

If I had-a- my way  
I'd tear this building down.  
Great God, then, if I had-a- my way  
If I had-a- my way, little children,  
I'd tear this building down.

—Slave Song

Just a little while to stay here,  
Just a little while to stay.

—Traditional

take me to the water

"That is a good idea," I heard my mother say. She was staring at a wad of black velvet, which she held in her hand, and she carefully placed this bit of cloth in a closet. We can guess how old I must have been from the fact that for years afterward I thought that an "idea" was a piece of black velvet.

Much, much, much has been blotted out, coming back only lately in bewildering and untrustworthy flashes. I must have been about five, I should think, when I made my connection between ideas and velvet, but I may have been younger; this may have been the same year that my father had me circumcised, a terrifying event which I scarcely remember at all; or I may think I was five because I remember tugging at my mother's skirts once and watching her face while she was telling someone else that she was twenty-seven. This meant, for me, that she was virtually in the grave already, and I tugged a little harder at her skirts. I already knew, for some reason, or had given myself some reason to believe, that she had been twenty-two when I was born. And, though I can't count today, I could count when I was little.

I was the only child in the house—or houses—for a while, a halcyon period which memory has quite repudiated; and if I remember myself as tugging at my mother's skirts and staring up into her face, it was because I was so terrified of the man we called my father; who did not arrive on *my* scene, really, until I was more than two years old. I have written both too

much and too little about this man, whom I did not understand till he was past understanding. In my first memory of him, he is standing in the kitchen, drying the dishes. My mother had dressed me to go out, she is taking me someplace, and it must be winter, because I am wearing, in my memory, one of those cloth hats with a kind of visor, which button under the chin—a Lindbergh hat, I think. I am apparently in my mother's arms, for I am staring at my father over my mother's shoulder, we are near the door; and my father smiles. This may be a memory, I think it is, but it may be a fantasy. One of the very last times I saw my father on his feet, I was staring at him over my mother's shoulder—she had come rushing into the room to separate us—and my father was not smiling and neither was I.

His mother, Barbara, lived in our house, and she had been born in slavery. She was so old that she never moved from her bed. I remember her as pale and gaunt and she must have worn a kerchief because I don't remember her hair. I remember that she loved me; she used to scold her son about the way he treated me; and he was a little afraid of her. When she died, she called me into the room to give me a present—one of those old, round, metal boxes, usually with a floral design, used for candy. *She* thought it was full of candy and *I* thought it was full of candy, but it wasn't. After she died, I opened it and it was full of needles and thread.

This broke my heart, of course, but her going broke

it more because I had loved her and depended on her. I knew—children *must* know—that she would always protect me with all her strength. So would my mother, too, I knew that, but my mother's strength was only to be called on in a desperate emergency. It did not take me long, nor did the children, as they came tumbling into this world, take long to discover that our mother paid an immense price for standing between us and our father. He had ways of making her suffer quite beyond our ken, and so we soon learned to depend on each other and became a kind of wordless conspiracy to protect *her*. (We were all, absolutely and mercilessly, united against our father.) We soon realized, anyway, that she scarcely belonged to us: she was always in the hospital, having another baby. Between his merciless children, who were terrified of him, the pregnancies, the births, the rats, the murders on Lenox Avenue, the whores who lived downstairs, his job on Long Island—to which he went every morning, wearing a Derby or a Homburg, in a black suit, white shirt, dark tie, looking like the preacher he was, and with his black lunch-box in his hand—and his unreciprocated love for the Great God Almighty, it is no wonder our father went mad. We, on the other hand, luckily, on the whole, for our father, and luckily indeed for our mother, simply took over each new child and made it ours. I want to avoid generalities as far as possible; it will, I hope, become clear presently that what I am now attempting dictates this avoidance; and

so I will not say that children love miracles, but I will say that I think we did. A newborn baby is an extraordinary event; and I have never seen two babies who looked or even sounded remotely alike. Here it is, this breathing miracle who could not live an instant without you, with a skull more fragile than an egg, a miracle of eyes, legs, toenails, and (especially) lungs. It gropes in the light like a blind thing—it *is*, for the moment, blind—what can it make of what it sees? It's got a little hair, which it's going to lose, it's got no teeth, it pees all over you, it belches, and when it's frightened or hungry, quite without knowing what a miracle it's accomplishing, it exercises its lungs. You watch it discover it has a hand; then it discovers it has toes. Presently, it discovers it has *you*, and since it has already decided it wants to live, it gives you a toothless smile when you come near it, gurgles or giggles when you pick it up, holds you tight by the thumb or the eyeball or the hair, and, having already opted against solitude, howls when you put it down. You begin the extraordinary journey of beginning to know and to control this creature. You know the sound—the meaning—of one cry from another; without knowing that you know it. You know when it's hungry—that's one sound. You know when it's wet—that's another sound. You know when it's angry. You know when it's bored. You know when it's frightened. You know when it's suffering. You come or you go or you sit still according to the sound the baby makes. And you watch over it

where I was born, even in your sleep, because rats love the odor of newborn babies and are much, much bigger.

By the time it has managed to crawl under every bed, nearly suffocate itself in every drawer, nearly strangle itself with string, somehow, God knows how, trapped itself behind the radiator, been pulled back, by one leg, from its suicidal investigation of the staircase, and nearly poisoned itself with everything—*its* hand being quicker than *your* eye—it can possibly get into its mouth, you have either grown to love it or you have left home.

I, James, in August. George, in January. Barbara, in August. Wilmer, in October. David, in December. Gloria, Ruth, Elizabeth, and (when we thought it was over!) Paula Maria, named by me, born on the day our father died, all in the summertime.

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The youngest son of the New Orleans branch of the family—family, here, is used loosely and has to be; we knew almost nothing about this branch, which knew nothing about us; Daddy, the great good friend of the Great God Almighty, had simply fled the South, leaving a branch behind. As I have said, he was the son of a slave, and his youngest daughter, by his first marriage, is my mother's age and his youngest son is nine years older than I. This boy, who did not get along with his father, was my elder brother, as far as I then knew, and he sometimes took me with him here and

there. He took me into the Coney Island breakers on his back one day, teaching me to swim, and somehow ducked beneath me, playing, or was carried away from me for a moment, terrified, caught me and brought me above the waves. In the time that his body vanished beneath me and the waters rolled over my head, I still remember the slimy sea water and the blinding green—it was not green; it was all the world's snot and vomit; it entered into me; when my head was abruptly lifted out of the water, when I felt my brother's arms and saw his worried face—his eyes looking steadily into mine with the intense and yet impersonal anxiety of a surgeon, the sky above me not yet in focus, my lungs failing to deliver the mighty scream I had nearly burst with in the depths, my four or five or six-year-old legs kicking—and my brother slung me over his shoulder like a piece of meat, or a much beloved child, and strode up out of the sea with me, with me! he had saved me, after all, I learned something about the terror and the loneliness and the depth and the height of love.

Not so very much later, this brother, who was in his teens, fooling around with girls or shooting dice with his friends, who knows, came home late, which was forbidden in our Baptist house, and had a terrible fight with his Daddy and left the house and never came back. He swore that he never would come back, that his Daddy would never see him again. And he never did come back, not while Daddy was still alive. Daddy

wrote, but his son never answered. When I became a young minister, I was asked to write him, and I did—sometimes my father dictated the letters to me. And the boy answered me, sometimes, but he never answered his father and never mentioned him. Daddy slowly began to realize that he was never going to see that son, who was his darling, the apple of his eye, anymore, and this broke his heart and destroyed his will and helped him into the madhouse and the grave—my only intimation, perhaps, during all those years, that he was human. The son came home, when his father died, to help me bury him. Then he went away again, and I didn't see him until I had to go to California on a Civil Rights gig, and he met me at the airport. By then, I was thirty-nine and he was nearly fifty, I had made his disowned father's name famous, and I had left home in exactly the same way he did, for more or less the same reasons, and when I was seventeen.

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Since Martin's death, in Memphis, and that tremendous day in Atlanta, something has altered in me, something has gone away. Perhaps even more than the death itself, the manner of his death has forced me into a judgment concerning human life and human beings which I have always been reluctant to make—indeed, I can see that a great deal of what the knowledgeable would call my life-style is dictated by this reluctance. Incontestably, alas, most people are not, in

action, worth very much; and yet, every human being is an unprecedented miracle. One tries to treat them as the miracles they are, while trying to protect oneself against the disasters they've become. This is not very different from the act of faith demanded by all those marches and petitions while Martin was still alive. One could scarcely be deluded by Americans anymore, one scarcely dared expect anything from the great, vast, blank generality; and yet one was compelled to demand of Americans—and for their sakes, after all—a generosity, a clarity, and a nobility which they did not dream of demanding of themselves. Part of the error was irreducible, in that the marchers and petitioners were forced to suppose the existence of an entity which, when the chips were down, could not be located—*i.e.*, there *are* no American people yet: but to this speculation (or desperate hope) we shall presently return. Perhaps, however, the moral of the story (and the hope of the world) lies in what one demands, not of others, but of oneself. However that may be, the failure and the betrayal are in the record book forever, and sum up, and condemn, forever, those descendants of a barbarous Europe who arbitrarily and arrogantly reserve the right to call themselves Americans.

The mind is a strange and terrible vehicle, moving according to rigorous rules of its own; and my own mind, after I had left Atlanta, began to move backward in time, to places, people, and events I thought I had forgotten. Sorrow drove it there, I think, sorrow, and

a certain kind of bewilderment, triggered, perhaps, by something which happened to me in connection with Martin's funeral.

When Martin was murdered, I was based in Hollywood, working—working, in fact, on the screen version of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. This was a difficult assignment, since I had known Malcolm, after all, crossed swords with him, worked with him, and held him in that great esteem which is not easily distinguishable, if it is distinguishable at all, from love. (The Hollywood gig did not work out because I did not wish to be a party to a second assassination: but we will also return to Hollywood, presently.)

Very shortly before his death, I had to appear with Martin at Carnegie Hall, in New York. Having been on the Coast so long, I had nothing suitable to wear for my Carnegie Hall gig, and so I rushed out, got a dark suit, got it fitted, and made my appearance. Something like two weeks later, I wore this same suit to Martin's funeral; returned to Hollywood; presently, had to come East again, on business. I ran into Leonard Lyons one night, and I told him that I would never be able to wear that suit again. Leonard put this in his column. I went back to Hollywood.

Weeks later, either because of a Civil Rights obligation, or because of Columbia Pictures, I was back in New York. On my desk in New York were various messages—and it must be said that my sister, Gloria, who worked for me then, is extremely selective, not to

say brutal, about the messages she leaves on my desk. I don't see, simply, most of the messages I get. I couldn't conceivably live with them. No one could—as Gloria knows. However, my best friend, black, when I had been in junior high school, when I was twelve or thirteen, had been calling and calling and calling. The guilt of the survivor is a real guilt—as I was now to discover. In a way that I may never be able to make real for my countrymen, or myself, the fact that I had “made it”—that is, had been seen on television, and at Sardi's, could (presumably!) sign a check anywhere in the world, could, in short, for the length of an entrance, a dinner, or a drink, intimidate headwaiters by the use of a name which had not been mine when I was born and which love had compelled me to make my own—meant that I had betrayed the people who had produced me. Nothing could be more unutterably paradoxical: to have thrown in your lap what you never dreamed of getting, and, in sober, bitter truth, could never have dreamed of having, and that at the price of an assumed betrayal of your brothers and your sisters! One is always disproving the accusation in action as futile as it is inevitable.

