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A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

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To Mary Frances,

who came to look for me.

Contents

A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

Preface

One of the few compensations for growing old is accumulating memories and sharing them with others. This is the stage of life that Disraeli called "anecdotage."

These vignettes are not an autobiography, for they do not try to cover a continuous lifespan or to tell an exhaustive story. Unlike some memoirs which "tell all" (or perhaps more than all), these reminiscences are as selective as memory and as prudent as required by a concern for other people's feelings. Some names have been changed. Moreover, I promise not to bore the reader with my love life.

Personal memories may have more than purely personal implications, especially when they span more than one-fourth of the entire history of the United States—years of great social change, seen from radically changing personal circumstances, and accompanied by evolving changes in personal perceptions and visions.

In retrospect, even my misfortunes were in some ways fortunate, for they taught me things that would be hard to understand otherwise, and they presented reality from an angle not given to those, among intellectuals especially, whose careers have followed a more straight-line path in familiar grooves. I lived through experiences which they can only theorize about.

Once, when I had listened to about as much advice from my daughter as I could stand, I asked her:

"How do you suppose I managed to make it through this world before you were born?"

"Luck!" she replied.

The following pages may suggest that she had a point, at least partly.

1

Carolina in the Morning

Henry was about to become a father again—if he lived that long. He probably knew he was dying, though he may not have known exactly what he was dying of. Black people in the South did not always go to doctors when they were sick, back in 1929. In any case, when Willie became pregnant, Henry went to his Aunt Molly to ask if she would take the baby to raise. There were four children to take care of already and there was no way that Willie could take care of a new baby, all by herself, while trying to earn a living without Henry.

Aunt Molly was the logical person to turn to. Her own children were grown and she had recently tried to adopt a baby boy, but the baby's mother had changed her mind and returned after a few months to take him back. It was an experience that may have left a lasting mark on Aunt Molly. But she was willing to try again. Willie's new baby turned out also to be a boy—and Henry was dead before he was born.

Willie had little choice but to go through with the arrangements that Henry had made with his aunt. Feeding four children and herself on a maid's wages turned out to be very hard, even after she gave the baby to Aunt Molly to raise as her own. Still, Willie managed somehow to visit the little boy regularly, even though Aunt Molly lived 15 miles away. These visits had to be carefully managed, as if Willie were visiting Aunt Molly, so that the boy—"little Buddy," she called him—

would never suspect that he was adopted, much less that Willie was his mother. This was in fact managed so well that he grew up to adulthood with no memory of the woman who came by unobtrusively in his early years, supposedly to visit with the adults.

Willie could see that her son had a better material life than she could give him. He wore better clothes than her other children and had toys that she could not buy them. He was also loved, and perhaps even spoiled, in his new family. Aunt Molly's youngest child was a 20-year-old girl named Birdie, who was especially fond of him. Still, Willie sometimes returned home in tears after a visit and spoke wistfully of someday being able to go get little Buddy and bring him back. But it was not to be. Willie died in childbirth a few years later.

Aunt Molly was very possessive of the boy, perhaps in reaction to having had the other little boy taken away from her after she had become attached to him. Whatever the reason, when she eventually moved away from North Carolina to New York, some relatives said that she did it to put distance between the boy and those who knew the family secret that he was adopted. Though there were in fact other, more compelling reasons to move to New York, it is significant that those who knew her could believe that she would do it to preserve her secret. In any event, she severed all links between the boy and his past. His brothers and a sister in North Carolina all knew of his existence, but he did not know of theirs, and they heard about him as he grew up in New York only through the family grapevine.

His original family continued to refer to the boy as Buddy, but he never heard that name as he grew up, for his new family renamed him in infancy. Birdie prevailed upon Aunt Molly to name him after her boy friend, Thomas Hancock. Aunt Molly's legal name was Mamie Sowell.

* * *

My earliest memories were of Mama and Daddy, and Birdie and Ruth. Daddy was my favorite—and I was his. He was a construction worker, a short man, and an elder in the church until I came along. One of the scenes that came down in family legend was his standing up in front of the congregation, with me in his arms and a baby bottle in his

pocket, explaining that he now had new duties to take the place of those he was resigning in the church.

