come for the food when called. His eyes burned

in his black face and his fists were doubled hard, as though he had to control himself from rushing over and grabbing the food.

We ate slowly while the man stared. It was a strange game. We, who were reduced to eating on the sidewalk, were suddenly elevated in status by this man's misery. We were the aristocrats and he the beggar. It flattered us. We were superbly above him and the comedy gave us a delusion of high self-respect. In a while, the magnanimity of the rich would complete the picture. We would feed our scraps to the poor.

Our servings were ample. When we had eaten our fill, we scraped the remains from our cartons onto Joe's plate.

The man trembled with expectation as Joe leisurely smoothed the food with the back of his spoon. Then, without looking at the wretch, Joe held out the pan. In a strangely kind tone of voice he said: "Okay, dog ass, come get some food."

The man bolted across the street and grabbed the pan.

"If there'd been a car coming, he'd have been killed," Sterling remarked.

"Now, listen, winehead - I want that pan back *clean*, you hear?" Joe said.

The beggar's gaze riveted on the food, his face crumpled as though he were about to weep and he hurried into the alley without answering.

"He comes here every day … it's the same thing," Sterling said. "I guess he'd starve if it weren't for Joe."

Business died. We sat on boxes in the sunlight with our backs against the wall and watched traffic come and go in the French Market. I stared into the broken windows of a deserted stone building across the street. Sterling snored loudly and then awoke with a strangled snort.

The beggar returned the pan, still wet from being washed. He handed it to Joe.

"Okay, winehead," Joe said.

Without speaking, the man drifted away.

I listened to the easy and usually obscene give-and-take between Joe and the men of the quarter who passed the sidewalk.

“Hey, dog nuts, what’s your hurry?”

“I got business, man.”

“What business you got? Hey - where can I get some peanuts.”

“They ain’t a peanut in this whole town. I been all over.”

“Me, too,” Joe said.

Odors of sweat, tobacco, coffee and damp stone surrounded us, overladen always by the smell of fish and nearby salt water.

I felt the wall warm against my back, making me drowsy. My first afternoon as a Negro was one of dragging hours and a certain contentment.

After a while Joe took a pocket Bible from the green serge army shirt he wore and began reading the Psalms to himself. His eyes drooped but he formed the words silently with his lips. From force of long habit, whenever anyone walked by, he said, “Shine?” without raising his head from the page.

Two pigeons flew down to the sidewalk at our feet. Joe tossed them some bread scraps. The sun sparked iridescence from their purple necks as they pecked. They provided us deep pleasure, an anodyne to the squalor and clutter of the street.

Joe got stiffly up, dusted his seat and ambled across to the fish market. When he returned, he had a sack of catfish heads and some green bananas. He told me the catfish heads were free and that tomorrow we would have them for lunch - catfish-head stew over spaghetti.

It sounds good,” I said, looking into the sack at dozens of glittering eyes.

We wrapped the green bananas he had retrieved from the market waste-bins in newspapers. “They’ll be ripe enough to eat in about two or three days,” he said.

By four o'clock the street was in shadow. Sunlight rimmed the buildings above us and the air chilled rapidly. I decided to go find a room for the night. Sterling suggested I go to the Negro YMCA on Dryades, some distance across town. "You better drink some water before you go," he said. "You might not find any before you get to Dryades." I up-ended the bucket and saw brass-colored circles at the bottom through the clear water.

A bluish haze hung over the narrow streets of the French Quarter. The strong odor of roasting coffee overwhelmed all others. The aroma and the scene reminded me of my school days in France. This was like the old quarter of Tours, where they roasted coffee at the spice shops each afternoon.

I emerged on Canal Street to a more modern scene, a crowded scene. I deliberately stopped many white men to ask the direction to Dryades in order to get their reaction. Invariably they were courteous and helpful.

On Dryades, the whites thinned and I saw more and more Negroes in the street. A church came into view on my right, its tower rising up past a bridge heavy with traffic. A sign told me it was St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, one of the oldest in New Orleans. I mounted the steps and pulled open one of the heavy doors. Street noises were muffled with its closing. A faint fragrance of incense drifted to me in the deep silence. Soft, warm light filtered through magnificent stained-glass windows in the church proper. Far to the front I saw the dim figure of a Negro woman making the Stations of the Cross. A few men knelt here and there in the vast structure. Votive candles burned feebly in blue and red clusters before statues of St. Joseph and the Virgin Mary. I rested in a pew, leaning forward, my forehead against the bench in front, my hands in my lap. At home my wife and children were probably having their evening baths, safe against the dusk and the cold. I thought of the house, so full of light and talk, and wondered what they would have for supper. Perhaps even now soup simmered on the kitchen stove.

Opening my eyes, I looked down at my hands and saw each dark pore, each black wrinkle in the hairless flesh. How white by contrast the image came to me of my wife and children. Their faces, their flesh shimmered with whiteness and they seemed so much a part of another life, so separated from me now that I felt consumed with loneliness. Rosary beads rattled against one of the pews, loud in the stillness. Perceptibly the light dimmed through the windows and the candles grew brighter.

Dreading the thought of spending another night in some cheap hotel if I could not get a room at the Y, I considered hiding in the church and sleeping there in one of the pews. The idea appealed to me so strongly I had to cast it off by force. I got to my feet and walked out into the dusk shot with car lights rushing in each direction.

The YMCA was filled to capacity, but the young man behind the desk suggested they had a list of nice homes where a man could rent a room. He kindly offered to telephone some of these. While waiting, I had a cup of coffee in the YMCA Coffee Shop, an attractive, modern place run by an elderly man who spoke with great elegance and courtesy. The young man at the desk came and told me he had arranged for a room in a private home next door to the Y. He assured me it was nice there, and that the widow who owned it was trustworthy in every way.

I carried my bags next door and met Mrs. Davis, a middle-aged woman of great kindness. She led me upstairs to a back room that was spotlessly clean and comfortably furnished. We arranged for a brighter lamp so I could work. She told me she had only one other roomer, a quiet gentleman who worked nights and whom I should probably never see. The kitchen was next to my room, and beyond that was the bathroom. I paid the three-dollar charge in advance, unpacked and returned to the YMCA Coffee Shop, which turned out to be the meeting place of the city's important men. There I met a much more educated and affluent class, older men who brought me into the conversation. We sat around a U-shaped counter drinking coffee. The talk was focused exclusively on "the problem" and the

forthcoming elections. The café proprietor introduced me to the Reverend A.L. Davis and one of his colleagues, Mr. Gayle, a civic leader and bookstore-owner, and a number of others.

My feeling of disorientation diminished for a time.

When asked what I did, I told them I was a writer, touring the South to make a study of conditions.

"Well, what do you think?" the Reverend Mr. Davis asked.

"I've only begun," I said. "But so far it's much better than I expected to find. I've been shown many courtesies by the whites."

"Oh, we've made strides," he said. "But we've got to do a lot better. Then, too, New Orleans is more enlightened than anyplace else in the state - or in the South."

"Why is that, I wonder?" I asked.

"Well, it's far more cosmopolitan, for one thing. And it's got a strong Catholic population," he said. "A white man can show you courtesies without fearing some neighbor will call him a 'nigger-lover' like they do in other places."

"What do you see as our biggest problem, Mr. Griffin?" Mr. Gayle asked.

"Lack of unity."

"That's it," said the elderly man who ran the café. "Until we as a race can learn to rise together, we'll never get anywhere. That's our trouble. We work against one another instead of together. Now you take dark Negroes like you, Mr. Griffin, and me," he went on. "We're old Uncle Toms to our people, no matter how much education and morals we've got. No, you have to be almost a mulatto, have your hair conked and all slicked out and look like a Valentino. Then the Negro will look up to you. You've got *class*. Isn't that a pitiful hero-type?"

"And the white man knows that," Mr. Davis said.

"Yes," the café-owner continued. "He *utilizes* this knowledge to flatter some of us, tell us we're above our people, not like most Negroes. We're so stupid we fall for it and work against our own.

Why, if we'd work just half as hard to boost our race as we do to please whites whose attentions flatter us, we'd really get somewhere."

A handsome, mature man entered and was introduced as J. P. Guillory, an insurance agent. When the others had gone and the café was closing, Mr. Guillory told me he came often to the Y to play chess. He asked if I would join him in a game, but I had work to do.

"Your name is somehow familiar, Mr. Griffin," he said. "I'm an avid reader. I must have read something by you. What are the names of some of your books?"

I named them. His face blanked with astonishment.

"Why, I just started reading that. My lawyer friend lent it to me," he said. He gazed at me and I had no doubt he thought I was either a tremendous liar for claiming authorship of a white man's book or that I was confessing something to him.

"I promise you I wrote it," I said. "I can't tell you more, but read the book, and the piece in last September's *Reader's Digest*, and you'll know who I really am."

I returned to my room and wrote in my journal. My landlady lit the fire and brought a pitcher of drinking water for my night stand. As I looked up to thank her, I saw the image in the large mirror of the wardrobe. Light gleamed from the elderly Negro's head as he looked up to talk to the Negro woman. The sense of shock returned; it was as though I were invisible in the room, observing a scene in which I had no part.

I dozed and the phone awakened me. I listened to it ring again and again but then realized that it could not be for me. No one in the world knew where I was. Finally someone answered it.

I heard noise and laughter. I got up in the darkness and walked to the window that looked down into the windows of the Y gym. Two Negro teams were playing baseball and a crowd of spectators alternately booed and cheered their favorites. I sat at the window and watched them until hunger began to pester me.

The kitchen clock read 7:30 when I passed through to go out to eat. I walked over to South Rampart in search of a café. As I turned the corner, I noticed two large white boys sprawled on the front steps of a house across the wide boulevard. One of them, a heavyset, muscular fellow in khaki pants and a white sweatshirt, whistled at me. I ignored him and continued walking. From the corner of my eye, I saw him get slowly to his feet and angle across under the streetlight to my side of the street.

“Hey, Baldy,” he called softly.

I walked faster and looked straight ahead.

“Hey, Mr. No-Hair,” he called. I realized he was following about seventy-five feet behind me. He spoke casually, almost pleasantly, his voice clear in the deserted street.

“I’m going to get you, Mr. No-Hair. I’m after you. There ain’t no place you go I won’t get you. If it takes all night, I’ll get you - so count on it.”

A deep terror took me. I walked faster, controlling my desire to break into a run. He was young, strong. If I made it a chase, he would easily overtake me.

His voice drifted to me again, from about the same distance, soft and merciless. “Ain’t no way you can get away from me, Mr. Shithead. You might as well stop right there.”

I did not answer, did not turn. He stalked me like a cat.

Cars passed occasionally. I prayed that a police car might choose this street. I noted that when my footsteps slowed, his slowed; when mine accelerated, his matched them. I looked for an open door, a light. The stores were closed. The sidewalk, with grass at each seam, stretched ahead from streetlamp to streetlamp.

Then, to my immense relief, I saw an elderly couple waiting on the corner for a bus. I approached and they stiffened with caution. The quarter was not safe at night.

I glanced back to see the boy halted at mid-block, leaning against the wall.

“I’m in trouble,” I said to the couple.

They ignored me.

“Please,” I said. “Someone’s chasing me. I don’t know what he wants, but he says he’ll get me. Is there anyplace around here where I can call the police?”

The man looked around. “Who’s chasing you, mister?” he asked irritably.

“That boy back there …” I turned and pointed to the empty street. The boy had disappeared.

The man grunted disapprovingly, as though he thought I were drunk.

I waited for a moment, thinking I would catch the bus. Then, certain it had been only a prank, I started down the side street toward well-lighted Dryades, where I knew I would be safe.

I had gone half a block when I heard his voice again.

“Hey, Shithead,” he said quietly.

I tasted fear and despair like salt in my mouth.

“You can stop right along about there anyplace, dad.”

We walked on in silence, his footsteps again matching mine.

“Stop right along there. Ain’t no nice people on this street for you to hide behind, Baldy.”

I searched for some solution and could find none. Something deadly, nightmarish about the pursuit terrified me more than the pursuit itself. I wondered about my family. What if he should knock me in the head - or worse; he sounded diabolic. For an instant I imagined the expression of some police officer’s face as he looked at my black body and read my identification papers:

JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN MANSFIELD, TEXAS
Sex: Male
Height: 6’1 1/2”
Weight: 196

Hair: Brown

Race: White

Would he think I had merely stolen the papers from some white man?

“What do you keep walking for when I told you to stop, dad?”

I knew I should never get away from the bully unless I bluffed. I had long ago been trained in judo. Perhaps if I were lucky enough to get in the first blow, I might have a chance. I saw an alleyway in the dim light and summoned a deep growl.

“You come on, boy,” I said without looking back.

“You follow me, boy. I’m heading into that alley down there.”

We walked on.

“That’s right, boy,” I said. “Now you’re doing just like I want you to.”

I approached the alley entrance. “I’m going in, boy. You follow me.”

“I don’t dig you, daddy.”

“You follow me boy, ‘cause I’m just aching to feed you a fistful of brass knucks right in that big mouth of yours.” I fairly shouted the last words.

I stepped into the alley and pressed against the wall, sick with fright. The stench of garbage and urine surrounded me. High above the buildings’ black silhouette stars shone in a clear sky. I listened for his footsteps, ready to bolt if he accepted the challenge.

“Blessed St. Jude,” I heard myself whisper, “send the bastard away,” and I wondered from what source within me the prayer had spontaneously sprung.

After what seemed a long time, I stuck my head around the alley corner and looked back along the street. It stretched empty to the streetlamp at the end.

I hurried to Dryades and along it to the well-lighted steps of the Catholic church I had visited in the afternoon. Sitting on the bottom

step, I rested my head on my crossed arms and waited for my nerves to settle to calm. A great bell from the tower slowly rolled eight o'clock. I listened as the metallic clangor rolled away over the rooftops of the quarter.

The word "nigger" picked up the bell's resonances and repeated itself again and again in my brain.

Hey, nigger, you can't go in there.

Hey, nigger, you can't drink here.

We don't serve niggers.

And then the boy's words: *Mr. No-Hair, Baldy, Shit-head.* (Would it have happened if I were white?)

And then the doctor's words as I left his office yesterday: *Now you go into oblivion.*

Seated on the church steps tonight, I wondered if he could have known how truly he spoke, how total the feeling of oblivion was.

A police car cruised past, slowed. The plaster-white face of an officers peered toward me. We stared at one another as the car took a right turn and disappeared behind the decrepit rectory of the church. I felt certain the police would circle the block and check on me. The cement was suddenly hard to my seat. I rose and hurried toward a little Negro café in the next block.

As I stepped through the door, the Negro woman sang out: "All we got left's beans and rice, honey."

"That's fine. Bring me a big plate," I said, sinking into a chair.

"How about some beer?"

"No … you got any milk?"

"Don't you like beer, honey?"

"I like it, but I've got diabetes."

"Oh … Say, I've got a couple of pig tails left. You want me to put them in with the beans?"

"Please."

She carried the platter to my table and fetched my milk. Though Negroes apparently live on beans and rice in this area, it is no handicap. They are delicious and nourishing. I tried to eat the pig tails, but like chicken necks, they are mostly bone and little meat.

Later, in my room, I undressed for bed. The game still went noisily at the Y next door. Though the large house was still, I heard the TV from Mrs. Davis's room somewhere on the other side.

The whites seemed far away, out there in their parts of the city. The distance between them and me was far more than the miles that physically separated us. It was an area of unknowing. I wondered if it could really be bridged.

November 10-12

Two days of incessant walking, mostly looking for jobs. I wanted to discover what sort of work an educated Negro, nicely dressed, could find. I met no rebuffs, only gentleness when they informed me they could not use my services as typist, bookkeeper, etc.

The patterns became the same. Each day at the shine stand we had the same kind of customers; each day we cooked food and ate on the sidewalk; each day we fed the beggar and the pigeons.

The widow woman dropped by both days. I gently let her know that I was married. Sterling said she asked him about me, proposing to invite me to her house for Sunday dinner. I stayed at the stand less and less.

Among Negroes I was treated with the most incredible courtesies, even by strangers.

One night I decided to go to a Negro movie house. I walked up Dryades and asked a young man if he could tell me the way.

"If you'll wait just a minute, I'll show you the way," he said.

I stood on the corner and in a moment he returned.

We began walking. He was a first-year student at Dillard University, hoping to become a sociologist, to "do something for our people." The walk appeared to be endless. We must have gone at least two miles when I asked: "Do you live over in this direction?"

"No, I live back there where you saw me."

"But this is taking you way out of your way."

"I don't mind. I enjoy the talk."

When we reached the movie, he asked, "Do you think you can find the way back?"

"Oh, yes … I won't have any trouble."

“If you aren’t sure, I can find out what time the feature ends and come back for you.”

Stupefied that he would walk these miles as a courtesy to a stranger, I suggested he let me buy him a ticket for the show and we could walk back together.

“No, thanks - I have to get some studying done. But I’ll be glad to come back for you.”

“I wouldn’t think of it. At least let me pay you something. This has been a great favor.”

He refused the money.

The next morning I went to the Y café next door for a breakfast of grits and eggs. The elderly gentleman who ran the café soon had me talking - or rather listening. He foresaw a new day for the race. Great strides had been made, but greater ones were to be made still. I told him of my unsuccessful job-hunting. He said it was all part of the pattern of economics - economic injustice.

“You take a young white boy. He can go through school and college with a real incentive. He knows he can make good money in any profession when he gets out. But can a Negro - in the South? No, I’ve seen many make brilliant grades in college. And yet when they come home in the summers to earn a little money, they have to do the most menial work. And even when they graduate it’s a long hard pull. Most take postal jobs, or preaching and teaching jobs. *This is the cream.* What about the others, Mr. Griffin? A man knows no matter how hard he works, he’s never going to *quite* manage … taxes and prices eat up more than he can earn. He can’t see how he’ll ever have a wife and children. The economic structure just doesn’t permit it unless he’s prepared to live down in poverty and have his wife work too. That’s part of it. Our people aren’t educated because they either can’t afford it or else they know education won’t earn the jobs it would a white man. Any kind of family life, any decent standard of living seems impossible from the outset. So a lot of them, without even understanding the cause, just give up. They

take what they can - mostly in pleasure, and they make the grand gesture, the wild gesture, because what have they got to lose if they do die in a car wreck or a knife fight or something else equally stupid?"

"Yes, and then it's these things that cause the whites to say we're not worthy of first-class citizenship."

"Ah …" He dropped his hands to his sides hard in frustration. "Isn't it so? They make it impossible for us to earn, to pay much in taxes because we haven't much in income, and then they say that because they pay most of the taxes, they have the right to have things like they want. It's a vicious circle, Mr. Griffin, and I don't know how we'll get out of it. They put us low, and then blame us for being down there and say that since we are low, we can't deserve our rights."

Others entered, ordered breakfast, joined the conversation.

"Equal job opportunities," Mr. Gayle said. "That's the answer to much of the tragedy of our young people."

"What's needed?" I asked. "What kind of wisdom can overcome the immense propaganda of the racists and the hate groups? People read this poison - and it's often presented in a benevolent tone, even a kind tone. Many sincerely think the Negro, because of his very Negro-ness, could not possibly measure up to white standards in work performance. I read recently where one of them said that equality of education and job opportunity would be an even greater tragedy for us. He said it would quickly prove to us that we can't measure up - disillusion us by showing us that we are, in fact, inferior."

"I wish those kind souls wouldn't be so protective. I know plenty who'd be willing to take the chance of being 'disillusioned,' " the proprietor laughed.

"They're about fifty years behind the times," an elderly man said. "The social scientists have shown this is wrong. Our own people have proven themselves in every field - not just a few, but thousands. How can the racists deny these proofs?"

“They don’t bother to find out about them,” Mr. Gayle said flatly.

“We need a conversion of morals,” the elderly man said. “Not just superficially, but profoundly. And in both races. We need a great saint - some enlightened common sense. Otherwise, we’ll never have the right answers when the pressure groups - those racists, super-patriots, whatever you want to call them - tag every move toward racial justice as communist-inspired, Zionist-inspired, Illuminati-inspired, Satan-inspired … part of some secret conspiracy to overthrow the Christian civilization.”

“So, if you want to be a good Christian, you mustn’t act like one. That makes sense,” Mr. Gayle said.

“That’s what they claim. The minute you give me my rights to vote when I pay taxes, to have a decent job, a decent home, a decent education - then you’re taking the first step toward ‘race-mixing’ and that’s part of the great secret conspiracy to ruin civilization - to ruin America,” the elderly man said.

“So, if you want to be a good American, you’ve got to practice bad Americanism. That makes sense, too,” Mr. Gayle sighed. “Maybe it’d take a saint after all to straighten such a mess out.”

“We’ve reached a poor state when people are afraid that doing the decent and right thing is going to help the communist conspiracy,” the proprietor said. “I’m sure a lot of people are held back just on that point.”

“Any way you look at it, we’re in the middle,” concluded the elderly man. “It’s hard for me to understand how letting me have a decent job, so I can raise my children in a better home and give them a better education is going to help the enemies of my country. …”

Walking along Dryades, through the ghetto, I realized that every informed man with whom I had spoken, in the intimate freedom of the colored bond, had acknowledged a double problem for the Negro. First, the discrimination against him. Second, and almost more grievous, his discrimination against himself; his contempt for

the blackness that he associates with his suffering; his willingness to sabotage his fellow Negroes because they are part of the blackness he has found so painful.

“Want something, mister?” a white merchant said as I passed. I glanced at him sitting in the doorway of his junky store. “Come on in,” he wheedled, sounding for the world as though he were pimping for the shoes he had on display.

I had not gone ten feet when I heard him solicit someone else in the same tone. “Want something, mister?”

“Yeah, but you ain’t my type,” the man behind me answered without humor.

On Chartres Street in the French Quarter, I walked toward Brennan’s, one of New Orleans’ famed restaurants. Forgetting myself for a moment, I stopped to study the menu that was elegantly exposed in a show window. I read, realizing that a few days earlier I could have gone in and ordered anything on the menu. But now, though I was the same person with the same appetite, the same appreciation and even the same wallet, no power on earth could get me inside this place for a meal. I recalled hearing some Negro say, “You can live here all your life, but you’ll never get inside one of the great restaurants except as a kitchen boy.” The Negro often dreams of things separated from him only by a door, knowing that he is forever cut off from experiencing them.

I read the menu carefully, forgetting that Negroes do not do such things. It is too poignant, like the little boy peering in the candy store window. It might affect the tourist.

I looked up to see the frowns of disapproval that can speak so plainly and so loudly without words. The Negro learns this silent language fluently. He knows by the white man’s look of disapproval and petulance that he is being told to get on his way, that he is “stepping out of line.”

It was a day of giving the gracious smile and receiving the gracious rebuff as I asked again and again about jobs.

Finally, I gave up and went to the shine stand. From there I set out to return at dusk to Dryades. But I had walked too far. My legs gave out. At Jackson Square, a public park, I found a long, curving bench and sat down to rest for a moment. The park appeared deserted. A movement through the bushes attracted my attention. I looked to see a middle-aged white man across the park slowly fold the newspaper he was reading, get to his feet and amble toward me. The fragrance of his pipe tobacco preceded him, reassuring me. Racists are not the pipe-smoking type, I thought to myself.

With perfect courtesy he said, “You’d better find yourself someplace else to rest.”

I took it as a favor. He was warning me so I could get out before someone insulted me. “Thank you,” I said. “I didn’t know we weren’t allowed in here.”

Later, I told the story at the Y, and discovered that Negroes have the right to sit in Jackson Square. This individual simply did not want me there.

But at the time I did not know it. I left, sick with exhaustion, wondering where a Negro could sit to rest. It was walk constantly until you could catch a bus, but keep on the move unless you have business somewhere. If you stop to sit on the curb, a police car will pass and probably ask you what you’re doing. I have heard none of the Negroes speak of police harassment, but they have warned me that any time the police see a Negro idling, especially one they do not recognize, they will surely question him. This is worrisome, certainly an experience any Negro wants to avoid.

I walked over to Claiborne and caught the first bus that passed. It took me out to Dillard University, a beautiful campus. I was too tired to explore it, however, and sat on the bench waiting to catch another bus into town. Buses were inexpensive to ride and it was a good way to rest.

Night was near when I finally caught the bus going toward town. Two blocks before Canal, the bus makes a left turn off Claiborne. I rang the bell to get off at this stop. The driver pulled to a halt and

opened the door. He left it open until I reached it. I was ready to step off when the door banged shut in my face. Since he had to remain there waiting for a clear passage through traffic, I asked him to let me off.

“I can’t leave the door open all night,” he said impatiently.

He waited another full minute, but refused to open the door.

“Will you please let me off at the next corner then?” I asked, controlling my temper, careful not to do or say anything that would jeopardize the Negroes’ position in the area.

He did not answer. I returned to my seat. A woman watched me with sympathetic anger, as though she in no way approved of this kind of treatment. However, she did not speak.

At each stop, I sounded the buzzer, but the driver continued through the next two stops. He drove me eight full blocks past my original stop and pulled up then only because some white passengers wanted to get off. I followed them to the front. He watched me, his hand on the lever that would spring the doors shut.

“May I get off now?” I asked quietly when the others had stepped down.

“Yeah, go ahead,” he said finally, as though he had tired of the cat-and-mouse game. I got off, sick, wondering how I could ever walk those eight blocks back to my original stop.

In all fairness, I must add that this is the only example of deliberate cruelty I encountered on any of the city buses of New Orleans. Even though I was outraged, I knew he did not commit this indignity against me, but against my black flesh, my color. This was an individual act by an individual, and certainly not typical.

November 14 Mississippi

After a week of wearying rejection, the newness had worn off. My first vague, favorable impression that it was not as bad as I had thought it would be came from courtesies of the whites toward the Negro in New Orleans. But this was superficial. All the courtesies in the world do not cover up the one vital and massive discourtesy - that the Negro is treated not even as a second-class citizen, but as a tenth-class one. His day-to-day living is a reminder of his inferior status. He does not become calloused to these things - the polite rebuffs when he seeks better employment; hearing himself referred to as nigger, coon, jigaboo; having to bypass available rest-room facilities or eating facilities to find one specified for him. Each new reminder strikes at the raw spot, deepens the wound. I do not speak here only from my personal reaction, but from seeing it happen to others, and from seeing their reactions.

The Negro's only salvation from complete despair lies in his belief, the old belief of his forefathers, that these things are not directed against him personally, but against his race, his pigmentation. His mother or aunt or teacher long ago carefully prepared him, explaining that he as an individual can live in dignity, even though he as a Negro cannot. "They don't do it to you because you're Johnny - they don't even know you. They do it against your Negro-ness."

But at the time of the rebuff, even when the rebuff is impersonal, such as holding his bladder until he can find a "Colored" sign, the Negro cannot rationalize. He feels it personally and it burns him. It gives him a view of the white man that the white can never understand; for if the Negro is part of the black mass, the white is always the individual, and he will sincerely deny that he is "like that," he has always tried to be fair and kind to the Negro. Such

men are offended to find Negroes suspicious of them, never realizing that the Negro cannot understand how - since as individuals they are decent and "good" to the colored - the whites as a group can still connive to arrange life so that it destroys the Negro's sense of personal value, degrades his human dignity, deadens the fibers of his being.

Existence becomes a grinding effort, guided by belly-hunger and the almost desperate need to divert awareness from the squalors to the pleasures, to lose oneself in sex or drink or dope or gut-religion or gluttony or the incoherence of falsity; and in some instances the higher pleasures of music, art, literature, though these usually deepen perceptions rather than dull them, and can be unbearable; they present a world that is ordered, sane, disciplined to felicity, and the contrast of that world to theirs increases the pain of theirs.

When I went out that morning the face of the Negro populace was glum and angry.

At the shoe stand, Sterling did not give his usual cordial greeting. His eyes looked yellower than usual.

"You heard?" he asked.

"No … I haven't heard anything …" He told me the Mississippi jury refused to indict in the Parker lynch case. The news had spread over the quarter like a wave of acid. Everyone talked of it. Not since I was in Europe, when the Russo-German Pact of 1939 was signed, had I seen news spread such bitterness and despair.

Sterling handed me this morning's issue of *The Louisiana Weekly*, a Negro newspaper. The editorial page condemned the jury's actions.

> If there was any doubt as to how "Southern Justice" operates in the state of Mississippi, it was completely dispelled … when the Pearl River County Grand Jury failed to return any indictments or even consider the massive information compiled by the FBI in the sensational Mack Parker kidnap-lynch murder case. … The axiom that a man is innocent until proved guilty by a court of law has been flagrantly ignored once again in the State of Mississippi. The fact that

> an accused man was deprived of a fair trial, kidnapped and murdered by a lynch mob from a Mississippi jail apparently had no effect on the thinking of the Grand Jury. The silent treatment merely gave approval of the mob taking the law into its hands. Mississippi has long had a reputation of failing to punish white men accused of criminal acts against Negroes. This is Mississippi's peculiar way of making Negroes "happy and contented" with the democratic processes and of showing the world how well they care for the Negro in respecting his rights as an American citizen.

The point that crushed most was that the FBI had supplied a dossier of evidence identifying the lynchers, and the Pearl River County Grand Jury had decided not to look inside it.

I handed the paper back to Sterling. In a voice heavy with anger he held it at arm's length and read: "The calculated lack of respect for law and order in Mississippi has made it a veritable jungle of intimidation, terrorism and brutality where only the fittest survive. Further, it has shamed the United States in the eyes of the world and added to the shame of the South, already experiencing strained, tense and explosive race relations because white supremacy mob rule substitutes too often for democracy. …"

He lowered the paper. "That's what pisses me off. They rant about how the rest of the country's against the Southern white - hell, how could they help being? Well, this just proves it. This is what we can expect from the white man's justice. What hope is there when a white jury won't even *look* at the evidence against a lynch mob?"

I could find nothing to say.

"We might as well learn not to expect *nothing* from Southern Justice. They're going to stack the cards against us every time," Sterling said.

No one outside the Negro community could imagine the profound effect this action had in killing the Negro's hope and breaking his morale.

I decided it was time to go into that state so dreaded by Negroes.

Joe returned with peanuts. I told them of my decision to move into Mississippi.

They jumped on the news almost angrily. “What the hell you want to go there for?” Joe protested. “That’s no place for a colored man - especially now with this Parker mess.

“They’re going to treat any Negro like a dog,” Sterling said. “You sure better not go.”

“That’s part of my work.”

“I’m telling you,” Joe insisted. “I know. I been there once and I couldn’t get out quick enough. And things weren’t as bad as they are now.”

“Yes, but Mississippi tells the rest of the world they got a wonderful relationship with their Negroes - that they understand each other, and like each other. They say outsiders just don’t understand. Well, I’m going there to see if I can understand.”

“It’s your ass,” Joe said. “But I sure hate to see you do it.”

“You’re going to come back and see us sometime, aren’t you?” Sterling said.

“You bet,” I said, walking away. A clumsy good-by.

My money was running low so I decided to cash some traveler’s checks before leaving. The banks were closed, since it was past noon on Saturday, but I felt I would have no difficulty with traveler’s checks in any of the larger stores, especially those on Dryades where I had traded and was known as a customer.

I took the bus to Dryades and walked down it, stopping at the dime store where I’d made most of my purchases. The young white girl came forward to wait on me.

“I need to cash a traveler’s check,” I said smiling.

“We don’t cash any checks of any kind,” she said firmly.

“Look, you know me. You’ve waited on me. I need some money.”

“You should have gone to the bank.”

“I didn’t know I needed the money until after the banks closed,” I said.

I knew I was making a pest of myself, but I could scarcely believe this nice young lady could be so unsympathetic, so insolent when she discovered I did not come in to buy something.

“I’ll be glad to buy a few things,” I said.

She called up to the bookkeeping department on an open mezzanine. “Hey! Do we cash traveler’s ch – ”

“No!” the white woman shouted back.

“Thank you for kindness,” I said and walked out.

I went into one store after the other along Dryades and Rampart Streets. In every store their smiles turned to grimaces when they saw I meant not to buy but to cash a check. It was not their refusal - I could understand that; it was the bad manners they displayed. I began to feel desperate and resentful. They would have cashed a traveler’s check without hesitation for a white man. Each time they refused me, they implied clearly that I had probably come by these checks dishonestly and they wanted nothing to do with them or me.

Finally, after I gave up hope and decided I must remain in New Orleans without funds until the banks opened on Monday, I walked toward town. Small gold lettering on the window of a store caught my attention: CATHOLIC BOOK STORE. Knowing the Catholic stand on racism, I wondered if this shop might cash a Negro’s check. With some hesitation, I opened the door and entered. I was prepared to be disappointed.

“Would you cash a twenty-dollar traveler’s check for me?” I asked the proprietress.

“Of course,” she said without hesitation, as though nothing could be more natural. She did not even study me.

I was so grateful that I bought a number of paperback books - works of Jacques Maritain, St. Thomas Aquinas and Christopher Dawson. With these in my jacket, I hurried toward the Greyhound bus station.

In the bus station lobby, I looked for signs indicating a colored waiting room, but saw none. I walked up to the ticket counter. When the lady ticket-seller saw me, her otherwise attractive face turned sour, violently so. This look was so unexpected and so unprovoked I was taken aback.

“What do you want?” she snapped.

Taking care to pitch my voice to politeness, I asked about the next bus to Hattiesburg.

She answered rudely and glared at me with such loathing I knew I was receiving what the Negroes call “the hate stare.” It was my first experience with it. It is far more than a look of disapproval one occasionally gets. This was so exaggeratedly hateful I would have been amused if I had not be so surprised.

I framed the words in my mind: “Pardon me, but have I done something to offend you?” But I realized I had done nothing - my color offended her.

“I’d like a one-way ticket to Hattiesburg, please,” I said and placed a ten-dollar bill on the counter.

“I can’t change that big a bill,” she said abruptly and turned away, as though the matter were closed. I remained at the window, feeling strangely abandoned but not knowing what else to do. In a while she flew back at me, her face flushed, and fairly shouted: “I *told* you - I can’t change that big a bill.”

“Surely,” I said stiffly, “in the entire Greyhound system there must be some means of changing a ten-dollar bill. Perhaps the manager - ”

She jerked the bill furiously from my hand and stepped away from the window. In a moment she reappeared to hurl my change and the ticket on the counter with such force most of it fell on the floor at my feet. I was truly dumfounded by this deep fury that possessed her whenever she looked at me. Her performance was so venomous, I felt sorry for her. It must have shown in my expression, for her face congested to high pink. She undoubtedly considered it supreme insolence for a Negro to dare to feel sorry for her.

I stooped to pick up my change and the ticket from the floor. I wondered how she would feel if she learned that the Negro before whom she had behaved in such an unladylike manner was habitually a white man.

With almost an hour before bus departure, I turned away and looked for a place to sit. The large, handsome room was almost empty. No other Negro was there, and I dared not take a seat unless I saw some other Negro also seated.

Once again a "hate stare" drew my attention like a magnet. It came from a middle-aged, heavyset, well-dressed white man. He sat a few yards away, fixing his eyes on me. Nothing can describe the withering horror of this. Yo u feel lost, sick at heart before such unmasked hatred, not so much because it threatens you as because it shows humans in such an inhuman light. You see a kind of insanity, something so obscene the very obscenity of it (rather than its threat) terrifies you. It was so new I could not take my eyes from the man's face. I felt like saying: "What in God's name are you doing to yourself."

A Negro porter sidled over to me. I glimpsed his white coat and turned to him. His glance met mine and communicated the sorrow, the understanding.

"Where am I supposed to go?" I asked him.

He touched my arm in that mute and reassuring way of men who share a moment of crisis. "Go outside and around the corner of the building. You'll find the room."

The white man continued to stare, his mouth twisted with loathing as he turned his head to watch me move away.

In the colored waiting room, which was not labeled as such, but rather as COLORED CAFÉ, presumably because of interstate travel regulations, I took the last empty seat. The room was crowded with glum faces, faces dead to all enthusiasm, faces of people waiting.

The books I had bought from the Catholic Book Store weighed heavily in my pocket. I pulled one of them out and, without looking at the title, let it fall open in my lap. I read:

… it is by justice that we can authentically measure man's value or his nullity … the absence of justice is the absence of what makes him man. - Plato.

I have heard it said another way, as a dictum: *He who is less than just is less than man.*

I copied the passage in a little pocket notebook. A Negro woman, her face expressionless, flat, highlighted with sweat, watched me write. When I turned in my seat to put the notebook in my hip pocket, I detected the faintest smile at the corners of her mouth.