I had not seen this friend—who could scarcely, any longer, be called a friend—in many years. I was brighter, or more driven than he—not my fault!—and, though neither of us knew it then, our friendship really ended during my ministry and was deadlier than my hope of heaven by the time I left the pulpit, the

church, and home. Hindsight indicates, obviously, that this particular rupture, which was, of necessity, exceedingly brutal and which involved, after all, the deliberate repudiation of everything and everyone that had given me an identity until that moment, must have left some scars. The current of my life meant that I did not see this person very often, but I was always terribly guilty when I did. I was guilty because I had nothing to say to him, and at one time I had told him everything, or nearly everything. I was guilty because he was just another post-office worker, and we had dreamed such tremendous futures for ourselves. I was guilty because he and his family had been very nice to me during an awful time in my life and now none of that meant anything to me. I was guilty because I knew, at the bottom of my heart, that I judged this unremarkable colored man very harshly, far more harshly than I would have done if he were white, and I knew this to be unjust as well as sinister. I was furious because he thought my life was easy and I thought my life was hard, and I yet had to see that by his lights, certainly, and by any ordinary yardstick, my life was enviable compared to his. And if, as I kept saying, it was not my fault, it was not *his* fault, either. You can certainly see why I tended to avoid my old school chum.

But I called him, of course. I thought that he probably needed money, because that was the only thing, by now, that I could possibly hope to give him. But, no.

He, or his wife, or a relative, had read the Leonard Lyons column and knew that I had a suit I wasn't wearing, and—as he remembered in one way and I in quite another—he was just my size.

Now, for me, that suit was drenched in the blood of all the crimes of my country. If I had said to Leonard, somewhat melodramatically, no doubt, that I could never wear it again, I was, just the same, being honest. I simply could not put it on, or look at it, without thinking of Martin, and Martin's end, of what he had meant to me, and to so many. I could not put it on without a bleak, pale, cold wonder about the future. I could not, in short, live with it, it was too heavy a garment. Yet—it was only a suit, worn, at most, three times. It was not a very expensive suit, but it was still more expensive than any my friend could buy. He could not afford to have suits in his closet which he didn't wear, he couldn't afford to throw suits away—he couldn't, in short, afford my elegant despair. Martin was dead, but *he* was living, he needed a suit, and—I was just his size. He invited me for dinner that evening, and I said that I would bring him the suit.

The American situation being what it is, and American taxi drivers being what they mostly are, I have, in effect, been forbidden to expose myself to the quite tremendous hazards of getting a cab to stop for me in New York, and have been forced to hire cars. Naturally, the car which picked me up on that particular guilty evening was a Cadillac limousine about seventy-

three blocks long, and, naturally, the chauffeur was white. Neither did he want to drive a black man through Harlem to the Bronx, but American democracy has always been at the mercy of the dollar: the chauffeur may not have liked the gig, but he certainly wasn't about to lose the bread. Here we were, then, this terrified white man and myself, trapped in this leviathan, eyed bitterly, as it passed, by a totally hostile population. But it was not the chauffeur which the population looked on with such wry contempt: I held the suit over my arm, and was tempted to wave it: *I'm only taking a suit to a friend!*

I knew how they felt about black men in limousines—unless they were popular idols—and I couldn't blame them, and I knew that I could never explain. We found the house, and, with the suit over my arm, I mounted the familiar stairs.

I was no longer the person my friend and his family had known and loved—I was a stranger now, and keenly aware of it, and trying hard to act, as it were, normal. But nothing *can* be normal in such a situation. They *had* known me, and they *had* loved me; but now they couldn't be blamed for feeling *He thinks he's too good for us now*. I certainly didn't feel that, but I had no conceivable relationship to them anymore—that shy, pop-eyed thirteen year old my friend's mother had scolded and loved was no more. *I* was not the same, but *they* were, as though they had been trapped, preserved, in that moment in time. They seemed scarcely



to have grown any older, my friend and his mother, and they greeted me as they had greeted me years ago, though I was now well past forty and felt every hour of it. My friend and I remained alike only in that neither of us had gained any weight. His face was as boyish as ever, and his voice; only a touch of grey in his hair proved that we were no longer at P.S. 139. And my life came with me into their small, dark, unspeakably respectable, incredibly hard-won rooms like the roar of champagne and the odor of brimstone. They still believed in the Lord, but I had quarreled with Him, and offended Him, and walked out of His house. They didn't smoke, but they knew (from seeing me on television) that I did, and they had placed about the room, in deference to me, those hideous little ash trays which can hold exactly one cigarette butt. And there was a bottle of whiskey, too, and they asked me if I wanted steak or chicken; for, in my travels, I might have learned not to like fried chicken anymore. I said, much relieved to be able to tell the truth, that I preferred chicken. I gave my friend the suit.

My friend's stepdaughter is young, considers herself a militant, and we had a brief argument concerning Bill Styron's *Nat Turner*, which I suggested that she read before condemning. This rather shocked the child, whose militancy, like that of many, tends to be a matter of indigestible fury and slogans and quotations. It rather checked the company, which had not

imagined that I and a black militant could possibly disagree about anything. But what was most striking about our brief exchange was that it obliquely revealed how little the girl respected her stepfather. She appeared not to respect him at all. This was not revealed by anything she said to him, but by the fact that she said nothing to him. She barely looked at him. He didn't count.

I always think that this is a terrible thing to happen to a man, especially in his own house, and I am always terribly humiliated for the man to whom it happens. Then, of course, you get angry at the man for allowing it to happen.

And *how* had it happened? He had never been the brightest boy in the world, nobody is, but he had been energetic, active, funny, wrestling, playing handball, cheerfully submitting to being tyrannized by me, even to the extent of kneeling before the altar and having his soul saved—my insistence had accomplished that. I looked at him and remembered his sweating and beautiful face that night as he wrestled on the church floor and we prayed him through. I remembered his older brother, who had died in Sicily, in battle for the free world—he had barely had time to see Sicily before he died and had assuredly never seen the free world. I remembered the day he came to see me to tell me that his sister, who had been very ill, had died. We sat on the steps of the tenement, he was looking down as

he told me, one finger making a circle on the step, and his tears splashed on the wood. We were children then, his sister had not been much older, and he was the youngest and now the only boy. But this was not *how* it had happened, although I thought I could see, watching his widowed mother's still very handsome face watching him, how her human need might have held and trapped and frozen him. She had been sewing in the garment center all the years I knew them, rushing home to get supper on the table before her husband got home from *his* job; at night, and on Sundays, he was a deacon; and God knows, or should, where his energy came from. When I began working for the garment center, I used to see her, from time to time, rushing to catch the bus, in a crowd of black and Puerto Rican ladies.

And, yes, we had all loved each other then, and I had had great respect for my friend, who was handsomer than I, and more athletic, and more popular, and who beat me in every game I was foolish enough to play with him. I had gone my way and life had accomplished its inexorable mathematic—and what in the world was I by now but an aging, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous, unspeakably erratic freak? his old friend. And what was *he* now? he worked for the post office and was building a house next door to his mother, in, I think, Long Island. They, too, then, had made it. But what I could not understand was how nothing seemed to have touched this man. We are

living through what our church described as “these last and evil days,” through wars and rumors of wars, to say the least. He could, for example, have known something about the anti-poverty program if only because his wife was more or less involved in it. He should have known something about the then raging school battle, if only because his stepdaughter was a student; and she, whether or not she had thought her position through, was certainly involved. She may have hoped, at one time, anyway, for his clarity and his help. But, no. He seemed as little touched by the cataclysm in his house and all around him as he was by the mail he handled every day. I found this unbelievable, and, given my temperament and our old connection, maddening. We got into a battle about the war in Vietnam. I probably really should not have allowed this to happen, but it was partly the stepdaughter's prodding. And I was astounded that my friend would defend this particular racist folly. What for? for his job at the post office? And the answer came back at once, alas—yes. For his job at the post office. I told him that Americans had no business at all in Vietnam; and that black people certainly had no business there, aiding the slave master to enslave yet more millions of dark people, and also identifying themselves with the white American crimes: we, the blacks, are going to need our allies, for the Americans, odd as it may sound at the moment, will presently have none. It wasn't, I said, hard to understand why a black boy, standing, future-

less, on the corner, would decide to join the Army, nor was it hard to decipher the slave master's reasons for hoping that he wouldn't live to come home, with a gun; but it wasn't necessary, after all, to defend it: to defend, that is, one's murder and one's murderers. "Wait a minute," he said, "let me stand up and tell you what I think we're trying to do there." "We?" I cried, "what motherfucking *we*? You stand up, motherfucker, and I'll kick you in the ass!"

He looked at me. His mother conveyed—but the good Lord knows I had hurt her—that she didn't want that language in her house, and that I had never talked that way before. And I love the lady. I had meant no disrespect. I stared at my friend, my old friend, and felt millions of people staring at us both. I tried to make a kind of joke out of it all. But it was too late. The way they looked at me proved that I had tipped my hand. And *this* hurt *me*. They should have known me better, or at least enough, to have known that I meant what I said. But the general reaction to famous people who hold difficult opinions is that they can't really mean it. It's considered, generally, to be merely an astute way of attracting public attention, a way of making oneself interesting: one marches in Montgomery, for example, merely (in my own case) to sell one's books. Well. There is nothing, then, to be said. There went the friendly fried chicken dinner. There went the loving past. I watched the mother watching me, won-

dering what had happened to her beloved Jimmy, and giving me up: her sourest suspicions confirmed. In great weariness I poured myself yet another stiff drink, by now definitively condemned, and lit another cigarette, they watching me all the while for symptoms of cancer, and with a precipice at my feet.

For that bloody suit was *their* suit, after all, it had been bought *for* them, it had even been bought *by* them: *they* had created Martin, he had not created them, and the blood in which the fabric of that suit was stiffening was theirs. The distance between us, and I had never thought of this before, was that they did not know this, and I now dared to realize that I loved them more than they loved me. And I do not mean that my love was greater: who dares judge the inexpressible expense another pays for his life? who knows how much one is loved, by whom, or what that love may be called on to do? No, the way the cards had fallen meant that I had to face more about them than they could know about me, knew their rent, whereas they did not know mine, and was condemned to make them uncomfortable. For, on the other hand, they certainly wanted that freedom which they thought was mine—that frightening limousine, for example, or the power to give away a suit, or my increasingly terrifying trans-Atlantic journeys. How can one say that freedom is taken, not given, and that no one is free until all are free? and that the price is high.

My friend tried on the suit, a perfect fit, and they all admired him in it, and I went home.