Daddy had a certain gruffness about him but was usually good-natured with people and was extremely patient with me. However, he became angry whenever he thought anyone was not treating me right. He would fuss with Mama if he found out that she had spanked me while he was at work. (I was, of course, the usual source of this information.) Once he almost got into a fight with a man on the street, who inadvertently frightened me by pointing his walking stick in my general direction while trying to give another man directions. Mama was more enigmatic, with changeable moods. A woman with very little education—she wrote her name with painful slowness—she was nevertheless shrewd and even manipulative, but she was also emotional and subject to an unpredictable sentimentality which sometimes brought her to tears over small things.

Birdie and I were very close in those early years, and remained so on into my teens. She taught me to read before I was four years old. We read stories in the comics together, so some of the first words I learned to spell were words like "pow" and "splash." Birdie also read to me some of the usual children's stories. One story that I found sad at the time, but remembered the rest of my life, was about a dog with a bone who saw his reflection in a stream and thought that the dog he saw had a bigger bone than he did. He opened his mouth to try to get the other dog's bone—and of course lost his own when it dropped into the water. There would be many occasions in life to remember that story.

Birdie gave me most of the mothering I received in these early years, with Mama being more concerned with teaching me practical things and maintaining discipline. But Mama also put some of her practical responsibilities on Birdie or others. One summer, when I was playing outside barefoot, as Southern kids did then, I stepped on some jagged glass and suffered a bad gash on the bottom of my foot. As I came running up the long back stairs, crying and yelling and trailing a stream of blood, Mama came out on the back porch, took one look at the scene and seemed to turn sick. She said, "Oh, Gosh!" and went back inside to lie down on the sofa, sending Birdie out to take

care of me. Birdie soon had me calmed down and comforted, and my foot bandaged up.

Ruth was a few years older than Birdie and was a more reserved person, with an occasional enigmatic smile and a more worldly air about her. But she was softer and warmer than her more sophisticated exterior would suggest. However, to me Ruth was always an adult, while Birdie and I sometimes played rough-house together, as if we were both kids.

A fifth person who entered my life so early that I was unaware of a time when I did not know him was Birdie's new boy friend, Lacy. He was a debonair young man with a gift for words and a way of jauntily tilting his head as he strode along. In later years, after he and Birdie were married, he would recall that the first time he saw me, I was swinging on the front gate, with my diapers very much in need of changing.

Lacy was to become a major influence in my formative years, especially after Daddy and Mama broke up and we moved to New York. Though it would be many years later before I would understand Lacy's background, he had himself been adopted and had not always been treated well. He not only took a special interest in me, but was also quick to speak up if he thought I was being unfairly punished or even unfairly criticized. Over the years, he many times charmed Mama out of punishing me.

A more remote figure was Mama's oldest child, Herman, who was married and lived in the country on his own farm. Herman was a dignified, even stuffy, individual. He also owned a car, which to us was a sign of prosperity well beyond our reach. He was not a fan of mine nor I of his. We seldom saw each other, however, and showed no sign of suffering from each other's absence. Herman's wife, Iola, was an attractive woman with a certain genteel quality, and she had several children from an earlier marriage. One of them, Gladys, was about three years older than me. One Sunday, when I fell asleep in church, Gladys picked me up and held me on her lap. When I woke up, I was outraged at the indignity of having a mere girl holding me like a baby. I tore loose from Gladys' embrace and punched her. Apparently this shocked even Herman's low expectations of me.

By this time, Birdie was in her mid-twenties, Ruth was around

thirty, and Herman was in his early forties. This meant that Mama was already elderly when I was a small child—more like my grandmother than my mother. My grandmother was in fact her sister. They were part of the first generation of our family born after slavery.

The first house I remember our living in was a wooden house at 1121 East Hill Street in Charlotte, North Carolina. It was near the bottom of a tall hill on an unpaved street, like most of the streets in the black neighborhoods. Daddy put a paved walkway in our yard and made a little window in the kitchen door in the back. Both were marks of distinction in which we took pride.