They called the bus. We filed out into the high-roofed garage and stood in line, the Negroes to the rear, the whites to the front. Buses idled their motors, filling the air with a stifling odor of exhaust fumes. An army officer hurried to get at the rear of the white line. I stepped back to let him get in front. He refused and went to the end of the colored portion of the line. Every Negro craned his head to look at the phenomenon. I have learned that men in uniform, particularly officers, rarely descend to show discrimination, perhaps because of the integration of the armed forces.

We sweated through our clothes and I was ready to leave and try for a later bus when they allowed us to board. Though nominally segregation is not permitted on interstate buses, no Negro would be fool enough to try to sit anywhere except at the rear on one going into Mississippi. I occupied a seat to myself not far from the back. Muffled conversations sprang up around me.

"Well, here we go into Mississippi - the most lied-about state in the union - that's what they claim," a man behind me said.

"It's the truth, too," another said. "Only it's Mississippi that does all the lying."

We drove through New Orleans under an overcast sky. Air conditioning in the bus cooled us comfortably. As we crossed the bridge, the water of Lake Pontchartrain reflected the sky's gray tone, with whitecaps on its disturbed surface.

The bus stopped at the outskirts of town to take on more passengers. Among them was a striking Negro man, tall, slender,

elegantly dressed - the “Valentino” type. He wore a mustache and a neatly trimmed Vandyke beard. He walked toward the rear, giving the whites a fawning, almost tender look. His expression twisted to a sneer when he reached the back and surveyed the Negroes.

He sat sidewise in an empty seat across the aisle from me and began to harangue two brothers behind him. “This place stinks. Damned punk niggers. Look at all of them - bunch of dirty punks - don’t know how to dress. You don’t deserve anything better. *Mein Kampf*! Do you speak German? No. You’re ignorant. You make me sick.”

He proceeded to denounce his race venomously. He spoke fragments of French, Spanish and Japanese.

I averted my head to the window and watched the country fly past as we traveled through an area of sunlight. I did not want to become involved in any discussion with this strange man. He was soon in a violent argument with one of the two brothers. They quarreled to the point of rage over whether Juárez was in Old Mexico or New Mexico.

The elegant one shouted. “You can’t lie to Christophe. Christophe’s got brains. No ignorant punk like you can fool him. You never been to Juárez!”

He jumped abruptly to his feet. Fearing violence, I turned toward him. He stood poised, ready to strike the other, his eyes narrowed into slits of hatred.

“If you hit me, you’ll be hitting me in the wrong,” the poorly dressed Negro said, looking calmly up at Christophe. His seat companion added with a gentle smile, “He’s my brother. I’d have to take his part.”

“You threatening me?” Christophe whispered.

“No, now look,” the brother placated. “Why don’t you two agree just not to talk.”

“He won’t say another word to me? You promise?” Christophe said. He lowered his fist, but his face did not relax.

“No, he won’t - will you?”

The poorly dressed one shrugged his shoulders pleasantly. “I guess - ”

“Don’t speak! Don’t speak!” Christophe shouted into his face.

“Okay … Okay …” he said, glancing toward me as though to say the elegant Christophe must be insane.

Christophe glared at him for some time before moving over into the seat next to me. His presence set my nerves on edge. He was cunning and apparently vicious and I did not know what kind of scene he might start. I stared out the window, turning so far he could see only the back of my head.

He slouched far down in the seat and, working his hands wildly in the air as though he were playing a guitar, he began to sing the blues, softly, mournfully, lowering his voice at the obscene words. A strange sweetish odor detached from him. I supposed it to be marijuana, but it was only a guess.

I felt his elbow dig into my ribs. “How you like that, pappy?”

I nodded, trying to be both polite and noncommittal. He had pulled his hat down over his eyes. He lighted a cigarette and let it dangle from his lips. I turned back to the window, hoping he would leave me alone.

He nudged me again and I looked around. He bent his head far back to gaze at me under his lowered hat brim. “You don’t dig the blues, do you, daddy?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

He studied me with narrowed eyes. Then, as though he had found some answer, he flashed me a magnificent smile, leaned hard against me and whispered, “I bet you dig this, daddy.”

He punched his hat back, concentrated, stiffened his hands, palms upward, in a supplicating gesture and began softly to chant *Tantum ergo sacramentum, Veneremur cernui* in as beautiful Latin as I have ever heard. I stared at him dumfounded as he chanted the Gregorian version of this famous text.

He glanced at me tenderly, his face soft as though he were on the verge of tears. “That got you, didn’t it, dad?”

“Yes,” I said.

He made a huge sign of the cross, lowered his head and recited, again with perfect Latin diction, the *Confiteor*. When it was over, he remained still, in profound introspection. Above the hum of the bus’s wheels on the pavement, silence surrounded us. No one spoke. Doubtless those nearest us who had witnessed the strange scene were perplexed.

“You were an altar boy, I guess,” I said.

“I was,” he said, not raising his head. “I wanted to be a priest.” His mobile face revealed every emotion. His eyes darkened with regret.

The man across the aisle grinned and said: “Better not believe anything he tells you.”

Christophe’s handsome face congealed instantly to hatred.

“I told you not to talk to me!”

The man’s brother intervened. “He just forgot.” Then to the poorly dressed one, “Don’t say *anything* to him. He can’t stand you.”

“I was talking to the other fellow, the one in the dark glasses,” he said.

“Shut up!” Christophe shouted. “You were talking *about* me - and I don’t even want you to do that.”

“Just be quiet,” the man’s brother said. “He’s going to be mad at anything you say.”

“Goddamn, it’s a free sonofabitching country,” the other said feebly, the smile remaining unchanged on his face. “I’m not afraid of him.”

“Well, just hush - no need in you talking to him,” his brother pleaded.

“You keep him quiet - or else,” Christophe said haughtily.

My stomach contracted with uneasiness, certain there would be a fight. I was astonished to see Christophe cut his eyes around to me and wink, as though secretly he were amused. He glared his "enemy" down for some time before turning back to me. "I came to sit by you because you're the only one here that looks like he's got enough sense to carry on an intelligent conversation."

"Thank you," I said.

"I'm not pure Negro," he said proudly. "My mother was French, my father Indian."

"I see. …"

"She was Portuguese, my mother - a lovely woman," Christophe sighed.

"I see. …"

The man across the aisle smiled broadly at the obvious admission of a lie from Christophe. I gave him a warning glance and he did not challenge our friend's French-Portuguese-Indian background.

"Let's see," Christophe said, eyeing me speculatively. "What blood have you got? Give me a minute. Christophe never makes a mistake. I can always tell what kind of blood a man's got in him." He took my face between his hands and examined me closely. I waited, certain this strange man would expose me. Finally, he nodded gravely to indicate he had deciphered my blood background. "I have it now." His eyes glowed and he hesitated before making his dramatic announcement to the world. I cringed, preparing explanations, and then decided to try to stop him from exposing me.

"Wait - let me - "

"Florida Navaho," he interrupted triumphantly. "Your mother was part Florida Navaho, wasn't she?"

I felt like laughing, first with relief and then at the thought of my Dutch-Irish mother being anything so exotic as Florida Navaho. At the same time, I felt vaguely disappointed to find Christophe no brighter than the rest of us.

He waited for my answer.

“You’re pretty sharp,” I said.

“Ha! I never miss.” Instantly, his expression degenerated to viciousness. “I hate us, Father.”

“I’m not a Father.”

“Ah, you can’t fool Christophe. I know you’re a priest even if you are dressed in civilian clothes. Look at these punks, Father. Dumb, ignorant bastards. They don’t know the score. I’m getting out of this country.”

His anger vanished. He leaned to whisper in my ear, his voice suddenly abject. “I’ll tell you the truth, Father. I’m just out of the pen - four years. I’m on my way to see my wife. She’s waiting with a new car for me in Slidell. And God … what a reunion we’re going to have!”

His face crumpled and his head fell against my chest. Silently he wept.

“Don’t cry,” I whispered. “It’s all right. Don’t cry.”

He raised his head and rolled his eyes upward in agony. His face bathed in tears, all of his arrogant defenses gone, he said: “Sometime, Father, when you say Mass, will you take the white Host for Christophe?”

“You’re wrong to believe I’m a priest,” I said. “But I’ll remember you next time I go to Mass.”

“Ah, that’s the only peace,” he sighed. “That’s the peace my soul longs for. I wish I could come back home to it, but I can’t - I haven’t been inside a church in seventeen years.”

“You can always go back.”

“Nah,” he snorted. “I’ve got to shoot up a couple of guys.”

My surprise must have shown. A smile of glee lighted his face. “Don’t worry, daddy. I’m going to watch out. Why don’t you get off with me and let’s shoot up this town together.”

I told him I could not. The bus slowed into Slidell. Christophe got to his feet, straightened his tie, stared furiously at the man across

the aisle for a moment, bowed to me and took off. We were relieved to have him gone, though I could not help wondering what his life might be were he not torn with the frustrations of his Negro-ness.

At Slidell we changed into another Greyhound bus with a new driver - a middle-aged man, large-bellied with a heavy jowled face filigreed with tiny red blood vessels near the surface of his cheeks.

A stockily built young Negro, who introduced himself as Bill Williams, asked if I minded having him sit beside me.

Now that Christophe was gone, the tensions disappeared in our Negro section. Everyone knew, from having heard our conversations, that I was a stranger in the area. Talk flowed easily and they surrounded me with warmth.

“People come down here and say Mississippi is the worst place in the world,” Bill said. “But we can’t all live in the North.”

“Of course not. And it looks like beautiful country,” I said, glancing out at giant pine trees.

Seeing that I was friendly, he offered advice. “If you’re not used to things in Mississippi, you’ll have to watch yourself pretty close till you catch on,” he said.

The others, hearing, nodded agreement.

I told him I did not know what to watch out for.

“Well, you know you don’t want to even look at a white woman. In fact, you look down at the ground or the other way.”

A large, pleasant Negro woman smiled at me across the aisle. “They’re awful touchy on that here. You may not even know you’re looking in a white woman’s direction, but they’ll try to make something out of it,” she said.

“If you pass by a picture show, and they’ve got women on the posters outside, don’t look at them either.”

“Is it that bad?”

He assured me it was. Another man said: “Somebody’s sure to say, ‘Hey, boy - what are you looking at that white gal like *that* for?’ ”

I remembered the woman on the bus in New Orleans using almost the same expression.

“And you dress pretty well,” Bill continued, his heavy black face frowning in concentration. “If you walk past an alley, walk out in the middle of the street. Plenty of people here, white and colored, would knock you in the head if they thought you had money on you. If white boys holler at you, just keep walking. Don’t let them stop you and start asking you questions.”

I told him I appreciated his warning.

“Can you all think of anything else?” he asked the others.

“That covers it,” one of them said.

I thanked him for telling me these things.

“Well, if I was to come to your part of the country, I’d want somebody to tell me,” Bill said.

He told me he was a truck driver, working out of Hattiesburg. He had taken a load to New Orleans, where he had left his truck for repairs and caught the bus back to Hattiesburg. He asked if I had made arrangements for a place to stay. I told him no. He said the best thing would be for me to contact a certain important person who would put me in touch with someone reliable who would find me a decent and safe place.

It was late dusk when the bus pulled into some little town for a stop. “ We get about ten minutes here,” Bill said. “Let’s get off and stretch our legs. They’ve got a men’s room here if you need to go.”

The driver stood up and faced the passengers. “Ten-minute rest stop,” he announced.

The whites rose and ambled off. Bill and I led the Negroes toward the door. As soon as he saw us, the driver blocked our way. Bill slipped under his arm and walked toward the dim-lit shed building.”

“Hey, boy, where you going?” the driver shouted to Bill while he stretched his arms across the opening to prevent my stepping down. “Hey, you, boy, I’m talking to you.” Bill’s footsteps crunched unhurriedly across the gravel.

I stood on the bottom step, waiting. The driver turned back to me.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked, his heavy cheeks quivering with each word.

“I’d like to go to the rest room.” I smiled and moved to step down.

He tightened his grip on the door facings and shouldered in close to block me. “Does your ticket say for you to get off here?” he asked.

“No, sir, but the others - ”

“Then you get your ass back there like I told you,” he said, his voice rising. “I can’t be bothered rounding up all you people when we get ready to go.”

“You announced a rest stop. The whites all got off,” I said, unable to believe he really meant to deprive us of rest-room privileges.

He stood on his toes and put his face up close to mine. His nose flared. Footlights caught silver glints from the hairs that curled out of his nostrils. He spoke slowly, threateningly: “Are you arguing with me?”

“No, sir …” I sighed.

“Then you do like I say.”

We turned like a small herd of cattle and drifted back to our seats. The others grumbled about how unfair it was. The large woman was apologetic, as though it embarrassed her for a stranger to see Mississippi’s dirty linen.

“There’s no call for him to act like that,” she said. “They usually let us off.”

I sat in the monochrome gloom of dusk, scarcely believing that in this year of freedom any man could deprive another of anything so basic as the need to quench thirst or use the rest room. There was nothing of the feel of America here. It was rather some strange country suspended in ugliness. Tension hung in the air, a continual threat, even though you could not put your finger on it.

“Well,” I heard a man behind me say softly but firmly, “if I can’t go in there, then I’m going in here. I’m not going to sit here and bust.”

I glanced back and saw it was the same poorly dressed man who had so outraged Christophe. He walked in a half crouch to a place behind the last seat, where he urinated loudly on the floor. Indistinguishable sounds of approval rose around me - quiet laughter, clearing throats, whispers.

“Let’s all do it,” a man said.

“Yeah, flood this bus and end all this damned foolishness.”

Bitterness dissolved in our delights to give the bus driver and the bus as good as they deserved.

The move was on, but it was quelled by another voice. “No, let’s don’t. It’ll just give them something else to hold against us,” an older man said. A woman agreed. All of us could see the picture. The whites would start claiming that we were unfit, that Negroes did not even know enough to go to the rest room - they just did it in the back of the bus - never mentioning, of course, that the driver would not let us off.

The driver’s bullish voice attracted our attention.

“Didn’t you hear me call you?” he asked as Bill climbed the steps.

“I sure didn’t,” Bill said pleasantly.

“You deaf?”

“No, sir.”

“You mean to stand there and say you didn’t hear me call you?”

“Oh, were you calling me?” Bill asked innocently. “I heard you yelling ‘Boy,’ but that’s not my name, so I didn’t know you meant me.”

Bill returned and sat beside me, surrounded by the approval of his people. In the immense tug-of-war, such an act of defiance turned him into a hero.

As we drove more deeply into Mississippi, I noted that the Negro comforted and sought comfort from his own. Whereas in New Orleans he paid little attention to his brother, in Mississippi everyone who boarded the bus at the various little towns had a smile and a greeting for everyone else. We felt strongly the need to establish friendship as a buffer against the invisible threat. Like shipwrecked people, we huddled together in a warmth and courtesy that was pure and pathetic.

The threat grew as we penetrated deeper toward the center of the state. The distance between the whites and the blacks grew tangibly greater, even though we saw only the backs of their heads and shoulders, their hats and the cigarette smoke rising from them as night fell and the bus lights switched on. They said nothing, did not look back, but hostility emanated from them in an unmistakable manner.

We tried to counter it by being warm and kind to one another, far more than strangers usually are. Women discussed where they lived and promised to visit one another, though all knew that such visits would never take place.

As we neared Poplarville, agitation swept through the bus. Everyone's mind was on the Parker youth's lynching and the jury's refusal to consider the FBI evidence against his lynchers.

"Do you know about Poplarville?" Bill whispered.

"Yes."

Some of the whites looked back. Animated Negro faces turned stony.

Bill pointed out places in a quiet expressionless voice. "That's the jail where they snatched him. They went up to his cell - the bastards - and grabbed his feet and dragged him down so his head bumped against each stair step. They found blood on them, and blood at the bottom landing. He must've known what they were going to do to him. He must've been scared shitless."

The bus circled through the streets of a small Southern town, a gracious town in appearance. I looked about me. It was too real for

my companions, too vivid. Their faces were pinched, their expressions indrawn as though they felt themselves being dragged down the jail stairway, felt their own heads bumping against the steps, experiencing the terror …

Bill's voice cut through, sourly: "That's the courthouse where they made that decision." He looked at me to see if I understood what decision he meant. I nodded.

"That's where they as much told the whites, 'You go ahead and lynch those niggers, we'll see you don't get in any trouble.' "

I wondered what the whites in front were thinking. The lynching and the callous decision of the Pearl River County Grand Jury were surely on all their minds. Perhaps the injustice was as nightmarish to them as it was to those surrounding me.

We drove through wooded countryside into the night. Bill dozed beside me, his snores adjusted to the hum of the tires. No one talked. After a while Bill roused himself and pointed out the window. "That's where they fished his body out of the creek," he said. I cupped my hands to the window but could see only black masses of foliage against a dark sky.

We arrived in Hattiesburg around eight thirty. Most of the Negroes hurried to the rest rooms. Bill gave me instructions with such solicitude that I was alarmed. Why, unless there was real danger, would he be so careful to help me avoid it? I wondered. He told me where I should go first, and whom I should request to see.

"What's the best way to get there?" I asked.

"Have you got some money?"

"Yes."

"Take a cab."

"Where do I catch one?"

"Any of those cabs out there," he said pointing to a string of parked cabs driven by white men.

"You mean a white driver'll take a Negro passenger?" I asked.

“Yeah.”

“They wouldn’t in New Orleans … they said they weren’t allowed to.”

“They’re allowed to do anything to get your dime here,” he said. We walked to one of the cabs.

“Yessir, where can I take you?” the driver said. I looked through the window to see a pleasant young man who showed no hint of animosity. Bill told him the address where he should deliver me.

“Wait just a second, will you?” Bill told the driver. He grabbed my arm and walked away.

“I’ll find out where you’re staying. I’ll come around noon tomorrow and check on you to see you’re all right.”

Again I was overwhelmed that strangers should go to such trouble for me.

I thanked him. He hesitated, as though uncertain, and then said: “I’m not buttin’ into your business, but if you’re planning on getting a girl - you don’t want to get one that’ll burn you.”

“I sure don’t.” I thought of La Fontaine’s “Les Deux Amis,” where the friend offers to help rid the hero of his sadness, even to procuring a girl for him. I detected no hint of lasciviousness in Bill’s voice or manner, certainly no element of pimping; no, he was simply trying to protect me.

“If you do plan on getting one, you better let me help you find a clean one.”

“I’m worn out, Bill,” I said. “I guess I’ll bypass it tonight.”

“That’s fine … I just didn’t want you to go getting yourself messed up.”

“I appreciate it.”

The cab driver delivered me to an address on Mobile Street, the main street of the Negro quarter. It was narrow, cluttered, lined by stores, cafés, bars. He was completely civil, and in such an authentic

way, I felt it was his real nature and not just a veneer to please the customer - the way I had seen it in the stores in New Orleans.

“Looks awful wild down here,” I said as I paid him. I had to speak loudly to make him hear me above the shouts and the amplified wails of jukebox rock-and-roll music.

“If you don’t know the quarter, you’d better get inside somewhere as soon as you can,” he said.

My contact inside referred me to another person in the quarter. As I walked down Mobile Street, a car full of white men and boys sped past. They yelled obscenities at me. A tangerine flew past my head and broke against a building. The street was loud and raw, with tension as thick as fog.

I felt the insane terror of it. When I entered the store of my second contact, we talked in low voices, though he made no effort to be guarded or cautious in expressing his contempt for the brutes who made forays into the area.

“The sonsofbitches beat one boy to a pulp. He was alone on a stretch of walk. They jumped out of the car, tore him up and were gone before anyone knew what was happening,” he said. “They framed another on a trumped-up charge of carrying whiskey in his car. He’s one of the finest boys in town. Never drinks.”

His bitterness was so great I knew I would be thought a spy for the whites if I divulged my identity.

Another car roared down the street, and the street was suddenly deserted, but the Negroes appeared again shortly. I sought refuge in a Negro drugstore and drank milk shakes as an excuse to stay there.

A well-dressed man approached and asked if I were Mr. Griffin. I told him I was. He said there was a room for me and I could go to it whenever I got ready.

I walked through the street again, through the darkness that was alive with lights and humanity. Blues boomed from a tavern across the street. It was a sort of infernal circus, smelling of barbecue and kerosene.

My room was upstairs in a wooden shanty structure that had never known paint. It was decrepit, but the Negro leaders assured me it was safe and that they would keep a close watch on me. Without turning on my light, I went over and sat on the bed. Lights from the street cast a yellowish glow over the room.

From the tavern below a man improvised a ballad about "poor Mack Parker … overcome with passion … his body in the creek."

"Oh Lord," a woman said in the quiet that followed, her voice full of sadness and awe.

"Lordy … Lordy …" a man said in a hushed voice, as though there were nothing more he could say.

Canned jazz blared through the street with a monstrous high-strutting rhythm that pulled at the viscera. The board floor squeaked under my footsteps. I switched on the light and looked into a cracked piece of mirror bradded with bent nails to the wall. The bald Negro stared back at me from its mottled sheen. I knew I was in hell. Hell could be no more lonely or hopeless, no more agonizingly estranged from the world of order and harmony.

I heard my voice, as though it belonged to someone else, hollow in the empty room, detached, say: "Nigger, what you standing up there crying for?"

I saw tears slick on his cheeks in the yellow light.

Then I heard myself say what I have heard them say so many times. "It's not right. It's just not right."

Then the onrush of revulsion, the momentary flash of blind hatred against the whites who were somehow responsible for all of this, the old bewilderment of wondering, "Why do they do it? Why do they keep us like this? What are they gaining? What evil has taken them?" (The Negroes say, "What sickness has taken them?") My revulsion turned to grief that my own people could give the hate stare, could shrivel men's souls, could deprive humans of rights they unhesitatingly accord their livestock.

I turned away from the mirror. A burned-out light globe lay on the plank floor in the corner. Its unfrosted glass held the reflection of the overhead bulb, a speck of brightness. A half-dozen film negatives curled up around it like dead leaves. I picked them up and held them before the light with strange excitement, curious to see the image that some prior occupant of this room had photographed.

Each negative was blank.

I imagined him going to the drugstore to pick up the package of photos and hurrying to this squalid room to warm himself with the view of his wife, his children, his parents, his girlfriend - who knows? He had sat here holding blank negatives, masterpieces of human ingenuity wasted.

I flicked the negatives, as he must have done, toward the corner, heard them scratch dryly against the wall and flap to the floor. One struck the dead globe, causing it to sing its strange filamental music of the spheres, fragile and high-pitched above the outside noises.

Music from the jukebox, a grinding rhythm, ricocheted down the street.

hangity
hangity hangity oomp
Harangity oomp oomp oomp oomp oomp oomp oomp

The aroma of barbecue tormented my empty insides, but I did not want to leave the room and go back into the mainstream of hell.

I took out my notebook, lay across the bed on my stomach and attempted to write - anything to escape the death dance out there in the Mississippi night. But the intimate contentment would not come. I tried to write to my wife - I needed to write her, to give her my news - but I found I could tell her nothing. No words would come. She had nothing to do with this life, nothing to do with the room in Hattiesburg or with its Negro inhabitant. It was maddening. All my instincts struggled against the estrangement. I began to understand Lionel Trilling's remark that culture - learned behavior patterns so deeply ingrained they produce involuntary reactions - is a prison.

My conditioning as a Negro and the immense sexual implications with which the racists in our culture bombard us, cut me off, even in my most intimate self, from any connection with my wife.

I stared at the letter and saw written: *Hattiesburg, November 14. My darling*, followed by a blank page.

The visual barrier imposed itself. The observing self saw the Negro, surrounded by the sounds and smells of the ghetto, write "Darling" to a white woman. The chains of my blackness would not allow me to go on. Though I understood and could analyze what was happening, I could not break through:

Never look at a white woman - look down or the other way.

What do you mean, calling a white woman "darling" like that, boy?

I went out to find some barbecue, down the outside steps, my hand on the cool weathered railing, past a man leaning forward with his head cushioned on his arm against a wall, leaking into the shadows; and on into a door somewhere. There were dim lights and signs: NO OBSENETY ALLOWED and HOT LINKS 25¢.

A round-faced woman, her cheeks slicked yellow with sweat, handed me a barbecued beef sandwich. My black hands took it from her black hands. The imprint of her thumb remained in the bread's soft pores. Standing so close, odors of her body rose up to me from her white uniform, a mingling of hickory-smoked flesh, gardenia talcum and sweat. The expression on her full face cut into me. Her eyes said with unmistakable clarity, "God … isn't it awful?" She took the money and stepped back into the open kitchen. I watched her lift the giant lid of the pit and fork out a great chunk of meat. White smoke billowed up, hazing her face to gray.

The meat warmed through the bread in my hand. I carried the sandwich outside and sat on the back steps leading up to my room to eat it. A streak of light from the front flowed past me, illuminating dusty weeds, debris and out buildings some distance to

the rear. The night, the hoots and shouts surrounded me even in this semi-hiding place.

hangity
hangity hangity
Harangity …

The music consumed in its blatant rhythm all other rhythms, even that of the heartbeat. I wondered how all this would look to the casual observer, or to the whites in their homes. “The niggers are whooping it up over on Mobile Street tonight,” they might say. “They’re happy.” Or, as one scholar put it, “Despite their lowly status, they are capable of living jubilantly.” Would they see the immense melancholy that hung over the quarter, so oppressive that men had to dull their sensibilities in noise or wine or sex or gluttony in order to escape it? The laughter had to be gross or it would turn to sobs, and to sob would be to realize, and to realize would be to despair. So the noise poured forth like a jazzed-up fugue, louder and louder to cover the whisper in every man’s soul. “You are black. You are condemned.” This is what the white man mistook for “jubilant living” and called “whooping it up.” This is how the white man can say, “They live like dogs,” never realizing why they must, to save themselves, shout, get drunk, shake the hip, pour pleasures into bellies deprived of happiness. Otherwise, the sounds from the quarter would lose order and rhythm and become wails.

I felt disaster. Somewhere in the night’s future the tensions would explode into violence. The white boys would race through too fast. They would see a man or a boy or a woman alone somewhere along the street and the lust to beat or to kill would flood into them. Some frightful thing had to climax this accelerating madness.

Words of the state song hummed through my memory:

Way down South in Mississippi,
Cotton blossoms white with the sun.
We all love our Mississippi,

Here we'll stay where livin' is fun.
The evening stars shine brighter,
And glad is every dewy morn,
For way down South in Mississippi,
Folks are happy they have been born.

Scenes from books and movies came back - the laces, the shaded white-columned veranda with mint juleps served by an elegantly uniformed "darky," the honor, the magnolia fragrance, the cotton fields where "darkies, happy and contented," labored in the day and then gathered at the manse to serenade their beloved white folks with spirituals in the evening after supper … until the time when they could escape to freedom.

Here, tonight, it was the wood plank beneath my seat, the barbecue grease on my lips, the need to hide from white eyes degenerate with contempt … even in the land "where livin' is fun."

And God is love in Mississippi,
Home and church her people hold dear.

I rose stiffly to my feet. Suddenly I knew I could not go back up to that room with its mottled mirror, its dead lightbulb and its blank negatives.

I knew of one white man in Hattiesburg to whom I might turn for help - a newspaperman, P.D. East. But I hesitated to call him. He had been so persecuted for seeking justice in race relations I was afraid my presence anywhere near him might further jeopardize him.

I washed my hands and mouth under an outside faucet and walked around into the street to a phone.

P.D. was not at home, but I explained the situation to his wife, Billie. She said she was long ago inured to shocks, and insisted on having P.D. rescue me.

"Not if it's going to cause you people more trouble," I said. "I'm scared to death, but I 'd rather stay here than get you in any

deeper."

"It's late," she said. "I'll contact P.D. He can bring you here without your being seen. Stand in front of the drugstore. He'll pick you up. Only one thing. You're not to do any of your investigating around this area - okay?"

"Of course not," I said.

"I mean, that would really get us in a jam …"

"Of course - I wouldn't think of it."

I waited in front of the lighted drugstore, which was closed down for the night. My nerves tightened each time a car passed. I expected another tangerine to be thrown or another oath to be hurled. Other Negroes stood in other doorways, watching me as though they thought I was insane to stand there in the bright light. A sensible man would wait in the darkness.

Moments later a station wagon passed slowly and parked a few yards down the street. I was certain it must be P.D. and wondered at his foolishness in parking where he would have to walk along a sidewalk toward me, past a gauntlet of Negroes who might not recognize him and who had good cause that night to resent any white man.

He got out and walked easily toward me, huge in the dim light. I could not speak. He shook my Negro hand in full view of everyone on the street. Then in his soft and cultivated voice he said: "Are you ready to go?"

I nodded and we returned to his car. He held the door for me to get in and then drove off.

"It's amazing," he said, after an uncomfortable silence.

We drove through the darkened streets to his home, talking in a strangely stilted manner. I wondered why, and then realized that I had grown so accustomed to being a Negro, to being shown contempt, that I could not rid myself of the cautions. I was embarrassed to ride in the front seat of the car with a white man, especially on our way to his home. It was breaking the "Southern

rule" somehow. Too, in this particular atmosphere, my "escape" was an emotional thing felt by both of us.

I repeated my plea that he not take me home if it meant any embarrassment or danger for his wife and child. He ignored this.

We drove into his carport, his wife stood in the shadows beside the house.

"Well, hello, Uncle Tom," she said.

Once again the terrible truth struck me. Here in America, in this day, the simple act of whites receiving a Negro had to be a night thing and its aura of uneasiness had to be countered with gallows humor.

What did we fear? I could not say exactly. It was unlikely the Klan would come riding down on us. We merely fell into the fear that hangs over the state, a nameless and awful thing. It reminded me of the nagging, focusless terror we felt in Europe when Hitler began his marches, the terror of talking with Jews (and our deep shame of it). For the Negro, at least, this fear is ever-present in the South, and the same is doubtlessly true of many decent whites who watch and wait, and feel the deep shame of it.

Once inside their home, the awkwardness gradually lessened. However, it was painful for me. I could not accustom myself to sitting in their living room as an "equal."

They have a modest home, but it was a palace compared to the places I had lived in recently. Most striking, however, was the atmosphere of easiness, of trust and warmth. It came as a new revelation to me: the simple ability to enjoy the pleasures of one's home, to relax and feel at ease. Though ordinary to most men, this was a luxury virtually unknown in my experience as a Negro.

The Easts showed me to my room and suggested I might like to wash up. I noted as another example of gallows humor that Billie had put out black guest towels and a washcloth for me.

We discussed our experiences until late in the night. We talked of our mutual friend, the literary historian Maxwell Geismar, who had

introduced us by correspondence a year ago. P.D. had recently visited the Geismar home; he told me of the great help Max and Anne Geismar had solicited over the country for him.

Then East fetched the manuscript of his autobiography, *The Magnolia Jungle,* which Simon & Schuster is publishing. At midnight I took the manuscript to my room, intending to glance through it before sleeping.

I could not put the manuscript down. I read through the night the story of a native-born Southerner, a man who had tried to follow the crowd, who ran an innocuous little newspaper, *The Petal Paper*, glad-handed, joined the local civic clubs and kept himself in line with "popular opinion," which meant "popular prejudice," or "keep the nigger in his place," in a Christian and 100 percent American fairplay manner, of course.

"I glad-handed from hell to breakfast, winning friends and conning people," he wrote. He adopted the Southern editorial policy, "Love American motherhood and hate sin" and never mention Negroes except in a manner harmonious to the Southern Way of Life. *The Petal Paper* carried local news along with short features such as "Citizen of the Week" and "Prayer and Meditation." This latter, written by a local minister, was "aimed at those Christians who were afraid not to read any printed word about Jesus."

For the first year, East managed to please everyone and offend no one. The paper had prospered. He had made money and he was popular among the townspeople.

East had fence-straddled all the major issues, if he mentioned them at all. At night he began to have trouble sleeping, to feel he was prostituting his conscience and his editorial responsibilities. "When I'd become aware of my state of mind, I would be frightened and snap back with a healthy smile and a hearty handshake. Such is the effect of the sweet smell of money."

More and more tormented, East entered a battle with his conscience, his sense of decency. It became clear to him that though

he wrote in his paper what his readers wanted to see, this was not always the truth. As the situation in the South degenerated after the 1954 Supreme Court decision on segregation, he was faced with a choice - either he must continue more and more to alter truth to make it conform to people's comfort, or he must write the truth in the dim hope that people would alter their comfort to conform to it.

His editorials began to lean away from the "correct" Southern attitude. He used the word "fair" to describe his new editorial policy. "I thought honestly and sincerely that with rare exception a man could say what he wished without fear of reprisal, especially a man with a newspaper who was seeking to expand his commercial and unhappy soul in a direction that was, for a rare change, decent and honest." His decision to be *fair* was not in keeping with the "correct" Southern attitude.

He continued stubbornly to preach justice. He said that in order to prove that the Negroes have no right to their freedoms, we were subverting the very principles that preserve the spirit of our own … we are endangering ourselves, no matter what our race and creed.

In essence, he asked for ethical and virtuous social conduct. He said that before we can have justice, we must first have truth, and he insisted on his right and duty to print the truth. Significantly, this was considered high treason.

I lay in the bed, under a lamp, and read and smoked cigarettes. Through the wall of the room, I heard P.D. snore, but in here he was much awake on the pages.

He was threatened and hounded by anonymous callers. The Citizens Councils found him worthy of their attention, after which he lost most of his local subscribers and ads. In a country of free speech and press, they starved him out for expressing views not in harmony with their prejudices.

For example, he questioned a bill proposed in the state legislature that would authorize use of tax funds to support the White Citizens Councils. He asked if it is fair to take tax money from the Negro and

then use it to support an organization set up for the avowed purpose of suppressing him.

Another bill, to levy penalizing fines against a church holding non-segregated services, was, he contended, in flagrant contradiction to the First Amendment of the Constitution.

He pointed out that these were simply the old story of legalized injustice. The local state legislature (in opposition to constitutional law) insisted that whatever it decided was *de jure* law, a position that wipes out the distinction between true and false judgments. "For," as Burke said, "if the judgment makes the law and not the law directs the judgment, it is impossible there should be such a thing as an illegal judgment given." A law is not good merely because the legislature wills it, but the legislature has the moral duty to will only that which is good.

This tendency to make laws that are convenient or advantageous rather than right has mushroomed in Southern legislatures. It has produced laws of a cynicism scarcely believable in a civilized society. Even when these have been tested and thrown out as illegal by superior courts, they have in some instances continued to be enforced because "they haven't taken them off the dockets."

Subscriptions were canceled. Ads were canceled. As a result of my host's campaign for nothing more than fairness or "couthness," as he came to call it, even his old friends, swayed by the pressures put on them by society, turned against him. He began getting telephone calls telling him he was a "goddamn nigger-loving, Jew-loving, communist son-of-a-bitch." Wherever he went he carried a gun.

"My reaction was as it had been before and as it was to be many times in the days to come. I was depressed to the point that I went into my room at home, sat on the side of the bed and wept like a baby."

It was an odd manuscript; in the midst of the profoundest personal tragedy, sinking into economic ruin, he wrote brilliantly funny columns. His finest attacks have been to take the "true Southerner's" viewpoint and render it absurd, all in seeming to

defend and explain it. Tragedy turned him into one of the subtlest and sharpest satirists in American letters. In *The Magnolia Jungle* the juxtaposition of the best of these columns against a background of stark horror gives a striking effect. It shows the phenomenon of a man living at his lowest and writing at his highest; a grief-stricken man who turns out monstrously funny copy. Like Monoculus, he poked fun at the devil.

His case, along with those of other "Southern traitors," like Hodding Carter, Easton King, Ralph McGill and Mark Ethridge, illustrates the "true Southerner's" admirable lack of race prejudice: he is as willing to destroy whites who question his "wisdom" as he is to destroy Negroes.

I put the manuscript away and tried to sleep. But the sun poured into my window. I had read all night.

November 15

I had hardly dozed when East came into the room with a lone cup of coffee on a serving tray. Groggily, I asked him the time. It was seven thirty. My body pleaded for sleep, but I knew he wanted to discuss the manuscript.

It was an odd, exhausting day. We spent it in the office he has at his home. I drank cups of coffee and listened to Mozart quintets and read the portions of the script he had cut out. In many instances I urged him to restore these deletions - but it was insane. I was sleepy, I was preoccupied with the magnificent music and I was trying to read while P.D. talked - a long, immensely funny monologue, punctuated every five minutes by: "Well, I'll shut up now and let you concentrate on that. But did Max ever tell you about …" And it would be another story.