Well. Time passes and passes. It passes backward and it passes forward and it carries you along, and no one in the whole wide world knows more about time than this: it is carrying you through an element you do not understand into an element you will not remember. Yet, *something* remembers—it can even be said that something avenges: the trap of our century, and the subject now before us.

I left home—Harlem—in 1942. I returned, in 1946, to do, with a white photographer, one of several unpublished efforts; had planned to marry, then realized that I couldn't—or shouldn't, which comes to the same thing—threw my wedding rings into the Hudson River, and left New York for Paris, in 1948. By this time, of course, I was mad, as mad as my dead father. If I had not gone mad, I could not have left.

I starved in Paris for a while, but I learned something: for one thing, I fell in love. Or, more accurately, I realized, and accepted for the first time that love was not merely a general, human possibility, nor merely the disaster it had so often, by then, been for me—according to me—nor was it something that happened to other people, like death, nor was it merely a mortal danger: it was among *my* possibilities, for here it was, breathing and belching beside me, and it was the key to life. Not merely the key to *my* life, but to life itself.

My falling in love is in no way the subject of this book, and yet honesty compels me to place it among the details, for I think—I know—that my story would be a very different one if love had not forced me to attempt to deal with myself. It began to pry open for me the trap of color, for people do not fall in love according to their color—this may come as news to noble pioneers and eloquent astronauts, to say nothing of most of the representatives of most of the American states—and when lovers quarrel, as indeed they inevitably do, it is not the degree of their pigmentation that they are quarreling about, nor can lovers, on any level whatever, use color as a weapon. This means that one must accept one's nakedness. And nakedness has no color: this can come as news only to those who have never covered, or been covered by, another naked human being.

In any case, the world changes then, and it changes forever. Because you love one human being, you see everyone else very differently than you saw them before—perhaps I only mean to say that you begin to *see*—and you are both stronger and more vulnerable, both free and bound. Free, paradoxically, because, now, you have a home—your lover's arms. And bound: to that mystery, precisely, a bondage which liberates you into something of the glory and suffering of the world.

I had come to Paris with no money and this meant that in those early years I lived mainly among *les miséra-*

bles—and, in Paris, *les misérables* are Algerian. They slept four or five or six to a room, and they slept in shifts, they were treated like dirt, and they scraped such sustenance as they could off the filthy, unyielding Paris stones. The French called them lazy because they appeared to spend most of their time sitting around, drinking tea, in their cafés. But they were not lazy. They were mostly unable to find work, and their rooms were freezing. (French students spent most of their time in cafés, too, for the same reason, but no one called them lazy.) The Arab cafés were warm and cheap, and they were together there. They could not, in the main, afford the French cafés, nor in the main, were they welcome there. And, though they spoke French, and had been, in a sense, produced by France, they were not at home in Paris, no more at home than I, though for a different reason. They remembered, as it were, an opulence, opulence of taste, touch, water, sun, which I had barely dreamed of, and they had not come to France to stay. One day they were going home, and they knew exactly where home was. They, thus, held something within them which they would never surrender to France. But on my side of the ocean, or so it seemed to me then, we had surrendered everything, or had had everything taken away, and there was no place for us to go: we *were* home. The Arabs were together in Paris, but the American blacks were alone. The Algerian poverty was absolute, their stratagems grim, their personalities, for me, unreadable.

ble, their present bloody and their future certain to be more so: and yet, after all, their situation was far more coherent than mine. I will not say that I envied them, for I didn't, and the directness of their hunger, or hungers, intimidated me; but I respected them, and as I began to discern what their history had made of them, I began to suspect, somewhat painfully, what my history had made of me.

The French were still hopelessly slugging it out in Indo-China when I first arrived in France, and I was living in Paris when Dien Bien Phu fell. The Algerian rug-sellers and peanut vendors on the streets of Paris then had obviously not the remotest connection with this most crucial of the French reverses; and yet the attitude of the police, which had always been menacing, began to be yet more snide and vindictive. This puzzled me at first, but it shouldn't have. This is the way people react to the loss of empire—for the loss of an empire also implies a radical revision of the individual identity—and I was to see this over and over again, not only in France. The Arabs were not a part of Indo-China, but they *were* part of an empire visibly and swiftly crumbling, and part of a history which was achieving, in the most literal and frightening sense, its *dénouement*—was revealing itself, that is, as being not at all the myth which the French had made of it—and the French authority to rule over them was being more hotly contested with every hour. The challenged authority, unable to justify itself and not dreaming in-

deed of even attempting to do so, simply increased its force. This had the interesting result of revealing how frightened the French authority had become, and many a North African then resolved, *coûte que coûte*, to bring the French to another Dien Bien Phu.

Something else struck me, which I was to watch more closely in my own country. The French were hurt and furious that their stewardship should be questioned, especially by those they ruled, and if, in this, they were not very original, they were exceedingly intense. After all, as they continually pointed out, there had been nothing in those colonies before they got there, nothing at all; or what meagre resources of mineral or oil there might have been weren't doing the natives any good because the natives didn't even know that they were there, or what they were there for. Thus, the exploitation of the colony's resources was done for the good of the natives; and so vocal could the French become as concerns what they had brought into their colonies that it would have been the height of bad manners to have asked what they had brought out. (I was later to see something of how this fair exchange worked when I visited Senegal and Guinea.)

It was strange to find oneself, in another language, in another country, listening to the same old song and hearing oneself condemned in the same old way. The French (for example) had always had excellent relations with their natives, and they had a treasurehouse

of anecdotes to prove it. (I never found any natives to corroborate the anecdotes, but, then, I have never met an African who did not loathe Dr. Schweitzer.) They cited the hospitals built, and the schools—I was to see some of these later, too. Every once in a while someone might be made uneasy by the color of my skin, or an expression on my face, or I might say something to make him uneasy, or I might, arbitrarily (there was no reason to suppose that they wanted me), claim kinship with the Arabs. Then, I was told, with a generous smile, that I was different: *le noir Américain est très évolué, voyons!* But the Arabs were not like me, they were not “civilized” like me. It was something of a shock to hear myself described as civilized, but the accolade thirsted for so long had, alas, been delivered too late, and I was fascinated by one of several inconsistencies. I have never heard a Frenchman describe the United States as civilized, not even those Frenchmen who like the States. Of course, I think the truth is that the French do not consider that the world contains any nation as civilized as France. But, leaving that aside, if so crude a nation as the United States could produce so gloriously civilized a creature as myself, how was it that the French, armed with centuries of civilized grace, had been unable to civilize the Arab? I thought that this was a very cunning question, but I was wrong, because the answer was so simple: the Arabs did not wish to be civilized. Oh, it was not possible for an American to understand these people as the French did; after all,

they had got on well together for nearly one hundred and thirty years. But they had, the Arabs, their customs, their dialects, languages, tribes, regions, another religion, or, perhaps, many religions—and the French were not *raciste*, like the Americans, they did not believe in destroying indigenous cultures. And then, too, the Arab was always hiding something; you couldn't guess what he was thinking and couldn't trust what he was saying. And they had a different attitude toward women, they were very brutal with them, in a word they were rapists, and they stole, and they carried knives. But the French had endured this for more than a hundred years and were willing to endure it for a hundred years more, in spite of the fact that Algeria was a great drain on the national pocketbook and the fact that any Algerian—due to the fact that Algeria was French, was, in fact, a French *département*, and was damn well going to stay that way—was free to come to Paris at any time and jeopardize the economy and prowl the streets and prey on French women. In short, the record of French generosity was so exemplary that it was impossible to believe that the children could seriously be bent on revolution.

Impossible for a Frenchman, perhaps, but not for me. I had watched the police, one sunny afternoon, beat an old, one-armed Arab peanut vendor senseless in the streets, and I had watched the unconcerned faces of the French on the café terraces, and the con-

gested faces of the Arabs. Yes, I could believe it: and here it came.

Not without warning, and not without precedent: but only poets, since they must excavate and recreate history, have ever learned anything from it.

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I returned to New York in 1952, after four years away, at the height of the national convulsion called McCarthyism. This convulsion did not surprise me, for I don't think that it was possible for Americans to surprise me anymore; but it was very frightening, in many ways, and for many reasons. I realized, for one thing, that I was saved from direct—or, more accurately, public—exposure to the American Inquisitors only by my color, my obscurity, and my comparative youth: or, in other words, by the lack, on their parts, of any imagination. I was just a shade too young to have had any legally recognizable political history. A boy of thirteen is a minor, and, in the eyes of the Republic, if he is black, and lives in a black ghetto, he was born to carry packages; but, in fact, at thirteen, I had been a convinced fellow traveler. I marched in one May Day parade, carrying banners, shouting, *East Side, West Side, all around the town, We want the landlords to tear the slums down!* I didn't know anything about Communism, but I knew a lot about slums. By the time I was nineteen, I was a Trotskyite, having learned a great deal by then, if not about Communism, at least about

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Stalinists. The convulsion was the more ironical for me in that I had been an anti-Communist when America and Russia were allies. I had nearly been murdered on 14th Street, one evening, for putting down too loudly, in the presence of patriots, that memorable contribution to the War effort, the Warner Brothers production of *Mission To Moscow*. The very same patriots now wanted to burn the film and hang the filmmakers, and Warners, during the McCarthy era, went to no little trouble to explain their film away. Warners was abject, and so was nearly everybody else, it was a foul, ignoble time: and my contempt for most American intellectuals, and/or liberals dates from what I observed of their manhood then. I say most, not all, but the exceptions constitute a remarkable pantheon, even, or, rather, especially those who did not survive the flames into which their lives and their reputations were hurled. I had come home to a city in which nearly everyone was gracelessly scurrying for shelter, in which friends were throwing their friends to the wolves, and justifying their treachery by learned discourses (and tremendous tomes) on the treachery of the Comintern. Some of the things written during those years, justifying, for example, the execution of the Rosenbergs, or the crucifixion of Alger Hiss (and the beatification of Whittaker Chambers) taught me something about the irresponsibility and cowardice of the liberal community which I will never forget. Their performance, then, yet more than the combination of

ignorance and arrogance with which this community has always protected itself against the deepest implications of black suffering, persuaded me that brilliance without passion is nothing more than sterility. It must be remembered, after all, that I did not begin meeting these people at the point that they began to meet *me*: I had been delivering their packages and emptying their garbage and taking their tips for years. (And they don't tip well.) And what I watched them do to each other during the McCarthy era was, in some ways, worse than anything they had ever done to me, for I, at least, had never been mad enough to depend on their devotion. It seemed very clear to me that they were lying about their motives and were being blackmailed by their guilt; were, in fact, at bottom, nothing more than the respectable issue of various immigrants, struggling to hold on to what they had acquired. For, intellectual activity, according to me, is, and must be, disinterested—the truth *is* a two-edged sword—and if one is not willing to be pierced by that sword, even to the extreme of dying on it, then all of one's intellectual activity is a masturbatory delusion and a wicked and dangerous fraud.