Like most of the houses in the area, ours had no such frills as electricity, central heating, or hot running water. There was a living room, a kitchen and two bedrooms. In the kitchen there was a wood-burning stove, with the brand name "Perfection" on it. They said it was the first word I spelled. The toilet was a little shed on the back porch. To take a bath, you heated water on the kitchen stove and poured it into a big metal portable tub. For heat in the winter, we had the stove, a fireplace in the living room, and a kerosene heater. For light at night, we had kerosene lamps.

It never occurred to me that we were living in poverty, and in fact these were some of the happiest times of my life. We had everything that people around us had, except for a few who had electricity and one lady who had a telephone. Once I tagged along with Ruth when she went to her job as a maid in the home of some white people. When I saw two faucets in their kitchen, I was baffled and said:

"They sure must drink a lot of water around here."

When Ruth showed me that there was hot water coming out of one of the faucets, I thought it was the most amazing thing.

We grew flowers in our front yard, but there was no back yard, just an alleyway. On the side of the house, however, there was a space fenced in, where we kept chickens. I can still remember the shock of seeing a chicken's head chopped off and watching the headless body running frantically around the yard, until it collapsed in the convulsions of death. But all that was forgotten when it reappeared hours later at dinner, completely transformed into beautiful and delicious pieces of Southern fried chicken.

Here and there I encountered white people—usually grocers, peddlers, or occasionally policemen. But white people were almost hypothetical to me as a small child. They were one of the things that grown-ups talked about, but they had no significant role in my daily life. That remained largely true until after we left Charlotte, when I was almost nine years old, and moved to New York. Then it came as a shock to me to be told that most of the people in the United States were white. Most of the people I had seen were black, everywhere I went. In reading the Sunday comics, I was not bothered by the fact that the characters were almost always white, but I could not understand why some of these characters had yellow hair. I had never seen anybody with yellow hair, and doubted that there were any such people.

• • •

The only books I remember seeing in our home during those early years in North Carolina were the Bible and books of the children's stories from which Birdie read to me. Daddy read the newspaper and the grown-ups sometimes talked about things that were happening in the world. There was a war going on between the Ethiopians and the Italians, and I knew that we were on the side of the Ethiopians, though I am not sure that I knew why or what color either of them were. However, I did know that there was a young black boxer coming along and that we were all very proud of him—as a man, as well as a fighter. Some said that he was going to be a champion someday. His name was Joe Louis.

One news story that got Mama emotionally involved was the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby. For reasons unknown, she became convinced that the convicted kidnapper, Bruno Richard Hauptman, was innocent. She cried when he was executed. Some time later, after we had moved and Daddy and Mama had split up, we got a big white dog, who was given the name Bruno—even though it was a female dog. Later, Bruno had pups.

Daddy did not stop seeing me after he and Mama broke up. He came back regularly and once took me to where he was now living. He asked me if I wanted to come and live with him and I said "yes," but nothing came of it. A couple of years later, he and Mama reunited for

a while, but it was not to last. I have no idea what their differences were.

Whenever I think of Daddy, I think of the joy of riding on his shoulders as a child. In fact, whenever I see a child riding on his father's shoulders, I still think of him. He was a good man, but it would be many years later before I would fully realize how good.

* * *

When Birdie and Lacy were courting, they often sat in the swing out on the front porch in the evenings. It was very romantic—just the three of us. They often let me sit in the swing beside them. I was fond of Lacy and looked up to him, but somewhere I had heard that he would take Birdie away, so I had mixed feelings, and I think they let me sit with them for reassurance.

Birdie and Lacy were high-spirited young people and even drank, despite Mama's disapproval. From them I acquired an early taste for beer.

One day, while Mama was away, I asked them for some beer. In order to discourage me, they said that I could have some only if I also drank some whiskey—which they knew I didn't like. However, I took them up on it and quickly downed some whisky and then claimed my beer. This combination was pretty potent stuff for a five-year-old, so I became woozy and they became alarmed, fearing a scene when Mama returned. They had me lie down and I slept it off before she came back home. But I don't recall having any more taste for any form of alcohol for many years and, even in adulthood, I never became a really enthusiastic drinker.