"I was supposed to go to Dillard and give a lecture Monday," he said sadly.

"Are you going?"

"No … Dean Gandy asked me to come. I begged him to let me postpone it a while. Told him I was busy working on the book. And that understanding sonofabitch *agreed*; didn't even insist. Said 'Certainly, P.D., the book comes first. We can have you a bit later.' It hurt my feelings."

"Hell, he was just being nice."

"Nice - hell." He grimaced with pain. "He didn't act a bit broken up because I put him off. Well - you just stay over till Monday and I'll drive you back to New Orleans. I'll drop by and see him and show him I could have been had if he'd just had the basic common decency to insist."

We worked all day, going through his files. He piled research material, hate pamphlets, news clippings, letters and other items on my bed for me to study at night. We broke off at intervals to visit with his wife, Billie, and their young daughter, Karen, who, learning that I was from Texas and lived on a farm, called me “that rich bald-headed Texas rancher.” Except for two Jewish families, they are ostracized from society in Hattiesburg. Billie spends much of her time fishing in a nearby tank in the afternoons - a lonely existence. Karen is an extraordinarily beautiful blond child, the same age as my daughter and much like her. She is bright, outrageously outspoken and tender. She and her father were constantly at war over the TV programs. I could make little sense of it, except that the arguments were long and full of recriminations on both sides; but the traditional roles were reversed. She did not approve of her father’s avid watching of westerns and children’s programs, and he insisted that he be allowed, by God, to view his “favorites.”

I left them around eleven and meant to fall into bed. But the material P.D. had placed on the two bed tables fascinated me so that I studied it and made notes without sleeping until dawn. It is perhaps the most incredible collection of what East calls “assdom” in the South. It shows that the most obscene figures are not the ignorant ranting racists, but the legal minds who front for them, who “invent” for them the legislative proposals and the propaganda bulletins. They deliberately choose to foster distortions, always under the guise of patriotism, upon a people who have no means of checking the facts. Their appeals are of regional interest, showing complete contempt for privacy of conscience, and a willingness to destroy and subvert values that have traditionally been held supreme in this land.

November 16 New Orleans

Though the trip from New Orleans to Hattiesburg had seemed interminable on the bus, the return to New Orleans in P.D.' s car was quickly done. P.D. took me to Dillard University, one of the two Negro universities in New Orleans. A green, spacious campus with white buildings, great trees streaming Spanish moss. We drove through slowly, of necessity, since the campus drives have cement ridges every forty or fifty feet that would cause your car to bump badly if any speed were attempted. P.D. cursed these richly and made the typical "Southern white" remarks about "Did you ever see such a damn beautiful campus for a bunch of *nigras*. They're getting uppityer and uppityer."

He stopped deep in the campus at the cottages provided for the faculty and we went in to meet Dean Sam Gandy. The Dean, a handsome, cultivated man of great wit, had just returned from a trip. Almost before we were introduced, P.D. launched into bitter complaints, wanting to know why Dean Gandy had not insisted he give the lecture today.

"But you told me you were simply too busy," Gandy laughed. "Naturally we wanted you, but …"

Placated, P.D. and I confided my project to the Dean and his beautiful wife. Though we had little time to discuss it, since the Dean had to be at his office for an appointment, I promised to return and share my findings with him. We went to the car, which P.D. carefully and ostentatiously pretended to unlock.

"Why, P.D., what on earth did you lock your car for here in this cloistered atmosphere?" Gandy asked.

P.D. looked shifty-eyed, distrustful, in both directions, and then in a loud stage whisper said: "Well, with all these damn nigras hanging around, you know …"

Gandy bent double with laughter and outrage. He asked P.D. how the voting situation was in Mississippi and P.D. told the story of the Negro who went to register. The white man taking his application gave him the standard literacy tests:

"What is the first line of the thirty-second paragraph of the United States Constitution?" he asked.

The applicant answered perfectly.

"Name the eleventh President of the United States and his entire cabinet."

The applicant answered correctly.

Finally, unable to trip him up, the white man asked, "Can you read and write?"

The applicant wrote his name and was then handed a newspaper in Chinese to test his reading. He studied it carefully for a time.

"Well can you read it?"

"I can read the headline, but I can't make out the body text."

Incredulous, the white man said: "You can read *that* headline?"

"Oh, yes, I've got the meaning all right."

"What's it say?"

"It says this is one Negro in Mississippi who's not going to get to vote this year."

East let me out of the car in downtown New Orleans, on Canal Street. I bought a meal of beans and rice in the nearby Negro café and then went to the bus station to purchase a ticket back into Mississippi, but this time to the coastal town of Biloxi. I did not see the lady who gave me the hate stare a few days earlier. With three hours to kill until bus time, I walked and window-shopped on Canal. The town was decorated for Christmas and I felt lost in the great crowds. A cool, sunlit afternoon. I looked at all the children coming and going in the stores, most of them excited to see Santa Claus, and I felt the greatest longing to see my own.

Once again I stopped men on the street and asked directions to the French Market or to some church, and once again each gave me courteous replies. Despite the inequalities, I liked New Orleans, perhaps because I dreaded so the prospect of leaving once more to go into the Deep South, perhaps because it was, after all, so much better here than in Mississippi - though I understand that the rest of Louisiana is scarcely any better.

At the Jesuit church, I picked up a booklet I had also noticed on Dean Gandy's coffee table - *For Men of Good Will*, by Father Robert Guste. Penciled across the top in red were the words "Racial Justice." I stood in the sunlight outside the church, noticing that passers by either lifted their hats or made a discreet sign of the cross on their chests as they came abreast the church. I flipped through the pages, noticing the dedication:

> Dedicated to My Dad and Mother and to the countless other Southern parents and educators who sincerely try to instill in their children and their students a love for all men and a respect for the dignity and worth of every man.

Father Guste, a parish priest of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, born and reared in the South, wrote the book to clarify the problems of racial justice for those "men of good will" who are sincerely alarmed by "the Problem."

I glanced through quickly and promised myself a thorough reading. Suddenly it occurred to me that I made a strange and too obvious picture there - a large Negro, standing in front of a church, absorbed in a pamphlet on racial justice. I quickly dropped it into my jacket and walked to the Greyhound station to wait for my bus.

In the rest room, I saw the remains of a loaf of French bread lying on the floor beside the waste bin. It told the story of some poor devil who had come there, closed himself in the cubicle and eaten his meal of a half a loaf. The small room was perfectly clean except for a placard attached to the back of the door. I read the neatly typed NOTICE! until I saw that it was only another list of prices a white man would pay for various types of sensuality with various

ages of Negro girls. The whites frequently walk into colored rest rooms, Scotch-tape these notices to the wall. This man offered his services free to any Negro woman over twenty, offered to pay, on an ascending scale, from two dollars for a nineteen-year-old girl up to seven fifty for a fourteen-year-old and more for the perversion dates. He gave a contact point for later in the evening and urged any Negro man who wanted to earn five dollars for himself to find him a date within this price category. He would probably have success, I thought, glancing at the butt of bread. To a man who had nothing to eat but bread and perhaps a piece of cheese in a public rest room, five dollars could mean a great deal. I wondered about the Negro who had left this trace of his passing. What sort of man was he? A derelict? No, a derelict would have left an empty wine bottle. Someone who could not find work and had grown too hungry to wait for something better? Probably. If the woman in the Catholic Book Store had not cashed my traveler's check, I might have been reduced to the same thing. What astonished me was that he had not carried the remains of the bread with him. Perhaps he, too, had seen the notice on the door and counted on five dollars for a decent supper.

A young man entered as I dried my hands. He nodded politely, with a quick, intelligent expression, glanced at the notice and snorted with amusement and derision. In these matters, the Negro has seen the backside of the white man too long to be shocked. He feels an indulgent superiority whenever he sees these evidences of a white man's frailty. This is one of the sources of his chafing at being considered inferior. He cannot understand how the white man can show the most demeaning aspects of his nature and at the same time delude himself into thinking he is inherently superior.

To the Negro who sees this element of the white man's nature - and he sees it much more often than any other - the white man's comments about the Negro's alleged "immorality" ring maddeningly hollow.

November 19 Mississippi-Alabama

I arrived by bus in Biloxi too late to find any Negroes about, so I walked inland and slept, half-freezing, in a tin-roofed shed with an open south front. In the morning I found breakfast in a little Negro café - coffee and toast - and then walked down to the highway to begin hitching. The highway ran for miles along some of the most magnificent beaches I have ever seen - white sands, a beautiful gulf; and opposite the beach, splendid homes. The sun warmed me through, and I took my time, stopping to study the historic markers placed along the route.

For lunch, I bought a pint of milk and a ready-wrapped bologna sandwich in a roadside store. I carried them to the walk that runs along the shallow sea wall and ate. A local Negro stopped to talk. I asked him if the swimming was good there, since the beaches were so splendid. He told me the beaches were "man-made," the sand dredged in; but that unless a Negro sneaked off to some isolated spot, he'd never know how the water was, since Negroes weren't permitted to enjoy the beaches. He pointed out the injustice of this policy, since the upkeep of the beaches comes from a gasoline tax. "In other words, every time we buy a gallon of gas, we pay a penny to keep the beach up so the whites can use it," he said. He added that some of the local Negro citizens were considering a project to keep an account of the gasoline they purchased throughout the year and at the end of that time demand from the town fathers either a refund on their gasoline tax or the privilege of using the beaches for which they had paid their fair part.

After a time I walked again on legs that grew weak with weariness. A car pulled up beside me and a young, redheaded white man told me to "hop in." His glance was friendly, courteous, and he spoke with no condescension. I began to hope that I had

underestimated the people of Mississippi. With that eagerness I grasped at every straw of kindness, wanting to give a good report.

“Beautiful country, isn’t it?” he said.

“Marvelous.”

“You just passing through?”

“Yes, sir … I’m on my way to Mobile.”

“Where you from?”

“Texas.”

“I’m from Massachusetts,” he said, as though he were eager for me to know he was not a Mississippian. I felt the keenest disappointment, and mentally erased the passages I had composed about the kindness of the Mississippian who gave the Negro a ride. He told me he had no sympathy for the “Southern attitude.”

“That shows,” I said.

“But you know,” he added, “these are some of the finest people in the world about everything else.”

“I’m sure they are.”

“I know you won’t believe it - but it’s really the truth. I just don’t ever talk to them about the race question.”

“With your attitude, I can understand that,” I laughed.

“They can’t discuss it,” he said. “It’s a shame but all they do is get mad whenever you bring it up. I’ve lived here over five years now - and they’re good neighbors; but if I mention race with any sympathy for the Negro, they just tell me I’m an ‘outsider’ and don’t understand about Negroes. What’s there to understand?”

I walked what - ten, fifteen miles? I walked because one does not just simply sit down in the middle of the highway, because there was nothing to do but walk.

Late in the afternoon, my mind hazed to fatigue. I concentrated all my energy in putting one foot in front of the other. Sweat poured down into my eyes and soaked my clothes and the heat of the

pavement came through my shoes. I remember I stopped at a little custard stand and bought a dish of ice cream merely to have the excuse to sit at one of the tables under the trees - none of which were occupied. But before I could take my ice cream and walk to one of them some white teenagers appeared and took seats. I dared not sit down even at a distant table. Wretched with disappointment I leaned against a tree and ate the ice cream.

Behind the custard stand stood an old unpainted privy leaning badly to one side. I returned to the dispensing window of the stand.

"Yes, sir," the white man said congenially. "You want something else?"

"Where's the nearest rest room I could use?" I asked.

He brushed his white, brimless cook's cap back and rubbed his forefinger against his sweaty forehead. "Let's see. You can go on up there to the bridge and then cut down the road to the left … and just follow that road. You'll come to a little settlement - there's some stores and gas stations there."

"How far is it?" I asked, pretending to be in greater discomfort than I actually was.

"Not far - thirteen, maybe fourteen blocks."

A locust's lazy rasping sawed the air from the nearby oak trees.

"Isn't there anyplace closer?" I said, determined to see if he would not offer me the use of the dilapidated outhouse, which certainly no human could degrade any more than time and the elements had.

His seamed face showed the concern and sympathy of one human for another in a predicament every man understands. "I can't think of any …" he said slowly.

I glanced around the side toward the outhouse. "Any chance of me running in there for a minute?"

"Nope," he said - clipped, final, soft, as though he regretted it but could never permit such a thing. "I'm sorry." He turned away.

"Thank you just the same," I said.

By dark I was away from the beach area and out in the country. Strangely, I began getting rides. Men would pass you in daylight but pick you up after dark.

I must have had a dozen rides that evening. They blear into a nightmare, the one scarcely distinguishable from the other.

It quickly became obvious why they picked me up. All but two picked me up the way they would pick up a pornographic photograph or book - except that this was verbal pornography. With a Negro, they assumed they need give no semblance of self-respect or respectability. The visual element entered into it. In a car at night visibility is reduced. A man will reveal himself in the dark, which gives the illusion of anonymity, more than he will in the bright light. Some were shamelessly open, some shamelessly subtle. All showed morbid curiosity about the sexual life of the Negro, and all had, at base, the same stereotyped image of the Negro as an inexhaustible sex-machine with oversized genitals and a vast store of experiences, immensely varied. They appeared to think that the Negro has done all of those “special” things they themselves have never dared to do. They carried the conversations into depths of depravity.

I note these things because it is harrowing to see decent-looking men and boys assume that because a man is black they need to show him none of the reticence they would, out of respect, show the most derelict white man. I note them, too, because they differed completely from the “bull sessions” men customarily have among themselves. These latter, no matter how frank, have generally a robust tone that says: “We are men. This is an enjoyable thing to do and to discuss, but it will never impugn the basic respect we give one another; it will never distort our humanity.” In this, the atmosphere, no matter how coarse, has a verve and an essential joviality that casts out morbidity. It implies respect for the persons involved. But all that I could see here were men shorn of their respect either for themselves or their companion.

In my grogginess and exhaustion, these conversations became ghoulish. Each time one of them let me out of his car, I hoped the

next would spare me his pantings. I remained mute and pleaded my exhaustion and lack of sleep.

“I’m so tired, I just can’t think,” I would say.

Like men who had promised themselves pleasure, they would not be denied. It became a strange sort of hounding as they nudged my skull for my sexual reminiscences.

“Well, did you ever do such-and-such?”

“I don’t know …” I moaned.

“What’s the matter - haven’t you got any manhood? My old man told me you wasn’t really a man till you’d done such-and-such.”

Or the older ones, hardened, cynical in their lechery. “Now, don’t try to kid me. I wasn’t born yesterday. You know you’ve done such-and-such, just like I have. Hell, it’s good that way. Tell me, did you ever get a white woman?”

“Do you think I’m crazy?” I tacitly denied the racist’s contention, for he would not hesitate to use it against the Negroes in his conversations around town: “Why, I had one of them admit to me just last night that he craves white women.”

“I didn’t ask if you was crazy,” he said. “I asked if you ever had one - or ever really wanted one.” Then, conniving, sweet-toned, “There’s plenty white women would like to have a good buck Negro.”

“A Negro’d be asking for the rope to get himself mixed up with white women.”

“You’re just telling me that, but I’ll bet inside you think differently. …”

“This is sure beautiful country through here. What’s the main crop?”

“*Don’t* you? You can tell me. Hell, I don’t care.”

“No, sir,” I sighed.

“You’re lying in your teeth and you know it.”

Silence. Soon after, almost abruptly he halted the car and said: “Okay, this is as far as I go.” He spoke as though he resented my uncooperative attitude, my refusal to give him this strange verbal sexual pleasure.

I thanked him for the ride and stepped down onto the highway. He drove on in the same direction.

Soon another picked me up, a young man in his late twenties who spoke with an educated flair. His questions had the spurious elevation of a scholar seeking information, but the information he sought was entirely sexual, and presupposed that in the ghetto the Negro’s life is one of marathon sex with many different partners, open to the view of all; in a word, that marital fidelity and sex as love’s goal of union with the beloved object were exclusively the white man’s property. Though he pretended to be above such ideas as racial superiority and spoke with genuine warmth, the entire context of his talk reeked of preconceived ideas to the contrary.

“I understand Negroes are much more broad-minded about such things,” he said warmly.

“I don’t know.”

“I understand you make more of an art - or maybe a *hobby* - out of your sex than we do.”

“I doubt it.”

“Well, you people don’t seem to have the inhibitions we have. We’re all basically puritans. I understand Negroes do a lot more things - different kinds of sex - than we do. Oh, don’t get me wrong. I admire your attitude, think it’s basically healthier than ours. You don’t get so damned many conflicts. Negroes don’t have much neuroses, do they? I mean you people have a more realistic tradition about sex - you’re not so sheltered from it as we are.”

I knew that what he really meant was that Negroes grew up seeing it from infancy. He had read the same stories, the same reports of social workers about parents sharing a room with children, the father coming home drunk and forcing the mother onto the bed in full view of the young ones. I felt like laughing in

his face when I thought of the Negro families I had known already as a Negro: the men on the streets, in the ghettos, the housewives and their great concern that their children “grow up right.”

“You people regard sex as a *total* experience - and that’s how it should be. Anything that makes you feel good is morally all right for you. Isn’t that the main difference?

“I don’t think there’s any difference,” I said cautiously, not wanting to test the possibility of his wrath at having a Negro disagree with him.

“You *don’t*?” His voice betrayed excitement and eagerness, gave no hint of offense.

“Our ministers preach sin and hell just as much as yours,” I said. “We’ve got the same puritanical background as you. We worry just as much as white people about our children losing their virginity or being perverted. We’ve got the same miserable little worries and problems over our sexual effectiveness, the same guilts that you have.”

He appeared astonished and delighted, not at what I said but at the fact that I could say it. His whole attitude of enthusiasm practically shouted, “Why, you talk *intelligently*!” He was so obtuse he did not realize the implied insult in his astonishment that a black man could do anything but say “yes, sir” and mumble four-letter words.

Again, he asked questions scarcely different from those that white men would ask themselves, especially scholars who would discuss cultural differences on a detached plane. Ye t here the tone was subtly conniving. He went through the motions of courteous research, but he could not hide his real preoccupation. He asked about the size of Negro genitalia and the details of Negro sex life. Only the language differed from the previous inquirers - the substance was the same. The difference was that here I could disagree with him without risking a flood of abuse or petulance. He quoted Kinsey and others. It became apparent he was one of those young men who possess an impressive store of facts, but no truths.

This again would have no significance and would be unworthy of note except for one thing: I have talked with such men many times as a white and they never show the glow of prurience he revealed. The significance lay in the fact that my blackness and his concepts of what my blackness implied allowed him to expose himself in this manner. He saw the Negro as a different species. He saw me as something akin to an animal in that he felt no need to maintain his sense of human dignity, though certainly he would have denied this.

I told myself that I was tired, that I must not judge these men who picked me up and for the price of a ride submitted me to the swamps of their fantasy lives. They showed me something that all men have but seldom bring to the surface, since most men seek health. The boy ended up wanting me to expose myself to him, saying he had never seen a Negro naked. I turned mute, indrawn, giving no answer. The silence rattled between us and I felt sorry for the reprimand that grew from me to him in the silence. I did not want this cruelty to him, since I knew that he showed me a side of his nature that was special to the night and the situation, a side rarely brought to light in his everyday living. I stared at the dimly lighted car dashboard and saw him attending an aunt's funeral, having Sunday dinner with his parents, doing some kindness for a friend - for he was kind. How would I let him see that I understood and that I still respected him, and that I formed no judgment against him for this momentary slip? For instead of seeing it as a manifestation of some poor human charity, he might view it as confirmation that Negroes are insensitive to sexual aberration, that they think nothing of it - and this would carry on the legend that has so handicapped the Negro.

"I wasn't going to do anything to you," he said in a voice lifeless with humiliation. "I'm not queer or anything."

"Of course not," I said. "It's nothing."

"It's just that I don't get a chance to talk to educated Negroes - people that can answer questions."

“You make it more complicated than it is,” I said. “If you want to know about the sexual morals of the Negro - his practices and ideals - it’s no mystery. These are human matters, and the Negro is the same human as the white man. Just ask yourself how it is for a white man and you’ll know all the answers. Negro trash is the same as white trash. Negro decency is about the same, too.

“But there are differences. The social studies I’ve read …”

“They don’t deal with any basic difference in human nature between black and white,” I said. “They only study the effects of environment on human nature. You place the white man in the ghetto, deprive him of educational advantages, arrange it so he has to struggle hard to fulfill his instinct for self-respect, give him little physical privacy and less leisure, and he would after a time assume the same characteristics you attach to the Negro. These characteristics don’t spring from whiteness or blackness, but from a man’s conditioning.”

“Yes, but Negroes have more illegitimate children, earlier loss of virginity and more crime - these are established facts,” he insisted without unkindness.

“The fact that the white race has the same problems proves these are not Negro characteristics, but the product of our condition as men,” I said. “When you force humans into a subhuman mode of existence, this always happens. Deprive a man of any contact with the pleasures of the spirit and he’ll fall completely into those of the flesh.”

“But we don’t deprive you people of the ‘pleasures of the spirit,’ ” he said.

“In most places we can’t go to the concerts, the theater, the museums, public lectures … or even to the library. Our schools in the South don’t compare to the white schools, poor as they are. You deprive a man of educational opportunities and he’ll have no knowledge of the great civilizing influences of art, history, literature and philosophy. Many Negroes don’t even know these things exist. With practically nothing to exalt the mind or exercise the spirit, any

man is going to sink to his lowest depths. It becomes vicious - and tragic."

"I can't imagine how it must be," he said. "I don't think it's fair. But just the same, plenty of whites don't have access to these things - to art, history, literature and philosophy. Some of the finest people I know live in the country where they never get to museums, concerts."

"Living in the country, they are surrounded by natural museums and concerts," I said. "Besides, those doors are always open to them. The Negro, too, fares better in the country. But most are deprived of education. Ignorance keeps them poor, and when a town-dwelling Negro is poor, he lives in the ghetto. His wife has to work usually, and this leaves the children without parental companionship. In such places, where all of man's time is spent just surviving, he rarely knows what it means to read a great book. He has grown up and now sees his children grow up in squalor. His wife usually earns more than he. He is thwarted in his need to be father-of-the-household. When he looks at his children and his home, he feels the guilt of not having given them something better. His only salvation is not to give a damn finally, or else he will fall into despair. In despair a man's sense of virtue is dulled. He no longer cares. He will do anything to escape it - steal or commit acts of violence - or perhaps try to lose himself in sensuality. Most often the sex-king is just a poor devil trying to prove the manhood that his whole existence denies. This is what the whites call the 'sorry nigger.' Soon he will either desert his home or become so unbearable he is kicked out. This leaves the mother to support the children alone. To keep food in their bellies, she has to spend most of her time away from them, working. This leaves the children in the streets, prey to any sight, any conversation, any sexual experiment that comes along to make their lives more interesting or pleasurable. To a young girl who has nothing, has never known anything, the baubles she can get - both in a kind of crude affection and in gifts or money - by granting sex to a man or boy appeal to her as toys to a child. She gets pregnant sometimes and then the vicious cycle is given

impetus. In some instances the mother cannot make enough to support the children, so she sells her sex for what she can get. This gets easier and easier until she comes up with still another child to abort or support. But none of this is 'Negro-ness.' "

"I don't know …" he sighed. "It looks like a man could do better."

"It looks that way to you, because you can see what would be better. The Negro knows something is terribly wrong, but with things the way they are, he can't know that something better actually exists on the other side of work and study. We are all born blank. It's the same for blacks or whites or any other shade of man. Your blanks have been filled in far differently from those of a child grown up in the filth and poverty of the ghetto."

He drove without speaking through a thundershower that crinkled the windshield and raised the hum of his tires an octave.

"But the situation is changing," I said after a time. "The Negro may not understand exactly *how*, but he knows one thing - the only way out of this tragedy is through education, training. Thousands of them sacrifice everything to get the education, to prove once and for all that the Negro's capacity for learning, for accomplishment, is equal to that of any other man - that the pigment has nothing to do with degrees of intelligence, talent or virtue. This isn't just wishful thinking. It's been proved conclusively in every field."

"We don't hear about those things," he said.

"I know. Southern newspapers print every rape, attempted rape, suspected rape and 'maybe rape,' but outstanding accomplishment is not considered newsworthy. Even the Southern Negro has little chance to know this, since he reads the same slanted reports in the newspapers."

The young man slowed to a halt in a little settlement to let me out: "I'm sorry about a while ago - I don't know what got into me," he said.

"I've already forgotten it."

"No offense?"

“No offense.”

“Okay. Good luck to you.”

I thanked him and stepped out onto the wet neon reflections of the road. The air, cool and mist-filled, surrounded me with its freshness. I watched the red taillight of his car fog into the distance.

I had no time to worry about sitting down or getting a sandwich. An old-model car tooted its horn and skidded to a stop a few yards beyond me. The smell of a rainy Alabama night, the succession of oddments turned me suddenly sick with dread at what this stranger would want. But I had no alternative. There was no place there to sleep.

“Where you going?” he asked.

“Mobile,” I said. He told me to get in. I glanced through the glassless window to see a heavyset, round-faced, tough-looking young man.

As we drove, the tensions drained from me. He was boisterous, loud and guileless. I could only conclude that he was color blind, since he appeared totally unaware that I was a Negro. He enjoyed company, nothing more. He told me he was a construction worker and tonight he was late getting home to his wife and infant son. “I couldn’t get this sonofabitching rattletrap to go,” he said. “I leave the good car at home for my wife.”

For an hour we delighted ourselves with talk of our children. The experience of parenthood filled him with enthusiasm and he recited the endless merits of his son and drew me out to tell him of my children.

“I can see I’m not going to make it without something to eat,” he said. “I’m usually home by six and my wife has supper on the table. You had any supper?”

“No, I sure haven’t.”

“You want a hamburger?”

“I don’t think there’s anyplace here that would serve me.”

“Shit, I’ll bring it to the car. We can eat while I’m driving.”

I watched him walk into the roadside café. He looked young, not over twenty, and I wondered how he had escaped the habit of guarded fencing that goes on constantly between whites and Negroes in the South wherever they meet. He was the first man I met of either color who did not confuse the popular image of the thing with the thing itself.

I wondered where he got this, and sought to discover the source of his attitude during the drive into Mobile. His background, his education and his home were ordinary. On the car radio he played with relish the twang-twang blues type of music and his TV preferences were westerns. “Oh, hell, I can’t go for those old heavy dramas.” Perhaps his religion? “My wife’s a Presbyterian. Sometimes I go with her. But I don’t much like it.” Perhaps his reading?

“Have you got a good library in Mobile?”

“I don’t know, to tell you the truth. I think it’s supposed to be pretty good. My wife reads a lot.”

I could only conclude that his attitude came from an overwhelming love for his child, so profound it spilled over to all humanity. I knew that he was totally unaware of its ability to cure men; of the blessing it could be to someone like me after having been exhausted and scraped raw in my heart by others this rainy Alabama night.

I thought of Maritain’s conclusion that the only solution to the problems of man is the return of charity (in the old embracing sense of *caritas*, not in the stingy literal sense it has assumed in our language and in our days) and metaphysics. Or, more simply, the maxim of St. Augustine: “Love, and then do what you will.”

To live in a world where men do not love, where they cheat and are callous, is to sink into a preoccupation with death, and to see the futility of anything except virtue. When I crossed the line from Mississippi into Alabama, I felt as though I were leaving a cemetery.

Since I knew little of the Mobile of today, my young friend let me out downtown near the bus center. Across the street from the bus station, I saw an elderly Negro man seated on a door stoop near the

curb. I went over and sat beside him. We talked casually for a time. He said he preached at a little street mission nearby. I asked him where I could find a room for the night. He put his head close to mine and studied me through thick glasses under the streetlamp. After asking if I were a “nice man,” he offered to let me bunk with him. He told me he occupied the two front rooms of the house where his daughter’s family lived.

We bought hamburgers for supper and took the bus to his home, eating on the way.

“It’s not much, but you’re welcome to stay here,” he said when he opened the door and turned on the lights. His two rooms were furnished only with an upright piano, a straight chair, a small table and an unmade double bed. His courtesy was simple and easy. He picked up dirty clothes and old newspapers without apology. Then, while I unpacked my duffel, he went outside and returned with a large metal washtub. Refusing my help, he filled it with buckets of water from the back of the house. He offered to let me bathe, but seeing how much trouble it was to haul the water, I declined.

While he bathed, I sat on the bed in the other room and made notes. The walls had been covered with cheesecloth but never papered. Gray planking showed through the gauze. Above the bed he had pinned a calendar-reproduction of *Christ in the Temple*. Thumb-tacked to the door frame were photos of his family. His extra clothing hung from nails driven into the wall. A fluffy new beige-colored bath mat at the side of the bed was the only floor covering. Despite its poverty, the room had a bare brightness. My host, unlike most Negroes, did not use the more economical low-watt bulbs. He lighted his rooms brilliantly. I heard his footsteps and the drip of water on the floor as he stepped out.

I remained seated until I heard him begin to drag the tub across the floor. When I stepped in to help him, he was dressed only in a pair of wrinkled khaki pants. We carried the tub out and emptied it under a chinaberry tree in the side yard.

We undressed and prepared to go to bed in our underwear. He removed the small black Bible from his coat pocket, kissed it unself-consciously before placing it at the rear of the table. The only other book I noted - or reading material of any sort - was a paperback mystery standing upright between two oriental book-ends on top of the piano.

He waited for me to crawl into bed before switching off the light. I heard his bare feet on the floor and felt his weight as he settled into bed beside me. In a moment he was up again. Though the night was cold, he opened the front door so we could have some fresh air. From a distant radio I heard the desolating music of a dance orchestra.

“Do you want to talk or sleep?” he asked when he returned to bed. His voice sounded startlingly close in the dark, after my ear had become accustomed to the radio music outside.

“Let’s talk a while,” I said, feeling the depression of the night and the poverty close in on the room.

But talk banished the somberness. He spoke of the Lord with relish. We lay there in the darkness under quilts, our voices bouncing back from the bare walls; and we chuckled and had a great time talking about the miracles. We marveled at the raising up of Lazarus.

“That ain’t every day, eh, Mr. Griffin?” he said, and nudged my arm with his elbow. “Don’t you wish you could’ve seen the look on their faces when they saw that dead man get up?” He burst out laughing. “After he’s been dead four whole days. God almighty!”

Later we talked about the South. He had sent two sons away to study law. They would never return. “If I could have foreseen ten years ago how things would happen, I’d have cleared out too. I’m too old now. And besides, I’ve got my daughters and grandchildren here.”

“But surely your sons will come back to see you.”

“I don’t want them to. They’ll come back for my funeral. That’s the worst part of this devilment. If the young ones want a decent

life, they've got to go somewhere else. All the families are being split up. That's the shame of it."

We spoke of the whites. "They're God's children, just like us," he said. "Even if they don't act very godlike anymore. God tells us straight - we've got to love them, no *ifs, ands*, and *buts* about it. Why, if we hated them, we'd be sunk down to their level. There's plenty of us doing just that, too."

"A lot of the people I've talked to think we've turned the other cheek too long," I said.

"You can't get around what's right, though," he said. "When we stop loving them, that's when they win."

"How's that?"

"Then they'll have ruined our race for sure. They'll have dragged us down plumb to the bottom."

"Are you just supposed to let them carry on then?"

"No … we can't do that any longer. We're supposed to get our rights in a proper way. And try to understand that it's hard for them, too, to change around from the old ways. We've got plenty of old Uncle Toms that don't want things changed any more than the whites. You can give them two dollars and they'll pull the string that sends us all to hell. They're a disgrace to our race. And then we've got plenty of young smart-aleck people that don't want nothing except the chance to 'get even' with the whites … they're full of hate and piss and it's a God's shame. They're just as much Judases as the Uncle Toms."

As always, the conversation stalemated with "None of it really makes any sense."

November 21 Mobile

Three days in Mobile. I spent them walking through the town, searching jobs, and then every night I met my host on the corner opposite the bus station and we went to his house to sleep.

Again, an important part of my daily life was spent searching for the basic things that all whites take for granted: a place to eat, or somewhere to find a drink of water, a rest room, somewhere to wash my hands. More than once I walked into drugstores where a Negro can buy cigarettes or anything else except soda fountain service. I asked politely where I might find a glass of water. Though they had water not three yards away, they carefully directed me to the nearest Negro café. Had I asked outright for a drink, they would perhaps have given it. But I never asked. The Negro dreads rejection, and I waited for them to offer the drink. Not one ever did. No matter where you are, the nearest Negro café is always far away, it seems. I learned to eat a great deal when it was available and convenient, because it might not be available or convenient when the belly next indicated its hunger. I have been told that many distinguished Negroes whose careers have brought them South encounter similar difficulties. All the honors in the world cannot buy them a cup of coffee in the lowest greasy-spoon joint. It is not that they crave service in the white man's café over their own - it is simply that in many sparsely settled areas Negro cafés do not exist; and even in densely settled areas, one must sometimes cross town for a glass of water. It is rankling, too, to be encouraged to buy all of one's goods in white stores and then be refused soda fountain or rest room service.

No, it makes no sense, but insofar as the Negro is concerned, nothing makes much sense. This was brought home to me in another realm many times when I sought jobs.

The foreman of one plant in Mobile, a large brute, allowed me to tell him what I could do. Then he looked me in the face and spoke to me in these words:

“No, you couldn’t get anything like that here.”

His voice was not unkind. It was the dead voice one often hears. Determined to see if I could break in somehow, I said: “But if I could do you a better job, and you paid me less than a white man …”

“I’ll tell you … we don’t want you people. Don’t you understand that?”

“I know,” I said with real sadness. “You can’t blame a man for trying at least.”

“No use trying down here,” he said. “We’re gradually getting you people weeded out from the better jobs at this plant. We’re taking it slow, but we’re doing it. Pretty soon we’ll have it so the only jobs you can get here are the ones no white man would have.”

“How can we live?” I asked hopelessly, careful not to give the impression I was arguing.

“That’s the whole point,” he said, looking me square in the eyes, but with some faint sympathy, as though he regretted the need to say what followed: “We’re going to do our damnedest to drive every one of you out of the state.”

Despite his frankness and the harshness of his intentions, I nevertheless had the impression he was telling me: “I’m sorry. I’ve got nothing against you personally, but you’re colored, and with all this noise about equality, we just don’t want you people around. The only way we can keep you out of our schools and cafés is to make life so hard for you that you’ll get the hell out before equality comes.”

This attitude cropped up often. Many otherwise decent men and women could find no other solution. They are willing to degrade themselves to their basest levels to prevent the traditional laborer from rising in status or, to put it bluntly, from “winning,” even

though what he wins has been rightfully his from the moment he was born into the human race.

I walked through the streets of Mobile throughout the afternoons. I had known the city before, in my youth, when I sailed from there once to France. I knew it then as a privileged white. It had impressed me as a beautiful Southern port town, gracious and calm. I had seen the Negro dock workers stripped to the waist, their bodies glistening with sweat under their loads. The sight had chilled me, touched me to pity for men who so resembled beasts of burden. But I had dismissed it as belonging to the natural order of things. The Southern whites I knew were kind and wise. If they allowed this, then surely it must be right.

Now, walking the same streets as a Negro, I found no trace of the Mobile I formerly knew, nothing familiar. The laborers still dragged out their ox-like lives, but the gracious Southerner, the wise Southerner, the kind Southerner was nowhere visible. I knew that if I were white, I would find him easily, for his other face is there for whites to see. It is not a false face; it is simply different from the one the Negro sees. The Negro sees him as a man with muscular emotions who wants to drive out all of his race except the beasts of burden.

I concluded that, as in everything else, the atmosphere of a place is entirely different for Negro and white. The Negro sees and reacts differently not because he is Negro, but because he is suppressed. Fear dims even the sunlight.

November 24

I hitchhiked up toward the swamp country between Mobile and Montgomery. A magnificent cool day.

I walked some miles before a large, pleasant-faced man halted his light truck and told me to get in. When I opened the door I saw a shotgun propped against the seat next to his knee. I recalled it was considered sport among some elements in Alabama to hunt “nigs” and I backed away.

“Come on,” he laughed. “That’s for hunting deer.”

I glanced again at his florid face, saw he looked decent and climbed into the leather seat beside him.