I made such motions as I could to understand what was happening, and to keep myself afloat. But I had been away too long. It was not only that I *could* not readjust myself to life in New York—it was also that I *would* not: I was never going to be anybody's nigger again. But I was now to discover that the world has



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more than one way of keeping you a nigger, has evolved more than one way of skinning the cat; if the hand slips here, it tightens there, and now I was offered, gracefully indeed: membership in the club. I had lunch at some elegant bistros, dinner at some exclusive clubs. I tried to be understanding about my countrymen's concern for difficult me, and unruly mine—and I really *was* trying to be understanding, though not without some bewilderment, and, eventually, some malice. I began to be profoundly uncomfortable. It was a strange kind of discomfort, a terrified apprehension that I had lost my bearings. I did not altogether understand what I was hearing. I did not trust what I heard myself saying. In very little that I heard did I hear anything that reflected anything which *I* knew, or had endured, of life. My mother and my father, my brothers and my sisters were not present at the tables at which I sat down, and no one in the company had ever heard of them. My own beginnings, or instincts, began to shift as nervously as the cigarette smoke that wavered around my head. I was not trying to hold on to my wretchedness. On the contrary, if my poverty was coming, at last, to an end, so much the better, and it wasn't happening a moment too soon—and yet, I felt an increasing chill, as though the rest of my life would have to be lived in silence.

I think it may have been my own obsession with the McCarthy phenomenon which caused me to suspect

the impotence and narcissism of so many of the people whose names I had respected. I had never had any occasion to judge them, as it were, intimately. For me, simply, McCarthy was a coward and a bully, with no claim to honor, nor any claim to honorable attention. For me, emphatically, there were *not* two sides to this dubious coin, and, as to his baleful and dangerous effect, there could be no *question* at all. Yet, they spent hours debating whether or not McCarthy was an enemy of domestic liberties. I couldn't but wonder what conceivable further proof they were awaiting: I thought of German Jews sitting around debating whether or not Hitler was a threat to their lives until the debate was summarily resolved for them by a knocking at the door. Nevertheless, this learned, civilized, intellectual-liberal debate cheerfully raged in its vacuum, while every hour brought more distress and confusion—and dishonor—to the country they claimed to love. The pretext for all this, of course, was the necessity of "containing" Communism, which, they unblushingly informed me, was a threat to the "free" world. I did not say to what extent this free world menaced me, and millions like me. But I wondered how the justification of blatant and mindless tyranny, on any level, could operate in the interests of liberty, and I wondered what interior, unspoken urgencies of these people made necessary so thoroughly unattractive a delusion. I wondered what they really felt about human life, for they were so choked and

cloaked with formulas that they no longer seemed to have any connection with it. They were all, for a while anyway, very proud of me, of course, proud that I had been able to crawl up to their level and been "accepted." What *I* might think of *their* level, how *I* might react to this "acceptance," or what this acceptance might cost me, were not among the questions which racked them in the midnight hour. One wondered, indeed, if anything could ever disturb their sleep. They walked the same streets I walked, after all, rode the same subways, must have seen the same increasingly desperate and hostile boys and girls, must, at least occasionally, have passed through the garment center. It is true that even those who taught at Columbia never saw Harlem, but, on the other hand, everything that New York has become, in 1971, was visibly and swiftly beginning to happen in 1952: one had only to take a bus from the top of the city and ride through it to see how it was darkening and deteriorating, how human bewilderment and hostility rose, how human contact was endangered and dying. Of course, these liberals were not, as I was, forever being found by the police in the "wrong" neighborhood, and so could not have had first-hand knowledge of how gleefully a policeman translates his orders from above. But they had no right not to know that; if they did not know that, they knew nothing and had no right to speak as though they were responsible actors in their society; for their complicity with the patriots of that

hour meant that the policeman was acting on *their* orders, too.

No, I couldn't hack it. When my first novel was finally sold, I picked up my advance and walked straight to the steamship office and booked passage back to France.

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I place it here, though it occurred during a later visit: I found myself in a room one night, with my liberal friends, after a private showing of the French film, *The Wages of Fear*. The question on the floor was whether or not this film should be shown in the United States. The reason for the question was that the film contained unflattering references to American oil companies. I do not know if I said anything, or not; I rather doubt that I could have said much. I felt as paralyzed, fascinated, as a rabbit before a snake. I had, in fact, already seen the film in France. It had not occurred to me, or to anyone I knew, that the film was even remotely anti-American: by no stretch of the imagination could this be considered the film's *motif*. Yet, here were the autumn patriots, hotly discussing the dangers of a film which dared to suggest that American oil interests didn't give a shit about human life. There was a French woman in the room, tight-mouthed, bitter, far from young. She may or may not have been the widow of a Vichyite General, but her sympathies were in that region: and I will never forget her saying, looking straight at me, "We always knew

that you, the Americans, would realize, one day, that you fought on the wrong side!”

I was ashamed of myself for being in that room: but, I must say, too, that I was glad, glad to have been a witness, glad to have come far enough to have heard the devil speak. That woman gave me something, I will never forget her, and I walked away from the welcome table.

Yet, hope—the hope that we, human beings, can be better than we are—dies hard; perhaps one can no longer live if one allows that hope to die. But it is also hard to see what one sees. One sees that most human beings are wretched, and, in one way or another, become wicked: because they are so wretched. And one’s turning away, then, from what I have called the welcome table is dictated by some mysterious vow one scarcely knows one’s taken—never to allow oneself to fall so low. Lower, perhaps, much lower, to the very dregs: but never there.

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When I came back to Paris at the end of the summer, most of the Arab cafés I knew had been closed. My favorite money-changer and low-life guide, a beautiful stone hustler, had disappeared, no one knew—or no one said—where. Another cat had had his eyes put out—some said by the police, some said by his brothers, because he was a police informer. In a sense, that beautiful, blinded boy who had been punished either as a traitor to France or as a traitor to Algeria, sums

up the Paris climate in the years immediately preceding the revolution. One was either French, or Algerian; one could not be both.

There began, now, a time of rumor unlike anything I had ever been through before. In a way, I was somewhat insulated against what was happening to the Algerians, or was aware of it from a certain distance, because what was happening to the Algerians did not appear to be happening to the blacks. I was still operating, unconsciously, within the American framework, and, in that framework, since Arabs are paler than blacks, it is the blacks who would have suffered most. But the blacks, from Martinique and Senegal, and so on, were as visible and vivid as they had always been, and no one appeared to molest them or to pay them any particular attention at all. Not only was I operating within the American frame of reference, I was also a member of the American colony, and we were, in general, slow to pick up on what was going on around us.

Nevertheless, I began to realize that I could not find *any* of the Algerians I knew, not one; and since I could not find one, there was no way to ask about the others. They were in none of the dives we had frequented, they had apparently abandoned their rooms, their cafés, as I have said, were closed, and they were no longer to be seen on the Paris sidewalks, changing money, or selling their rugs, their peanuts, or themselves. We heard that they had been placed in camps around Paris, that they were being tortured there, that

they were being murdered. No one wished to believe any of this, it made us exceedingly uncomfortable, and we felt that we should do something, but there was nothing we could do. We began to realize that there *had* to be some truth to these pale and cloudy rumors: one woman told me of seeing an Algerian hurled by the proprietor of a café in Pigalle *through* the café's *closed* plate-glass door. If she had not witnessed a murder, she had certainly witnessed a murder attempt. And, in fact, Algerians *were* being murdered in the streets, and corraled into prisons, and being dropped into the Seine, like flies.

Not only Algerians. Everyone in Paris, in those years, who was not, resoundingly, from the north of Europe was suspected of being Algerian; and the police were on every street corner, sometimes armed with machine guns. Turks, Greeks, Spaniards, Jews, Italians, American blacks, and Frenchmen from Marseilles, or Nice, were all under constant harassment, and we will never know how many people having not the remotest connection with Algeria were thrown into prison, or murdered, as it were, by accident. The son of a world-famous actor, and an actor himself, swarthy, and speaking no French—rendered speechless indeed by the fact that the policeman had a gun leveled at him—was saved only by the fact that he was close enough to his hotel to shout for the night porter, who came rushing out and identified him. Two young Italians, on holiday, did not fare so well: speeding

merrily along on their Vespa, they failed to respond to a policeman's order to halt, whereupon the policeman fired, and the holiday came to a bloody end. Everyone one knew was full of stories like these, which eventually began to appear in the press, and one had to be careful how one moved about in the fabulous city of light.

I had never, thank God—and certainly not once I found myself living there—been even remotely romantic about Paris. I may have been romantic about London—because of Charles Dickens—but the romance lasted for exactly as long as it took me to carry my bags out of Victoria Station. My journey, or my flight, had not been *to* Paris, but simply *away* from America. For example, I had seriously considered going to work on a kibbutz in Israel, and I ended up in Paris almost literally by closing my eyes and putting my finger on a map. So I was not as demoralized by all of this as I would certainly have been if I had ever made the error of considering Paris the most civilized of cities and the French as the least primitive of peoples. I knew too much about the French Revolution for that. I had read too much Balzac for that. Whenever I crossed la place de la Concorde, I heard the tumbrils arriving, and the roar of the mob, and where the obelisk now towers, I saw—and see—*la guillotine*. Anyone who has ever been at the mercy of the people, then, knows something awful about us, will forever distrust

the popular patriotism, and avoids even the most convivial of mobs.

Still, my flight had been dictated by my hope that I could find myself in a place where I would be treated more humanely than my society had treated me at home, where my risks would be more personal, and my fate less austere sealed. And Paris had done this for me: by leaving me completely alone. I lived in Paris for a long time without making a single French friend, and even longer before I saw the inside of a French home. This did not really upset me, either, for Henry James had been here before me and had had the generosity to clue me in. Furthermore, for a black boy who had grown up on Welfare and the chicken-shit goodwill of American liberals, this total indifference came as a great relief and, even, as a mark of respect. If I could make it, I could make it; so much the better. And if I couldn't, I couldn't—so much the worse. I didn't want any help, and the French certainly didn't give me any—they let me do it myself; and for that reason, even knowing what I know, and unromantic as I am, there will always be a kind of love story between myself and that odd, unpredictable collection of bourgeois chauvinists who call themselves *la France*.

Or, in other words, my reasons for coming to France, and the comparative freedom of my life in Paris, meant that my attitude toward France was very different from that of any Algerian. He, and his broth-

ers, were, in fact, being murdered by my hosts. And Algeria, after all, is a part of Africa, and France, after all, is a part of Europe: that Europe which invaded and raped the African continent and slaughtered those Africans whom they could not enslave—that Europe from which, in sober truth, Africa has yet to liberate herself. The fact that I had never seen the Algerian casbah was of no more relevance before this unanswerable panorama than the fact that the Algerians had never seen Harlem. The Algerian and I were both, alike, victims of this history, and I was still a part of Africa, even though I had been carried out of it nearly four hundred years before.