* * *

Bruno's pups were growing and I became very fond of them, as I was of Bruno. One day, however, I was puzzled as she began walking away from the pups when they wanted to nurse from her. She was of course starting to wean them, but I had no idea what she was doing. To me, it seemed like a mean way to treat the little puppies, who looked so pitiful as they ran after her, yelping and trying vainly to keep up, with their short legs scrambling.

Finally, I pounced on Bruno and held her, so that the pups could catch up and get some milk. Fortunately, the grown-ups saw what was happening and explained to me one of the lessons of life, that pups must be weaned for their own good. That experience was also one that came back to me many times later, in my adult years.

* * *

Beginning about the age of four or five, my world began to contract painfully. The first loss was when Daddy and Mama separated, for though he came back to see me, it wasn't the same as having him there all the time. Then Lacy went north to New York City, to look for work and a better life. Once he had a foothold, he sent for Birdie and they were married in 1934 in New York. They returned in 1935 but, after a few months, they went back to New York again, for good. A year later, Ruth followed in their footsteps. By the time I was six, only Mama and I were left and we lived in a smaller place. To make matters worse, I came down with mumps and whooping cough, so that I couldn't go to school until I was seven. None of the kids my age were around anymore on school days, so it was a lonely time.

There was a pretty little girl in our new neighborhood. She used to walk by our house around sunset and pat me on the back as she passed by, saying, "Hi, Tom."

I was tongue-tied and flustered, but Mama told me that just meant that the little girl liked me. Since I liked her too, I decided to show her in the same way. One day I turned and enthusiastically pounded her on the back as she passed. She collapsed like a house of cards, got up crying and ran home. She never spoke to me again and I was heartbroken. It was not the last time I was baffled by the opposite sex, nor perhaps they by me.

Another unsettling episode of this period was the only time that Ruth ever spanked me. I cannot recall what it was for, but it had something to do with her being up on a ladder. I cannot believe that I would have tried to pull the ladder out from under her, but it is hard to imagine Ruth's spanking me for anything less. At the time, however, I was highly indignant.

* * *

We moved again before I began school in September 1937. There was a house at 1212 East Brown Street, owned by some of our more prosperous relatives by marriage. It had acquired a reputation as a place where Sowells died, shortly after moving in. They were usually of advanced years when they decided to settle down there to retire, so it is not all that surprising that they died there. However, in a place and time where superstition was a force to be reckoned with, not many Sowells wanted to move into that house, which was considered haunted. But we were too poor to be able to afford superstition, so that was where we went.

It wasn't a bad house and it even had electricity. I remember listening to Bing Crosby on the radio there. The backyard was large enough for us to grow a considerable amount of vegetables, and there was a large tree that gave us apples. Someone planted a cotton plant, apparently for my benefit, so that a Southern boy should not grow up without knowing what cotton looked like. I remember Ruth's living there for a while and Daddy's living there for a while.

Bruno got into the habit of going off by herself on long excursions by a stream in the area. We would watch from the house until she disappeared around a bend. She would usually return much later. But one day she didn't return at all. To me, it was as if someone had died. It was part of a melancholy time, when I seemed to be losing a whole happier world of earlier years.

* * *

There was a knock on our door one day, but when Mama went to answer it, there was no one to be seen. Later, we learned that one of the young Sowell women had decided to brave the haunted house (after much teasing) and come to visit us. However, after she knocked on the door and saw Mama's silhouette coming down the hall—looking just like the silhouette of her dead Aunt Alma—she fled fast enough to be out of sight by the time the door was opened.

We enjoyed many a laugh recounting this incident to others, and

it had a lasting effect in making me consider all superstition ridiculous.

• • •

A white fruit-and-vegetable peddler came by the neighborhood regularly in his horse-drawn wagon. One day he had his little girl—about my age—riding beside him. She decided to get down off the wagon and come join me where I was playing in the yard alone, while her father made his rounds on the street. We hit it off wonderfully, had a great time playing together, and waved happy good-byes when the time came for her to leave. But when I turned to Mama to enthuse about my new playmate, I found her unsmiling and even grim.