“Do you have any luck getting rides through here?” he asked.

“No, sir. You’re my first ride since Mobile.”

I learned he was a married man, fifty-three years old, father of a family now grown and the grandfather of two children. He was certainly, by the tone of his conversation, an active civic leader and respected member of his community. I began to hope that I had encountered a decent white.

“You married?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Any kids?”

“Yes, sir - three.”

“You got a pretty wife?”

“Yes, sir.”

He waited a moment and then with lightness, paternal amusement, “She ever had it from a white man?”

I stared at my black hands, saw the gold wedding band and mumbled something meaningless, hoping he would see my reticence. He overrode my feelings and the conversation grew more salacious. He told me how all of the white men in the region craved colored girls. He said he hired a lot of them both for housework and in his business. “And I guarantee you, I’ve had it in every one of them before they ever got on the payroll.” A pause. Silence above humming tires on the hot-top road. “What do you think of that?”

“Surely some refuse,” I suggested cautiously.

“Not if they want to eat - or feed their kids,” he snorted. “If they don’t put out, they don’t get the job.”

I looked out the window to tall pine trees rising on either side of the highway. Their turpentine odor mingled with the soaped smells of the man’s khaki hunting clothes.

“You think that’s pretty terrible, don’t you?” he asked.

I knew I should grin and say, “Why no - it’s just nature,” or some other disarming remark to avoid provoking him.

“Don’t you?” he insisted pleasantly.

“I guess I do.”

“Why hell - everybody does it. Don’t you know that?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, they sure as hell do. We figure we’re doing you people a favor to get some white blood in your kids.”

I wondered what moral and ethical difference there was between this sort of rape by coercion that threatened to starve a person, and rape by coercion that threatened to knife or shoot a person. Newspapers play up as sensational every attempt by a Negro to rape a white woman. Yet this white rape of Negro women is apparently a different matter. But it is rape nonetheless, and practiced on a scale that dwarfs the Negro’s defaults.

The grotesque hypocrisy slapped me as it does all Negroes. It is worth remembering when the white man talks of the Negro’s lack of sexual morality, or when he speaks with horror about

mongrelization and with fervor about racial purity. Mongrelization is already a widespread reality in the South - it has been exclusively the white man's contribution to the Southern Way of Life. His vast concern for "racial purity" obviously does not extend to all races.

(Later I encountered many whites who freely admitted the same practices my companion described. In fairness, however, other Southern whites roundly condemned it and claimed it was not as typical as my informants suggested. None denied that it was widespread.)

This aspect of Southern life does not hit the newspapers because, as my companion said, "Alabama nigger women are good about that - they won't never go to the cops or tell on you."

It was obvious what would happen if one of them tried it.

As I feared it would, my lack of "cooperation" nettled the driver. He took my silence, rightly, for disapproval.

"Where you from?" he asked.

"Texas."

"What're you doing down here?"

"Just traveling around, trying to find jobs."

"You're not down here to stir up trouble, are you?"

"Oh, God, no."

"You start stirring up these niggers and we sure as hell know how to take care of you."

"I don't intend to."

"Do you know what we do to troublemakers down here?"

"No, sir."

"We either ship them off to the pen or kill them."

He spoke in a tone that sickened me, casual, merciless. I looked at him. His decent blue eyes turned yellow. I knew that nothing could touch him to have mercy once he decided a Negro should be "taught a lesson." The immensity of it terrified me. But it caught him up like a lust now. He entertained it, his voice unctuous with pleasure and

cruelty. The highway stretched deserted through the swamp forests. He nodded toward the solid wall of brush flying past our windows.

"You can kill a nigger and toss him into that swamp and no one'll ever know what happened to him."

"Yes, sir …"

I forced myself to silence, forced myself to picture this man in his other roles. I saw him as he played with his grandchildren, as he stood up in church with open hymnal in hand, as he drank a cup of coffee in the morning before dressing and then shaved and talked with his wife pleasantly about nothing, as he visited with friends on the front porch Sunday afternoons. This was the man I had seen when I first got into the truck. The amiable, decent American was in all his features. This was the dark tangent in every man's belly, the sickness, the coldness, the mercilessness, the lust to cause pain or fear through self-power. Surely not even his wife or closest friends had ever seen him like this. It was a side he would show no one but his victims, or those who connived with him. The rest - what he really must be as a husband, devoted father and respected member of the community - I had to supply with my imagination. He showed me the lowest and I had to surmise the highest.

His face was set hard in an attempt to regain his equilibrium, when he pulled off the main highway and stopped on a dirt road that led into the jungle. We had engaged in a subtle battle of which I think he had only then become aware. He needed to salvage from it something. "This is where I turn off. I guess you want to stick to the highway."

I thanked him for the ride and opened the door. Before I could get out, he spoke again. "I'll tell you how it is here. We'll do business with you people. We'll sure as hell screw your women. Other than that, you're just *completely off the record as far as we're concerned.* And the quicker you people get that through your heads, the better off you'll be."

"Yes, sir …" I stepped out and closed the door. He drove down the side road scattering fine gravel behind his wheels. I listened until his

truck was out of hearing distance. The heavy air of evening, putrid with swamp rot, smelled fragrant. I walked across the highway, sat on my duffel and waited for another car. None came. The woods issued no sound. I felt strangely safe, isolated, alone in the stillness of dusk turning into night. First stars appeared in darkening skies still pale and the earth's heat escaped upward.

My mouth was dry and my stomach began to ache for food. I realized I had not eaten or had a drink of water all day. Cold surrounded me rapidly. I got up and began to walk along the highway in the darkness. It was better to walk than to freeze. My duffel pulled heavily at my arms and I knew I could not go far without food and rest.

I wondered at the lack of traffic on Alabama highways. No cars passed. My footsteps on the roadside gravel sloughed in echo from the wall of trees and brush.

After a while a light flickered among the foliage. I hurried forward around the curve of highway until I saw it came from an isolated service station at the top of the hill. When I arrived opposite it, I stood for some time across the highway and watched. An elderly white couple sat inside, surrounded by shelves of groceries and auto supplies, by soft drink machines and cigarette dispensers. They looked kind, gentle, and I framed in advance what I should say to allay any fears they might have of a large Negro appearing out of the night, and to convince them that they should sell me food and drink. Perhaps I might even ask them to let me spend the night sleeping on the floor there.

The woman saw me approach past the lighted gasoline lamps. I whistled to give them warning. She met me at the door. I felt an outgush of warm air and heard country music from a radio when she opened. I glanced through the glass to see the man seated in a chair, his ear close to his small radio.

"Pardon me, ma'am," I said, nodding low. "I'm traveling through to Montgomery. I got stranded on the highway and can't seem to get a ride. I wonder if I could buy something to eat and drink?"

She studied me with suspicion, her eyes hard in their wrinkles.

“We’re closing up,” she said and stepped back to shut the door.

“Please,” I pleaded, not needing to feign abjection. “I’ve been without food and water all day.”

I could see her hesitate, her caution and repugnance struggling against instincts of common decency. She obviously wanted to refuse me. She was undoubtedly afraid not only of me but of having someone drive up for gasoline and see her waiting on me. But I recalled the driver’s statement: “We’ll do business with you people.” I waited. The night was cold, the country lonely. Even animals had to eat and drink.

“Well, I guess it’s all right,” she said with disgust. She turned back into the room. I stepped inside and closed the door. Neither of them spoke. The old man glanced up at me from a lean, seamed face devoid of all expression.

I bought an orange drink and a package of cracker sandwiches. The atmosphere was so inhospitable I stepped outside where they could watch me and drank the orange. When I finished, I returned the empty bottle and quickly bought another. The store had little to offer in the way of food that I could manage. The only two cans of sardines had no keys and the owner stared at the floor, nodding no when I asked if he had a can opener. I bought a fried pie, a loaf of bread and five Milky Way bars.

The woman stood in front of the gas heater and picked the dirt from under her thumbnail with the third finger of the other hand. When I mumbled my thanks, she was so absorbed in her task that she acknowledged my departure only by staring at her hands with a deeper frown. The husband stuck the money in his shirt pocket.

I walked down the highway into the darkness again, carrying both duffel bags in my left hand and feeding myself the tasteless pineapple fried pie with my right.

A distant hum behind me caught my attention. I turned to see a yellow glow on the road’s horizon. It grew stronger and headlights

appeared. Though I dreaded riding with another white man, I dreaded more staying on the road all night. Stepping out into full view, I waved my arms. An ancient car braked to a halt and I hurried to it. To my great relief, the reflections from the dash light showed me the face of a young Negro man.

We discussed my problem. He said he lived back in the woods, but had six kids and only two rooms. He wouldn't even have a bed to offer me. I asked him about some other house in the area where I might rent a bed. He said there were none any better than what he had to offer.

However, we could find no other solution.

"You can't stand out here all night. If you don't mind sleeping on the floor, you're welcome to come with me," he said finally.

"I don't mind sleeping on the floor," I said. "I just wouldn't want to put you to any trouble."

As we drove several miles down a lane into the forest, he told me he was a sawmill worker and never made quite enough to get out from under his debts. Always, when he took his check to the store, he owed a little more than the check could cover. He said it was the same for everyone else; and indeed I have seen the pattern throughout my travels. Part of the Southern white's strategy is to get the Negro in debt and keep him there.

"It makes it hard, doesn't it?" I said.

"Yeah, but you can't stop," he answered quickly. "That's what I tell the men at the mill. Some of them are willing just to sit there. I told them, 'Okay, so you're going to give up just because you get no butter with your bread. That's no way to act. Go ahead and eat the bread - but work, and maybe someday we'll have butter to go with it.' I tell them we sure ain't going to get it any other way."

I asked him if he could not get together with some of the others and strike for better wages. He laughed with real amusement.

"Do you know how long we'd last, doing something like that?"

"Well, if you stuck together, they sure couldn't kill you all."

“They could damn sure try,” he snorted. “Anyway, how long could I feed my kids? There’s only a couple of stores in twenty miles. They’d cut off credit and refuse to sell to us. Without money coming in, none of us could live.”

He turned off the lane into a rutted path that led through dense underbrush up to a knoll. The headlights fell on a shanty of unpainted wood, patched at the bottom with a rusting Dr. Pepper sign. Except for the voices of children, a deep silence hung over the place. The man’s wife came to the door and stood silhouetted against the pale light of a kerosene lamp. He introduced us. Though she appeared embarrassed, she asked me in.

The subdued babble of children mounted to excited shouts of welcome. They ranged in age from nine years to four months. They were overjoyed to have company. It must be a party. We decided it was.

Supper was on a makeshift table. It consisted entirely of large yellow beans cooked in water. The mother prepared mashed beans and canned milk for the infant. I remembered the bread and offered it as my contribution to the meal. Neither parent apologized for the meagerness of the food. We served ourselves on plastic dishes from the table and sat where we could find places, the children on the floor with a spread-out newspaper for a tablecloth.

I congratulated them on such a fine family. The mother told me they had been truly blessed. “Ours are all in good health. When you think of so many people with crippled or blind or not-right children, you just have to thank God.” I praised the children until the father’s tired face animated with pride. He looked at the children the way another looks at some rare painting or treasured gem.

Closed into the two rooms, with only the soft light of two kerosene lamps, the atmosphere changed. The outside world, outside standards disappeared. They were somewhere beyond in the vast darkness. In here, we had all we needed for gaiety. We had shelter, some food in our bellies, the bodies and eyes and affections of children who were not yet aware of how things were. And we had

treats. We cut the Milky Way bars into thin slices for dessert. In a framework of nothing, slices of Milky Way become a great gift. With almost rabid delight, the children consumed them. One of the smaller girls salivated so heavily the chocolate dribbled syrup-like from the corner of her mouth. Her mother wiped it off with her fingertip and unconsciously (from what yearning?) put it in her own mouth.

After supper, I went outside with my host to help him carry water from a makeshift boarded well. A near full moon shone above the trees and chill penetrated as though brilliance strengthened it. We picked our way carefully through fear of snakes down a faint footpath to the edge of the trees to urinate. The moon-speckled landscape exhaled its night rustlings, its truffle-odor of swamps. Distantly the baby cried. I listened to the muffled rattle of our waters against damp leaf loam. A fragment of memory returned - recollection of myself as a youngster reading Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*, her description of the Negro boy stopping along a lonely path to urinate. Now, years later, I was there in a role foreign to my youth's wildest imaginings. I felt more profoundly than ever before the totality of my Negro-ness, the immensity of its isolating effects. The transition was complete from the white boy reading a book about Negroes in the safety of his white living room to an old Negro man in the Alabama swamps, his existence nullified by men but reaffirmed by nature, in his functions, in his affection.

"Okay?" my friend said and we turned back. Moonlight caught his protruding cheekbones and cast the hollows beneath into shadow.

"Okay," I said.

The house stood above us, rickety, a faint light at the windows. I could hear the whites say, "Look at that shanty. They live like animals. If they wanted to do better they could. And they expect us just to accept them? They *like* to live this way. It would make them just as miserable to demand a higher standard of living as it would make us miserable to put us down to that standard."

I mentioned this to my host. “But we can’t do any better,” he said. “ We work just for that … to have something a little better for the kids and us.”

“Your wife doesn’t seem to get down in the dumps,” I remarked.

“No - she’s good all the way through. I’ll tell you - if we don’t have meat to cook with the beans, why she just goes ahead and cooks the beans anyhow.” He said this last with a flourish that indicated the grandness of her attitude.

We placed buckets of water on the cast-iron wood stove in the kitchen so we could have warm water for washing and shaving. Then we returned outside to fill the wood-box.

“Are there really a lot of alligators in these swamps?” I asked.

“Oh God yes, the place is alive with them.”

“Why don’t you kill some of them? The tails make good meat. I could show you how. We learned in jungle training when I was in the army.”

“Oh, we can’t do that,” he said. “They stick a hundred-dollar fine on you for killing a gator. I’m telling you,” he laughed sourly, “they got all the loopholes plugged. There ain’t a way you can win in this state.”

“But what about the children?” I asked. “Aren’t you afraid the gators might eat one of them?”

“No …” he said forlornly, “the gators like turtles better than they do us.”

“They must be part white,” I heard myself say.

His laughter sounded flat in the cold air. “As long as they keep their bellies full with turtles, they’re no danger to us. Anyway, we keep the kids close to the house.”

(Later I learned that the fine for killing alligators appears to be a conservation measure and means of controlling turtles, not a punitive action against the Negroes, though few Negroes realize this.)

The cheerful and fretful noises of children being readied for bed drifted to us as we returned to the kitchen. Physical modesty in such cramped quarters was impossible, indeed in such a context it would have been ridiculous. The mother sponge-bathed the children while the husband and I shaved. Each of the children went to the toilet, a zinc bucket in the corner, since it was too cold for them to go outside.

Their courtesy to me was exquisite. While we spread tow sacks on the floor and then feed sacks over them, the children asked questions about my own children. Did they go to school? No, they were too young. How old were they then? Why, today is my daughter's fifth birthday. Would she have a party? Yes, she'd certainly have a party. Excitement. Like we had here, with the candy and everything? Yes, something like that.

But it was time to go to bed, time to stop asking questions. The magic remained for them, almost unbearable to me - the magic of children thrilled to know my daughter had a party. The parents brought in patch-work quilts from under the bed in the other room and spread them over the pallets. The children kissed their parents and then wanted to kiss Mr. Griffin. I sat down on a straight-back chair and held out my arms. One by one they came, smelling of soap and childhood. One by one they put their arms around my neck and touched their lips to mine. One by one they said and giggled soberly, "Good night, Mr. Griffin."

I stepped over them to go to my pallet near the kitchen door and lay down fully dressed. Warning the children he did not want to hear another word from them, the father picked up the kerosene lamp and carried it into the bedroom. Through the doorless opening I saw light flicker on the walls. Neither of them spoke. I heard the sounds of undressing. The lamp was blown out and a moment later their bedsprings creaked.

Fatigue spread through me, making me grateful for a tow sack bed. I fought back glimpses of my daughter's birthday party in its cruel contrasts to our party here tonight.

“If you need anything, Mr. Griffin, just holler,” the man said.

“Thank You. I will. Good night.”

“Good night,” the children said, their voices locating them in the darkness.

“Good night,” again.

“Good night, Mr. Griffin.”

“That’s enough,” the father called out warningly to them.

I lay there watching moonlight pour through the crack of the ill-fitting door as everyone drifted to sleep. Mosquitoes droned loudly until the room was a great hum. I wondered that they should be out on such a cold night. The children jerked in their sleep and I knew they had been bitten. The stove cooled gradually with almost imperceptible interior pops and puffings. Odors of the night and autumn and the swamp entered to mingle with the inside odors of children, kerosene, cold beans, urine and the dead incense of pine ashes. The rot and the freshness combined into a strange fragrance - the smell of poverty. For a moment I knew the intimate and subtle joys of misery.

And yet misery was the burden, the pervading, killing burden. I understood why they had so many children. These moments of night when the swamp and darkness surrounded them evoked an immense loneliness, a dread, a sense of exile from the rest of humanity. When the awareness of it strikes, a man either suffocates with despair or he turns to cling to his woman, to console and seek consolation. Their union is momentary escape from the swamp night, from utter hopelessness of its ever getting better for them. It is an ultimately tragic act wherein the hopeless seek hope.

Thinking about these things, the bravery of these people attempting to bring up a family decently, their gratitude that none of their children were blind or maimed, their willingness to share their food and shelter with a stranger - the whole thing overwhelmed me. I got up from bed, half-frozen anyway, and stepped outside.

A thin fog blurred the moon. Trees rose as ghostly masses in the diffused light. I sat on an inverted washtub and trembled as its metallic coldness seeped through my pants.

I thought of my daughter, Susie, and her fifth birthday today, the candles, the cake and party dress; and of my sons in their best suits. They slept now in clean beds in a warm house while their father, a bald-headed old Negro, sat in the swamps and wept, holding it in so he would not awaken the Negro children.

I felt again the Negro children's lips soft against mine, so like the feel of my own children's good-night kisses. I saw again their large eyes, guileless, not yet aware that doors into wonderlands of security, opportunity and hope were closed to them.

It was thrown in my face. I saw it not as a white man and not as a Negro, but as a human parent. Their children resembled mine in all ways except the superficial one of skin color, as indeed they resembled all children of all humans. Ye t this accident, this least important of all qualities, the skin pigment, marked them for inferior status. It became fully terrifying when I realized that if my skin were permanently black, they would unhesitatingly consign my own children to this bean future.

One can scarcely conceive the full horror of it unless one is a parent who takes a close look at his children and then asks himself how he would feel if a group of men should come to his door and tell him they had decided - for reasons of convenience to them - that his children's lives would henceforth be restricted, their world smaller, their educational opportunities less, their future mutilated.

One would then see it as the Negro parent sees it, for this is precisely what happens. He looks at his children and knows. No one, not even a saint, can live without a sense of personal value. The white racist has masterfully defrauded the Negro of this sense. It is the least obvious but most heinous of all race crimes, for it kills the spirit and the will to live.

It was too much. Though I was experiencing it, I could not believe it. Surely in America a whole segment of decent souls could not

stand by and allow such massive crimes to be committed. I tried to see the whites' side as I have all along. I have studied objectively the anthropological arguments, the accepted clichés about cultural and ethnic differences. And I have found their application simply untrue. The two great arguments - the Negro's lack of sexual morality and his intellectual incapacity - are smoke screens to justify prejudice and unethical behavior. Recent scientific studies, published in *The Eighth Generation* (Harper & Brothers, New York), show that the contemporary middle-class Negro has the same family cult, the same ideals and goals as his white counterpart. The Negro's lower scholastic showing springs not from racial default, but from being deprived of cultural and educational advantages by the whites. When the segregationist argues that the Negro is scholastically inferior, he presents the most eloquent possible argument for desegregated schools; he admits that so long as the Negro is kept in tenth-rate schools he will remain scholastically behind white children.

I have held no brief for the Negro. I have looked diligently for all aspects of "inferiority" among them and I cannot find them. All the cherished question-begging epithets applied to the Negro race, and widely accepted as truth even by men of good will, simply prove untrue when one lives among them. This, of course, excludes the trash element, which is the same everywhere and is no more evident among Negroes than whites.

When all the talk, all the propaganda has been cut away, the criterion is nothing but the color of skin. My experience proved that. They judged me by no other quality. My skin was dark. That was sufficient reason for them to deny me those rights and freedoms without which life loses its significance and becomes a matter of little more than animal survival.

I searched for some other answer and found none. I had spent a day without food and water for no other reason than that my skin was black. I was sitting on a tub in the swamp for no other reason.

I went back into the shanty. The air was slightly warmer and smelled of kerosene, tow sacks and humanity. I lay down in

darkness, in the midst of snores.

"Mr. Griffin … Mr. Griffin."

I heard the man's soft voice above my shouts. I awakened to see the kerosene lamp and beyond it my host's troubled face.

"Are you all right?" he asked. In the surrounding darkness I sensed the tension. They lay silent, not snoring.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was having a nightmare."

He stood upright. From my position flat on the floor his head appeared to touch the ceiling beams far above. "Are you all right now?"

"Yes, thank you for waking me up."

He stepped carefully over the children and returned to the other room.

It was the same nightmare. I had been having it recently. White men and women, their faces stern and heartless, closed in on me. The hate stare burned through me. I pressed back against a wall. I could expect no pity, no mercy. They approached slowly and I could not escape them. Twice before, I had awakened myself screaming.

I listened for the family to settle back into sleep. The mosquitoes swarmed. I lighted a cigarette, hoping its smoke would drive them out.

The nightmare worried me. I had begun this experiment in a spirit of scientific detachment. I wanted to keep my feelings out of it, to be objective in my observations. But it was becoming such a profound personal experience, it haunted even my dreams.

My host called me again at dawn. His wife stood in lamplight at the stove, pouring coffee. I washed my face in a bowl of water she had heated for me. We spoke by nods and smiles to avoid waking the children sprawled on the floor.

After breakfast of coffee and a slice of bread, we were ready to leave. I shook hands with her at the door and thanked her. Reaching for my wallet, I told her I wanted to pay her for putting me up.

She refused, saying that I had brought more than I had taken. “If you gave us a penny, we’d owe you change.”

I left money with her as a gift for the children, and the husband drove me back to the highway.

The morning was bright and cool. Before long a car with two young white boys picked me up. I quickly saw that they were, like many of their generation, kinder than the older ones. They drove me to a small town bus station where I could catch a bus.

I bought a ticket to Montgomery and went to sit outside on the curb where other Negro passengers gathered. Many Negroes walked through the streets. Their glances were kind and communicative, as though all of us shared some common secret.

As I sat in the sunlight, a great heaviness came over me. I went inside to the Negro rest room, splashed cold water on my face and brushed my teeth. Then I brought out my hand mirror and inspected myself. I had been a Negro more than three weeks and it no longer shocked me to see the stranger in the mirror. My hair had grown to a heavy fuzz, my face skin, with the continued medication, exposure to sunlight and ground-in stain, was what Negroes call a “pure brown” - a smooth dark color that made me look like millions of others.

I noted, too, that my face had lost all animation. In repose, it had taken on the strained, disconsolate expression that is written on the countenance of so many Southern Negroes. My mind had become the same way, dozing empty for long periods. It thought of food and water, but so many hours were spent just waiting, cushioning self against dread, that it no longer thought of much else. Like the others in my condition, I was finding life too burdensome.

I felt a great hunger for something merely pleasurable, for something people call “fun.” The need was so great that deep within, through the squalor and the humiliations of this life, I took some joy in the mere fact that I could be alone for a while inside the rest room cubicle with its clean plumbing and unfinished wood walls. Here I had a water faucet to drink from and I could

experience the luxury of splashing cold water on my face as much as I wanted. Here, with a latch on the door, I was isolated from the hate stares, the contempt.

The smell of Ivory livened the atmosphere. Some of the stain came off and I wondered how long it would be before I could pass as white again. I decided to take no more pills for a while. I removed my shirt and undershirt. My body, so long unexposed to the sun or the sun lamp, had paled to a *café-au-lait* color. I told myself I would have to be careful not to undress unless I had privacy henceforth. My face and hands were far darker than my body. Since I often slept in my clothes, the problem would not be great.

I wet my sponge, poured dye on it and touched up the corners of my mouth and my lips, which were always difficult spots.

We boarded the bus in late afternoon and rode without incident to Selma, where I had a long layover before taking another bus to the state capital.

In deep dusk I strolled through the streets of a beautiful town. A group of nicely dressed Negro women solicited contributions for missionary activities. I placed some change in their cup and accepted a tract explaining the missionary program. Then, curious to see how they would fare with the whites, I walked along with them.

We approached the stationkeeper. His face soured and he growled his refusal. We walked on. In not a single instance did a white hear them out.

Two well-dressed men stood talking in front of the Hotel Albert.

“Pardon us, sir,” one of the women said, holding a tract in her hand. “We’re soliciting contributions for our missionary - ”

“G’wan,” the older one snapped, “I got too many of them damned tracts already.”

The younger man hesitated, dug in his pocket and tossed a handful of change in the cup. He refused the tract, saying, “I’m sure

the money'll be put to good use."

After we had gone two blocks, we heard footsteps behind us. We stopped at a street corner, not looking back. The younger man's voice came to us. "I don't suppose it does any good," he said quietly, "but I apologize for the bad manners of my people."

"Thank you," we said, not turning our heads.

As we passed the bus station, I dropped out of the little group and sat on a public bench near an outside phone booth. I waited until I saw a Negro use the phone and then I hurried to it, closed the door and asked the long-distance operator to call my home collect.

When my wife answered, the strangeness of my situation again swept over me. I talked with her and the children as their husband and father, while reflected in the glass windows of the booth I saw another man they would not know. At this time, when I wanted most to lose the illusion, I was more than ever aware of it, aware that it was not the man she knew, but a stranger who spoke with the same voice and had the same memory.

Happy at least to have heard their voices, I stepped from the booth to the night's cooler air. The night was always a comfort. Most of the whites were in their homes. The threat was less. A Negro blended inconspicuously into the darkness.

Night coming tenderly
Black like me.

At such a time, the Negro can look at the starlit skies and find that he has, after all, a place in the universal order of things. The stars, the black skies affirm his humanity, his validity as a human being. He knows that his belly, his lungs, his tired legs, his appetites, his prayers and his mind are cherished in some profound involvement with nature and God. The night is his consolation. It does not despise him.

The roar of the wheels turning into the station, the stench of exhaust fumes, the sudden bustle of people unloading told me it was

time to go. Men, better and wiser than the night, put me back into my place with their hate stares.

I walked to the back of the bus, past the drowsers, and found an empty seat. The Negroes gave me their sleepy smiles and then we were off. I leaned back and dozed along with the others.

November 25 Montgomery

In Montgomery, the capital of Alabama, I encountered a new atmosphere. The Negro's feeling of utter hopelessness is here replaced by a determined spirit of passive resistance. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.' s influence, like an echo of Gandhi's, prevails. Nonviolent and prayerful resistance to discrimination is the keynote. Here, the Negro has committed himself to a definite stand. He will go to jail, suffer any humiliation, but he will not back down. He will take the insults and abuses stoically so that his children will not have to take them in the future.

The white racist is bewildered and angry by such an attitude, because the dignity of the Negro's course of action emphasizes the indignity of his own. It is a challenge to him to needle the Negro into acts of a baser nature, into open physical conflict. He will walk up and blow cigarette smoke in the Negro's face, hoping the Negro will strike out at him. Then he could repress the Negro violently and claim it was only self-defense.

Where the Negro has lacked unity of purpose elsewhere, he has in Montgomery rallied to the leadership of King. Where he has been degraded elsewhere by unjust men of both races, here he is resisting degradation.

I could not make out the white viewpoint in Montgomery. It was too fluid, too changeable. A superficial calm hung over the city. At night police were everywhere. I felt that the two races stood like blocks of concrete, immovable, and that the basic issues of right and wrong, justice and injustice, were lost from view by the whites. The issues had degenerated to who would win. Fear and dread tensed both sides.

The Negroes with whom I associated feared two things. They feared that one of their own might commit an act of violence that

would jeopardize their position by allowing the whites to say they were too dangerous to have their rights. They dreaded the awful tauntings of irresponsible white men, the jailing, the frames.

The white man's fears have been widely broadcast. To the Negro these fears of "intermingling" make no sense. All he can see is that the white man wants to hold him down - to make him live up to his responsibilities as a taxpayer and soldier, while denying him the privileges of a citizen. At base, though the white brings forth many arguments to justify his viewpoint, one feels the reality is simply that he cannot bear to "lose" to the traditionally servant class.

The hate stare was everywhere practiced, especially by women of the older generation. On Sunday, I made the experiment of dressing well and walking past some of the white churches just as services were over. In each instance, as the women came through the church doors and saw me, the "spiritual bouquets" changed to hostility. The transformation was grotesque. In all of Montgomery only one woman refrained. She did not smile. She merely looked at me and did not change her expression. My gratitude to her was so great it astonished me.

November 27

I remained in my room more and more each day. The situation in Montgomery was so strange I decided to try passing back into white society. I went out only at night for food. My heart sickened at the thought of any more hate. Too, I wanted no more sunlight until I had the medication sufficiently out of my system to allow me to lighten.

November 28

I decided to try to pass back into white society. I scrubbed myself almost raw until my brown skin had a pink rather than black undertone. Yes, looking into the mirror, I felt I could pass. I put on a white shirt, but by contrast it made my face and hands appear too dark. I changed to a brown sports shirt, which made my skin appear lighter.

This shift was nerve-racking. As a white man I could not be seen leaving a Negro home at midnight. If I checked into a white hotel and then got too much sun, it would, in combination with the medication still in my system, turn me too dark and I would not be able to return to the hotel.

I waited until the streets were quiet outside and I was sure everyone in the house slept. Then, taking my bags, I walked to the door and out into the night.

It was important to get out of the neighborhood and into the white sector as quickly and inconspicuously as possible. I watched for police cars. Only one appeared in the distance and I dodged down a side street.

At the next intersection a Negro teenager strode by. I stepped out and walked behind him. He glanced at me and then kept his eyes to the front. Obviously thinking I might harass him, he pulled something from his jacket and I heard a click. Though I could not see what he held in his hand, I have no doubt it was a switch-blade knife. To him I was nothing more than a white stranger, a potential source of harm against whom he must protect himself.

He stopped at the corner of a wide street and waited to cross. I came up beside him.

“It’s getting cold, isn’t it?” I said, seeking to reassure him that I had no unfriendly intentions.

He stood like a statue, unresponsive.

We crossed the street to a brighter downtown section. A policeman strolled toward us and the boy quickly dropped his weapon into his jacket pocket.

The policeman nodded affably to me and I knew then that I had successfully passed back into white society, that I was once more a first-class citizen, that all doors to cafés, rest rooms, libraries, movies, concerts, schools and churches were suddenly open to me. After so long I could not adjust to it. A sense of exultant liberation flooded through me. I crossed over to a restaurant and entered. I took a seat beside white men at the counter and the waitress smiled at me. It was a miracle. I ordered food and was served, and it was a miracle. I went to the rest room and was not molested. No one paid me the slightest attention. No one said, “What’re you doing in here, nigger?”

Out there in the night I knew the men who were exactly as I had been these past weeks roamed the streets and not one of them could go into a place and buy a cup of coffee at this time of night. Instead of opening the door into rest rooms, they looked for alleys.

To them as to me, these simple privileges would be a miracle. But though I felt it all, I felt no joy in it. I saw smiles, benign faces, courtesies - a side of the white man I had not seen in weeks, but I remembered too well the other side. The miracle was sour.

I ate the white meal, drank the white water, received the white smiles and wondered how it could all be. What sense could a man make of it?

I left the café and walked to the elegant Whitney Hotel. A Negro rushed to take my duffel. He gave me the smiles, the “yes, sir - yes, sir.”

I felt like saying, “You’re not fooling me,” but now I was back on the other side of the wall. There was no longer communication between us, no longer the glance that said everything.

The white clerks registered me, surrounded me with smiles, sent me to my comfortable room accompanied by a Negro who carried my bags. I gave him his tip, received his bow and realized that already he was far from me, distant as the Negro is distant from the white. I locked the door, sat on the bed and smoked a cigarette. I was the same man who could not possibly have bought his way into this room a week ago. My inclination was to marvel at the feel of the carpet beneath my feet, to catalogue the banal miracle of every stick of furniture, every lamp, the telephone, to go and wash myself in the tile shower - or again to go out into the street simply to experience what it was like to walk into all the doors, all the joints and movies and restaurants, to talk to white men in the lobby without servility, to look at women and see them smile courteously.

November 29

Montgomery looked different that morning. The face of humanity smiled - good smiles, full of warmth; irresistible smiles that confirmed my impression that these people were simply unaware of the situation with the Negroes who passed them on the street - that there was not even the communication of intelligent awareness between them. I talked with some - casual conversations here and there. They said they knew the Negroes, they had had long talks with the Negroes. They did not know that the Negro long ago learned he must tell them what they want to hear, not what is. I heard the old things: the Negro is this or that or the other. You have to go slow. You can't expect the South to sit back and let the damned communist North dictate to it, especially when no outsider can really "understand." I listened and kept my tongue from giving answers. This was the time to listen, not to talk, but it was difficult. I looked into their eyes and saw sincerity and wanted to say: "Don't you know you are prattling the racist poison?"

Montgomery, the city I had detested, was beautiful that day; at least it was until I walked into a Negro section where I had not been before. I was a lone white man in a Negro neighborhood. I, the white man, got from the Negro the same shriveling treatment I, the Negro, had got from the white man. I thought, "Why me? I have been one of you." Then I realized it was the same stupidity I had encountered at the New Orleans bus station. It was nothing I had done, it was not me, but the color of my skin. Their looks said: "You white bastard, you ofay sonofabitch, what are you doing walking these streets?" just as the whites' looks had said a few days before: "You black bastard, you nigger sonofabitch, what are you doing walking these streets?"

Was it worth going on? Was it worth trying to show the one race what went on behind the mask of the other?

December 1 Alabama-Georgia

I **developed a technique** of zigzagging back and forth. In my bag I kept a damp sponge, dyes, cleansing cream and Kleenex. It was hazardous, but it was the only way to traverse an area both as Negro and white. As I traveled, I would find an isolated spot, perhaps an alley at night or the brush beside a highway, and quickly apply the dye to face, hands and legs, then rub off and reapply until it was firmly anchored in my pores. I would go through the area as a Negro and then, usually at night, remove the dyes with cleansing cream and tissues and pass through the same area as a white man.

I was the same man, whether white or black. Yet when I was white, I received the brotherly-love smiles and privileges from whites and the hate stares or obsequiousness from Negroes. And when I was a Negro, the whites judged me fit for the junk heap, while the Negroes treated me with great warmth.

As the Negro Griffin, I walked up the steep hill to the bus station in Montgomery to get the schedule for buses to Tuskegee. I received the information from a polite clerk and turned away from the counter.

“Boy!” I heard a woman’s voice, harsh and loud.

I glanced toward the door to see a large, matriarchal woman, elderly and impatient. Her pinched face grimaced and she waved me to her.

“Boy, come here. Hurry!”

Astonished, I obeyed.

“Get those bags out of the cab,” she ordered testily, seeming outraged at my lack of speed.

Without thinking, I allowed my face to spread to a grin as though overjoyed to serve her. I carried her bags to the bus and received three haughty dimes. I thanked her profusely. Her eyebrows knitted with irritation and she finally waved me away.

I took the early afternoon bus for Tuskegee, walked through a Southern town of great beauty and tranquility. The famed Tuskegee Institute was, I learned, out of the city limits. In fact the major portion of the Negro residential area is out of the city limits - put there when the city fathers decided it was the simplest way to invalidate the Negro vote in local elections.

The spirit of George Washington Carver hangs strongly over the campus - a quiet, almost hauntingly quiet area of trees and grass. It radiates an atmosphere of respect for the work of one's hands and mind, of human dignity. In interviews here, my previous findings were confirmed: with the exception of those trained in professions where they can set up independent practice, they can find jobs commensurate with their education only outside the South. I found an atmosphere of great courtesy, with students more dignified and more soberly dressed than one finds on white campuses. Education for them is a serious business. They are so close to the days when their ancestors were kept totally illiterate, when their ancestors learned to read and write at the risk of severe punishment, that learning is an almost sacred privilege now. They see it also as the only possible way out of the morass in which the Negro finds himself.