The question of my identity had never before been so crucially allied with the reality—the doom—of the moral choice. The irreducible inconvenience of the moral choice is that it is, by definition, arbitrary—through it sounds so grandiose—and, on the surface, unreasonable, and has no justification but (or in) itself. My reaction, in the present instance, was unreasonable on its face, not only because of my ignorance of the Arab world, but also because I could not affect their destiny in any degree. And yet, their destiny was somehow tied to mine, their battle was not theirs alone but was my battle also, and it began to be a matter of my honor not to attempt to avoid this loaded fact.

And, furthermore—though this was truer in principle than it was in fact, as I had had occasion to learn

—my life in Paris was to some extent protected by the fact that I carried a green passport. This passport proclaimed that I was a free citizen of a free country, and was not, therefore, to be treated as one of Europe's uncivilized, black possessions. This same passport, on the other side of the ocean, underwent a sea change and proclaimed that I was not an African prince, but a domestic nigger and that no foreign government would be offended if my corpse were to be found clogging up the sewers. I had never had occasion to reflect before on the brilliance of the white strategy: blacks didn't know each other, could barely speak to each other, and, therefore, could scarcely trust each other—and therefore, wherever we turned, we found ourselves in the white man's territory, and at the white man's mercy. Four hundred years in the West had certainly turned me into a Westerner—there was no way around that. But four hundred years in the West had also failed to bleach me—there was no way around *that*, either—and my history in the West had, for its daily effect, placed me in such mortal danger that I had fled, all the way around the corner, to France. And if I had fled, to Israel, a state created for the purpose of protecting Western interests, I would have been in yet a tighter bind: on which side of Jerusalem would I have decided to live? In 1948, no African nation, as such, existed, and could certainly neither have needed, nor welcomed, a penniless black American, with the possible exception of Liberia. But, even with black over-

seers, I would not have lasted long on the Firestone rubber plantation.

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I have said that I was almost entirely ignorant of the details of the Algerian-French complexity, but I was endeavoring to correct this ignorance; and one of the ways in which I was going about it compelled me to keep a file of the editorial pronouncements made by M. Albert Camus in the pages of the French political newspaper, *Combat*. Camus had been born in Oran, which is the scene of his first novel, *The Stranger*. He could be described, perhaps, as a radical humanist; he was young, he was lucid, and it was not illogical to assume that he would bring—along with the authority of knowing the land of his birth—some of these qualities to bear on his apprehension of the nature of the French-Algerian conflict.

I have never esteemed this writer as highly as do so many others. I was struck by the fact that, for Camus, the European humanism appeared to expire at the European gates: so that Camus, who was dedicated to liberty, in the case of Europeans, could only speak of “justice” in the case of Algeria. And yet, he must surely have known, must have seen with his own eyes, some of the results of French “justice” in Algeria. (“A legal means,” said an African recipient, “of administering injustice.”) Given the precepts upon which he based his eloquent discourses concerning the problems of individual liberty, he must have seen that what

the battle of Algiers was really about was the fact that the French refused to give the Algerians the right to be wrong; refused to allow them, so to speak, that “existentialist” situation, of which the French, for a season, were so enamored; or, more accurately, did not even dare imagine that the Algerian situation could be “existentialist”; precisely because the French situation was so extreme. There was no way for him not to have known that Algeria was French only insofar as French power had decreed it to be French. It existed on the European map only insofar as European power had placed it there. It is power, not justice, which keeps rearranging the map, and the Algerians were not fighting the French for justice (of which, indeed, they must have had their fill by that time) but for the power to determine their own destinies.

It was during this time that Camus translated and directed, for the Mathurin Theatre, in Paris, William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*, and an American magazine asked me to review it. I would almost certainly not have seen this production otherwise, for I had seen the play in New York, and I had read the book, and had found Faulkner’s fable to be a preposterous bore. But I trotted off to the Mathurin Theatre to see it, taking along a gallant lady friend. And we suffered through this odd and interminable account of the sins of a white Southern lady, and her cardboard husband, and the nigger-whore-dope fiend maid, Nancy. Nancy, in order to arrest her mistress’s headlong flight to self-

destruction—to bring her to her senses—murders the white lady’s infant. This may seem an odd way of healing the sick, but Nancy is, in fact, the Christ figure, and has taken her mistress’s sins on herself.

Why? Nancy has enough sins of her own, which on the whole would seem to be rather more interesting, and the lady she takes such drastic means of saving is too dull, and much, much too talkative—in a word, too unreal—to warrant such concern.

The key to a tale is to be found in who tells it; and so I thought I could see why Faulkner may have needed to believe in a black forgiveness, furthermore, which, if one stands aside from what Faulkner wishes us to make of it, can scarcely be distinguished from the bloodiest, most classical Old Testament revenge. What Faulkner wishes us to believe, and what he wishes to believe, is at war with what he, fatally, suspects. He suspects that black Nancy may have murdered white Temple’s white baby out of pure, exasperated hatred. In life, in any case, it would scarcely matter: Nancy’s forgiveness, or Nancy’s revenge, result, anyway, in infanticide; and it is this tension between hope and terror, this panic-stricken inability to read the meaning of the event, which condemns the play to an insupportable turgidity. I could see why Faulkner needed Nancy: but why did Camus need Faulkner? On what ground did they meet, the mind of the great, aging, Mississippi novelist, and the mind of the young writer from Oran?

Neither of them could accurately, or usefully, be described as racists, in spite of Faulkner's declared intention of shooting Negroes in the streets if he found this necessary for the salvation of the state of Mississippi. This statement had to be read as an excess of patriotism, unlikely, in Faulkner's case, to lead to any further action. The mischief of the remark lay in the fact that it certainly encouraged others to such action. And Faulkner's portraits of Negroes, which lack a system of nuances that, perhaps, only a black writer can see in black life—for Faulkner could see Negroes only as they related to him, not as they related to each other—are nevertheless made vivid by the torment of their creator. He is seeking to exorcise a history which is also a curse. He wants the old order, which came into existence through unchecked greed and wanton murder, to redeem itself without further bloodshed—without, that is, any further menacing itself—and without coercion. This, old orders never do, less because they would not than because they cannot. They cannot because they have always existed in relation to a force which they have had to subdue. This subjugation is the key to their identity and the triumph and justification of their history, and it is also on this continued subjugation that their material well-being depends. One may see that the history, which is now indivisible from oneself, has been full of errors and excesses; but this is not the same thing as seeing that, for millions of people, this history—oneself—has been

nothing but an intolerable yoke, a stinking prison, a shrieking grave. It is not so easy to see that, for millions of people, life itself depends on the speediest possible demolition of this history, even if this means the leveling, or the destruction of its heirs. And whatever this history may have given to the subjugated is of absolutely no value, since they have never been free to reject it; they will never even be able to assess it until they are free to take from it what they need, and to add to history the monumental fact of their presence. The South African coal miner, or the African digging for roots in the bush, or the Algerian mason working in Paris, not only have no reason to bow down before Shakespeare, or Descartes, or Westminster Abbey, or the cathedral at Chartres: they have, once these monuments intrude on their attention, no honorable access to them. Their apprehension of this history cannot fail to reveal to them that they have been robbed, maligned, and rejected: to bow down before that history is to accept that history's arrogant and unjust judgment.

This is why, ultimately, all attempts at dialogue between the subdued and subduer, between those placed within history and those dispersed outside, break down. One may say, indeed, that until this hour such a dialogue has scarcely been attempted: the subdued and the subduer do not speak the same language. What has passed for dialogue has usually involved one of "our" niggers, or, say, an *évolué* from



One bright afternoon, several of us, including the late Richard Wright, were meandering up the Boulevard St.-Germain, on the way to lunch. Much, if not most of the group was African, and all of us (though some only legally) were black. Facing us, on every newspaper kiosk on that wide, tree-shaded boulevard, were photographs of fifteen-year-old Dorothy Counts being reviled and spat upon by the mob as she was making her way to school in Charlotte, North Carolina. There was unutterable pride, tension, and anguish in that girl's face as she approached the halls of learning, with history, jeering, at her back.

It made me furious, it filled me with both hatred and pity, and it made me ashamed. Some one of us should have been there with her! I dawdled in Europe for nearly yet another year, held by my private life and my attempt to finish a novel, but it was on that bright afternoon that I knew I was leaving France. I could, simply, no longer sit around in Paris discussing the Algerian and the black American problem. Everybody else was paying their dues, and it was time I went home and paid mine.

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I took a boat home in the summer of 1957, intending to go South as soon as I could get the bread together. This meant, in my case, as soon as I could get an assignment. This was not so easy in 1957, and I was stuck in New York for a discouragingly long time. And now I had to begin to arrive at some kind of *modus*

*vivendi* with New York—for here I was, home again, for the first time in nine years—to stay. *To stay*: if this thought chilled me, it also relieved me. It was only here, after all, that I would be able to find out what my journey had meant to me, or what it had made of me.

And I began to see New York in a different way, seeing beneath the formlessness, in the detail of a cornice, the shape of a window, the movement of stone steps—*stoep*, say the Dutch, and we say, *stoop*—beneath the nearly invincible and despairing noise, the sound of many tongues, all struggling for dominance. Since I was here to stay, I had to examine it, learn it all over again, and try to find out if I had ever loved it. But the question contained, or so I suspected, its own melancholy answer. If I had ever loved New York, that love had, literally, been beaten out of me; if I had ever loved it, my life could never have depended on so long an absence and so deep a divorce; or, if I had ever loved it, I would have been glad, not frightened, to be back in my home town. No, I didn't love it, at least not any more, but I was going to have to survive it. In order to survive it, I would have to watch it. And, though I had nightmares about that Southland which I had never seen, I was terribly anxious to get there, perhaps to corroborate the nightmare, but certainly to get out of what was once described to me as "the great unfinished city."

Finally, I got my assignment, and I went South. Something began, for me, tremendous. I met some of

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the noblest, most beautiful people a man can hope to meet, and I saw some beautiful and some terrible things. I was old enough to recognize how deep and strangling were my fears, how manifold and mighty my limits: but no one can demand more of life than that life do him the honor to demand that he learn to live with his fears, and learn to live, every day, both within his limits and beyond them.

I must add, for the benefit of my so innocent and criminal countrymen, that, today, fifteen years later, the photograph of Angela Davis has replaced the photograph of Dorothy Counts. These two photographs would appear to sum up the will of the Americans—heirs of all the ages—in relation to the blacks.

There comes floating up to me, out of a life I lived long ago—during the cybernetics craze, the Wilhelm Reich misapprehension, the Karen Horney precisions, that time, predating Sartre, when many of my friends vanished into the hills, or into anarchies called communes, or into orgone boxes, never to be seen, and certainly never to make love again—the memory of a young white man, beautiful, Jewish, American, who ate his wife's afterbirth, frying it in a frying pan. He did this because—who knows?—Wilhelm Reich, according to him, had ordered it. He comes floating up to me because, though he never knew it, I loved him, and the silence between us was the precise indication of how deeply something in me responded to, and is still bewildered by, his trouble. I remember his face when

he told me about it, long after his courageous culinary effort. By this effort, he made his wife and child a part of himself. The question which has remained in my mind, no doubt, is why so extreme an effort should have been needed to prove a fact which should have been so obvious and so joyous. By the time he told me, he had lost both the wife and the child, was virtually adopting another one, black, this time, and, though he was younger than I, and I am speaking of a long time ago, had, emotionally, it seemed to me, ceased to exist. I got the impression that he had hurried himself through a late and tormented adolescence into an early middle age, with an almost audible sigh of relief, having encountered only theorems along the way: and, though he did not know it, was now helplessly and hopelessly in love with a small black boy, not more than ten. I do not mean to suggest that he had sexual designs on the boy. It might, indeed, have been better for him if he had, however outrageous that may sound—it would, at least, have landed him in deep emotional trouble and brought to the fore the question of his honor: I mean that he appeared to be able to love only the helpless. I have not seen this man in many years, and I hope that everything I say here has since been proven false. I hope, in short, that he has been able to live. But I have always been struck, in America, by an emotional poverty so bottomless, and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep, that virtually no American appears able to achieve any viable, organic

connection between his public stance and his private life. This is what makes them so baffling, so moving, so exasperating, and so untrustworthy. "Only connect," Henry James has said. Perhaps only an American writer would have been driven to say it, his very existence being so threatened by the failure, in most American lives, of the most elementary and crucial connections.

This failure of the private life has always had the most devastating effect on American public conduct, and on black-white relations. If Americans were not so terrified of their private selves, they would never have needed to invent and could never have become so dependent on what they still call "the Negro problem." This problem, which they invented in order to safeguard their purity, has made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them; and this not from anything blacks may or may not be doing but because of the role a guilty and constricted white imagination has assigned to the blacks. That the scapegoat pays for the sins of others is well known, but this is only legend, and a revealing one at that. In fact, however the scapegoat may be made to suffer, his suffering cannot purify the sinner; it merely incriminates him the more, and it seals his damnation. The scapegoat, eventually, is released, to death: his murderer continues to live. The suffering of the scapegoat has resulted in seas of blood, and yet not one sinner has been saved, or changed, by this despairing ritual. Sin has merely been

added to sin, and guilt piled upon guilt. In the private chambers of the soul, the guilty party is identified, and the accusing finger, there, is not legend, but consequence, not fantasy, but the truth. People pay for what they do, and, still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it very simply: by the lives they lead. The crucial thing, here, is that the sum of these individual abdications menaces life all over the world. For, in the generality, as social and moral and political and sexual entities, white Americans are probably the sickest and certainly the most dangerous people, of any color, to be found in the world today. I may not have realized this before my first journey South. But, once I found myself there, I recognized that the South was a riddle which could be read only in the light, or the darkness, of the unbelievable disasters which had overtaken the private life.

I say, "riddle": not the riddle of what this unhappy people claim, madly enough, as their "folk" ways. I had been a nigger for a long time. I was not struck by their wickedness, for that wickedness was but the spirit and the history of America. What struck me was the unbelievable dimension of their sorrow. I felt as though I had wandered into hell. But, it must also be said that, if they were in hell, some among them were beginning to recognize what fuel, in themselves, fed the flames. Their sorrow placed them far beyond, exactly, as at that hour, it seemed to have placed them far beneath, their compatriots—who did not yet know

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that sorrow existed, and who imagined that hell was a condition to which others were sentenced. For this reason, and I am not the only black man who will say this, I have more faith in Southerners than I will ever have in Northerners: the mighty and pious North could never, after all, have acquired its wealth without utilizing, brutally, and consciously, those "folk" ways, and locking the South within them. And when this country's absolutely inescapable disaster levels it, it is in the South and not in the North that the rebirth will begin.

I went, first, if memory serves, to Charlotte, North Carolina, where I met, among others, *The Carolina Israelite*. I went to Little Rock, where I met, among others, Mr. and Mrs. Bates. I went to Atlanta, where I met, among others, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. I went to Birmingham. I went to Montgomery. I went to Tuskegee. I don't know how long I was on the road. The canvas suitcase I had carried down was so full of contraband by the time I lugged it, on one shoulder, up, that it burst in the middle of Grand Central Station, scattering underground secrets all over the floor: no one, luckily, exhibited the remotest curiosity. I managed to get it all together, tied the suitcase together with the belt from my trousers, and got up the stairs, into the city. I collapsed in the home of a friend who lived in what was not yet known as the East Village—when I had been a tenant, it was known as the Lower East Side—and, re-living my trip, surrendered

to my nightmares, and, as far as the city was concerned, vanished. I could not take it on, I could not move out of that cold-water flat. I kept meaning to, I kept putting it off: for five days. I had called my sister, Gloria, from the station, so she knew that I was back in New York, but she did not know where. Therefore, my family and friends were searching for me in every Village street and bar and were considering the dubious and desperate extreme of calling the police. But, finally, I surfaced, fully conscious of how irresponsible I had been, and more than a little shaken by the realization that it had been a kind of retrospective terror which had paralyzed me so long. While in the South I had suppressed my terror well enough, in any case, to function; but when the pressure came off, a kind of wonder of terror overcame me, making me as useless as a snapped rubber band. This worried me exceedingly. I sensed in it a pattern which I was never, in fact, thoroughly to overcome. I will never forget the weary face of a black friend who had been searching for me for days, meeting me on Sixth Avenue as I was on my repentant way to the subway. He saw me as he turned from Waverly Place onto the avenue at the same time that I saw him. He stood stock-still as I was forced to walk toward him. A small, unwilling smile tugged at the corners of his lips. Then, I was in front of him and Lonnie said, "Well, *I'm* not going to curse you out. You've done it to yourself already." And he bought me a drink, and I went uptown to my sister's house,

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where I was sleeping on the couch in those days.

In the church, the preacher says, after an apparently meaningless anecdote, "I have said all that to say"—this: I doubt that I really knew much about terror before I went South. I do not mean, merely, though I very well might, that visceral reaction produced by the realization that one is facing one's own death. Then, as now, a Northern policeman, black or white, a white co-worker, or a black one, the colorless walls of precinct basements, the colorless handcuffs, the colorless future, are quite enough to introduce into one's life the stunning realization that that life can be ended at any moment. Furthermore, this terror can produce its own antidote: an overwhelming pride and rage, so that, whether or not one is ready to die, one gives every appearance of being willing to die. And at that moment, in fact, since retreat means accepting a death far worse, one *is* willing to die, hoping merely (God's last small mercy) to drag one's murderer along.

Not many among the redeemed have any sense of this passion, which they describe, without knowing how profoundly they are describing themselves, as suicidal. They mean that it is suicidal to contend with a force obviously, or apparently, greater than oneself and that they would never dream of doing such a thing. They also mean that they, by definition, by their numbers, are the greater force, and they never suspect to what merciless level of contempt this oblique and arrogant confession exposes them. A man who knows

that he is facing death, or, more accurately, who knows that it is, after all, he, himself, who has insisted on and brought about this moment, may, involuntarily, helplessly, shout or weep, or even piss or shit in his pants, where he stands. But he will not turn back. To turn back is no longer among his possibilities: that is why he may shout or weep and his stink may then fill the air. He has brought himself to this moment, and this is *he*—if only for a moment—*he*; and the others are beneath him, and anonymous forever because they value their manhood less than he.

But the terror I am speaking of has little to do with one's specific fears for oneself: it relates to Dante's *I would not have believed that death had undone so many*.

I arrived in Little Rock, for example, during the famous—then famous, now all but forgotten—school convulsion. This convulsion, it is to be remembered, had apparently to do with the question of the integration or education of black children—integration and education are not synonyms, though Americans appear to think so. I am a city boy. My life began in the Big City, and had to be slugged out, toe to toe, on the city pavements. This meant that I was badly prepared for an entity like Little Rock, which, while it was certainly not yet a city, was, equally certainly, no longer a town. For that matter, it was not, geographically speaking, Southern. It was Southern only in truth, in terms of what its history had made of it, which is to say, ultimately, that it was Southern by choice. It was

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Southern, therefore, to put it brutally, because of the history of America—the United States of America: and small black boys and girls were now paying for this holocaust. They were attempting to go to school. They were attempting to get an education, in a country in which education is a synonym for indoctrination, if you are white, and subjugation, if you are black. It was rather as though small Jewish boys and girls, in Hitler's Germany, insisted on getting a German education in order to overthrow the Third Reich. Here they were, nevertheless, scrubbed and shining, in their never-to-be-forgotten stiff little dresses, in their never-to-be-forgotten little blue suits, facing an army, facing a citizenry, facing white fathers, facing white mothers, facing the progeny of these co-citizens, facing the white past, to say nothing of the white present: small soldiers, armed with stiff, white dresses, and long or short dark blue pants, entering a leper colony, and young enough to believe that the colony could be healed, and saved. They paid a dreadful price, those children, for their missionary work among the heathen.

My terror involved my realization of the nature of the heathen. I did not meet any of my official murderers, not during that first journey. I met the Negro's friends. Thus, I was forced to recognize that, so long as your friend thinks of you as a Negro, you do not have a friend, and neither does he—your friend. You have become accomplices. Everything between you

depends on what he cannot say to you, and what you will not say to him. And one of you is listening. If one of you is listening, to all those things, precisely, which are not being said, the intensity of this attention can scarcely be described as the attention one friend brings to another. If one of you is listening, both of you are plotting, though, perhaps, only one of you knows it. Both of you may be plotting to escape, but, since very different avenues appear to be open to each of you, you are plotting your escape from each other.

I have written elsewhere about those early days in the South, but from a distance more or less impersonal. I have never, for example, written about my unbelieving shock when I realized that I was being groped by one of the most powerful men in one of the states I visited. He had got himself sweating drunk in order to arrive at this despairing titillation. With his wet eyes staring up at my face, and his wet hands groping for my cock, we were both, abruptly, in history's ass-pocket. It was very frightening—not the gesture itself, but the abjectness of it, and the assumption of a swift and grim complicity: as my identity was defined by his power, so was my humanity to be placed at the service of his fantasies. If the lives of those children were in those wet, despairing hands, if their future was to be read in those wet, blind eyes, there was reason to tremble. This man, with a phone call, could prevent or provoke a lynching. This was one of the men you called (or had a friend call) in order to

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get your brother off the prison farm. A phone call from him might prevent your brother from being dug up, later, during some random archaeological expedition. Therefore, one had to be friendly: but the price for this was your cock.