Later that afternoon, after wandering around the town, I turned back toward the Institute to talk with the dean. A white man stood in front of a Negro recreation parlor near the college entrance gates and waved to me. I hesitated at first, fearing he would be just another bully. But his eyes pleaded with me to trust him.

I crossed slowly over to him.

"Did you want me?" I asked.

"Yes - could you tell me where is Tuskegee Institute?"

"Right there," I said, pointing to the gates a block away.

“Aw, I know it,” he grinned. I smelled whiskey in the fresh evening air. “I was just looking for an excuse to talk to you,” he admitted. “Do you teach here?”

“No, I’m just traveling through,” I said.

“I’m a Ph.D.,” he said uncomfortably. “I’m from New York - down here as an observer.”

“For some government agency?”

“No, strictly on my own,” he said. I studied him closely, since other Negroes were beginning to watch us. He appeared to be in his early fifties and was well enough dressed.

“How about you and me having a drink?” he said.

“No, thanks,” I said and turned away.

“Wait a minute, dammit. You people are my brothers. It’s people like me that are your only hope. How do you expect me to observe if you won’t talk to me?”

“Very well,” I said. “I’ll be glad to talk with you.”

“Hell, I’ve observed all I can stomach,” he said. “Let’s go get just roaring blinko drunk and forget all this damned prejudice stuff.”

“A white man and a Negro,” I laughed. “We’d both hear from the merciful Klan.”

“Damned right - a white man and a Negro. Hell, I don’t consider myself any better than you - not even as good, maybe. I’m just trying to show some brotherhood.”

Though I knew he had been drinking, I wondered that an educated man and an observer could be so obtuse - could create such an embarrassing situation for a Negro.

“I appreciate it,” I said stiffly. “But it would never work.”

“They needn’t know,” he whispered, leaning close to me, an almost frantic look in his eyes as though he were begging not to be rejected. “I’m going to get soused anyway. Hell, I’ve had all this I can stand. It’s just between you and me. We could go into the woods somewhere. Come on - for brotherhood’s sake.”

I felt great pity for him. He was obviously lonely and fearful of rejection by the very people he sought to help. But I wondered if he could know how offensive this overweening “brotherhood” demonstration was. Others stood by and watched with frowns of disapproval.

At that moment a Negro drove up in an old car and stopped. Ignoring the white man, he spoke to me. “Would you like to buy some nice fat turkeys?” he asked.

“I don’t have any family here,” I said.

“Wait a minute there,” the white man said. “Hell, I’ll buy all your turkeys … just to help you out. I’ll show you fellows that not all white men are bastards. How many’ve you got in there?” We looked into the car and saw several live turkeys in the backseat.

“How much for all of them?” the white man asked, pulling a ten-dollar bill from his wallet.

The vendor looked at me, puzzled, as though he did not wish to unload such a baggage on the generous white man.

“What can you do with them when you get them out of the car?” I asked.

“What’re you trying to do,” the white man asked belligerently, “kill this man’s sale?”

The vendor quickly put in: “No … no, mister, he’s not trying to do that. I’m glad to sell you all the turkeys you want. But where you want me to unload them? You live around here?”

“No, I’m just an observer. Hell, take the ten dollars. I’ll give the damned turkeys away.”

When the vendor hesitated, the white man asked: “What’s the matter - did you steal them or something?”

“Oh, no sir …”

“You afraid I’m a cop or something?”

The unpardonable had been said. The white man, despite his protestations of brotherhood, had made the first dirty suggestion

that came to his mind. He was probably unaware of it but it escaped none of us. By the very tone of his question he revealed his contempt for us. His voice had taken on a hard edge, putting us in our place, as they say. He had become just like the whites he decried.

“I didn’t steal them” the turkey man said coldly. “You can come out to my farm. I’ve got more there.”

The white man, sensing the change, the resentment, glared at me. “Hell, no wonder nobody has any use for you. You don’t give a man a chance to be nice to you. And dammit, I’m going to put that in my report.” He turned away grumbling. “There’s something ‘funny’ about all of you.” Then he raised his head toward the evening sky and announced furiously: “But before I do anything else, I’m going to get drunk, stinking drunk.”

He stamped off down the road toward open country. Negroes around me shook their heads slowly, with regret. We had witnessed a pitiful one-man attempt to make up for some of the abuses the man had seen practiced against the Negro. It had failed miserably. If I had dared, I would have gone after him and tried to bridge the terrible gap that had come between him and us.

Instead, I walked to the street lamp and wrote in my notebook:

“ We must return to them their lawful rights, assure equality of justice - and then everybody leave everybody else to hell alone. Paternalistic - we show our prejudice in our paternalism - we downgrade their dignity.”

It was too late to visit the dean of Tuskegee, so I went to the bus station and boarded a bus for Atlanta via Auburn, Alabama.

The trip was without incident until we changed buses in Auburn. As always, we Negroes sat in the rear. Four of us occupied the back bench. A large, middle-aged Negro woman sat in front of us to the left, a young Negro man occupied the seat in front of us to the right.

At one of the stops, two white women boarded and could find no place to sit. No gallant Southern white man (or youth) rose to offer

them a place in the “white section.”

The bus driver called back and asked the young Negro man and the middle-aged Negro woman to sit together so the white women could have one of the seats. Both ignored the request. We felt tensions mount as whites craned to stare back at us.

A redheaded white man in a sports shirt stood up, faced the rear and called out to the Negro, “Didn’t you hear the driver? Move out, man.”

“They’re welcome to sit here,” the Negro said quietly, indicating the empty seat beside him and the one beside the woman across the aisle.

The driver looked dumfounded and then dismayed. He walked halfway to the rear and, struggling to keep his voice under control, said: “They don’t want to sit with you people, don’t you know that? They don’t want to - is that plain enough?”

We felt an incident boiling, but none of us wanted the young Negro, who had paid for his ticket, to be forced to vacate his seat. If the women did not want to sit with us, then let one of the white men offer his seat and he could come and sit with us. The young Negro said no more. He gazed out the window.

The redhead bristled. “Do you want me to slap these two jigaboos out of their seats?” he asked the driver in a loud voice.

We winced and turned into mummies, staring vacantly, insulating ourselves against further insults.

“No - for God’s sake - please - no rough stuff,” the driver pleaded.

One of the white women looked toward us apologetically, as though she were sorry to be the cause of such a scene. “It’s all right,” she said. “Please …” asking the driver and the young man to end their attempts to get her a seat.

The redhead flexed his chest muscles and slowly took his seat, glaring back at us. A young teenager, sitting halfway to the front, sniggered: “Man, he was going to slap that nigger, all right.” The

white bully was his hero, but other whites maintained a disapproving silence.

At the Atlanta station we waited for the whites to get off. One of them, a large middle-aged man, hesitated, turned and stepped back toward us. We hardened ourselves for another insult. He bent over to speak to the young Negro. “I just wanted to tell you that before he slapped you, he’d have had to slap me down first,” he said.

None of us smiled. We wondered why he had not spoken up while the whites were still on the bus. We nodded our appreciation and the young Negro said gently: “It happens all the time.”

“Well, I just wanted you to know - I was on your side, boy.” He winked, never realizing how he had revealed himself to us by calling our companion the hated name of “boy.” We nodded wearily in response to his parting nod.

I was the last to leave the bus. An elderly white man, bald and square of build, dressed in worn blue work clothes, peered intently at me. Then he crimped his face as though I were odious and snorted, “Phew!” His small blue eyes shone with repugnance, a look of such unreasoning contempt for my skin that it filled me with despair.

It was a little thing, but piled on all the other little things it broke something in me. Suddenly I had had enough. Suddenly I could stomach no more of this degradation - not of myself but of all men who were black like me. Abruptly I turned and walked away. The large bus station was crowded with humanity. In the men’s room, I entered one of the cubicles and locked the door. For a time I was safe, isolated; for a time I owned the space around me, though it was scarcely more than that of a coffin. In medieval times, men sought sanctuary in churches. Nowadays, for a nickel, I could find sanctuary in a colored rest room. Then, sanctuary had the smell of incense-permeated walls. Now it had the odor of disinfectant.

The irony of it hit me. I was back in the land of my forefathers, Georgia. The town of Griffin was named for one of them. Too I, a Negro, carried the name hated by all Negroes, for former Governor

Griffin (no kin that I would care to discover) devoted himself heroically to the task of keeping Negroes “in their place.” Thanks in part to his efforts, this John Griffin celebrated a triumphant return to the land from which his people had sprung by seeking sanctuary in a toilet cubicle at the bus station.

I took out my cleansing cream and rubbed it on my hands and face to remove the stain. I then removed my shirt and undershirt, rubbed my skin almost raw with the undershirt, and looked into my hand mirror. I could pass for white again. I repacked my duffel, put my shirt and coat back on and wondered how I could best leave the colored rest room without attracting attention. I guessed it was near midnight, but the traffic in and out remained heavy.

Oddly, there was little of the easy conversation one generally hears in public rest rooms, none of the laughter and “woofing.” I waited, listening to footsteps come and go, to the water-sounds of hand-washing and flushing.

Much later, when I heard no more footsteps, I stepped from my cubicle and walked toward the door that led into the main waiting room. I hurried into the crowd unnoticed.

The shift back to white status was always confusing. I had to guard against the easy, semi-obscene language that Negroes use among themselves, for coming from a white man it is insulting. It was midnight. I asked a doorman where to find a room for the night. He indicated a neon sign that stood out against the night sky - YMCA, only a block or so away. I realized that though I was well dressed for a Negro, my appearance looked shabby for a white man. He judged me by that and indicated a place where lodging was inexpensive.

December 2 Trappist Monastery, Conyers

Telephone calls to the *Sepia* office in Fort Worth. They asked me to do some more stories about Atlanta. My photographer, Don Rutledge, could not get there for two days. I telephoned the Trappist monastery at Conyers, Georgia, about thirty miles away and asked if they would receive me for a short visit. I felt the past weeks, the strange sickness that cried for a change, for some relief from the constant racial grind.

I checked out of the Y and boarded a bus for Conyers.

The driver had mastered one of the techniques of degrading the Negro. Every time a white person got off, the driver said politely: "Watch your step, please." But whenever a Negro approached the front to get off, the driver's silence fairly roared. His refusal to extend even this courtesy to passengers who had paid as much as any white for the tickets was so conspicuous it made me aware of the stirrings of resentment among the Negroes behind me.

Nicely dressed, respectable Negro women, even the aged, could not draw from him the courteous warning, "Watch your step." The implication was clear and unmistakable.

I watched, wondering at the uselessness of the man's bad manners. Then at a stop, a group of whites walked to the front and behind them a sedately dressed Negro woman in her fifties. I felt the driver's dilemma and was amused by it. Should he say "Watch your step, please," when the statement would be addressed also to the Negro?

"Watch your step, please," he finally said, opening the doors. The whites stepped down without response, but the Negro lady nodded politely to him and said, "Thank you," knowing full well his warning had not been meant for her. It was a moment of triumph. She proved herself more courteous than his white passengers and

more courteous than he; and she did it without the slightest sarcasm. The subtlety of it escaped the whites on the bus, but it in no way escaped the driver or the Negroes at the back. I heard stifled chuckles of approval from behind me. The driver slammed the doors harder than necessary and lurched the bus forward.

I arrived at the Trappist monastery with its two thousand acres of wood and farmlands and entered the courtyard as the monks were chanting Vespers. Their voices floated to me. A brown-robed Brother led me to a cell on the second floor and informed me supper would be at five.

The contrast was almost too great to be borne. It was a shock, like walking from the dismal swamps into sudden brilliant sunlight. Here all was peace, all silence except for the chanted prayers. Here men know nothing of hatred. They sought to make themselves conform ever more perfectly to God's will, whereas outside I had seen mostly men who sought to make God's will conform to their wretched prejudices. Here men sought their center in God, whereas outside they sought it in themselves. The difference was transforming.

We had supper at five - homemade bread, butter, milk, red beans, spinach and a peach.

At six thirty we went into the chapel for the last prayers of the day. I knelt in the chapel balcony, looking down on ninety white-robed monks. When Compline was finished, they turned out most of the lights and chanted the solemn *Salve Regina* so beautifully, so tenderly, we felt the crusts of our lives fall away and we rested in the deep hush of eternity. When the last echoes died to silence the monks filed out. Another day had ended for them. They went to bed at seven and would get up to begin a new day in the morning at two. The same thing has happened in Trappist monasteries throughout the centuries. I felt the timelessness of it and I remained a long time alone in the darkened chapel - not praying, simply resting in the warmth where all senses are ordered into harmony, where hatred cannot penetrate. After my weeks of travel, when I had seen constantly the rawness of man's contempt for man, the mere act of resting in this atmosphere was healing.

I went down the hall to take a shower and wash my clothes in the sink. As I returned to my cell, I found a monk, the guest-master, who had come to see if I needed anything. We talked for a time and I explained my research project to him.

“Do Negroes often come here as guests, to spend a few days, Father?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” he said. “Though I don’t suppose many really know about this place.”

“This is the Deep South,” I said. “When you have Negro guests, do you have any trouble with your white guests?”

“No … no … the type of white man who would come to the Trappists - well, he comes here to be in an atmosphere of dedication to God. Such a man would hardly keep one eye on God and the other on the color of his neighbor’s skin.”

We discussed the religiosity of the racists. I told him how often I had heard them invoke God, and then some passage from the Bible, and urge all who might be faltering in their racial prejudice to “Pray, brother, with all your heart before you decide to let them niggers into our schools and cafés.”

The monk laughed. “Didn’t Shakespeare say something about ‘every fool in error can find a passage of Scripture to back him up’? He knew his religious bigots.”

I showed the priest the booklet on racial justice, *For Men of Good Will*, written by the New Orleans priest Robert Guste, in which most of the questions and clichés about the Negro are discounted, particularly that God made the Negro dark as a curse. Father Guste says, “No modern biblical scholar would subscribe to any such theory.”

The monk nodded. I insisted on the point. “Is there anyplace in the Bible that justifies it - even by a stretch of the imagination, Father?”

“Biblical scholars don’t stretch their imaginations - at least reputable ones don’t,” he said. “Will you wait a moment? I have

something you must read."

He returned almost immediately with the book *Scholasticism and Politics,* by Jacques Maritain.

"Maritain has some profound things to say about the religion of racists," he said, leafing the book. "You might review this page." He placed a cardboard marker at the page and handed the book to me.

The monk bowed and left. I listened to the rustle of his thick robes as he walked down the hall in the tremendous silence. I then had a visit from a young college instructor of English - a born Southerner of great breadth of understanding. He told me that his more liberated views of the Negro were in such contradiction to those of his elders, his parents and uncles, that he no longer went home to visit them. We talked until midnight. He invited me to go with him to visit Flannery O'Connor the next day, but I told him that since I had only a few hours, I felt I must spend them in the monastery.

He left. The cell was cold. The Georgia countryside slept outside. Since I would not be getting up at two to begin the day, I decided not to sleep. I felt the steam radiator on my hand. It was without a hint of warmth. The Maritain lay on the cot. I got into bed and opened the page the monk had marked.

Speaking of the religiosity of racists, Maritain observes:

> God is invoked … and He is invoked against the God of the spirit, of intelligence and love - excluding and hating this God. What an extraordinary spiritual phenomenon this is: people believe in God and yet do not know God. The idea of God is affirmed and at the same time disfigured and perverted.

He goes on to say that this kind of religion, which declines wisdom, even though it may call itself Christian, is in reality as anti-Christian as atheism.

I was startled that the French philosopher could so perfectly characterize the racists of our Southern states. Then I realized that he was describing racists everywhere and from all times - that this is

the religious trait of men who twist their minds to consider racial prejudice as a virtue - whether it be a White Citizens Council or Klan member, a Nazi *gauleiter*, a South African white supremacist or merely someone's aunt who says, "Nobody's worse than those Italians (or Spaniards, or Englishmen, or Danes, etc.)."

I slept and woke up shouting from the old familiar nightmare of men and women closing in on me, shuffling toward me. I lay there fully dressed under the cell's bare globe, trembling. I felt myself flush with embarrassment at having disturbed the Trappist silence. Surely monks sleeping in other cells, their bodies exhausted from work in the fields and hours of prayers, heard me and lay awake wondering.

December 4 Atlanta

This morning the young professor drove me back to Atlanta. Along the roadside, oaks were spectacularly red against the green of pines. In town I registered at the Georgia Hotel, a luxury hotel, where I was treated with the utmost suspicion and discourtesy. Did the staff have doubts about my "racial purity"? Though I had bags and was well enough dressed, they made me pay in advance and I could not make a phone call without their insisting I come down immediately to the desk and pay the dime. I had never encountered such obtuseness in a first-class hotel, and I told them so, but this only increased their inhospitality. I decided not to stay.

The *Black Star* photographer, Don Rutledge, arrived in his little Renault from Rockvale, Tennessee, around noon. We were to do a story together on Atlanta's Negro business and civic leaders, and perhaps some others. I liked him immediately. He is a tall, somewhat skinny young fellow, married and has a child - a gentleman in every way.

December 7

Three days of hard work, from morning until late at night. My interview notebooks were filled up, but at night I was too tired to write in my journal and went immediately to bed. We had had the most splendid help and cooperation from such Negro leaders as attorney A.T. Walden, businessman T.M. Alexander, the Reverend Samuel Williams, and the immensely impressive Dr. Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse … also many others.

I had arrived in Atlanta feeling that the situation for the Negro in the South was utterly hopeless - due to the racists' powerful hold on the purse strings of whites and Negroes alike; and due to the lack of unanimity among the Negroes.

But Atlanta changed my mind. Atlanta has gone far in proving that "the Problem" can be solved and in showing us the way to do it. Though segregation and discrimination still prevail and still work a hardship, great strides have been made - strides that must give hope to every observer of the South.

At least three factors are responsible:

First and most important, the Negroes have united in a common goal and purpose; and Atlanta has more men of leadership quality than any other city in the South - men of high education, long vision and great dynamism.

Second, as one of the leaders, Mr. T.M. Alexander, explained to me, though the State of Georgia has never had an administration sympathetic to the Negro cause, the city of Atlanta has long been favored with an enlightened administration, under the leadership of Mayor William B. Hartsfield.

Third, the city has been blessed by a newspaper, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, that is not afraid to make a stand for right and

justice. Its most noted columnist (and now publisher), Ralph McGill, Pulitzer Prize winner, is significantly referred to as “Rastus” by the White Citizens Councils.

In the South, where most newspapers, even the great metropolitan dailies, have shown themselves shortsighted and uncourageous, or - worse - have propagandized as though they were organs of the Councils and Klans, the importance of those newspapers that live up to their journalistic responsibilities cannot be sufficiently emphasized. A handful of the latter, headed by such men as Mark Ethridge, Hodding Carter, Easton King, Harry Golden, P.D. East and Ralph McGill, plus a few others, have stood up for the freedoms of all men.

McGill and his colleagues gamble their fortunes and their reputations on the proposition that it is journalism’s sacred trust to find and publish the truth and that the majority, if properly informed, will act for the good of the community and the country. The great danger in the South comes precisely from the fact that the public is not informed. Newspapers shirk notoriously their editorial responsibilities and print what they think their readers want. They lean with the prevailing winds and employ every fallacy of logic in order to editorialize harmoniously with popular prejudices. They also keep a close eye on possible economic reprisals from the Councils and the Klans, plus other superpatriotic groups who bring pressure to bear on the newspapers’ advertisers. In addition, most adhere to the long-standing conspiracy of silence about anything remotely favorable to the Negro. His achievements are carefully excluded or, when they demand attention, are handled with the greatest care to avoid the impression that anything good the individual Negro does is typical of his race.

We spent our time, significantly, between the three-block section on Auburn Street where Negro financing and industry controls some eighty million dollars, and the section of the six Negro colleges. A close parallel exists between the two, for most of the business leaders are connected with the schools of higher learning, either as teachers or directors. In addition, all of these men are religious

leaders in the community. As Alexander stated: “If we know anything, it is that if virtues do not equal powers, the powers will be misused.”

About twenty-five years ago two men came to Atlanta to teach in the university system. Both were economists. They found Atlanta a thriving intellectual center for the Negro. In the slave years any attempt at literacy among Negroes was severely punished. In some communities a Negro’s right hand was mutilated if he learned to read and write. The Negro therefore prized education as the only doorway into the world of knowledge and dignity to which he aspired. The climate was right to begin a program that would lead them to economic respectability. L.D. Milton and J.B. Blayton, the two economists, recognized that so long as the Negro had to depend on white banks to finance his projects for improvement and growth, he was at the mercy of the white man. They recognized that economic emancipation was the key to the racial solution. So long as the race had to depend on a basically hostile source of financing, it would not advance, since the source would simply refuse loans for any project that did not meet with its approval.

These two men said in essence: “Let everyone in the community pool what little resources he has with others.” By uniting the small power of small sums, by skillfully manipulating it, they could achieve a consolidated financial power. This action resulted in the founding of two banks in Atlanta. Recently, I discovered, an instance arose where the Negro leaders used their economic leverage in a typical manner. It became necessary for the Negro community to expand its physical limits. An area of white residences served as a bottleneck. The housing committee met and Negroes and whites alike agreed to have Negroes purchase this block of homes. The white lending agencies, however, refused to make the loans. As usual the Negro leaders called a meeting to discuss what might be done. They agreed to set aside a large sum of money from which applicants could make loans to buy these houses. After such loans were made, the white lending agencies called and said: “Don’t take all that business away from us. How about letting

us handle a few of those loans?" Business that had been refused a few days previously was now welcomed.

But though financing is the key, other elements are no less important. Education, housing, job opportunities and the vote enter the picture of any improving community. The Negro leader, the "successful" man in Atlanta, is deeply imbued with a sense of responsibility toward his community. This is true of the doctors, the lawyers, the educators, the religious leaders and the businessmen.

"There is no 'big Me' and 'little you,' " T.M. Alexander, one of the founders of the Southeastern Fidelity Fire Insurance, said. "We must pool all of our resources, material and mental, to gain the respect that will enable all of us to walk the streets with the dignity of American citizens."

In the matter of education, Atlanta has long been eminent. With men of the quality of Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse, and Rufus Clement, president of Atlanta University - to mention only two who are world-renowned - the intellectual climate is of high quality. The most impressive proof of this is found in the classrooms where teachers and students face squarely the problems that haunt this country, particularly the race problem. I visited the sociology class of Spelman College where Dr. Moreland (Mrs. Charles Moreland) bullied and taunted and challenged her class to think and talk. This handsome and brilliant young woman, like her students, despises the idea that in America any man has to "earn" his rights to first-class citizenship. In the classes I attended, one of the students was assigned to take the role of the white racist, and to argue his points to the other students. It was a brutal and revealing session. The comparison between them and the white racists was cruel indeed. The students have better manners, more learning, more courtesy and infinitely more understanding.

Every leader is interested in better housing. Many professional men, particularly doctors like F. Earl McLendon, have developed residential areas as their contribution to the cause. Atlanta has virtually miles and miles of splendid Negro homes. They have destroyed the cliché that whenever Negroes move into an area the

property values go down. In every instance, they have improved the homes they have bought from the whites and built even better ones. The philosophy here is simple. Try to anchor as many Negroes as possible in their own homes.

The fourth element, the vote, the right of the governed to govern themselves, has long been a cherished goal of all thinking men of Atlanta. Every business, professional and civic leader is also a leader in politics. In 1949, the Democrats, under A.T. Walden, and the Republicans, under John Wesley Dobbs, united to form the Atlanta Negro Voters League; and the Negro began to have a voice in his government. It has become an increasingly important and responsible one. By 1955 this type of political action helped elect Atlanta University President Rufus E. Clement to the city school board, making him the first Negro to hold elective office in Georgia since the Reconstruction. (See Bardolph, *The Negro Vanguard,* New York: Rinehart & Co., 1959.)

All take into account the cooperation of a fair-minded city administration under the leadership of Mayor Hartsfield. Almost alone among politicians of the South, Mayor Hartsfield has not sunk to the level of winning votes at the Negro's expense. He has proved the point that a man can, after all, stand up for justice and constitutional law and still not sacrifice his political career.

Benjamin Mays, J.B. Blayton, L.D. Milton, A.T. Walden, John Wesley Dobbs, Norris Herndon of the Atlantic Life Insurance Company, banker-druggist C.R. Yates, W.J. Shaw, E.M. Martin, Rev. Samuel Williams, Rev. William Holmes Borders, Rev. H.I. Bearden, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., and his son, Martin Luther King, Jr. - each has contributed and continues to contribute to the American dream in its best sense.

I recall scenes picked at random:

- The look of growing concern on photographer Don Rutledge's face as we moved from one scene to another - concern and humiliation to realize that these men, these scenes, these ideals were unknown to most Americans and utterly beyond the

comprehension of the Southern racist. It was a look, however, overspread with delight;

- The look of surprise and vast amusement on Dr. Benjamin Mays' intelligent face when I confided to him my journey as a Negro;

- At Spelman College, hearing Rosalyn Pope play magnificently the Bach Toccata in D, and then the strange, bewildered expression on her face when she told me about arriving in Paris to spend a year studying piano - the strangeness of living in a great city where she could attend concerts to her fill, where she could walk into any door where she was a human being first and last and not dismissed as a "Negro";

- The evening in T.M. Alexander's home, the talk with his wife and his brilliant children: "We realize that we have to run just to keep up." They are intent, like the other members of the community, upon doing everything within their power to nullify the picture of the loud, the brassy, the pushy and "successful" Negro;

- The long talk with the Reverend Samuel Williams in his living room. A forceful man, but quiet, of fine intellect. Professor of Philosophy. "I spent years," he told me, "studying the phenomenon of love."

"And I spend years studying the phenomenon of justice."

"At base, we spend years studying the same thing," he said.

It was time to return to New Orleans. My assignments in Atlanta with Rutledge were finished. He was anxious to get back to his wife and child. I asked him if he knew a first-rate photographer in New Orleans, since I wanted to go back over the terrain again as a Negro and have photos made. The project fascinated him and we arranged to drive to New Orleans together so he could photograph it.

December 9 New Orleans

In New Orleans I resumed my Negro identity and we went to all of my former haunts to photograph them.

Getting photos proved a problem. A Negro being photographed by a white arouses suspicions. Whites tended to wonder, “What Negro celebrity is he?” and to presume I was uppity. It equally aroused the curiosity of the Negroes. The “Uncle Toms” think that every Negro should bury his head in the sand and pretend he is not there. They distrust any Negro prominent enough to be photographed by a white photographer. Others feared I might be an Uncle Tom going over to the white side.

We had to arrange to be at the same spot at the same time, but pretended to have no relationship. Rutledge appeared to be simply another tourist taking photos, and I just happened to be in them.

One day we got some unexpected help. He approached a fruit stand in the French Market and began taking photographs. I walked up from another direction and bought some walnuts and an apple. An elderly and civil woman waited on me while another woman talked to him some distance away. She said, “Why don’t you hurry up and get a picture of that funny old nigger before he leaves?” Rutledge said he believed he would, and I, pretending to be unaware of the plot, obliged by hanging around the fruit stalls.

An hour later we went into the fish market. I showed interest in buying a fish and at that moment Rutledge walked up and asked the vendor if he minded being photographed with some of the fish. The vendor was delighted. He left me standing at the counter and went to pose with a giant fish in his hand. I followed, pretending to think this was the fish he would sell me. Trying not to be impolite to me, he nevertheless maneuvered every possible way to keep me out of the pictures, and finally, when I stuck close to him, he became

irritated and told me customers weren't allowed behind the counter. Then, when Rutledge said: "That's good right there, hold it," the man faced front and gave his most winning smile. A nod from Rutledge told me we had enough pictures, so I drifted away and out the door.

We returned to the shoe stand, where we had no problems since my old partner, Sterling Williams, was intelligent and knowledgeable. Otherwise we had to take the pictures quickly and disappear before a crowd gathered and began to ask questions,

The experience had subtler points that did not escape Rutledge. Having a Negro for a companion took him inside the problem. He could avail himself of any rest room, any water fountain, any café for a cup of coffee; but he could not take me with him. Needless to say, he was too much of a gentleman to do this, and there were times when we went without that cup of coffee or that glass of water.

December 14

Finally the photos were taken, the project concluded, and I resumed for the final time my white identity. I felt strangely sad to leave the world of the Negro after having shared it so long - almost as though I were fleeing my share of his pain and heartache.

December 15 Mansfield, Texas

I sat in the jet this afternoon, flying home from New Orleans, and looked out the window to the patterns of a December countryside far below. And I felt the greatest love for this land and the deepest dread of the task that now lay before me - the task of telling truths that would make me and my family the target of all the hate groups.

But for the moment, the joyful expectation of seeing my wife and children again after seven weeks overwhelmed all other feelings.

When the plane landed, I hurried to collect my bags and walk out front. The car soon arrived, with children waving and shouting from the windows. I felt their arms around my neck, their hugs and the marvelous jubilation of reunion. And in the midst of it, the picture of the prejudice and bigotry from which I had just come flashed into my mind, and I heard myself mutter: “My God, how can men do it when there are things like this in the world?”

The faces of my wife and mother spoke their relief that it was over.

That night was a festival. The country was aromatic with late autumn, with the love of family, with the return to light and affection. We talked little about the experience. It was too near, too sore. We talked with the children, about the cats and the farm animals.

Photographs by Don Rutledge

Photographs by Don Rutledge

Among Don Rutledge's historical photographs of John Howard Griffin - taken after the *Black Like Me* journey, December 1959, in New Orleans - this image provided the cover art for several paperback editions around the world. It continues to be the most well known of Rutlege's images and was featured as the cover art for *Man in the Mirror: John Howard Griffin and the Story of Black Like Me* (Orbis Books,1997), Robert Bonazzi's study of the classic text.

Griffin under the sunlamp: Ultraviolet radiation accelerated the darkening process, initiated by Oxsoralen, the drug used to treat vitiligo (a condition that causes white splotches on the skin).

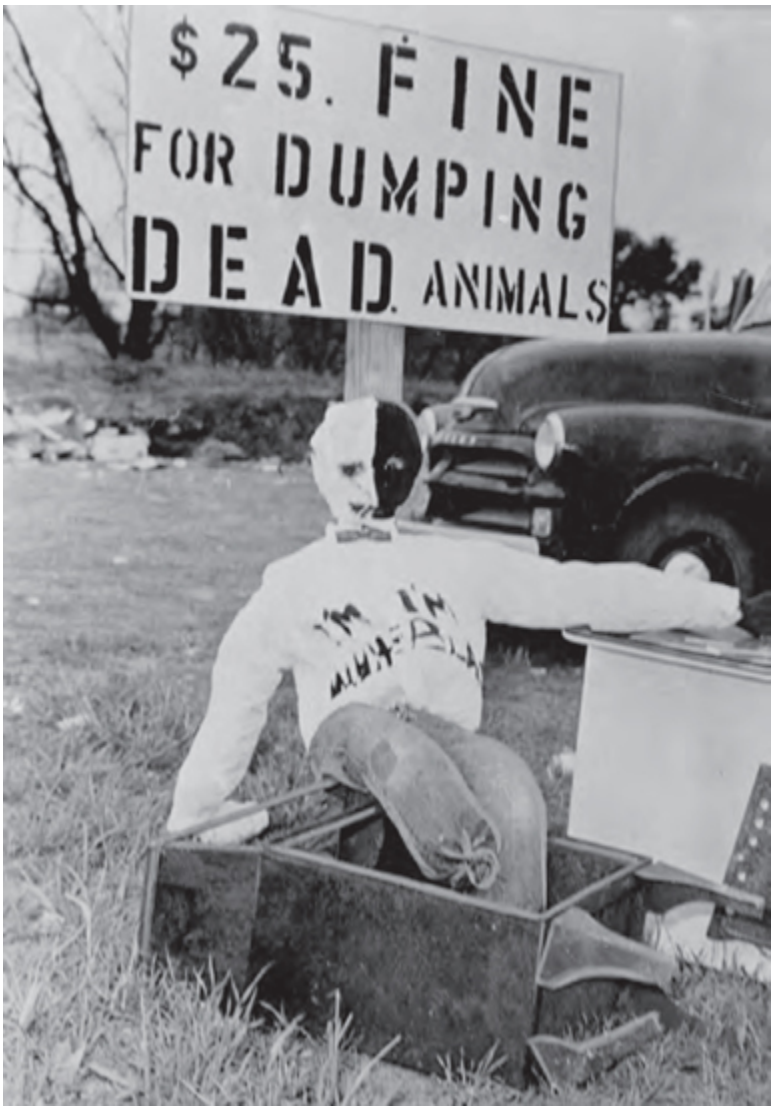
Below: As described in the text, Griffin was warned against looking at white women - including movie posters (p. 60).

Griffin spent a great deal of his journey walking. Warned away from park benches and stoops - or any other resting place where a Black person could be accused of loitering - he found such casual racist attitudes curiously balanced by the inherent courtesy of the South.

Above: Griffin and Sterling Williams share a stew of corn, turnips, and rice, seasoned with thyme, bay leaf and green peppers (p. 28).

Below: Griffin orders a meal from the proprietress of one of the many Negro cafés he frequented.

Griffin collects his fee from a dapper patron at Sterling Williams' shoe-shine stand in the French Quarter. Griffin worked with Williams off and on for a week in mid-November (p. 23 ff). All the change he collected he left with Williams.



On April 2, 1960, Griffin was informed that he had been “hanged in effigy” on Main Street in Mansfield, Texas. Griffin’s name and a yellow streak were painted on the dummy’s back. Taken to the town dump by the local constable, by the time a *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* photographer took this picture, someone had placed the dummy in front of this sign (pp. 159-160). Griffin later quipped that it was “not a very good likeness.”

Above: Griffin being interviewed by Mike Wallace (CBS Television) on March 23, 1960, as the April issue of *Sepia* was just hitting newsstands, over a year before the book was published (p. 155-157).

Below: Griffin being interviewed by Ted Lewis for a New York radio show. Griffin was interviewed by many other prominent journalists.

This previously unpublished portrait of Griffin as a Black man was taken in Gladys and Harold Levy's guesthouse (the former slave quarters of an old plantation). Some years prior, during Griffin's decade of blindness, the Levys had introduced Griffin to Sadie Jacobs, an innovative teacher of the blind. Griffin spent a week at the Levy guesthouse preparing himself prior to beginning his "journey" (pp. 7-13). Griffin does not mention the Levys by name in *Black Like Me*. See also, *Man in the Mirror*, pp. 41-42.

The Aftermath 1960

January 2

Mr. Levitan, the owner of *Sepia,* called and asked me to come in for an editorial conference with Mrs. Jackson. Though the magazine had paid for the trip, and I in turn promised them some articles about it, he gave me the opportunity to back out. “It’ll cause trouble,” he said. “ We don’t want to see you killed. What do you think? Hadn’t we better forget the whole thing?”

“Do you mean you’re willing to cancel this, after all you’ve been led to expect?” I asked.

“The only way I’ll run it is if you insist,” he said.

“Then I think we must run it,” I said, wishing with all my heart I could drop it. However, *Sepia*, unlike many magazines, is widely read in the Deep South by Negroes. I felt it was the best way of letting them know that their condition was known, that the world knew more about them than they suspected; the best way to give them hope.

The world would know, then, in early March. It was January. I had two months left in which to work before the storm would break.

February 26

The time drew to a close. The news became known. I had spent weeks at work, studying, correlating statistics, going through reports, none of which actually help to reveal the truth of what it is like to be discriminated against. They cancel truth almost more than they reveal it. I decided to throw them away and simply publish what happened to me.

A call from Hollywood. Paul Coates spoke to me, asked me to fly out and be on his interview program. I accepted.

March 14 Los Angeles

The first of the Coates shows was televised locally after it had been given heavy publicity over the weekend by the newspapers. I think almost every TV viewer in the area watched the show.

When the program was finished, and we heard Paul Coates announce we would return “tomorrow” to continue the interview, our attention switched to the telephone. We realized that now our neighbors knew, now the whole Dallas-Fort Worth area knew.

The phone began to ring. I picked it up, wondering what I should say if it were an abusive call. It was Penn and L.A. Jones from Midlothian. They talked for a long time. I realized that they were tying up the line so that no hate calls could come through. Finally, after almost an hour, we said good-by. Immediately my parents called to say it was fine. How full of dread their voices were - but they sincerely approved of what I had said.