This will sound an exaggerated statement to Americans, who will suppose it to refer, merely, to sexual (or sectional) abnormality. This supposition misses the point: which is double-edged. The slave knows, however his master may be deluded on this point, that he is called a slave because his manhood has been, or can be, or will be taken from him. To be a slave means that one's manhood is engaged in a dubious battle indeed, and this stony fact is not altered by whatever devotion some masters and some slaves may have arrived at in relation to each other. In the case of American slavery, the black man's right to his women, as well as to his children, was simply taken from him, and whatever bastards the white man begat on the bodies of black women took their condition from the condition of their mother: blacks were not the only stallions on the slave-breeding farms! And one of the many results of this loveless, money-making conspiracy was that, in giving the masters every conceivable sexual and commercial license, it also emasculated them of any human responsibility—to their women, to their children, to their wives, or to themselves. The results of this blasphemy resound in this country, on every private and public level, until this hour. When the man

grabbed my cock, I didn't think of him as a faggot, which, indeed, if having a wife and children, house, cars, and a respectable and powerful standing in the community, mean anything, he wasn't: I watched his eyes, thinking, with great sorrow, *The unexamined life is not worth living*. The despair among the loveless is that they must narcotize themselves before they can touch any human being at all. They, then, fatally, touch the wrong person, not merely because they have gone blind, or have lost the sense of touch, but because they no longer have any way of knowing that any loveless touch is a violation, whether one is touching a woman or a man. When the loveless come to power, or when sexual despair comes to power, the sexuality of the object is either a threat or a fantasy. That most men will choose women to debase is not a matter of rejoicing either for the chosen women or anybody else; brutal truth, furthermore, forces the observation, particularly if one is a black man, that this choice is by no means certain. That men have an enormous need to debase other men—and only because they are *men*—is a truth which history forbids us to labor. And it is absolutely certain that white men, who invented the nigger's big black prick, are still at the mercy of this nightmare, and are still, for the most part, doomed, in one way or another, to attempt to make this prick their own: so much for the progress which the Christian world has made from that jungle in which it is their clear intention to keep black men treed forever.

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Every black man walking in this country pays a tremendous price for walking: for men are not women, and a man's balance depends on the weight he carries between his legs. All men, however they may face or fail to face it, however they may handle, or be handled by it, know something about each other, which is simply that a man without balls is not a man; that the word *genesis* describes the male, involves the phallus, and refers to the seed which gives life. When one man can no longer honor this in another man—and this remains true even if that man is his lover—he has abdicated from a man's estate, and, hard upon the heels of that abdication, chaos arrives. It was something like this that I began to see, watching black men in the South and watching white men watching them. For that marvelously mocking, salty authority with which black men walked was dictated by the tacit and shared realization of the price each had paid to be able to walk at all. Their fights came out of that, their laughter came out of that, their curses, their tears, their decisions, their so menaced loves, their courage, and even their cowardice—and perhaps especially the stunning and unexpected changes they could play on these so related strings—their music, their dancing: it all came from the center. “No,” said an elderly black man, standing in front of his barber shop, “I don't believe I'll join this voting registration drive. You see, I only cut the white folks' hair in here, and they'll close me up.” He was very tall; as he said this, he seemed to be

looking up at me, a physical impossibility; he had been bowing so long, my brother said, that his head would never be straight on his neck again. Yet, there he stood, a gnarled old tree, and the authority of his response made it impossible to question his decision: he may have been planning to cut a white man's throat one day. If I had been white, I certainly would never have allowed him anywhere near *me* with a razor in his hand. Most white men, by comparison, seemed to be barely shuffling along, and one always doubted whatever they said, because one realized that they doubted it themselves. As far as personal authority went, one could imagine that their shriveled faces were an exact indication of how matters were with them below the belt. And the women were worse—proof, if proof were needed: nowhere in the world have I encountered women so blighted, and blighted so soon. It began to seem to me, indeed, not entirely frivolously, that the only thing which prevented the South from being an absolutely homosexual community was, precisely, the reverberating absence of men.

One could not be in any Southern community for long and not be confronted with the question of what a man is, should do, or become. The world in which we live is, after all, a reflection of the desires and activities of men. We are responsible for the world in which we find ourselves, if only because we are the only sentient force which can change it. What brought this question to the front of my mind, of course, was



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the fact that so many of the black men I talked to in the South in those years were—I can find no other word for them—heroic. I don't want to be misunderstood as having fallen into an easy chauvinism when I say that: but I don't see how any observer of the Southern scene in those years can have arrived at any other judgment. Their heroism was to be found less in large things than in small ones, less in public than in private. Some of the men I am thinking of could be very impressive publicly, too, and responsible for large events; but it was not this which impressed me. What impressed me was how they went about their daily tasks, in the teeth of the Southern terror. The first time I saw Reverend Shuttlesworth, for example, he came strolling across the parking lot of the motel where I was staying, his hat perched precariously between the back of his skull and the nape of his neck, alone. It was late at night, and Shuttlesworth was a marked man in Birmingham. He came up into my room, and, while we talked, he kept walking back and forth to the window. I finally realized that he was keeping an eye on his car—making sure that no one put a bomb in it, perhaps. As he said nothing about this, however, naturally I could not. But I was worried about his driving home alone, and, as he was leaving, I could not resist saying something to this effect. And he smiled—smiled as though I were a novice, with much to learn, which was true, and as though he would be glad to give me a few pointers, which, indeed, not

much later on, he did—and told me he'd be all right and went downstairs and got into his car, switched on the motor and drove off into the soft Alabama night. There was no hint of defiance or bravado in his manner. Only, when I made my halting observation concerning his safety, a shade of sorrow crossed his face, deep, impatient, dark; then it was gone. It was the most impersonal anguish I had ever seen on a man's face. It was as though he were wrestling with the mighty fact that the danger in which he stood was as nothing compared to the spiritual horror which drove those who were trying to destroy him. They endangered him, but they doomed themselves.

I had never seen this horror, this poverty, before, though I had worked among Southerners, years before, when I was working for the Army, during the war. It was very frightening, disagreeable, and dangerous, but I was not, after all, in their territory—in a sense, or at least as they resentfully supposed, they were in mine. Also, I could, in a sense, protect myself against their depredations and the fear that they inspired in me by considering them, quite honestly, as mad. And I was too young for the idea of my death or destruction really to have taken hold of my mind. It is hard for anyone under twenty to realize that death has already assigned him a number, which is going to come up one day.

But I was not in my territory now. I was in territory absolutely hostile and exceedingly strange, and I was

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old enough to realize that I could be destroyed. It was lucky, oddly enough, that I had been out of the country for so long and had come South from Paris, in effect, instead of from New York. If I had not come from Paris, I would certainly have attempted to draw on my considerable kit of New York survival tricks, with what results I cannot imagine, for they would certainly not have worked in the South. But I had so far forgotten all my New York tricks as to have been unable to use them in New York, and now I was simply, helplessly, nakedly, an odd kind of foreigner and could only look on the scene that way. And this meant that, exactly like a foreigner, I was more fascinated than frightened.

There was more than enough to fascinate. In the Deep South—Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, for example—there is the great, vast, brooding, welcoming and bloodstained land, beautiful enough to astonish and break the heart. The land seems nearly to weep beneath the burden of this civilization's unnameable excrescences. The people and the children wander blindly through their forest of billboards, antennae, Coca-Cola bottles, gas stations, drive-ins, motels, beer cans, music of a strident and invincible melancholy, stilted wooden porches, snapping fans, aggressively blue-jeaned buttocks, strutting crotches, pint bottles, condoms, in the weeds, rotting automobile corpses, brown as beetles, earrings flashing in the gloom of bus stops: over all there seems to hang a

miasma of lust and longing and rage. Every Southern city seemed to me to have been but lately rescued from the swamps, which were patiently waiting to reclaim it. The people all seemed to remember their time under water, and to be both dreading and anticipating their return to that freedom from responsibility. Every black man, whatever his style, had been scarred, as in some tribal rite; and every white man, though white men, mostly, had no style, had been maimed. And, everywhere, the women, the most fearfully mistreated creatures of this region, with narrowed eyes and pursed lips—lips turned inward on a foul aftertaste—watched and rocked and waited. Some of them reminded me of a moment in my adolescent life when a church sister, not much older than I, who had been my girl friend, went mad, and was incarcerated. I went to visit her, in the women's wing of the asylum, and, coming out into the courtyard, stood there for a moment to catch my breath. Something, eventually, made me turn my head. Then I realized that I was standing in the sight of hundreds of incarcerated women. Behind those bars and windows, I don't know how many pairs of female eyes were riveted on the one male in that courtyard. I could dimly see their faces at the windows all up and down that wall; and they did not make a sound. For a moment I thought that I would never be able to persuade my feet to carry me away from that unspeakable, despairing, captive avidity.

My first night in Montgomery, I, like a good re-

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porter, decided to investigate the town a little. I had been warned to be very careful how I moved about in the South after dark—indeed, I had been told not to move at all; but it was a pleasant evening, night just beginning to fall: suppertime. I walked a ways, past dark porches which were mostly silent, yet one felt a presence, or presences, sitting deep in the dark, sometimes silhouetted—but rarely—in the light from an open door, or one saw the ember of a cigarette, or heard a child's voice. It was very peaceful, and, though it may sound odd, I was very glad that I had come South. In spite of all that could have divided us, and in spite of the fact that some of them looked on me with an inevitable suspicion, I felt very much at home among the dark people who lived where I, if so much had not been disrupted, would logically have been born. I felt, beneath everything, a profound acceptance, an unfamiliar peace, almost as though, after despairing and debilitating journeys, I had, at last, come home. If there was, in this, some illusion, there was also some truth. In the years in Paris, I had never been homesick for anything American—neither waffles, ice cream, hot dogs, baseball, majorettes, movies, nor the Empire State Building, nor Coney Island, nor the Statue of Liberty, nor the *Daily News*, nor Times Square. All of these things had passed out of me as naturally and simply as taking a leak, and even less self-consciously. They might never have existed for me, and it made absolutely no difference to me if

I never saw them again. But I had missed my brothers and my sisters, and my mother—*they* made a difference. I wanted to be able to see them, and to see their children. I hoped that they wouldn't forget me. I missed Harlem Sunday mornings and fried chicken and biscuits, I missed the music, I missed the style—that style possessed by no other people in this world. I missed the way the dark face closes, the way dark eyes watch, and the way, when a dark face opens, a light seems to go on everywhere. I missed my brothers especially—missed David's grin and George's solemnity and Wilmer's rages, missed, in short, my connections, missed the life which had produced me and nourished me and paid for me. Now, though I was a stranger, I was home.

The racial dividing lines of Southern towns are baffling and treacherous for a stranger, for they are not as clearly marked as in the North—or not as clearly marked for *him*. I passed a porch with dark people; on the corner about a block away there was a restaurant. When I reached the corner, I entered the restaurant.

I will never forget it. I don't know if I can describe it. Everything abruptly froze into what, even at that moment, struck me as a kind of Marx Brothers parody of horror. Every white face turned to stone: the arrival of the messenger of death could not have had a more devastating effect than the appearance in the restaurant doorway of a small, unarmed, utterly astounded black man. I had realized my error as soon as I opened

the door: but the absolute terror on all these white faces—I swear that not a soul moved—paralyzed me. They stared at me, I stared at them.

The spell was broken by one of those women, produced, I hope, only in the South, with a face like a rusty hatchet, and eyes like two rusty nails—nails left over from the Crucifixion. She rushed at me as though to club me down, and she barked—for it was not a human sound: “What you want, boy? What you want in here?” And then, a decontaminating gesture, “Right around there, boy. Right around there.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. I backed out the door.

“Right around there, boy,” said a voice behind me.