After that, silence. We sat and waited, but the phone did not ring. The silence was so unnatural, so ominous, it weighed heavy on us. Were none of my friends, no other members of my family going to call?

March 17 New York

Flew to New York two days ago. Interview this morning with *Time* magazine in their new offices. They took photos and treated me with great cordiality. While I was at *Time*, the Dave Garroway show called. We were to have a preliminary interview that afternoon at five.

Unable to bear the silence from home, I returned to my room and telephoned to Mansfield. As a result of the two Paul Coates shows, my mother had received her first threatening call. It was from a woman who would not identify herself. The conversation had begun politely enough. The woman said they could not understand in town how I could turn against my own race. My mother assured her I had done this precisely *for* my race. The woman said: "Why he's just thrown the door wide open for those niggers, and after we've *all* worked so hard to keep them out." She then became abusive and succeeded in terrorizing my mother by telling her, "If you could just hear what they're planning to do to him if he ever comes back to Mansfield - "

"Who's planning?" my mother asked.

"That's all right. You just ought to be over at Curry's [a local café and night spot on the highway leading into Mansfield, run by ardent segregationists]. You'd see to it he never showed his face in Mansfield again."

My mother said she felt better when I talked to her. She had never been confronted by this sort of brutality before. She called my wife over and they sat together, frightened. Then they called Penn Jones, who came immediately and placed himself at their disposal.

Sickened that they would pick on a man's mother and strike him through terrorizing her, I immediately made calls and asked for police surveillance of both my home and my parents' home.

March 18

Garroway was immensely impressive. When we finally met this morning, briefly, before I went on camera, I told him I was afraid that my appearance would bring severe repercussions against him from the South. He stood large, larger than he appears on the screen. I told him I would answer his questions as carefully as possible. He bent over me and said: “Mr. Griffin - John - let me just ask you to do one thing.”

I braced myself against his request, fearing he would ask me to soft-pedal.

“Just tell the truth as honestly and as frankly as you can and don’t worry about my sponsors or anything else. You keep your mind clear to answer whatever I ask. Will you forget everything else and just remember that?”

I looked at him with a resurgence of faith in a public figure. He kept me on camera twenty minutes and he asked pointed questions that did not evade the issue. Before the interview was over, we were both deeply moved. At the end he asked me about discrimination in the North. I told him I was not competent to answer. I told him that the Southern racist invariably brought up the point that things aren’t perfect in the North either - which is no doubt so - as though that fact justified his injustices in the South.

March 23

It was a busy weekend. I spent more and more time in my room between interviews and conferences with Mr. Levitan and our PR man, Benn Hall, while Mr. Levitan had a constant stream of visitors in his suite.

On Tuesday I did a TV documentary with Harry Golden. The Mike Wallace show went on that evening, and then a long radio interview on the Long John show from midnight until four thirty in the morning. I got no sleep. Benn Hall offered me tranquilizers, but I did not dare take one for fear it would put me out completely. The *Time* article would be out that evening. I was anxious to see how they would treat the story. But I was most nervous about the Mike Wallace show, and told Benn Hall that if Wallace asked one wrong question, I would get up and walk out. He assured me Wallace would be sympathetic, but I had strong reservations. I particularly feared he would get embroiled in a religious discussion, bring in my Roman Catholicism in a way that could embarrass the Church.

The Golden show went all right. It was easy, with the director taking pains to keep it informal and to encourage me. I got off to a bad start, but we did it over and it came out all right.

Then, in the evening, Benn Hall came to pick me up. We took a taxi to Mike Wallace's office, stopping at the corner of Broadway and 14th to pick up a copy of *Time*. It was around eight o'clock and the streets were wet under a drizzling rain. Benn left me in a cigar stand and ran across the street to get the magazine. In a moment he returned with two copies. The story was good - they told it right and straight. Relieved, we walked to Wallace's office.

When they showed us in, Wallace rose from his chair behind the desk and shook hands. I was surprised to find him so much more youthful in appearance than I had imagined; but he looked also

tired and uncomfortable. He offered me a seat and without pretense asked if I wanted to see the questions he planned to ask me. I told him no. He appeared to know that I viewed him cautiously and that I was not enthusiastic about this interview. He fumbled uncomfortably for words and I took a liking to him. From the hints he dropped ("We've investigated you pretty thoroughly"), I was aghast - he knew things about the trip, the names of people I had stayed with - many things I had tried to hide in order to protect the people involved.

"Please," I pleaded. "Don't mention those names on the air. I'd be afraid their lives would be endangered, and they were my friends."

"Hell - I'm not going to do a damned thing to hurt them," he said. "Look - I'm on your side."

"How did you find out about all of this?" I asked.

"Oh, it's part of the business," he said.

We sat in his office, both of us dull, both of us tired to death. Our talk frittered out. He asked how the Coates shows went, said he heard they were excellent. "That makes me want to do better," he said.

"He had a full hour - you've only got a half hour," I said.

He pulled a bottle of whiskey out of his desk, offered me a drink. I refused. "Look, John - hell, I know you've done nothing but answer questions on all these shows and newspaper interviews; but will you pull yourself together and really work for me tonight?"

"I'd do that as a matter of conscience anyway," I said.

"You want me to tell you something," he said. "I'm scared to death of you - I mean a man who'd do what you've done - "

"Then you don't know me as well as I thought you did," I said. "The truth is I'm scared to death of you."

He burst out laughing. "Well, I guarantee you, you've got no reason to be."

Liveliness returned. Both of us felt certain it would go well.

We walked out onto a stage that contained only two chairs and a smoking stand. The camera technicians and director prepared us, got cables out of sight, strapped mikes on our necks, shouted instructions. Wallace smoked incessantly and smiled at me while yelling oaths in answer to yelled instructions. “Remember,” he said. “We’ve got to do as well in a half hour as you did with Paul in an hour.”

“I’ll talk fast,” I said, peering past the lights into the camera jumble of darkness.

The count started. The red lights came on. Wallace talked and smoked. He poured intelligent questions into me and kept his face close, absorbing my attention, encouraging me. It was a supercharged moment. I answered, forgetting everything except him and his questions. Fatigue disappeared. Fascination took over. The excitement sustained us. I realized, when the time was up, that it had gone well. And when we went off the air, Wallace shouted, “Top notch. Cancel everything and schedule it immediately.”

It was an extraordinary experience. Never have I been handled more superbly by an interviewer.

April 1 Mansfield

Radio-Television Française flew a crew of five from Paris to do a television show of the person-to-person type at my home in Mansfield. We had three busy days, with Pierre Dumayet, the commentator, and Claude Loursais, the director of the *Cinq Colonnes à la Une*. I put them on the plane out of here yesterday evening, and only then had time to settle down and do some work. But work was difficult. The story had circulated all over the world, and mail, telegrams and telephone calls poured in.

The local situation was odd. I had no contact with anyone in town and no one had contact with me. However, I understood that I was loudly discussed in the stores and on the streets - that the druggist and a couple of others had risen to my defense when the discussions became hot. I avoided going downtown, going into any of the stores for fear my presence would embarrass people who had been my friends.

The local roadside café, a gathering place for the segregationists, had a new sign. For some time it had carried a sign reading WE DON'T SERVE NEGROES. Then it was replaced by a larger sign: WHITES ONLY. Now another had joined it: NO ALBINOS ALLOWED. This sign that so disgusted my parents greatly amused me. I was surprised and pleased to discover that Foy Curry, the café-owner, was, after all, a man of some wit.

The principal point of contention among the women of the town appeared to be whether or not I had done a "Christian" thing. I feel that though few of them liked it, at least a large proportion of them understood that I worked as much for them and their children as I did for the Negroes. Certainly, my mail thus far was overwhelmingly congratulatory. I began to hope that I had been overly pessimistic,

that we might be able to live in Mansfield in an atmosphere of peace and understanding after all.

April 2

The phone woke me in the morning. I glanced out our front window to a calm spring landscape of fields and woods, then picked up the phone. A long-distance call from the *Star-Telegram* in Fort Worth. What could they want? I wondered, since they had not carried one word about my story. The reporter came on the line. He cautiously asked me how things were.

"All right as far as I know," I said.

"You don't sound too excited," he said. I began to feel uneasy.

"Why should I be?"

"You mean you haven't heard?"

"What?"

"You were hanged in effigy from the center red-light wire downtown on Main Street this morning."

"In Mansfield," I asked.

"That's right." He told me that the *Star-Telegram* had received an anonymous call that racists had hanged my effigy on Main Street. The newspaper checked it out with the local constable who confirmed that a dummy, half black, half white, with my name on it and a yellow streak painted down its back, was hanging from the wire.

"What would you like to say about it?" the reporter asked.

"I'm sorry it happened," I said. "It'll only give the town a worse name."

"People seem pretty excited about what you've done. There's a lot of loose talk out in Mansfield. Do you think this represents a real threat?"

"I'd probably be the last to know," I said.

“Do you think your life’s in danger?”

“I have no idea.”

“What are you going to do about this hanging?”

“Ignore it.”

“You’re not even going downtown to see it?”

“No … this sort of thing is not interesting,” I said.

“Do you think this represents the prevailing sentiment around town?”

“No, I’m sure it doesn’t.”

The reporter thanked me for my answers. He said they had sent a photographer out to take a picture of the effigy.

The reporter called back. He wondered, as I did, how this could have happened on Main Street when we are supposed to have police on duty all night. He told me that a grocer saw the effigy around 5 A.M. when he came to work, called the constable and told him to “get that damned thing down from there.” The constable had taken it down and thrown it onto the town junk heap, but when the reporter and photographer got to Mansfield, someone had retrieved the effigy from the dump and hung it on a sign reading:

$25 FINE FOR DUMPING DEAD ANIMALS

The local people remained utterly silent. I waited for just one, anyone, to call and say: “We may not approve of your views, but we think this hanging is shameful.” Their silence was eloquent and devastating. My disappointment grew as the afternoon passed. Did their silence condone the lynching? My family’s uneasiness approached terror now. My parents and my wife’s mother begged us to take the children and go away somewhere until this thing blew over.

That evening the *Star-Telegram* carried a six-column banner front-page headline announcing the lynching in effigy. Margaret Ann Turner (Mrs. Decherd Turner) had heard the news on TV and called

from Dallas to say they were coming after the children. We telephoned the Joneses at Midlothian and then called the Turners back. Decherd said we must come and stay with them as long as there was the slightest danger. The Joneses also invited us, but they felt it might be better if we were in Dallas, since I had much support there, according to them.

At such times, the slightest kindness on the part of anyone becomes a sort of bravery. My dad, who had gone to town, defiantly I imagine, returned almost jubilant. He had gone into the grocery store where he usually trades and heard the sudden silence. Then one of the owners, in the back at the meat counter, called a greeting.

"I didn't know whether I was still welcome," Dad said.

"Hell, you know better than that," the grocer shouted.

"I don't know - the way people have been acting. I was afraid if they saw me coming into your store, they might stop trading here."

"That's the kind of customer we don't want in the first place," the grocer said.

In the context of the day, this was heroism. Someone in town dared to express an opinion.

The time came to take my wife and children to Dallas. Decherd Turner had called again and told me to bring my typewriter and current work. "We've fixed you up an office here at the Bridwell Library," he said, referring to the library of the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.

"I'm not going to do it. Somebody's sure to find out and they'll make a squawk about S.M.U. offering me protection. I'm too unpopular. I don't want to get you or them into any uncomfortable situation."

Decherd insisted. He said they would be honored to offer me any hospitality and library or research facilities. They even requested I lecture to the student body.

On my way out of the lane that leads from my parents' place to my home, the neighbors at the halfway point waved, but those near the highway - people with whom we have been cordial - gave me the most violently hostile stare. I ran the gauntlet driving through town. At the second red light a truck pulled up beside me and a young man in a cowboy hat looked down into the cab of my car. He told me he'd heard talk that "they" were planning to come and castrate me, that the date had been set. He said this coldly, without emotion, neither threatening nor sympathetic, exactly the way one would say: "The weatherman's promising rain for tomorrow." I stared up at him, not recognizing him, and felt my face flush with the embarrassment of being a public spectacle. After he drove on, I felt sure he meant to imply that someone from out of town, not a local group, planned this.

When I got home, the suitcases were packed. My wife's mother said people in town thought the effigy-hanging was the work of "outsiders." I told her I had no way of knowing but would certainly like to believe it.

April 7 Dallas

The *Star-Teleg ram* carried an excellent and accurate story as a follow-up to the effigy hanging. It made things clear, it clarified motives and it certainly lifted the entire matter above segregation and desegregation.

Yet we learned that they burned a cross just above our house at the Negro school, and that someone remarked they should have burned it on my land. I wish they had, I wish they had - it would have been far better than burning it at the school.

The Turners crowded us into their house. The relief to be there, surrounded by friends, away from the hostility and the threats of the bullies and the castraters, was so great that we were suddenly filled with exhaustion.

April 11

We returned to Mansfield, deciding to hide away no longer. The mail poured in, hearteningly favorable and moving. Most people in other areas, including the Deep South, understood, though the situation remained uncomfortable at home. Our townspeople wanted to “keep things peaceful” at all costs. They said I had “stirred things up.” This is laudable and tragic. I, too, say let us be peaceful; but the only way to do this is first to assure justice. By keeping “peaceful” in this instance, we end up consenting to the destruction of all peace - for so long as we condone injustice by a small but powerful group, we condone the destruction of all social stability, all real peace, all trust in man’s good intentions toward his fellow man.

June 19 Father's Day

There were six thousand letters to date and only nine of them were abusive. Many favorable letters came from Deep South states, from the whites. This confirmed my contention that the average Southern white is more properly disposed than he dares allow his neighbor to see, that he is more afraid of his fellow white racist than he is of the Negro.

Justice Bok sent me a copy of his controversial speech at Radcliffe. He put it clearly:

> I am an Angry Old man about racial segregation. I live in a city where twenty-five percent of the population is Negro and I doubt that the percentage is much higher, except in spots, in the eleven Civil War States. I am angry at being told I cannot understand the problem. I do not believe that it takes a genius to pierce to the heart of a situation to which Southern chivalry once gave, among other things, the mulatto. The cry about lack of understanding and the need for time to work things out are only excuses to do little or nothing about them, and for almost a hundred years this served the South very well. … With all of the pious talk against communism, the present conflict over integration is doing the work of the communists almost better than they can do it themselves. This is to our shame when we should be sharpening and perfecting our procedures … it is only a mixture of ignorance and conceit that leads one section of the country to assume that no human beings on earth but themselves can understand the conditions under which they live.
>
> I am annoyed by those who love mankind but are cruel and discourteous to people.

- Curtis Bok, Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, speech at Radcliffe College Commencement, 1960.

I worked all afternoon and then went home and took a cold shower. Returning to my office in the evening, the desolation of a little town on a frightfully hot Sunday struck me. And it struck me, too, that no one there forgets, no one there forgives. I ran the lines of disapproval every time I drove through town to my office at the edge of the woods. This afternoon the town had been deserted except for the loafers who stood around the filling station and the street corners. All of them eyed me with animosity. Teenage boys in their jeans lounged against building fronts. They stared. One of the town's citizens who had been cordial to me drove up and stopped beside me at the red light. I waved. He looked grimly away, not wanting the loungers to see him make a friendly gesture, not wanting them to carry tales. I smelled the sun-softened asphalt, smelled the summer odors of clover, swallowed the rebuff and drove on. But I found myself looking down the country lane that leads to the barn, checking to make certain no one's car blocked the path.

The lane was clear, but the neighbors were out in their yard. The woman stared hard at her feet. The husband lifted his head from weeding and glared at me as I drove past. I fixed my gaze on the sandy ruts and looked neither to right nor left. (I had tried nodding too many times.) In my rearview mirror, I saw them after I had passed, saw them stand like statues peering after me through the fog of pink dust raised by my wheels.

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It was late in the afternoon of a cloudy, humid day. My parents, unable to bear the hostility, had sold their home and all their furniture and left for Mexico where they hoped to find a new life. We, too, were going, since we had decided that it was too great an injustice to our children to remain.

But I felt I must remain a while longer, until the bullies had a chance to carry out their threats against me. I could not allow them to say they had "chased" me out. They had promised to fix me on July 15th, and now they said they would do it August 15th.

Across the pastures, the incredible vulgarity of highly amplified hillbilly music drifted from the café on the highway. I sat in the barren studio where I had worked so many years, emptied now of all except the table and the typewriter and the bed, stripped of its sheets, with only the mattress ticking staring up at the ceiling. Empty bookshelves surrounded me. A few yards away, my parents' house stood equally empty. I wandered back and forth from the barn to the house.

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I stayed on, and the lane leading to my barn office remained empty. They did not come for me.

I hired a Negro youth to come and help me clean up my parents' house so it would be spotless for the new owners. The youth knew me and had no reticence in talking since he was sure I was "one of them" so to speak. Both Negroes and whites have gained this certainty from the experiment - because I was a Negro for six weeks, I remained partly Negro or perhaps essentially Negro.

While we swept and burned old newspapers, we talked.

"Why do whites hate us - we don't hate them? he asked.

We had a long conversation during which he brought out the obvious fact that whites teach their children to call them "niggers." He said this happened to him all the time and that he would not even go into white neighborhoods because it sickened him to be called that. He said revealing things:

"Your children don't hate us, do they?"

"God, no," I said. "Children have to be taught that kind of filth. We'd never permit ours to learn it."

"Dr. Cook's like that. His little girl called me nigger and he told her if he ever heard her say that again he'd spank her till she couldn't sit down."

The Negro does not understand the white any more than the white understands the Negro. I was dismayed to see the extent to which this youth exaggerated - how could he do otherwise? - the feelings of the whites toward Negroes. He thought they all hated him.

The most distressing repercussion of this lack of communication has been the rise in racism among Negroes, justified to some extent,

but a grave symptom nonetheless. It only widens the gap that men of good will are trying desperately to bridge with understanding and compassion. It only strengthens the white racist's cause. The Negro who turns now, in the moment of near- realization of his liberties, and bares his fangs at a man's whiteness, makes the same tragic error the white racist has made.

And this is happening on a wider scale. Too many of the more militant leaders are preaching Negro superiority. I pray that the Negro will not miss his chance to rise to greatness, to build from the strength gained through his past suffering and, above all, to rise beyond vengeance.

If some spark does set the keg afire, it will be a senseless tragedy of ignorant against ignorant, injustice answering injustice - a holocaust that will drag down the innocent and right-thinking masses of human beings.

Then we will all pay for not having cried for justice long ago.

Epilogue 1976

What's Happened Since *Black Like Me*

The experiment that led to writing *Black Like Me* was done at the very end of 1959, before the first "freedom rides" or any other manifestation of national concern about racial injustice. It was undertaken to discover if America was involved in the practice of racism against black Americans. Most white Americans denied any taint of racism and really believed that in this land we judged every man by his qualities as a human individual. In those days, any mention of racism brought to the public's mind the Nazi suppression of Jewish people, the concentration camps, the gas chambers - and certainly, we protested, we were not like that.

If we could not accept our somewhat different practice of racist suppression of black Americans, how could we ever hope to correct it? Our experience with the Nazis had shown one thing: where racism is practiced, it damages the whole community, not just the victim group.

Were we racists or were we not? That was the important thing to discover. Black men told me that the only way a white man could hope to understand anything about this reality was to wake up some morning in a black man's skin. I decided to try this in order to test this one thing. In order to make the test, I would alter my pigment and shave my head, but change nothing else about myself. I would keep my clothing, my speech patterns, my credentials, and I would answer every question truthfully.

Therefore, if we did, as we claimed, judge each man by his quality as a human individual, my life as a black John Howard Griffin would not be greatly changed, since I was that same human individual, altered only in appearance.

If, on the other hand, we looked at men, saw the mark of pigment, applied all the false "racial and ethnic characteristics," then since I bore that mark, my life would be changed in ways I could not anticipate.

I learned within a very few hours that no one was judging me by my qualities as a human individual and everyone was judging me by my pigment. As soon as white men or women saw me, they automatically assumed I possessed a whole set of false characteristics (false not only to me but to all black men). They could not see me or any other black man as a human individual because they buried us under the garbage of their stereotyped view of us. They saw us as "different" from themselves in fundamental ways: we were irresponsible; we were different in our sexual morals; we were intellectually limited; we had a God-given sense of rhythm; we were lazy and happy-go-lucky; we loved watermelon and fried chicken. How could white men ever really know black men if on every contact the white man's stereotyped view of the black man got in the way? I never knew a black man who felt this stereotyped view fit him. Always, in every encounter even with "good whites," we had the feeling that the white person was not talking with us but with his image of us.

"But," white men would protest, "they really are like that. I've known hundreds of them and they're all the same." White men would claim black men were really happy; they liked it that way.

And in a sense, such white men had good evidence for these claims, because if black men did not, in those days, play the stereotyped role of the "good Negro," if he did not do his yessing and grinning and act out the stereotyped image, then he was immediately considered a "bad Negro," called "uppity, smart-alecky, arrogant," and he could lose his job, be attacked, driven away.

White society had everything sewed up. If you didn't grin and yes, you were in deep trouble. If you did, then you allowed white America to go right on believing in the stereotype.

People like Martin Luther King, they said, were just troublemakers and subversives. Whites told their black employees, and really believed it, that the NAACP and Martin Luther King were the black man's greatest enemies. They were offended by any suggestion of injustice. They claimed that they always treated black people wonderfully well and always would so long as black people "stayed

in their place." If you asked them what that "place" was, they could not really say, but every black man knew that place was right in the middle of the stereotype.

Often they would face the black employee with this direct question: "Aren't you happy with your situation? Don't I treat you good?" If the black man had any hopes of remaining employed, he had to plaster that smile all over his face and agree.

Once when I was employed at some menial job I noticed that one of the white middle-aged bosses kept looking at me and getting more and more irritated. I could not imagine what I was doing wrong. Certainly I was sad, and that sadness must have shown, for finally he yelled at me: "What's *eating* you, anyway?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Well, what're you so *sullen* about?" he said.

"Nothing," I repeated.

"Well, if you want to hang on to this job, you better show us some teeth."

And I did my grinning.

In those days, the deepest despair hung over the lives of black people, a sense of utter hopelessness, for it seemed that no one in this country knew - or if they knew, couldn't care less - about this hopeless situation.

Good whites - not the type that is overtly bigoted - urged us to "work, study, lift ourselves up by our bootstraps." They really thought that was the remedy. They did not realize that every time black men thought they had found a loophole in the closed society, a way to accomplish this, that loophole was quickly plugged by the consent of all white society. For example, we did not see WHITE ONLY signs on the doors of libraries (where we could find learning and books), but we knew we had better not try to enter one. We saw no WHITE ONLY signs on the doors of schools or universities, but we knew it was suicidal to try to enter one. Above all, that good advice sounded hollow to us because we knew that when men, even

educated men, judged you by your pigment, it didn't matter how much you had worked, studied, or lifted yourself up. The Ph.D. had to walk just as far to get food, water or rest- room facilities as the illiterate, and he could be turned away with the same base discourtesy.

So the predominant feeling was one of hopelessness and despair.

"That white man is not going to let you have anything," black people said.

With the beginning of the freedom rides, the sit-ins, the display of heroic courage and commitment on the part of many who engaged in these activities, and with the rallying around Martin Luther King's philosophy of nonviolent resistance, that feeling of despair began to change into hope. Someone did know. Someone did care. Even white men showed concern. White priests like the Markoe brothers and Father John LaFarge; Lillian Smith and others had long pioneered and suffered the fury of racist resentment. Newsmen like P.D. East and other white Southerners showed that the white man who advocated that this country live up to its promises to *all* citizens was no more free than any black man. Any white man who advocated justice in those days could be ruined by his white neighbors. This message did not get across to white America. Men kept thinking they were free and that these "rabble-rousers" were really getting what they deserved. Certainly many who had a sense of justice did not dare show it for fear of reprisals. So no one was free, and yet most lived under the delusion that they were free. Heaped on top of the economic reprisals and the dangers of physical reprisal was perhaps the most damaging reprisal of all - the deliberate character assassination that sprang into play the moment a man suggested that there ought to be equality among citizens, and this in a land where we claim equality as a first principle. How easy it was to destroy a man's good name and reputation by suggesting he was in some way subversive or by calling him a communist. This got so bad that concerned people would come to me and say: "I'd like to speak out, but if I do, my neighbors will call me a communist." It got so bad that Lillian Smith wrote: "It's high time

we stopped giving the communists credit for every decent, brave, considerate act" white men might show in regard to black men.

I think the general public has never understood the "special" kind of life that civil rights advocates had to lead in those years. Racists showed high ingenuity in developing schemes to destroy a man's reputation as a means of nullifying his work. For example, many civil rights advocates, white and black, traveled and lectured extensively. In the early days, a number of effective men were entrapped in situations that either damaged them personally or ruined their reputations. Those who were with lecture bureaus were particularly vulnerable. Anyone could write the lecture bureau for the travel schedule of its speakers. If a man made a long flight to fulfill a speaking engagement, the chances were at least fair that when he landed at the distant airport he might make use of the rest room. It would be enough to plant one or two men in the rest room and accuse him of some indecency. This happened to a Mississippi white attorney in a case that was given maximum publicity in white newspapers. He had to fly to Los Angeles for an appearance. His travel schedule was known. At the end of this flight he went to the men's rest room, and when he emerged, he was arrested because two men claimed he had indecently exposed himself. He was tried in absentia and found guilty in Mississippi. He was publicly labeled a pervert and his career in civil rights was effectively quashed.

Priests openly involved in civil rights advocacy were menaced with rumors that they were immorally involved with women. An Oklahoma priest told me that one day after Mass, when he had given communion to a lady, she met him at the door of the church, gave him a hate stare, and said, "How's your woman, Father?" Priests are accustomed to being called by people in all kinds of distress. Another priest in the South told me a lady called him in distress because she could not understand a certain passage from scripture and wanted to come right over and discuss it with him. He let her come, but when she made advances, he repudiated her and sent her away, fearing it was a scheme of racists to throw a "woman rap" at him.

When Father John Coffield became a public figure because he went into voluntary exile from his diocese in protest against the racial injustices condoned there, he was accepted into the Chicago archdiocese. We feared that he would be victimized by character assassins, perhaps even entrapped into this kind of “woman rap.” I went to Chicago to brief him on the precautions he must take now that he stood as a symbol for civil rights, warning him that he must not be alone with any woman, that he must always be able to account for his time so that no one could say he was at such and such a place at such and such a time. He and his host priests were quite dumfounded. When I saw that they were not really going to believe that men would go to such lengths to vilify Father Coffield, I called Dick Gregory, who happened to be at his home in Chicago. I told him my situation and said I felt Father Coffield would believe him if he would come over and add his warnings to mine. He came to the rectory and we sat up and talked with the priests until six in the morning. He, of course, knew about Father Coffield. He had heard the same rumors I had heard - that Father might be subjected to character assassination. Dick Gregory had already telephoned Chicago’s city officials and told them that if there was any attempt on the part of any racist group to smear Father Coffield, Chicago’s black citizens would block every freeway leading into the city and tie up Chicago until Father’s name was cleared.

We discussed this problem of character assassination and entrapment with Dr. King and Dick Gregory and Whitney Young and other men active in civil rights. We were advised by a black man in the government to take precautions. We should keep our travel schedules secret. We should avoid using public rest rooms unless some reliable person accompanied us, to serve as a witness in the event some plant might accuse us of some immoral act or gesture. We were advised never to get maneuvered into a situation where we were alone with any lady we did not know. In the bad days we were even advised to find some pretext for changing our hotel rooms as soon as we registered. Civil rights workers risked being harassed in their hotel rooms. One minister, shortly after arriving at his hotel,

answered a knock at his door and was beaten unconscious by two men wielding baseball bats. In my own case, if I stayed more than three days in any large city, I usually tried to change hotels or else move in with some black family. In one city in Louisiana where I lectured, I could not even stay in the city because all the lodging places had been threatened with bombings if they accepted me as a guest.

This kind of thing continued throughout the early and mid-sixties. We led strange, hidden lives. We were advocating one thing: that this country rid itself of the racism that prevented some citizens from living as fully functioning men and as a result dehumanized all men. We were advocating only that this country live up to its promises to all citizens. But since racism always hides under a respectable guise - usually the guise of patriotism and religion - a great many people loathed us for knocking holes in these respectable guises. It was clear that we would have to live always under threat. When we would get together - with Dick Gregory, Martin Luther King, Sarah Patton Boyle, P.D. East, or any of the hundreds of more or less public advocates of civil rights - we compared notes and discussed this. One thing was clear: we had to accept the fact that these principles were worth dying for, and that there were plenty of people who were willing to see us disappear. In one year we lost seven friends and colleagues in death, of whom only one died a natural death; the others were killed. Dr. King and Dick Gregory became almost fatalistic in accepting the fact that they were dead men and that it was only a matter of time before that fact became a reality. They and many, many others acted with a bravery and heroism almost incomprehensible to most men. They went into areas of extreme danger. This is possible occasionally, but it is almost impossible to keep it up. The human nervous system will not stand it.

I got a glimpse of it up close one day in Chicago when we learned that a black man had been found murdered in a town called Liberty, in Mississippi. In those days you could only get an “official version” of such events. No black person would talk to you long distance for

fear the operator was listening and would report the call. So the official version said simply that the victim, Mr. Louis Allen, had been found shot, but since he had not been involved in civil rights, it was apparently just an ordinary killing. We did not believe it, so we decided to go there together and see what black people had to say about this. In those days we worked such trips this way. We would fly into a nearby city - either Memphis or New Orleans. A Mississippi car, driven by black people, would pick us up and drive us to the area of trouble. We would get our answers as rapidly as possible and get gone.

But even as we were making our arrangements, the nervousness overwhelmed us. There was some flaw in the planning. We called our contact again from the airport in Chicago. Dick Gregory wanted to make sure the pickup car would have someone he knew. I heard him shout into the phone: “I’m not going to get in a car with anybody unless I know who he is!” By then we were both trembling. We were shaken with tremors of pure fear. When I mentioned this to Dick Gregory, he mumbled, “That’s what we call knee-knocking courage.” I suppose almost everyone in that kind of work had to learn a simple technique: to make our wills say “yes” even when our bodies and our nervous systems said “no.” It is possible to go places and to function even when you are frightened. We discovered, incidentally, that although Mr. Allen was not involved in civil rights, as the officials stated (as though that were a good enough reason for getting killed!), he had had the misfortune to witness a white man’s attack on a black man and had been forced to testify to that in a court hearing the Wednesday before the Saturday on which he was found shot.

In a sense we led absurd lives in those days of terrible tensions. We formed a kind of loose confederation, without organization, exchanging information, helping one another. I deliberately did not belong to any organization. All of us, blacks and whites, were more or less in touch with one another and at the same time pretty independent. If something occurred in an area where one of us might be, particularly if it involved an injustice done to a black

man, whichever of us was closest to it tried to find out what had really happened and tried to help, if possible. Because the Klan and Klan sympathizers were strong, we often stayed in the homes of brave black people.

Often when I was doing investigative work in the South, I would travel with my old friend, P.D. East, the white editor of *The Petal Paper*, one of the heroes of early resistance to racism in his southland. He was a comic genius who worked effectively by ridiculing the racists. He was broken, harassed, and impoverished because of this. But even in tragedy he was irrepressibly funny. One day we were driving through a particularly disturbed area of the South where the Klan was strong. We were very nervous for fear someone would recognize us. In those days, strange things happened. Police cars, for example, would simply get behind you and trail you so that you did not dare call on the person you intended to see for fear he would receive reprisals later. Filling stations, service stations, were particularly adept at spotting suspicious persons and reporting them to the police or highway patrol. The police could stop you on any pretense - you were going too fast, or you had broken some law - and question you and harass you. Since so many of the lawmen were racists, it could be a nerve-wracking experience. I forget where we were going that day, but we were driving through a beautiful forest on a good highway and I heard P.D. begin to curse under his breath. We were driving very carefully so as not to attract attention. I looked back and saw a police car, or perhaps a highway patrol car. In a moment the car began to flash its dome flasher. We had to stop.

“Let me do the talking,” P.D. growled.

“I won’t open my mouth,” I said.

We waited, almost paralyzed with fright. Both of us were extremely hated in that particular area.

The officer approached the driver’s window of the car and asked P.D. where we were going.

In a voice of humble cordiality, P.D. gave some response.

The officer replied with greater warmth, said we had made a turn back there without flashing the turning lights. Relieved that he apparently did not recognize us, we began testing the turning lights and found one of them did not work. He said he would not ticket us, but we should get it fixed at the next stop. P.D. thanked him profusely and we drove on down the highway, watching in the rearview mirror to see that the patrol car was not following. It turned and headed in the opposite direction and both of us heaved sighs of loud and profound relief.

"That was a close one, Griffin," P.D. said. "Did you see how cool I was handling him?" P.D. asked this brashly, in complete contrast to his mild and meek manner with the officer.

"You were great, P.D.," I said. "Let's hurry up and get out of this part of the country. The next one might recognize us." He accelerated slightly and we drove on in silence as I watched the tall trees flash past the car windows.

Suddenly P.D. exploded. "Why, that ignorant sonofa-bitch. That insulting, *ignorant* sonofabitch!"

"What're you talking about, P.D.?" I asked.

"Do you realize that ignorant bastard didn't even recognize us? Hell, Griffin, we're famous, and he didn't even recognize us. I'm insulted."

"You'd better thank God he didn't."

"Well, I do thank God he didn't," P.D. said, "but that doesn't make it any less insulting."

In spite of everything, however, those days of the early and mid-sixties were full of hope. The country seemed to be awakening to the depth of injustices suffered by black people. Hundreds of college students, white and black, poured into black areas to register black citizens for the vote. In areas outside the South, students on campuses were deeply concerned and picketed local businesses that continued the practice of discrimination. These events became a matter for world news coverage. The world watched and mourned

the bombings of Birmingham. The world watched, outraged and inspired by the events of Selma, enthralled by the Washington March. A major civil rights bill was passed in 1964, and if it was controversial, it at least nullified a lot of local discriminatory ordinances.

The great surge of concern was important but it was also deceptive. Many white civil rights advocates did not keep in close touch with the reality being lived by black Americans. For example, the noted Ralph McGill, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and editor of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, did a major article for *Look* magazine in which he stated that the civil rights battle had been won. It was all over. Only a few diehard bigots were left, he said. Everything was rosy.

I was in Atlanta when the article hit the newsstands. McGill had been highly respected by black people. I visited several of the black scholars in the universities that day, including Dr. Benjamin Mays and Dr. Samuel Williams. All who had seen the article were stunned, embittered, and outraged by McGill's totally unrealistic and misleading statements - stunned that a man of his impressive credentials could be so out of contact with truths that almost any black man could have told him.

The truth is that if things looked beautiful to whites sympathetic to the movement, this was a surface appearance. What lay beneath the surface was another matter. It is true that hope and determination now largely replaced the old despair and that was in itself a tremendous advance. But still the problems of daily living for the vast majority of black men had not changed. Black people were still fired from their jobs for daring to register. Economic discrimination was rampant all over the land. The black press covered many events and developments that were never mentioned in the white press. To get anything like a full picture, you had to read the black press. It was revealing to see how few whites did. Again and again, in lectures to universities with good social science departments where students were fired with enthusiasm for racial justice, I found that the school libraries, which took every

newspaper published here and in Europe, did not have any subscriptions to black newspapers, scholarly journals or magazines. We were already a land of two peoples (more, of course, but we are concerned with two here) possessing entirely different sets of information, and we were out of touch with one another.

The situation was doubly dangerous because we thought we were, finally, communicating. We were not, of course, because even well-disposed white men tended to be turned off and affronted if black men told them truths that offended their prejudices. For years it was my embarrassing task to sit in on meetings of whites and blacks, to serve one ridiculous but necessary function: I knew, and every black man there knew, that I, as a man now white once again, could say the things that needed saying but would be rejected if black men said them. In city after city we had these meetings to attempt to communicate, and in each one my function was to say those things that the black man knew much better than I could hope to know, but could not communicate as yet for the simple reason that white men could not tolerate hearing them from a black man's mouth. Dick Gregory and I once made an experiment with this. We agreed to say essentially the same things to a lecture audience at the same school. I got an ovation for "talking straight." He got uncomfortable silence for saying the same things.

Another time, this was eloquently illustrated in a small community where there had been much tension between Protestants and Catholics. A professor of Bible at a local college persuaded the two groups to get together and sponsor a lecture by me. I went in and lectured precisely on these problems of communication. I went into it in great detail. The audience, as always, thought I was talking about somewhere else and was sure it was "different" there. At the end I got a prolonged standing ovation.