A white man had appeared out of nowhere, on the sidewalk which had been empty not more than a second before. I stared at him blankly. He watched me steadily, with a kind of suspended menace.

My first shock had subsided. I really had not had time to feel either fear or anger. Now, both began to rise in me. I knew I had to get off this street.

He had pointed to a door, and I knew immediately that he was pointing to the colored entrance.

And this was a dreadful moment—as brief as lightning, and far more illuminating. I realized that this man thought that he was being kind; and he was, indeed, being as kind as can be expected from a guide in hell. I realized that I must not speak to him, must not involve myself with him in any way whatever. I

wasn't hungry anymore, but I certainly couldn't say *that*. Not only because this would have forced both of us to go further, into what confrontation I dared not think, but because of my Northern accent. It was the first time I realized that this accent was going to be a very definite liability; since I certainly couldn't change it, I was going to have to find some way of turning it into some kind of asset. But not at this very flaming moment, on this dark and empty street.

I saved my honor, hopefully, by reflecting, *Well, this is what you came here for. Hit it*—and I tore my eyes from his face and walked through the door he had so kindly pointed out.

I found myself in a small cubicle, with one electric light, and a counter, with, perhaps, four or five stools. On one side of the cubicle was a window. This window more closely resembled a cage-wire mesh, and an opening in the mesh. I was, now, in the back of the restaurant, though no one in the restaurant could see me. I was behind the restaurant counter, behind the hatchet-faced woman, who had her back to me, serving the white customers at the counter. I was nearly close enough to touch them, certainly close enough to touch her, close enough to kill them all, but they couldn't see me, either.

Hatchet-Face now turned to me, and said, “What you want?” This time, she did not say, “boy”: it was no longer necessary.

I told her I wanted a hamburger and a cup of coffee,

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which I didn't; but I wanted to see how those on my side of the mesh were served; and I wondered if she had to wash her hands each time, before she served the white folks again. Possibly not: for the hamburger came in paper, and the coffee in a paper cup.

I had all I could do to be silent as I paid her, and she turned away. I sat down on one of the stools, and a black man came in, grunted a greeting to me, went to the window, ordered, paid, sat down, and began to eat. I sat there for a while, thinking that I'd certainly asked for one hell of a gig. I wasn't sorry I'd come—I was never, in fact, ever to be sorry about that, and, until the day I die, I will always consider myself among the greatly privileged because, however inadequately, I was there. But I could see that the difficulties were not going to be where I had confidently placed them—in others—but in me. I was far from certain that I was equipped to get through a single day down here, and if I could not so equip myself then I would be a menace to all that others were trying to do, and a betrayal of their vast travail. They had been undergoing and overcoming for a very long time without me, after all, and they hadn't asked me to come: my role was to do a story and avoid becoming one. I watched the patient man as he ate, watched him with both wonder and respect. If he could do that, then the people on the other side of the mesh were right to be frightened—if he could do that, he could do anything and when he walked through the mesh there would be

nothing to stop him. But *I* couldn't do it yet; my stomach was as tight as a black rubber ball. I took my hamburger and walked outside and dropped it into the weeds. The dark silence of the streets now frightened me a little, and I walked back to my hotel.

My hotel was a very funky black joint, so poverty stricken and for so long, that no one had anything to hide, or lose—not that they had stopped trying: they failed in the first endeavor as monotonously as they succeeded in the second. Life still held out the hope of what Americans, helplessly and honestly enough, call a “killing” and what blacks, revealingly enough, call a “hit.” There seemed to be music all the time, someone was dancing all the time. It would have seemed, from a casual view, that this hotel was the gathering place for all the dregs of the town and that was true enough. But, since these dregs included the entire black society, it was a very various and revealing truth. Lodging for transient blacks, or entertainment for the locals, is a severely circumscribed matter in the Deep South, so that, for example, if one is not staying with friends or relatives, one stays in a hotel like mine, or, if one's friends or relatives decide to buy you a drink, they will bring you to the bar of this hotel. I liked it very much. I liked watching staid Baptist ministers and their plump, starched wives seated but a table away from the town's loose and fallen ladies and their unstarched men. I thought it healthy, because it reduced the possibilities of self-delusion—especially in

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those years. The Man had everybody in the same bag, and for the same reason, no matter what kind of suit he was wearing, or what kind of car he drove. And the people treated each other, it seemed to me, with rather more respect than was typical of New York, where, of course, the opportunities for self-delusion were, comparatively, so much greater.

Where whiskey was against the law, you simply bought your whiskey from the law enforcers. I did it, many times, all over the South, at first simply to find out if what I had been told was true—to see it with my own eyes and to pay the man with my own hands—and then, later, because life on the road began to run me ragged. It was almost impossible to get anything but bourbon, and the very smell of bourbon is still associated in my mind with the mean little eyes of deputy sheriffs and the holster on the hip and the ominous trees which line the highways. Nor can you get a meal anywhere in the South without being confronted with “grits”; a pale, lumpy, tasteless kind of porridge which the Southerner insists is a delicacy but which I believe they ingest as punishment for their sins. “What? you don’t want no grits?” asks the wide-eyed waitress; not hostile yet, merely baffled. She moves away and spreads the word all over the region: “You see that man there? Well, he don’t *eat* no grits”—and you are, suddenly, a marked man.

It is not difficult to become a marked man in the South—all you have to do, in fact, is go there. The

Montgomery airport, for example, was, in those years, a brave little shack, set down, defiantly, in limbo. It was being guarded, on the morning of my first arrival, by three more or less senior citizens, metallic of color and decidedly sparing of speech. I was the only thing, of any color, to descend from that plane that morning, and they stood at the gate and watched me as I crossed the field. I was carrying my typewriter, which suddenly seemed very heavy. I was frightened. The way they watched me frightened me. Their silence frightened me. Martin Luther King, Jr., had promised to have a car meet me at the airport. There was no car in sight, but I had the phone number of the Montgomery Improvement Association—if I could find a phone, if I could get past the men at the wire. It was eerie and instructive to realize that, though these were human beings like myself, I could not expect them to respond to any human request from me. There was nothing but space behind me, and those three men before me: I could do nothing but walk toward them. Three grown men: and what was the point of this pathetic, boys-together, John Wayne stance? Here I was, after all, having got on a plane with the intention of coming here. The plane had landed and here I was—and what did they suppose they could do about it now? short, of course, of murdering every black passenger who arrived, or bombing the airport. But these alternatives, however delectable, could not lightly be undertaken. I walked past them and into the first phone

booth I saw, not checking to see, and not caring whether I had entered the white or the black waiting room. I had resolved to avoid incidents, if possible, but it was already clear that it wouldn't always be possible. By the time I got my number, they watching me all the while, the MIA car drove up. And if the eyes of those men had had the power to pulverize that car, it would have been done, exactly as, in the Bible, the wicked city is leveled—I had never in all my life seen such a concentrated, malevolent poverty of spirit.

The Montgomery blacks were marching then, remember, and were in the process of bringing the bus company to its knees. What had begun in Montgomery was beginning to happen all over the South. The student sit-in movement has yet to begin. No one has yet heard of James Foreman or James Bevel. We have only begun to hear of Martin Luther King, Jr. Malcolm X has yet to be taken seriously. No one, except their parents, has ever heard of Huey Newton or Bobby Seale or Angela Davis. Emmett Till had been dead two years. Bobby Hutton and Jonathan Jackson have just mastered their first words, and, with someone holding them by the hand, are discovering how much fun it is to climb up and down the stairs. Oh, pioneers!—I got into the car, and we drove into town: the cradle of the Confederacy, the whitest town this side of Casablanca, and one of the most wretched on the face of the earth. And wretched because no one in authority in the town, the state, or the nation, had the force or the courage

or the love to attempt to correct the manners or redeem the souls of those three desperate men, standing before that dismal airport, imagining that they were holding back a flood.

But how can I suggest any of the quality of some of those black men and women in the South then?—for it is important that I try. I can't name the names; sometimes because I can't remember them, or never knew them; and sometimes for other reasons. They were, the men, mostly preachers, or small tradesmen—this last word describes, or must be taken to suggest, a multitude of indescribable efforts—or professionals, such as teachers, or dentists, or lawyers. Because the South is, or certainly was then, so closed a community, their colors struck the light—the eye—far more vividly than these same colors strike one in the North: the prohibition, precisely, of the social mingling revealed the extent of the sexual amalgamation. Girls the color of honey, men nearly the color of chalk, hair like silk, hair like cotton, hair like wire, eyes blue, grey, green, hazel, black, like the gypsy's, brown like the Arab's, narrow nostrils, thin, wide lips, thin lips, every conceivable variation struck along incredible gamuts—it was not in the Southland that one could hope to keep a secret! And the niggers, of course, didn't try, though they knew their white brothers and sisters and papas, and watched them, daily, strutting around in their white skins. And sometimes shoveled garbage for their kith and kin, and sometimes went,

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hat in hand, looking for a job, or on more desperate errands. But: they could do it, knowing what they knew. And white men couldn't bear it—knowing that they knew: it is not only in the Orient that white is the color of death.

I remember the Reverend S., for example, a small, pale man, with hair resembling charred popcorn, and his tiny church, in a tiny town, where every black man was owned by a white man. In democratic parlance, of course, one says that every black man *worked* for a white man, and the democratic myth wishes us to believe that they worked together as men, and respected and honored and loved each other as men. But the democratic circumlocution pretends a level of liberty which does not exist and cannot exist until slavery in America comes to an end: in those towns, in those days, to speak only of the towns, and only of those days, a black man who displeased his employers was not going to eat for very long, which meant that neither he, nor his wife, nor children, were intended to live for very long. Yet, here he was, the Reverend S., every Sunday, in his pulpit, with his wife and children in the church, and bullet holes in the church basement, urging the people to move, to march, and to vote. For we believed, in those days, or made ourselves believe, that the black move to the registrar's office would be protected from Washington. I remember a Reverend D., who was also a grocer, and the night he described to me his conversion to nonvio-

lence. A black grocer in the Deep South must also, like all grocers everywhere, purchase somewhere, somehow, the beans he places on his shelves to sell. This means that a black grocer who is one of the guiding spirits of a voting registration drive and who is also, virtually, a one-man car pool, can find remaining in business, to say nothing of his skin, an exceedingly strenuous matter. This was a big, cheerful man, as strong as an ox and stubborn as a mule, a fly not destined for the fly-paper, and he stayed in business. It cost him something. Bombing was not yet the great Southern sport which it was to become: they simply hurled bricks through his windows. He armed himself and his sons and they sat in the dark store night after night, waiting for their co-citizens—who, knowing they were armed, did not appear. And then, one morning, after the long night, the Reverend D. decided that this was no way for a man or a woman or a child to live. He may, of course, by this time, have been forced to change his mind again, but he was the first person to make the concept of nonviolence real to me: for it entered, then, precisely, the realm of individual and, above all, private choice and I saw, for the first time, how difficult a choice it could be.



I told Jesus it would be all right  
If He changed my name.

—Traditional

to be baptized