Afterward I went to a reception for the whites who had promoted the lecture and one black guest. We were introduced. I was told in his presence just how proud the community was of its black industrial psychologist and how he had "gained acceptance" in the most perfect way. The professor of Bible who had initiated the

project was jubilant. He remarked loudly what a great success it was and how marvelous that the Protestants and Catholics had finally worked together to make it a success.

“I view this as a historic night,” he announced. Then turning to the black industrial psychologist, he asked, “Don’t you see this night as a historic turning point for this community?”

The black doctor, in a voice of perfect calm, replied, “Frankly, I’m not too excited.”

The Bible professor’s face clouded, and he said, “What do you mean?”

The doctor said, “It’s true that I have a good job in this town, and I seem to be respected, and I am certainly paid a wage commensurate with my skills. *But* - so long as I have to house my wife and children in a town twenty miles away because I can’t buy, rent, lease or build a home here, don’t expect me to get too excited over your ‘historic turning points.’ ”

I watched, fascinated, as the group of whites began to growl and the professor of Bible reddened with anger. “Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” he said. “If you’re going to be that cynical, I don’t see how you can expect us to do anything for you.”

I heard a local minister mumble to a lady standing be-side him. “I knew there’d be trouble if we invited that black man. …”

The Bible professor lost most of his self-control. He battered at the lack of graciousness and courtesy that he perceived in the black doctor. The doctor remained calm, lethal in his replies, unshaken.

I watched until the professor was almost screaming his anger and then stepped in. “Isn’t this remarkable?” I said. “Here you give me a standing ovation for telling you this same kind of truth. Now you have a black man, far more knowledgeable than I could be, who is honoring you with a truth, and you are furious with him. You will hear it from me and applaud me for saying it, but you can’t stand it yet from him.”

The point was finally made, but I doubt if it would ever have been made if that doctor had not been invited and had not spoken up.

Almost constantly and almost everywhere black men were being faced with this kind of duality. Whites were saying the right things, showing deep concern over injustices, expressing determination to resolve the problems of racism, but never really consulting with black people as equals. The vast difference between what this country was saying and apparently believing, and what the black man was experiencing, was embittering.

As a person who lived almost constantly in both communities, I could foresee nothing but trouble. Frequently, in cities where "racial difficulties" surfaced, I was called in by perfectly sincere community leaders, usually mayors or college presidents or city council members. They wanted me to study their situation and report to them on it. First I would have meetings and be briefed by white men, often by trained white social scientists. Then I would be taken into the black community, where again I would be briefed by black leaders and sometimes by black social scientists. In no city did these two briefings coincide. In St. Louis, Rochester, Detroit, Kansas City, Los Angeles, and many others this occurred. In every city there was this different view of the same situation by perfectly sincere men. I always pointed out the irony in this: I was being called into an area I did not really know. Why not ask local black leaders directly the kind of questions the cities were asking me? After the first difficulties in Rochester, New York, I was asked to consult with community leaders. I went and spoke for quite a long time. The leaders were concerned and sincere men. The first question one of them asked after I talked was: "Well, Mr. Griffin, what is the first thing we should do now?" I told him that I had been asked to come and consult with community leaders, and yet I was sitting in a room full of white men. The white man who had asked the question slapped his forehead in real chagrin. "It never occurred to me to ask any of them," he said apologetically.

“So you see what’s happening,” I said. “Black men are going to know about this meeting. I have already consulted with many black men locally because that’s the way I get my information. See how it looks from their point of view. You have brought me a long distance to consult with community leaders about a problem that profoundly involves black men in this community, and yet no black man was invited.” I warned them that this kind of thing was interpreted by black men as part of the hopeless lack of understanding on the part of white men and that they must be careful to invite the black people considered leaders, not just a few black men that the business and community leadership considered leaders.

Later, I got a call from one of the white leaders who asked: “How do we go about finding black leaders whom the black people would respect as leaders?”

“Ask black people - ask a lot of black people,” I advised.

This kind of pattern existed almost everywhere. I would be called in. Often in the presence of local black men whites would ask me questions that should have been addressed to the black men present. They knew the community. I didn’t. Always this was an affront to black men, one of the many affronts that white men apparently could not perceive. What it really told black men was that we had better buckle down and garner the superior problem- solving abilities of white men to get this thing settled. This is one of the attitudes that led black men to believe that racism was so deeply ingrained in the white man there was really no hope of his ever understanding. This was an attitude, too, which did not inspire one bit of confidence in black men who saw problems affecting their very lives being handled by white men who did not even consult with the black men.

So, while on the surface, things looked good and promising to white men, and I was always being urged to admit that great “progress” has been made, resentment grew among black people, and quite particularly among educated black people.

Black spokesmen like Dr. King, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, James Farmer, Dick Gregory, Stokely Carmichael and many others warned that the inner cities were becoming powder kegs and would certainly explode. In every city I was brought in to study (and often I returned again and again), I would live in the black ghetto with black families. I would come out and give the most detailed analysis to the whole city and to community leaders, warning them that black resentments and frustrations were explosive and that one day some little insignificant event would occur and produce an explosion that would astound the whole community.

In every city the local community leaders who had brought me in nevertheless felt that they lived there and knew better and said that I was being "unduly pessimistic." In some cities I was called "unduly pessimistic" only weeks before the explosions occurred. And when those cities exploded into turmoil, men who had not believed me would telephone to tell me I had been right and they had been wrong.

"I wish I had been wrong," was all I could answer.

One of the strange things was the resentment people showed when you gave such warnings. The warnings were seen as threats. Often I was accused, as were even Dr. King and Dick Gregory, of *advocating* violence. This is like accusing a doctor of advocating the very cancer he is trying to prevent from spreading. But somehow people could not face what appeared inevitable, and they sought to evade it by viewing these warnings as threats.

And when the matches were tossed and the powder kegs began to explode in 1967, men hid behind the belief that it was all some massive subversive plot against this nation. The Kerner Commission was established and asked to investigate. Its report, which was a courageous one under the circumstances, showed that matches had indeed been tossed and powder kegs had exploded - and that these were individual explosions, not connected through any discernible subversive plotting on the part of black men. The Commission report warned that massive displays of so-called riot control was one of the deepest sources of resentment and could trigger off more

riots. The report was an obvious disappointment to some of our leaders, who had really counted on it to reveal massive subversion, so they simply cast its recommendations aside with the remark: “The report blamed everyone but the rioters.” Black spokesmen countered by saying that to blame the rioters would be like blaming the powder keg that exploded.

This was perhaps the most terrible time in modern history insofar as civil rights were concerned in this land. Black people began to believe in greater numbers that this country was really moving toward genocide, and from the point of view of black America, the evidence was alarming. That year, in President Johnson’s State of the Union message, his appeals for social justice and civil rights met with absolute silence from Congress - not a single lone handclap of approval broke that silence. His appeal for saving the California redwood trees, which followed immediately, got an ovation of wild, handclapping approval from Congress. The message was clear and desolating. It showed this country’s priorities and mood. It said to every black man: “Save the redwood forests and to hell with you.”

In my dismay, I wired the President:

“AM TIRED OF BEING A LOSER. FROM NOW ON I’M GOING TO FORGET HUMANITY AND WORK FOR THE TREES.”

The patterns of the exploding inner cities began to emerge. From the black man’s viewpoint it often looked as though black people were being driven to flare up which would then justify suppression by white men on the grounds of “self-defense.”

In those terrible days of open conflict, I was being taken into the inner cities, usually by black militants, as an observer. I hardly ever opened my mouth. The day was past when black people wanted any advice from white men. I was taken in simply to view it from the inside, so that in the event we did come to open genocidal conflict, there would be someone to give another view of history. And another view I got. I attended enraged meetings where black men, women, children, students discussed their experiences. Everyone

was saying the turmoil was the work of young blacks. That was not true. Middle-aged and elderly black people attended those meetings everywhere, and burned with rage. In Wichita, Kansas, I heard a young college student say the kinds of things that were being said in all the cities. He recounted an injustice done him in that community. He showed wounds where he had been beaten by white men.

"We've tried everything *decent*," he said loudly.

"Yes," the audience responded. "Yes. Who can doubt that?"

"We asked for justice and they fed us committees," he shouted.

"Yes."

"They've even got committees to decide how much self-determination we're going to have."

"Take ten!" someone shouted from the back of the room.

"Take ten!" a few responded.

After he had spoken, the young man came over to my chair, almost sobbing with frustration. He looked into my eyes with eyes that were wild with anguish and whispered while we shook hands, "When you go back, will you do me a favor?"

"Yes, if I can," I said.

"When you go back out there, will you tell your friend, Jesus Christ, and your friend, Martin Luther King - '*shit*!'" He spat out the word with the deepest despair I have ever heard in a human voice.

On the streets, young black men would call out, "Take ten!" to one another. Whites thought they were talking about a ten- minute coffee break. What they were really saying was that this country was moving toward the destruction of black people, and since the proportion was ten whites to every black, then black men should take ten white lives for every black life taken by white men.

Certainly the news reports and coverage, given largely by white interpreters outside the ghettos and widely and sincerely believed by horrified whites, had no credibility within the ghettos because they did not coincide with what black men were experiencing; and

in the heat of emotions, few white men could penetrate the troubled areas, and the media had not yet hired many black reporters who could have given a more balanced view.

As black men began to compare notes with me around the country, a strange pattern began to emerge. If it did not hold true for all the exploding communities, it held true for many of them. In these, someone in a high place - the mayor, chief of police, or other official - would receive information that a neighboring city was already in flames and that carloads of armed black men were coming to attack this city. This happened in Cedar Rapids when Des Moines was allegedly in flames. It happened in Ardmore, Oklahoma, and in Fort Worth, Texas, when it was alleged that Oklahoma City was in flames and carloads were converging on those cities. It happened in Reno and other western cities, when Oakland, California, was supposed to be in flames. It happened in Roanoke when Richmond, Virginia, was supposed to be in flames. And in many other communities.

In no instance were these reports true or were any of these cities actually in flames. But the result was immediate action on the part of white officials. They got in contact with important community and industrial leaders. Riot control measures were ordered into effect. Civilians armed themselves for the coming attack and stationed themselves at strategic points. In most cases many whites became aware of the “danger” and no local black person had any idea what was going on, though I recall one case where the rumor spread through a West Coast community and a white official called a young black teacher with whom he was friendly. He told the black teacher about the report and asked him to look around the neighborhood and see if anything suspicious was going on - any preparations for battle. The young black man went and looked and returned to the phone. “It looks pretty sinister,” he said. “There’s a lady across the street putting her baby in the stroller, and down the block I saw a man mowing his lawn. You’d better take proper precautions.”

In most cases, however, black people were quite unaware that a storm was brewing. Then, when the riot controls had been put into effect, and a nervous white population was waiting, it took little to set it off. In Wichita, a few white youths drove down into the black area and simply fired off guns. This brought black people out of their houses; in rage at seeing the harassment, they hurled stones or sticks at a passing car, and the battle was on. In that particular instance the police arrested the five whites who were armed and twelve young black men who had only rocks and sticks. All were jailed. The next morning, all were released on bail, but the bail set for the five armed whites was only one-fifth the amount set for the twelve unarmed black students. This kind of overt inequity in bonding spread its message to the black community. And when no whites protested, or even seemed to find it unjust, black people saw that as highly significant, too.

In other cities, it was enough to throw rocks on the porches of black people to bring them out and for the confrontation and the madness to occur.

Some cities were saved. Variants of this rumor-mongering set off other cities.

Who was doing this? I don't suppose anyone really knows. White people were sure it was traveling black agitators who came in and exploded the community from within. Black people viewed this as an open lie, since the explosions occurred from outside the ghettos; also they were not seeing any "traveling black agitators," at least until after the explosions had happened. And certainly no one had to come in and stir up resentments among black people in 1967 - these resentments were open and raw already.

In not a single one of these cities where the hundreds of carloads of armed blacks were supposed to be converging did any of these cars show up. How did it happen, black people asked, that white people did not notice this and repudiate the pattern of rumor? In Davenport, Iowa, officials were informed that a busload of armed black men was coming in from Washing-ton. The police alerted civic leaders and went to meet the bus. There was indeed a busload of

black people from Washington, but they were not armed. They were teachers on tour.

Again, we had the duality of viewpoint regarding who was actually implementing these patterns of tension, rumor and explosion. Black people were absolutely certain it was not black people, and it was generally feared it might be some white racist group and therefore another symptom of genocidal manipulation. I traveled from city to city in those days, and the view from within the ghettos was terrible and terrifying. While white people in the periphery were arming themselves against the day when they would have to defend themselves from attack by blacks (and really believed someone was fomenting a racial war in which black people would rise up and attack them), black people mostly without arms huddled inside the ghettos feeling that they were surrounded by armed whites. Black parents tried to keep a closer watch on their children. Black men spoke of the old "licensed bloodlust" which allowed racists to do anything to black people and get away with it.

Local white leadership was discredited in the eyes of black people, too, by their insistence on asking me, when we met to discuss the local events, usually with black people, if I had discovered who was the traveling black agitator who had come in and stirred up their "good black people." And had I discovered if there were any communists behind the disruptions? Black people could not believe local white officials, who surely must be aware of local conditions, could really think the explosion had been caused by "outside agitators" or communists. And the white officials were viewed as completely insincere. Sadly enough, I knew the white officials really and sincerely did believe the causes lay elsewhere than in their own backyards.

During the Miami Republican convention of 1968, because the media had black reporters who could get into the black area even in crisis times, this whole nation saw the making of a riot unfold before them on TV screens. They saw the unwarranted police raids on black political caucuses because these caucuses refused to allow white reporters. They saw a curfew that was ordered in the

afternoon when most black people were at work or did not have their radios on. They saw that curfew really being made known for the first time to most black people that evening when law enforcement men rolled into the black areas, unleashed a cloud of tear gas and only then announced on their portable speakers that a 6 P.M. curfew had been ordered and all people should return to their homes and stay inside. After that series of provocations, the city exploded into a riot. The country saw it, got a good and expert report on it. The commentators even mentioned the fact that it was very hot and the people were cooling themselves outdoors, since there was little or no air-conditioning in the dwellings of that part of the city. And yet, within hours, one of the state's top officials blandly announced that they were looking for the communists and black outside agitators who had caused it. Presumably they never found them. Black people who had witnessed this all over the country could only despair at the gullibility of white people who, seeing all this, swallowed the old line that it was caused by communists and black agitators.

Three weeks before the assassination of Martin Luther King, I met on the West Coast with a group of black leaders to compare notes. Almost simultaneously, many black people had become convinced that every time a black community was goaded into such an explosion, it served only the cause of racists and brought us closer to a genocidal situation. The word went out not to let racists goad the communities into flare-ups. This is certainly one of the reasons why Dr. King's murder did not unleash massive violence, as might have been anticipated. There were, of course, scattered pockets of retaliatory violence in some of the Eastern cities and Washington, D.C., but it was not the all-out race war that it could have been.

What reconciliation was possible then? If whites looked at blacks with distrust, it was nothing compared to the vast distrust with which blacks regarded whites.

Almost ironically, the person of Martin Luther King in life and in death became the touchstone for a whole new evaluation among

black thinkers. This evaluation led to alternatives to violent confrontation. So, in a bizarre sense, Dr. King, who had seemed so defeated and who had died without much hope that his philosophy of nonviolent resistance had accomplished anything, became the mainspring for a whole new way of thinking among black people and, in the long run, averted violent head-on collision between the citizens of this country. As a result of this new thinking, the "take ten!" call faded. Black men began to see other ways out. A whole new dynamism was put into play at the time of Dr. King's martyrdom.

Up until that time black thinking had been focused on the dream of an integrated society as the ultimate solution to discrimination and racial injustice. It was a dream held also by many whites, a dream for which many whites and blacks had already died. This dream was so deep, so cherished, and seemed to be such an unqualified good that no one really questioned it. It took men of great mental toughness to begin to ask if that dream had not carried in its wake certain weaknesses for the black American. When this painful line of thought was opened up, it became apparent that at least some of that dream had kept black men weak. For example, if a black man set up a business, he might very well hear his black potential clients say: "After all this struggle for integration, I'm not going to self-segregate," and refuse to patronize his business.

Also, it was generally believed, though the belief was fading, that most "good whites" lived in the North and most "bad whites" lived in the South. Certainly many Northern cities deplored what was going on in the South. But when Martin Luther King, who had been so praised in the North for the work he did in the South, came to work in the cities of the North, the very officials who had praised him sometimes led opposition to his work locally. This revealed to black people that there was no basic difference between attitudes in the North and South. A white-imposed separation had always existed in both areas. Dr. King's trips into the North showed that even in the friendliest cities there would always rise up out of the local community sufficient opposition to prevent bridging this

separation. It became bitterly apparent that this separation was going to go on existing into the foreseeable future.

What then? Black leaders and thinkers began to stand back and review the situation. Their conclusions were harsh. The old dream, and the constant hope for one solution - that of an integrated society - had not worked and had little chance of working now. Black people were jammed together in ghettos and were going to have to stay there. All the apparent progress had not changed the problems of black people living in the ghettos of this land. Black men were still not able to function as men, as leaders of their households, as self-determining, self-respecting human individuals. What were the possible alternatives to these exhausting and violent cycles of hopes built up and then dashed through the moods of white society?

Black leaders pondered. They must find the genius to turn a seemingly hopeless situation into an advantageous one. The first step was to accept the realities of the situation and act on them rather than on some nebulous dream of a future when all men would come to the realization that racial justice was for the good of all society, not just for the good of the oppressed.

Once viewed from this perspective, some startling facts became clear. Black thinkers, discarding the old dream, began to expose the weaknesses that had been built into the system. The first of these weaknesses was called “fragmented individualism” by the philosophers. As soon as it was defined, it was understood by black people and recognized. What fragmented individualism really meant was what happened to a black man who tried to make it in this society: in order to succeed, he had to become an imitation white man - dress white, talk white, think white, express the values of middle-class white culture (at least when he was in the presence of white men). Implied in all this was the hiding, the denial, of his selfhood, his negritude, his culture, as though they were somehow shameful. If he succeeded, he was an alienated marginal man - alienated from the strength of his culture and from fellow black men, and never able, of course, to become that imitation white man because he bore the pigment that made the white man view him as

intrinsically other. The instant the term fragmented individualism was understood, it was completely understood by black men who had lived it in all its nuances. And as soon as it was understood, black men could do something positive to counter it. The “brother” and “sister” concept swept in. Black people deliberately stopped trying to imitate white men in dress, speech, and etiquette. Black men reversed the weaknesses of fragmented individualism by studying black history, developing black pride, even using words like “black” which had been oppressive before, hammering them home until they stood for the symbol of the New Black and became beautiful.

Black thinkers spoke of turning the ghettos into gardens, taking over their own schools, building a “nation within a nation.”

They pointed out the economic weaknesses of the old system. Most businesses in black areas were owned by white men, particularly the big chain grocery stores. Black people were shown that their dollars lost strength when spent in those stores because the profits went into white banks, which would not discriminate against black people for TV and car loans, but would discriminate against them for small-business or housing loans. With this understanding, black people in Chicago began to make the rounds of such stores, saying in effect that if the stores expected to sell another leaf of lettuce to black people, the stores had to hire black personnel, including black people at management level; and furthermore, they had to bank the proceeds of that particular ghetto operation in black banks which would not discriminate against black people in loans. The stores had to comply, and this was so successful in Chicago that the techniques spread across the country.

At more personal levels, it began to be understood, and was then quickly understood, that black society must work to salvage the black male child. Always before there had been concern for the black girl child. It was now pointed out that the black male child, even in a black school using white textbooks, could early come to the conclusion that all the heroes in history were white men. Furthermore, with the exception of nationally known black civil

rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, and others, the black male child frequently saw the adult black male as ineffectual and defeated. The old picture of the white man leading the black man by the hand toward the solution to his problems again gave the black male child a view of the adult black male as something not worth becoming, and killed his spirit and his will to become an adult, problem-solving individual. This perception swept the nation. Black parents began to demand changes in textbooks and to demand that black people be visibly involved in the solutions to all problems that concerned them. A few white men who had worked long and hard in civil rights saw the immense importance of this new perception. Men like Saul Alinsky and Father James Groppi and others, who were regarded as heroes of the civil rights movement, began to fade from public view, although continuing to work privately. They felt, as many blacks now felt, that for the sake of that black male child, black men should be seen as the problem-solvers and leaders, and that whites should stay out of the spotlight.

Some whites, who had never really understood, were offended by this sudden death of their role as the "good white leading the poor black out of the jungle." Many of these were among the saddest people of our time, good-hearted whites who had dedicated themselves to helping black people become imitation whites, to "bringing them up to our level," without ever realizing what a deep insult this attitude can be.

White perception of these rapid changes in black concepts lagged. Whites, in general, could not keep up with the progress in black thinking. It was fascinating and tragic to see so many whites who had given long years to civil rights work suddenly excluded from the thinking of black men. Black students were particularly aware that they had to give the black child a view of black men standing on their own, and to erase all hints of the old view of being led by whites. College students formed black student unions and excluded white students. Few white students understood. White college students, after all, had been one of the great bulwarks in the battle

for racial justice, and many had dedicated themselves heroically to this cause. But part of that incipient racism had always led whites to assume the leadership positions and perpetuated the view that whites rather than blacks were the heroes of the movement. Really sincere and informed whites were thanked for what they had done and advised to go and work in their own communities, to combat the racism there which could ultimately be as oppressive to nonracist whites as to blacks. Some did this and continue to do it, though it is perhaps more onerous than working with blacks.

The same principle held in black universities, where students demanded more and more black teachers. White professors who had virtually dedicated their lives and their academic careers as historians, anthropologists, sociologists, to the problems of racism and its cures, thinking they did this for the good of the oppressed victims of racism (and often suffering social and academic insults as a result), were asked to leave schools in favor of black teachers. Some of them turned very bitter.

Some who were eminent authorities in their disciplines, and were recognized as such by black authorities in the same disciplines, were told by students that their work was not relevant because they were not black. To have one's life's work dismissed in such a frivolous manner by people who had never yet studied it was a severe insult. One elderly scholar who had been a thundering advocate of civil rights now speaks of "those black punks." Another, a sociologist, still involved in the study of discrimination in medicine and medical schools, recently told a professor at a California medical school who was proud of the achievement of black medical students there, "Well, I hope when you get sick you call one of *them*."

Such men, deeply offended to be excluded from participation with black men in the solutions to the problems of racism, sometimes began to look for symptoms of inferiority as a means of self-defense. We are seeing a recrudescence of these contentions by scientists, even to the recent suggestion that men with lower IQs (by white-oriented tests) be paid to have vasectomies - one thousand dollars for each point lower than 100, so that a man with an IQ of 90 would

get ten thousand dollars to have himself sterilized. This has been viewed as another example of genocidal thinking.

All of this is part of the current scene. Some people call it polarization, and many of us, white and black, still remember the days of the early and mid-sixties when we were all working together, singing “We Shall Overcome” and thinking that success was just around the corner.

But now, though we can still bungle into fratricide, there is really more hope than in the past. In the past, hope was based on the moods of the majority - a fragile and slippery basis. That is gone now, and a realism - harsh, full of contradictions - has replaced it as something more solid on which to build, a basis which says that black people will continue to move toward being fully functioning and self-determining people. All this is irreversible.

Polarization. Separation. No one has wanted this, white or black. It has come because the things we dreamed of did not materialize. Many still hold the old dreams even while accepting today’s realities.

A couple of years ago I was seated in an auditorium in Detroit where Reverend Cleage was explaining to a conference of priests that what they called “black separatists” were in reality men who recognized the implacability of a white-imposed separation.

Afterward, one of the priests got up and asked: “But aren’t you advocating an un-Christian way - the way of accepting as a reality this white-imposed separation? You are a minister. Are not all of us who are ministers obligated to bring men together in love?”

“Yes,” Reverend Cleage said. “And because you have not preached that long enough and loudly enough, we are faced with accepting the separation.”

Eventually, some black thinkers believe, this “separation” may be the shortest route to an authentic communication at some future date when blacks and whites can enter into encounters in which

they truly speak as equals and in which the white man will no longer load every phrase with unconscious suggestions that he has something to “concede” to black men or that he wants to help black men “overcome” their blackness.

Beyond *Otherness* 1979

In ***Black Like Me***, I tried to establish one simple fact, which was to reveal the insanity of a situation where a man is judged by his skin color, by his philosophical "accident" - rather than by who he is in his humanity.

I think I proved that, because as a white man I could go anywhere freely; but as a black man I was restricted by segregation laws and Southern white customs. I was judged entirely by my pigmentation and not by my qualities as a human individual.

This simple fact was indisputable, yet many whites did not seem to comprehend this, or were unwilling to accept the truth, or flatly denied it. My experience as a "Negro" merely substantiated an experiential truth known by all black people and all persons of color universally - that white majority cultures discriminate against minorities solely on the basis of skin color.

This system of discrimination, an inculcated double standard, may vary in content from culture to culture, but it is always unjust. There are thousands of kinds of injustice but there is only one kind of justice - equal justice for all. To call for a little more justice, or a moderately gradual sort of justice, is to call for no justice. That is a simple truth.

And there is another simple truth: Humanity does not differ in any profound way; there are *not* essentially different species of human beings. If we could only put ourselves in the shoes of others to see how we would react, then we might become aware of the injustice of discrimination and the tragic inhumanity of every kind of prejudice.

Having recognized the depths of my own prejudices when I first saw my black face in the mirror, I was grateful to discover that within a week as a black man the old wounds were healed and all the emotional prejudice was gone. It had disappeared for the simple reason that I was staying in the homes of black families and I was experiencing at the emotional level, for the first time in thirty-nine

years, what I had known intellectually for a long time. I was seeing that in families everything is the same for all people.

This was revealed in conversations about what to have for supper and how to pay the bills; about which child should help with the dishes and which should clear the table. It was revealed in the most obvious ways in which people in all families relate with each other. It was revealed in sitting with black parents and seeing that they responded to frustration as all human parents do. I was experiencing all this as a *human parent* and it was exactly as I experienced my own children.

The emotional garbage I had carried all of those years - the prejudice and the denial, the shame and the guilt - was dissolved by understanding that the *Other* is not other at all.

All human beings face the same fundamental problems of loving and of suffering, of striving toward human aspirations for themselves and their children, of simply being and inevitably dying. These are the basic truths in all people, the common denominators of all cultures and all races and all ethnic categories.

In reality, the Us-and-Them or I-and-Thou dichotomies do not exist. There is only one universal *We* - one human family united by the capacity to feel compassion and to demand equal justice for all.

I believe that before we can truly dialogue with one another we must first perceive intellectually, and then at the profoundest emotional level, that there is no *Other* - that the *Other* is simply *Oneself* in all the significant essentials.

This alone is the key that can unlock the prison of culture. It will neutralize the poisons of the stereotype that allow men to go on benevolently justifying their abuses against humanity.

Afterword

to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Black Like Me*

(2011)

by Robert Bonazzi

Fearlessness is the first requisite of a spiritual life.
Cowards can never be moral.

—Mohandas Gandhi

Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were,
what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really
happening when your eyes were looking through?
And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower
frequencies, I speak for you?

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Fifty years ago John Howard Griffin embarked upon his 1959 journey through the Deep South disguised as a Negro. He risked a bold experiment based upon a simple but provocative premise never before tested. His intention was to experience daily life as a black laborer and to keep a journal with absolute truthfulness, even if his discoveries proved to be prejudicial, embarrassing or naive. His honesty was tested the very first time he looked at the mirror to examine his disguise. There he perceived "the face and shoulders of a stranger—a fierce, bald, very dark Negro" glaring back at him.

This powerful passage from *Black Like Me* reads like a loss of identity scene in a modern literary novel, but it was not fiction. Within that illuminated instant, his sense of self—physical, mental, emotional—had been thrown into chaos. But who had glared at

whom? Was he the dark face reflected in the glass or the white consciousness reflecting upon it? Soon he realized he was both "the observing one and the one who panicked…" Griffin had projected his deepest fears onto the mirror, causing him to deny the truth of what he had witnessed. The emotional prejudice that intellect had long rationalized was exposed by his unexpected reaction of antipathy. "The worst of it was that I could feel no companionship for this new person. I did not like the way he looked," he writes. "But the thing was done and there was no possibility of turning back."

The stranger in the mirror was none other than the *Other*—that threatening mask of the stereotype that every culture affixes upon the face of every other culture. Griffin had encountered the *Other*-as-Self, coming face-to-face with his own unconscious racism. Initially he denied the truth he had witnessed, rationalizing it as the shock of recognition—even though it was his *lack* of recognition that truly startled him. However, from that transforming encounter emerged a unique double perspective, perceiving clearly the bias projected on his darkened skin by whites and the reality of racism known by Negroes. While he could never plumb the depths of experience that only black people can know, he was exposed for several weeks to the insane hatred of racial discrimination. Griffin delivered over 1,200 lectures to mostly-white student audiences. He encouraged them to repudiate the bigotry of earlier generations and envisioned in them the hope of healing the white community and the future of a peaceful, desegregated society. The core concept in Griffin's writings about racism—that members of dominant groups tend to view minorities, because they *seem different* in some extrinsic way, as *intrinsically other*, and "as merely underdeveloped versions of their own imprisoning culture"—was intuited in *Black Like Me* and articulated in a seminal essay, "The Intrinsic Other" (1966).

In that essay Griffin examines this inculcated attitude and clarifies the fallacies inherent in the racist viewpoint. "One of the characteristics of our expression of such attitudes is that they are often perfectly natural to the speaker and unnatural to the hearer.

They reveal in the speaker the falsity of viewing others as intrinsically *Other*, intrinsically different as men. This intrinsic difference always implies some degree of inferiority."

Prejudices are taught directly or indirectly by elders but we are all submerged in the inculcation process. This unconscious environment of communication in which we are imprisoned blinds our perceptions to institutionalized racism. We tend to deny that racism exists in this new century, but our denial perpetuates the systemic process. "Implicit in this process," Griffin writes, "is a consent to racism." He cites the Irish jurist Edmund Burke for providing the "touchstone of this error when he said: 'I know of no way to draw up an indictment against a whole people.' Racism begins when we draw up an indictment against a whole people merely by considering them as a whole underdeveloped versions of ourselves, by perpetuating the blindness of the stereotype."

After the publication of *Black Like Me* in 1961, Griffin was asked the same question persistently: Why had he done such a thing? He thought the question irrelevant, pointing out that it was a question black people *never* asked. Nonetheless, he attempted to answer it by saying: "If I could take on the skin of a black man, live whatever might happen and then share that experience with others, perhaps at the level of shared human experience, we might come to some understanding that was not possible at the level of pure reason."

But the real answer, never an easy answer, must be tracked along the path of events that forced him to confront his own cultural conditioning. Griffin had grown up in Dallas, Texas, which was as segregated as the Deep South, and where the dominant white culture cast black people into *Otherness*. He characterized his childhood as "Southern in the old sense, the terrible sense. We were not rich but not poor either; we were genteel Southerners, and I was taught the whole mythology of race."

As a student he had excelled in the sciences but felt under-challenged by the American educational system that stifled rapid advancement. Searching for greater challenges, he responded to a newspaper advertisement for a private boys' school in France,

saying he would sweep floors to earn his keep. To his amazement, six weeks later he was offered a scholarship to the Lycée Descartes in Tours. Although he spoke no French, and his reluctant parents could afford only one-way passage and a small monthly stipend, he sailed for Europe at the age of fifteen, in 1935.

Leaving for Europe, where he would encounter different cultures, initiated profound changes over the next five years. He recalled being pleased to see African students in classes, but became indignant when they sat at the same table for lunch. He asked why and his French friends immediately responded: “Why Not?” The teenager was stunned and embarrassed to realize that he had never asked that question. While a “classical education” had expanded his knowledge and consciousness, his unconscious racism persisted.

After graduating from the lycée, he attended Medical School at Tours (also on scholarship) and attended some literature courses at the University of Poitier’s campus at Tours. Two years later, he became an graduate assistant to Dr. Pierre Fromenty, Director of the Asylum at Tours. But during the German occupation the director was conscripted into the French medical corps and the American, who could not be conscripted, was left in charge of 1200 patients, along with a nursing order of Catholic nuns. Soon after he joined fellow students in the underground resistance, and the asylum became a safe house where wounded soldiers got treatment.

The underground also gave temporary sanctuary to Jewish families from Germany, Belgium and France, in the alley boarding houses nearby, where Griffin heard parents, realizing that they would be shipped to concentration camps eventually, plead with him to take their children to safety. He helped smuggle children under the age of fifteen in the asylum ambulance—disguised as mental patients in straitjackets—out of Tours to the countryside, where other teams moved them on to England. In 1940, when the underground intercepted the Gestapo’s death list that included Griffin’s name, he was smuggled out of France, through England then Ireland, and back to the United States.

Griffin had witnessed the tragic effects of the Holocaust—refined to hideous perfection by the Nazis, who had drawn up *an indictment against a whole people* (the Jewish community of Europe), blaming their victims for every problem of German society. But he had *not* understood then the parallels between the Warsaw ghetto and every urban American ghetto; between anti-Semitism and white racism toward Negroes. Segregation—technically legal yet ethically unjust and immoral—was also an indictment drawn up against a whole people, the black community of America.

Enlisting in the Army Air Corps in 1941, he was shipped to the Pacific theater the following year. Impressed by his linguistic skills, the high command assigned him to an island in the Solomon chain where he lived for a year in a remote village. He studied the indigenous culture, translated their dialect and gathered strategic information from the native allies. Initially, he viewed the natives as "primitives"—as *Other*. But after he was unable to navigate jungle trails, and had to rely on a five-year-old child as a guide, it became obvious "that within the context of that culture, I was clearly the inferior—an adult man who could not have survived without the guidance of a child. And from the point of view of the local inhabitants—a valid point of view—I was *Other*, inferior, and they were superior." It was an experiential truth he could not deny.

While living with Pacific islanders, Griffin developed a friendship with John Vutha, Grand Chief of the Solomons, who was a staunch ally of America in battling against Japan's occupation. Vutha provided crucial information by tracking enemy movements and, when he had been captured and tortured by the Japanese, he refused to divulge allied positions. After 22 bayonet wounds, they left him for dead, hanging from a tree as an example. "There is little doubt that if he had given in and spoken," Griffin writes, "the American victory at Guadalcanal might have been much slower in coming. Countless lives would certainly have been lost that were saved by his silence." For his heroism, Vutha received the highest awards accorded by American and British governments.

In 1945, when a Japanese invasion plan was intercepted, Griffin was reassigned to the landing base on Morotai and resumed his duties as a radio operator. When the air raids were imminent, orders were sent to select one soldier for a dangerous mission. He drew the short straw and was dispatched to the radar tent at the edge of the airstrip with orders to destroy the files if the enemy invaded. That evening brought a steady rain. For the first time, he felt "a foreboding of violence, a certainty of death." At nightfall he heard the scream of air raid sirens and the rumble of distant bombers. He ran down a slope toward a slit-trench for protection as the pattern bombing exploded along the airstrip. Just as he reached the rim of the trench, a nearby explosion catapulted him over the edge into darkness.

Two days later Griffin regained consciousness in the base hospital, suffering from a severe concussion that had impaired his eyesight. He kept his injury secret, pretending to read mail and playing the role of the recovering soldier until they promised to send him home. He earned the rank of sergeant, won medals and commendations, but never saved the stripes, claimed the awards, or filed for benefits. He had known war on both sides of the world and could not bear to be reminded of it.

Back home, he consulted eye specialists and was declared legally blind. Griffin was told that remaining light perception would be gone within 18 months. He sailed to France in the summer of 1946, to study music composition with Nadia Boulanger and composer-pianist, Robert Casadesus. After realizing he would not become a composer, he made a retreat to the Abbey of Solesmes, the fabled monastery of Gregorian Chant, where he was granted permission to study with the Benedictine monks. In 1947, he experienced an epiphany that nudged him "out of the agnosticism I had drifted into and led me eventually into the Catholic Church." By Good Friday of that year he was totally blind.

Returning to America, Griffin settled on his parents' country property near Mansfield, Texas. He raised livestock as a two-year experiment to prove that the sightless could become independent.

His hogs were judged best of show locally and the experiment was a success. He wrote a guide for the sighted in their relationships with the blind, *Handbook for Darkness*, published in 1949. That same year he wrote a 600-page novel in seven weeks, based on his experiences with music and monasticism in France, and he began a journal in 1950, which he would keep over the next 30 years. Also, he studied audio tapes on theology and philosophy, lectured on Gregorian Chant and, in 1951, converted to Catholicism.

His first novel, *The Devil Rides Outside*, was published in 1952, and became a surprise bestseller. In 1953, he wed 17-year- old Elizabeth Holland in a Catholic ceremony, and the couple moved into a cottage on her family's farm west of Mansfield, eventually raising four children during their 27 years of marriage. The 1954 paperback of *The Devil Rides Outside* was censored in Detroit, and then submitted by the publisher as a test case on pornography. This historic battle was adjudicated by the US Supreme Court in the publisher's favor in 1957. The ruling established the significant precedent that a book must be evaluated in its entirety and *not* censored on the basis of objectionable words or passages quoted out of context. *Nuni*, a novel set on a remote island in the Pacific, came out in 1956. His third novel, *Street of the Seven Angels*, a satire on pornography, appeared forty years after it was completed, in 2003.

During a decade of sightlessness Griffin experienced what it was like to become the *Other*, because the sighted perceived him as handicapped. "A man loses his sight then, but let it be understood that he loses nothing else," he declares in *Scattered Shadows: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision* (2004). "He does not lose his intelligence, his taste, his sensitivity, his ideals, his right to respect" and "remains as much an individual as always." Then without warning, on January 9, 1957, Griffin began perceiving reddish glints of light that stunned and frightened him. He telephoned his wife to say that he thought he was seeing and then broke down in tears. Elizabeth dispatched the doctor to her husband's studio and followed soon after. On that day he glimpsed images of his wife and children, quite literally, for the first time. In a state of shock, the

patient was sedated and taken to a specialist. The media was on the trail of the story, so Griffin was sequestered in the nearby Carmelite monastery, where he had made regular retreats. He needed calm, for it was not known immediately if eyesight would improve or fade. With weeks of rest, optical exercises, and the aid of powerful lenses, his sight steadily improved and he was astonished by the glorious gift of sight. Griffin had accepted blindness as a matter of Divine Will, believing that he had been plunged into a long night of the soul for a purpose, and also that his sight- recovery had been a revelation of mystical healing. This spiritual dimension grounded his demand for equal justice as a human right, no matter what his personal sacrifice.

In 1959, on the night before departure to New Orleans to begin the *Black Like Me* experiment, Griffin writes in his journal: "Nothing is more difficult than to face this, than deciding to look squarely at profound convictions and to act upon them, even when doing so goes contrary to our desires. Yes, it must be done—deciding to abandon ourselves deliberately and completely to that which is so beautiful, justice, and to that which is so terrible, the reprisals, the disesteem of men. We know it, perhaps we have even done it—made the act, said the yes."

When Griffin returned from the Deep South journey, he wrote a series of articles for the black monthly magazine, *Sepia*, published between April and October of 1960 as "Journey Into Shame"—a hasty first draft of *Black Like Me*. Before the first installment hit the news stands, he and his family were receiving death threats by mail and over the phone from white racists in their hometown of Mansfield. After being "lynched in effigy" (Griffin's phrase) in April of 1960, his frightened parents made plans to sell their acreage and to resettle in Mexico, where older son Edgar owned real estate. By mid-August they had departed by car, and Griffin put his wife and three children on a plane bound for Mexico City two days later. He packed his own car and joined them all soon after. They settled in a small village overlooking the Spanish colonial city of Morelia, in the Sierra Tarasca mountains of Michoacán, about 130 miles west of

Mexico City. It was their new home for nearly a year and Griffin wrote the final draft of *Black Like Me* there. This "lost" chapter in his story is told in *Available Light: Exile in Mexico* (2008). But during a series of communist student uprisings in Morelia, Griffin sent home his young family and elderly parents. He stayed on to write a report on the unrest, reflecting on the ironic fact that he had been hounded by the Nazis out of France, by the racists out of Mansfield, and finally by the communists out of Mexico.

Griffin returned to Texas in the spring of 1961. On August 20, he received an advance copy of *Black Like Me*. "Always a strange moment," he remarked, "to see one's work printed into this format, complete—a year of labor that weighs less than a pound; and yet few pounds of any substance have produced the explosion this has, the repercussions, the changes in our life and status." His daily existence, if not his status, dramatically changed during the 1960s—this solitary writer soon transformed himself into a dynamic public advocate for the cause of equal justice by nonviolent means.

The uniqueness of Griffin's story and his harsh denunciation of the segregated system was aired in interviews with Mike Wallace, Dave Garroway, Studs Terkel and others, stirring controversy before *Black Like Me* appeared in November of 1961. For the publisher, uncertain if the book would have interest to general readers, it was a free publicity campaign from heaven; for its author it initiated a nearly-endless purgatory only slightly less hellish than the journey itself. The book received rave reviews from major media on both coasts, was hailed in Texas press but, with the exception of the Atlanta papers, it was entirely ignored in the South. However, the segregationists whose human rights violations had been exposed, would not ignore its author. While *Black Like Me* ascended bestseller lists, Griffin's name was added to hate lists and he was targeted as "an enemy of the white race." (A decade later the Klan caught up with Griffin, beat him mercilessly with chains, and left him for dead on a back road in Mississippi.) But he survived the beating and continued to lecture about racism, and his later treks cross country

uncovered a geography of prejudice hidden beneath a thin veneer of tolerance.

On the lecture circuit for a dozen years, Griffin admitted that he had withheld criticism of the Catholic Church in *Black Like Me*, naively believing that once the hierarchy were made aware of the segregation of black Catholics, this immoral practice would be abolished. “I knew the Church’s teaching allowed for no racial distinction between members of the human family,” he writes in “Racist Sins of Christians” in 1963, because the Church “regarded man as a *res sacra*, a sacred reality. God created all men with equal rights and equal dignity. The color of skin did not matter. What mattered was the quality of soul.” He had been guided by the words of Father J. Stanley Murphy, who said: “Whenever any man permits himself to regard any other man, in any condition, as anything less than a *res sacra*, then the potentiality for evil becomes almost limitless.” Every religion professes the sacredness of human rights, but Catholic officials rationalized their discrimination “for fear of alienating souls.” Griffin “knew they were referring to the souls of prejudiced white Catholics,” and wondered “why they appeared to have so little ‘fear’ of alienating the souls of Negroes.”

If this cover story for the mainstream Catholic monthly, *Sign*, had not embarrassed the hierarchy enough, an even deeper alienation among the black clergy was revealed in a second 1963 cover piece for *Ramparts*, the most radical Catholic magazine of the day. It was in his dialogue with Father August Thompson, that the young priest from Louisiana declared that “in some areas, we Negro priests might be called second-class Christs, if that’s possible.” Stunned by this, Griffin replied: “We know that we do have the profound scandal of second-class Catholics—I mean this is a situation that is too well-known to hide any longer—but when it is the scandal of a ‘second-class Christ’ it becomes inconceivable.” Both pieces stirred controversy but many Church officials denied these claims and Father Thompson’s bishop tried to censor the interview. But leading thinkers like Thomas Merton, French philosopher Jacques Maritain

and black theologian Albert Cleage confirmed the truth of these allegations.

Dr. King's 1963 *Letter From A Birmingham Jail* clarifies the morality of resisting segregation: "An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal." He poses a question answered by civil disobedience. "Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong." Like his mentor Mohandas Gandhi, King drew on Christ's teachings and the work of Henry David Thoreau, saying: "In no sense, do I advocate evading or defying the law as a rabid segregationist would do. This would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do it *openly, lovingly*…and with a willingness to accept the penalty." Both holy men awakened public conscience peacefully, accepted imprisonment willingly, and expected to be martyrs. They were victims of violence, despite their non-violent creed and espousal of a religious ideal whose source was Christ's crucifixion, which Gandhi called "a perfect act of Charity."

The strategy of peaceful resistance helped erase segregation ordinances in the South. But after the 1964 Civil Rights Bill became law, "racists redoubled their efforts in the name of patriotism and Christianity, to suppress not only black people but all nonracists," Griffin declares in his 1969 book, *The Church and the Black Man*. Since social integration "always depends on the conversion of the hostile force," blacks abandoned King's dream and pursue other political strategies.

Black Power called for "black people to consolidate behind their own, so they can bargain from a position of strength," wrote the authors of *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. In their 1967 blueprint for new political action, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton envisioned a different result from white power. "The ultimate values and goals are not dominion or exploitation of other groups, but rather an effective share in the total power of the

society." The most common criticism judged Black Power as a form of reverse racism. This was a false analogy, since blacks had not lynched whites or bombed their churches. According to Carmichael, racism was not merely a question of attitude, because "the problem of racism arises only when there's power to carry out your acts." Racist attitudes can cause emotional pain, but without the power to injure or kill a black person with impunity, which was the case in some tacit police states, an attitude remains merely personal. Carmichael was perceived by most whites as a militant leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. "What few whites realize," Griffin pointed out, "is that for years Stokely Carmichael—a man of great insights—was a flawless advocate of nonviolent resistance; not only was he an advocate, he lived nonviolence heroically. For years when he was slapped down, insulted, jailed and abused, he would fall on his knees and pray for those who abused him….he prayed for the dehumanized white who loathed him for the unforgivable sin of not being a 'good nigger'… Finally, he could take no more," and turned to Black Power. Carmichael later took the African name Kwame Turé, never preached violence, but advocated the right to bear arms for self-defense, as did most white citizens, all gun clubs and hate clans.

According to Reverend Albert Cleage (in *The Church and the Black Man*), the question of violence was irrelevant, observing that fellow blacks "were rather weird creatures dedicated to nonviolence in the midst of a nation as violent as America is, has been, and will be." As for separatism, he points out that "we were separate and yet we dreamed of integration and therefore did not utilize the separation to our benefit, but permitted it to be utilized for our exploitation." During the Black Liberation Movement there emerged a new sensibility, a recognition of black identity and beauty, a demand for self-esteem, self-determination and pride in peaceful communities.

While always a believer in nonviolence, Griffin insisted in 1971 that the lecture bureau represent him with this statement: "I'm a firm believer in Black Power, as I believe any man who wants the good of the total community must be. It is a tragedy that

nonviolence didn't work. The black man was trying to cure his white brother with it, but the white man wouldn't be cured. Nonviolent resistance has done more than we realize, though. I think history will show that it accomplished an enormous thing in men's souls. It didn't fail, it just didn't complete the job. Black Power is a progression from it. It's the black's assertion of his humanity, and it requires us to confront one another as equals."

These developments gained political power for individuals and group efforts, but the black community could not attain equal footing against an entrenched system supported by centuries of institutionalized racism. Any critique of the black liberation struggle from 1955 to 1975 cannot be judged as *progress* from a white capitalist perspective. Rather it must be understood as a *process* of revolutionary awareness of the necessity for simple justice as the basis for a sane, moral and peaceful society. We know of the leaders during that period but tend to overlook the contributions of students who were the foot soldiers of the movement. "Because of these young people," said the late Fannie Lou Hamer, who organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party of black delegates in 1964 with the support of students, "I think for the first time we have a chance to make democracy a reality in the United States."

For Griffin, the tumultuous 1960s began with the unexpectedness of *Black Like Me* and ended with *The Church and the Black Man,* his anthology of radical black voices that fell on deaf white ears. The only similarity between his two works was hate mail each had generated. Then he endured the return of censorship in the mid-1970s, when *Black Like Me* was pulled from library shelves—along with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* considered the most illuminating novel of black experience in the 20th century, Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* and works by Mark Twain—all due to "objectionable" language. One lawsuit, later dismissed, was filed against *Black Like Me*, contending it was "totally objectionable, obscene and perverting" when "intentionally directed to 13-year-olds." He was bewildered by the white backlash, especially the claim that his lectures were "a deliberate plan to subvert the minds of young

children." By the 1980s these banned books had become part of the literary canon, and today they are required reading from mid-school through college levels.

From the outset of his lecture tours, Griffin told audiences: "I don't stand up here and represent myself as a spokesman for black people," emphasizing this point in books as well. "This is a personal book," begins *A Time To Be Human*, his final overview on racism in 1977. "I will simply talk about my own experiences with racism; first as a white child growing up in Texas, then as a black man in the South in 1959, and since then as a white man once again in the ghettos of most of our major cities and in many other countries." Griffin explained his position: "I have become far less visible as a public figure involved in racial reconciliation. Once a few whites had to speak out for justice and interracial dialogue at a time when whites would not listen to blacks. But those days are over and it is absurd for a white man to presume to speak for black people when they have superlative voices of their own." He agreed with black leaders who suggested that white activists focus on educating their own communities. He had done that, but also perceived his role as "a bridge to reconcile the tremendous duality of information and viewpoint which whites and blacks have and on which they make their judgments—as well as the kind of misinformation whites believe that leads them to make judgments that are ethnic rather than human."

Griffin was such an effective voice for equal justice because of the unique perspective of the *Black Like Me* experience and his direct involvement in the human rights movements and crises of the 1960s and 1970s. But he was effective also because of his communicative gifts and a compelling truthfulness. He served as a bridge for dialogue between the communities since he had "access to and experience in both black and white cultures." However, his work was "not a vocation that is specifically black and white," but a deeper spiritual quest that he called "a vocation for the reconciliation of humanity." Yet he held no heroic illusions about

who he was or what he did, realizing that this was “not the kind of work which produces statistical or measurable results.” He never expected to witness the end of racism or the beginning of King’s “Beloved Community” in his lifetime. Yet he continued the social struggle even as it went against his deepest personal inclinations. “It isn’t my nature to be an activist,” he told Studs Terkel in 1978, “but your vocation doesn’t necessarily conform to your nature.” Being the reluctant activist, public life cut against his desire for family intimacy, for writing novels, for spiritual contemplation. Too often he lectured while ill or recovering from surgeries, traveling when mobility was reduced to crutches or a wheelchair. But he answered to a higher will that demanded merciful acts in a merciless world.

Looking back in *A Time To Be Human*, Griffin writes about the hate stares when disguised as a Negro, and skeptical readers claimed he had overstated the case. “Whites have sometimes argued that I felt this degradation more deeply than black people because it was new to me, whereas black people had known nothing else all their lives.” He realized this was a matter of *thinking white*, of projecting cultural stereotypes. “This is utterly untrue,” Griffin says, because prejudice “burns any man, and no person ever gets accustomed to it that it does not burn. Such whites say it the way they have *seen* it, but I say it in the way I have *experienced* it.”

Before *Black Like Me*, he held the same stereotypes to be true without questioning their inherent logical fallacies—assuming Negroes “led essentially the same kind of lives whites know, with certain inconveniences caused by discrimination and prejudice.” His deepest shock came not from inconvenience but as a total shift in reality. “Everything is different. Everything changes. As soon as I got into areas where I had contact with white people, I realized that I was no longer regarded as a human individual. Surely one of the strangest experiences a person can have is suddenly to step out into the streets and find that the entire white society is convinced that an individual possesses qualities and characteristics which that person

knows he does *not* possess. I am not speaking here only of myself. This is the mind-twisting experience of every black person I know."

All questions concerning the authenticity of his experiment cannot be *answered* only intuited. Complex subjectivity cannot be distilled to a precise point of objectivity. But Griffin was a keen observer of people and witnessed the behavior of whites caught up in the racist syndrome, as if "blackness" were absolute proof of inferiority. Also he was a careful listener and, since he was accepted as a Negro in their community, black people expressed their true thoughts and feelings without fear of reprisal. What he was privileged to hear, no white person would have been trusted to hear. And what he learned was that "blackness was not a color but a lived experience."

Because Griffin faced his racism with harsh self-criticism, he was able to deprogram the prejudices he had been taught. What he does not say directly but which the overall spirit of *Black Like Me* implies, was that his journey was inspired by religious ideals and pushed forward by a vow of obedience to those ideals. His "motives" for risking the experiment can be understood only in this spiritual context. In his Preface that was written after the experiment, he says the book "traces the changes that occur to heart and body and intelligence." Yes, and it also traces a soul's journey through change. *Black Like Me*, a creative act of insight *par excellence*, transcends the conventional limits of cultural perception to reveal a spiritual vision for overcoming man's inhumanity to man.

We are all born innocent with the essentials we call human nature, and not one of us entered this world with any inborn bias. Ye t we all learned prejudice, because every culture teaches us to honor its way while subtly denigrating other cultures. At best, we are taught conscious lessons in tolerance, but prejudices are slippery, precisely because they are often unconscious. Eventually these cultural attitudes are codified through irrational emotion, unfounded opinion and blind belief. Even though prejudice changes names—colonialism, racism, genocide, anti-Semitism, apartheid, ethnic-cleansing and profiling—every alias results in the same injustice. We shall remain prisoners of culture unless we become

aware of the process and force ourselves to confront it and to deprogram it. Griffin accomplished this through the experience of *Black Like Me* and then clarified the process of racism in "The Intrinsic *Other*" in 1966. "Beyond Otherness" revisits both works, and it was the last piece he wrote about racism, in 1979, the year before he died.

The inculcated misconception that posits the *Other*, simply because a person has darker pigmentation or worships a different god or follows "strange" customs or speaks in a "foreign" tongue, has led humanity to tragic consequences. Extrinsic differences separate us instead of the deeper commonalties that should unite us —survival and basic needs, raising families, creating art, desiring peace, risking love, daring to hope, enduring pain, and dying— everything that makes us human. How can we know the suffering of innocents and not be human rights advocates? "This is insidious," Griffin writes, "because it is often done in good faith, is often accomplished with an illusion of benevolence. It leads to master delusion. The delusion lies in the fact that no matter how well we think we know the *Other*, we still judge from within the imprisoning framework of our own limited cultural criteria, we still speak within the cliché of the stereotype."

That *master delusion* began when we were taught to pre-judge a person from another culture without the benefit of sufficient or unbiased knowledge of their culture. This tragic phenomenon, based on a faulty and rigid generalization, reveals our unconscious hostility toward other groups. It fulfills the irrational function of making us believe we are superior to all "outsiders" and that our culture reigns supreme. But culture is *not* human nature, even as it shapes our view of human nature. What we learn to label as differences in human nature are merely the stereotypes of our cultural viewpoint. Never shall we understand fully another culture if we are imprisoned in our own; and never shall we fully understand our culture if it remains out of awareness. Yet encountering another culture can provide a dramatic contrast that may awaken a fresh view of ourselves, may illuminate our blind

spot toward the *Other*. “I believe that before we can truly dialogue with one another”—says Griffin in “Beyond *Otherness*”—we must first perceive intellectually, and then at the profoundest emotional level, that there is no *Other*—that the *Other* is simply *Oneself* in all the significant essentials.”

Look around, sisters and brothers, the Global Village arrived while we were out to lunch or napping through re-runs of starving children on the death channel. Look inward to the Great Spirit and know that the reality of human nature has been—and will always be—universal. *Black Like Me* means *Human Like Us*.

John Howard Griffin and *Black Like Me*

John Howard Griffin (1920-1980) received the following awards for his humanitarian work: The *Journey Into Shame* series in *Sepia* magazine was recognized in 1960 by the National Council of Negro Women; the annual Ainsfield-Wolf Award from *Saturday Review* went to *Black Like Me* in 1962; Griffin shared the *Pacem in Terris* Award with President John F. Kennedy in 1963; he received the Christian Culture Award from Assumption University of Windsor, Ontario in 1968; and in 1980 he was given the Kenneth David Kaunda Award for Humanism from the Pan African Association.

Black Like Me has remained available in English since being published in 1961. It has been translated into 16 languages, selling over 12 million copies worldwide. It was first published by Houghton Mifflin in cloth, then reprinted in 1962 as a Signet mass paperback from New American Library. Houghton Mifflin published a second cloth edition that included Griffin’s “Epilogue” in 1976 and Signet/Penguin issued a new paperback in 1977. In 1996, a 35th Anniversary Edition appeared (with an Afterword by Robert Bonazzi); and in 2009 Penguin published a 50th Anniversary Edition (with a new Afterword by Bonazzi).

The first Wings Press publication of the Griffin Estate Edition of *Black Like Me* appeared in 2004, the first cloth edition since 1976. The second printing of 2006 includes the first index to the American

classic. This Ebook is based on the 2006 edition, but with a revised Afterword and updated Notes.

Notes

The following notes on the works and authors cited in the Afterword, in order of their first appearance:

The Mohandas Gandhi's quote is from *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (edited by Thomas Merton, New Directions, 1965); Ralph Ellison's quote is from *Invisible Man* (Random House, 1952).

"The Intrinsic Other" was written in French in 1996 and anthologized in *Building Peace* (edited by Dominique Pire). Its first US publication was in *The John Howard Griffin Reader* (edited by Bradford Daniel, Houghton Mifflin, 1968). The essay was reprinted in *Encounters With the Other: A Personal Journey* (edited by Robert Bonazzi, Latitudes Press, 1997); that edition also included a personal essay by Griffin on Chief John Vutha.

Scattered Shadows: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision (Orbis Books, 2004) was published 40 years after it was written. Several chapters had appeared in *The John Howard Griffin Reader*.

Griffin's *Handbook for Darkness* was produced by the Lighthouse for the Blind in 1949, both as an English-language text and in a Braille edition.

The Devil Rides Outside was published by Smiths, Inc. of Fort Worth, Texas in 1952. It was an alternate selection of the Book of the Month Club. The 1954 paperback from Pocket Books was banned in Detroit. It was submitted as a test case and adjudicated as "not

pornographic" by the United States Supreme Court in a landmark case (*Butler v. Michigan*) in 1957. This case established the precedent that no book could be censored merely on the basis of "objectionable" words or passages, but had to be considered in terms of its entire text.

Nuni, was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1956. *Street of the Seven Angels* was published by Wings Press in 2003, 40 years after Griffin had completed it.

"Racist Sins of Christians" was first published in 1963 by *Sign* magazine as a cover story; it was reprinted in *The John Howard Griffin Reader*.

"Dialogue with Father August Thompson" first appeared in *Ramparts* magazine as a cover story in 1963; it was reprinted in *The John Howard Griffin Reader* and *Encounters With the Other: A Personal Journey*.

Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was written in April 1963 in response to a statement by eight white Alabama clergymen, calling for a cessation to the civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham. The text has been reprinted in 40 languages since.

Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America was written by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton (Knopf, 1967).

The Church and the Black Man included Griffin's texts and photographs, a manifesto by the Black Priests Caucus, and a diskette with speeches by Reverend Albert B. Cleage and Father James

Groppi (Pflaum, 1969). A French edition by Brouwer appeared in 1970.

A Time To Be Human was published in 1977 by Macmillan (US/ Canada), and by Collier in the UK that same year.

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Continued appreciation to the four children of Elizabeth Griffin-Bonazzi (1935-2000) and John Howard Griffin, for they are the Griffin Estate: Susan, John, Gregory and Amanda; also to Barry Griffin for his efforts toward making a new feature film about Griffin's life.

Deep thanks to friends Daniel L. Robertson, Michael Power and Paul Christensen for textual insights; to Brother Patrick Hart and Father August Thompson, for spiritual support; and to Joanna Marston Co-Director of the Rosica Colin Agency for intelligent guidance.

Thanks also to new friends: Morgan Atkinson, a filmmaker at work on the first Griffin documentary; to editor Rudolf F. Rau for sharp editorial suggestions; and to Kamala Platt for creating the first-ever index to this American classic.

Long term appreciation to Robert Ellsberg, editor and publisher of Orbis Books, for directing Griffin volumes into print—*Scattered Shadows: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision* (2004) and *Follow the Ecstasy: The Hermitage Years of Thomas Merton* (1993)—and for editing *Man in the Mirror: John Howard Griffin and the Story of Black Like Me* (1997).

Last but not least, Bryce Milligan, publisher of Wings Press, who has designed several versions of *Black Like Me*, as well as editions of Griffin's novel, *Street of the Seven Angels* in 2003, and *Available Light: Exile in Mexico* in 2008. Without my old poet- friend, these last two titles would never have seen the light of day.

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Note: Pages cited refer to the printed edition, not to the ebook.

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Colophon

The Wings Press cloth edition of *Black Like Me*, by John Howard Griffin, is printed on 70 pound non-acidic Arbor paper, containing fifty percent post-consumer recycled fiber, by Edwards Brothers, Inc. of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Text and interior titles were set in a contemporary version of Classic Bodoni, originally designed by the 18th century Italian typographer and punchcutter, Giambattista Bodoni, press director for the Duke of Parma. This edition of *Black Like Me* was designed by Bryce Milligan.

Wings Press was founded in 1975 by J. Whitebird and Joseph F. Lomax as "an informal association of artists and cultural mythol- ogists dedicated to the preservation of the literature of the nation of Texas." The publisher/ editor since 1995, Bryce Milligan, is honored to carry on and expand that mission to include the finest in American writing.

Special ebook added content:

2006 brochure from
Lewis & Clark College,
Special Collections,
celebrating the 45th anniversary
of the publication of *Black Like Me*.
Exhibit curated by Jerry Harp

A Tribute to John Howard Griffin

For the 45th Anniversary of *Black Like Me*

An Exhibit at the Aubrey Watzek Library
Lewis & Clark College
Portland, Oregon
January - April 2006

Exhibited Books

Listed according to exhibit arrangement starting with top left of case.

John Howard Griffin. *The Church and the Black Man*. Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1969.

The John Howard Griffin Reader. Selected and edited by Bradford Daniel. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1968, [c1967].

John Howard Griffin. *Black Like Me*. 1961. Four editions displayed.

Robert Bonazzi. *Man in the Mirror: John Howard Griffin and the Story of Black Like Me*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, c1997.

John Howard Griffin. *Twelve Photographic Portraits*. Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1978.

John Howard Griffin. *The Hermitage Journals: A Diary Kept While Working on the Biography of Thomas Merton*. edited by Conger Beasley, Jr. Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, c1981.

John Howard Griffin. *Nuni*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956.

By John Howard Griffin. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton*. Photographs by Thomas Merton and John Howard Griffin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.

Interview with John Howard Griffin in *Latitudes*, Vol. 1, No. 1, February 1967. Houston: Latitudes Press. edited by Robert Bonazzi.

John Howard Griffin and Yves R. Simon. *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures*. Foreword by Anthony Simon. Albany: Magi Books, c1974.

John Howard Griffin. *The Devil Rides Outside*. Fort Worth: Smiths, 1952.

John Howard Griffin. *Land of the High Sky*. Midland, Texas: First National Bank of Midland, c1959.

John Howard Griffin. *Street of the Seven Angels*. Edited and with an introduction by Robert Bonazzi. San Antonio, TX: Wings Press, c2003.

John Howard Griffin and Theodore Freedman. *Mansfield, Texas: A Report of the Crisis Situation Resulting from Efforts to Desegregate the School System*. New York, NY: Anti-defamation League of B'nai B'rith, [1957?].

John Howard Griffin. *Scattered Shadows: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, c2004.

Black Hands On a White Face: A Time Piece of Experiences in a Black and White America, an Anthology. Edited by Whit Burnett. New York: Dodd, Mead, c1971. Includes "Black Again, White Again by John Howard Griffin.

John Howard Griffin. *A Time To Be Human*. New York: Macmillan, c1977.

John Howard Griffin. *Encounters With the Other: A Personal Journey*. Edited with an introduction by Robert Bonazzi. Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1997.

Best known for his classic *Black Like Me* (1961), John Howard Griffin (1920-1980) spent much of his writing life responding to the complicated demands of his literary vocation. He composed his first novel, *The Devil Rides Outside* (1952), by speaking the story in French into a tape recorder and then translating it into English as he transcribed the tape with a typewriter. No doubt, this rather complicated process calls for some explanation.

When he was in his early teens in Texas, and growing dissatisfied with the education he was receiving, Griffin wrote to the headmaster of a French lycée that he had read about. He requested admission and even specified that he would be willing to sweep floors to earn his tuition. Six months later the teenager received notice of his admission, as well as of a scholarship that would relieve him of any extra cleaning duties. Griffin therefore pursued an extensive education in France, first at the Lycée Descartes in Tours and then later as a medical student at the University of Poitiers, also in Tours. It was in his capacity as the acting head of the Asylum of Tours, during World War II, that Griffin worked as a member of the French underground resistance movement, smuggling Jewish children out of the country disguised as patients in straitjackets. When he discovered that his name was on a Nazi death list, Griffin fled the country as well. After returning to the United States, Griffin joined the Air Force and was later stationed on a remote island in the Solomon Islands chain, where he lived and worked among persons of the indigenous culture. It was during this period of service that he sustained the injuries that would lead to his blindness. Before his sight failed completely, he spent a year in France at the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Pierre of Solesmes, known for its manuscripts of Gregorian chant, to study music, one of his early passions. He became totally blind in 1947.

It was because of his blindness and his comfort with the French language that Griffin composed his first novel by the unusual process outlined above. The novel's protagonist, a young musicologist studying Gregorian chant at an unspecified Benedictine monastery in France, is deeply influenced by the monks he comes to know, though by the novel's end he has not embraced their faith. However, Griffin himself pointed to the writing of this novel, along with the experiences that helped to

inspire it, as important influences on his own conversion to Catholicism. He became friends with such fellow Catholic converts as the French philosopher Jacques Maritain and the writer and Trappist monk Thomas Merton. He went on to publish books about both figures: *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (1970) and *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures* (1974).

Photograph of Jacques Maritain and Thomas Merton by John Howard Griffin from *A Hidden Wholeness.*

Griffin's second novel, *Nuni* (1956), was inspired by his time on the Solomon Islands, though the protagonist is not a young soldier, but rather a professor of literature in his fifties. The wartime experiences that Griffin was relying on when he wrote *Nuni* deeply challenged certain of his cultural assumptions, including what he later referred to as his own "genteel racism," prejudicial attitudes masking themselves behind a facade of good manners and considerate conduct. On the Solomon Islands, Griffin found himself in a world where he was decidedly inept, where he regularly required the aid of a five-year-old boy to find his way through the jungle. Nevertheless, he continued to think of this ineptitude as merely an artifact of his relative unfamiliarity with the world and culture of the islands. As his writings show, it would require time, further experience, and deeper reflection for him to come to think of this culture as one of a dignity and worth equal to his own.

Unexpectedly, Griffin's sight returned in 1957. For the first time, he saw his wife, Elizabeth, whom he had married in 1953, and their two children; they went on to have two more children. In 1959 Griffin sought further insight into the dynamics of preju-

dice by journeying through the American South in the guise of an African-American man. Griffin had his skin medically darkened and simply presented himself as who he was. As he put it, "I decided not to change my name or identity.... If asked who I was or what I was doing, I would answer truthfully." As a member of the FBI said to him before he started the journey, as soon as white people saw that he was a black man, they would know all about him that they cared to know. In fact, Griffin encountered a variety of signals, including what he referred to as the "hate stare," informing him that the whites around him considered him to be inferior and other, his very presence an imposition. Even more shocking was his reaction to his own face in the mirror after his transformation: "The worst of it was that I could feel no companionship with this new person. I did not like the way he looked." Seeing himself in this way, Griffin came to realize how deeply in his own consciousness resided the very racist attitudes that he was opposing.

The series of articles that originally appeared in *Sepia* in 1960 were revised and published as *Black Like Me* in 1961. After these publications Griffin became a prominent spokesperson concerning racism in America. According to Robert Bonazzi, Griffin's official biographer, Griffin delivered in excess of a thousand lectures on the topic. Griffin was careful to point out, however, that he by no means considered himself to be a spokesman for persons of color, who have powerful voices of their own. Rather, Griffin often found himself in the position of saying much the same thing to white audiences that African-American speakers were saying, the latter of whom white audiences were often unable or unwilling to hear. In the course of his life as an activist, Griffin worked with such persons as Dick Gregory and Martin Luther King, Jr.

It was partly Griffin's commitment to social justice that led to his friendship with Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who wrote extensively on social justice issues in the sixties. Their friendship developed such that, after Merton's death in 1968, Griffin was appointed to be the monk's official biographer, a project that Griffin was forced to give up because of health problems. Nevertheless, two books related to his work with the Merton biography, *The Hermitage Journals* (1981) and *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (1983), were published soon after Griffin's death. Griffin left behind a considerable body of unpublished material, which has continued to appear under the editorship of Robert Bonazzi.

Jerry Harp

Publicity photograph of Griffin for *The Devil Rides Outside*, 1952.

Front image: Portrait of John Howard Griffin disguised as a black man in New Orleans, by Don Rutledge, 1959.

Exhibit curated by Jerry Harp
for the Lewis & Clark College Special Collections.

Brochure printed and designed by the
Berberis Press

at the Watzek Library Special Collections
January 2006

Critical Praise for *Black Like Me:*

Winner of the Saturday Review Anisfield-Wolfe Award, 1962

Pacem in terris Award (shared with John F. Kennedy), 1963

Christian Culture Gold Medal (Canada), 1966

Pan African Association Award for Humanism, 1980

- Cyril Connolly, *Sunday Times of London*

Some actions are so absolutely simple and right that they amount to genius. *Black Like Me* was an act of genius on the part of Mr. Griffin.

- Dan Wakefield, *New York Times Book Review*

Griffin's fully detailed journal of this odyssey is a brief, unsettling, and essential document of contemporary American life.

- San Francisco Chronicle

Black Like Me is essential reading as a basic text for study of this great contemporary social problem. It is a social document of the first order, providing material absolutely unavailable elsewhere with such authenticity that it cannot be dismissed.

- New York Herald Tribune

His new book may serve as a corrective to the blindness of many of his countrymen.

- Newsweek

With this book, John Howard Griffin easily takes rank as probably the country's most venturesome student of race relations. It is a piercing and memorable document.

- Saturxay Review of Literature

Black Like Me is a moving and troubling book written by an accomplished novelist. It is a scathing indictment of our society.

- Dallas Morning News

A stinging indictment of thoughtless, needless inhumanity. No one can read it without suffering.

- Atlanta Journal-Constitution

One of the deepest, most penetrating documents yet set down on the racial question.

- Detroit News

Black Like Me is gentle in tone, but it is more powerful and compelling than a sociological report, more penetrating than most scientific studies. It has the ring of authenticity.

- Commonweal

This is the pilgrimage par excellence of our time; the story of an incarnation made by one man, in deep reverence for the Divine Humanity that is daily insulted, buffeted, scourged, beaten and bled in every black man whites insult. Mr. Griffin's heroic charity and courage are a glory for the church.

- Publishers Weekly

A shocker - the report of a white man who darkened his skin and lived as a Negro in the South to see the racial problem at first hand. This book will generate emotion.

- St. Petersburg Times

This is a shocking book, growing from the shock experienced by a white man who had the courage to find out for himself what it was like to be treated as a Negro. This is the human story … a book about simple justice. It suggests that any white man who thinks the Negro in the South is secure and contented should try being one.

- Negro Digest

It is an appalling report of man's inhumanity - institutionalized and sactioned - to his fellow man. And, while it can only succeed in approximating the true horror of the Negro's situation, the book should be must reading for all whites and for those numerous Negroes who like to pretend all's right with the world.

- Cleveland Plain Dealer

Griffin's theory is that much of the trouble in the South results from the fact that the public is not informed on the race question. Naturally our young people wonder what this visual social pattern we call the American way of life is all about. It seems to me that we should look upon this comedy of color with critical eyes.

***— The Washington Post*, 2007**

What remains most important about "Black Like Me" is the force of the shock Griffin felt when he learned, in the most intimate ways, what it was — and for many still is — like to be black in America.…

Overall, though, the portrait that Griffin paints of the South is gloomy. Everywhere he went, "the criterion is nothing but the color of skin. My experience proved that. [Whites] judged me by no other quality. My skin was dark. That was sufficient reason for them to deny me those rights and freedoms without which life loses its significance and becomes a matter of little more than animal survival." He became depressed, and his face lapsed into "the strained, disconsolate expression that is written on the countenance of so many Southern Negroes." He "decided to try to pass back into white society" and scrubbed off the stain; immediately "I was once more a first-class citizen." The knowledge gave him little joy.

A few months later, as his story became public, he was hanged in effigy in the Texas town where he lived with his

wife and four children. They moved to Mexico for a while, then to Fort Worth. For the rest of his life he was an outspoken advocate of civil rights who had, as much as or more than any other white person in the country, earned his stripes. His influence is felt to this day through this remarkable book.

— The Washington Post, 2007