"You've just taken your first step toward the gallows," she said.

From then on, whenever the girl and her father came around, there was always some excuse why I was not available to play with her.

• • •

Another chapter of my life opened when I finally entered school in September 1937, a year older than the other kids in my class because of my year out with illness. Mama did not take me to school herself, but instead paid one of the older girls in the neighborhood to take me with her. Mama often tended to avoid confronting situations where she would feel awkward and out of place.

I went along quietly enough with the girl—until we were out of sight. Then I told her in no uncertain terms that there was no way I was going to have some girl bring me to school. She conscientiously insisted, but when I discovered that words were not enough, I resorted to throwing rocks—and arrived at school in splendid isolation.

It was an attractive little building and I was fortunate enough to have a pleasant teacher. My memories of the first grade include nothing that I learned. I already knew how to read and count before going to school. My only memories are of fights, being spanked by the teacher, having crushes on a couple of girls and the long walk to and from school.

The next year, in the second grade, I encountered one of those

mindless educational routines, which happened to work to my advantage in this case. During the reading period, a child would be asked to read aloud until he or she made a mistake, after which the book would then be passed on to the next child. (There was no such thing as issuing a book to each child.) Because I had already been reading for some years, I could go straight through one of these books without making a mistake—and when I did so, I was simply handed the next book in the series and told to continue. Within a couple of weeks, I had done all the reading for the term.

One day, when the rest of the kids were acting up, the teacher said in a pique that this was a silly bunch for me to be stuck with, and arranged to have me promoted immediately into the third grade—only a few weeks after the beginning of the term. Suddenly I was with kids my own age.

One of these kids was a boy named Henry, whom I knew from the days when we lived on East Hill Street. Henry and I looked so much alike that Mama had once mistakenly called to him to come to dinner. He was also the toughest kid in the class, which came in very handy. Apparently I had rubbed one of the other boys in class the wrong way and he decided to beat me up—but he jumped on Henry by mistake. It was not a mistake that anyone wanted to repeat, so I had relatively little fighting to contend with in the third grade.

Academically, there were some difficulties at first, partly because I lacked everything that I was supposed to have learned in the second grade. For example, I had to learn division in the third grade without having stayed in the second grade long enough to learn addition and subtraction. However, I was soon at or near the top of the class. It was a nice feeling, but of course I had no inkling as to what it might mean for my future.

* * *

Somewhere in 1938 or 1939, Mama and I—there were now just the two of us—moved again, this time to 1123 East Hill Street. It was next door to the house we had lived in several years earlier. We were now living at the end of the street, so we had neither a back yard nor a side yard. We no longer had electricity—and now I missed it, especially

when some of the other kids talked about hearing a new radio program called "The Lone Ranger."

Like most of the other houses in the neighborhood, ours did not have a paved walkway like the one Daddy had built next door. Seeing that walkway was just one of the painful reminders of happier times, when Daddy, Birdie, Lacy, and Ruth were all part of my world.

To make matters worse, the family living next door was awful and their children were brats. When one of them started a fight with me one day, I beat him up. This brought his parents over to our house, making threats against Mama and me. Fortunately, it wasn't long before we moved to New York. For all I know, that may be what prompted the move. In any event, there had been talk before about our going to New York, and now we did it. We left before the school year was out, on Mother's Day, 1939.

My last day in Charlotte was spent at Herman's house, while Mama went off somewhere to make the last-minute arrangements. Herman was now living in town, not far from us, in a bigger and nicer home. I wasn't happy with the idea of going to spend the day at Herman's, and he probably wasn't overjoyed at my being there, but it went better than either of us might have expected. Eventually, Mama returned and we headed for the train that would take us to a new life.

2

In Old New York

After a long and exhausting train ride, we finally arrived in Penn Station, New York, and suddenly I was wide awake and filled with wonder. The station was so much bigger and grander than the station we had left back in Charlotte. Above all, it was wonderful to see Birdie, Lacy, and Ruth again. The gleaming station and then the subway—clean and sleek in those days—were a breath-taking sight for an eight-year-old kid from the South.

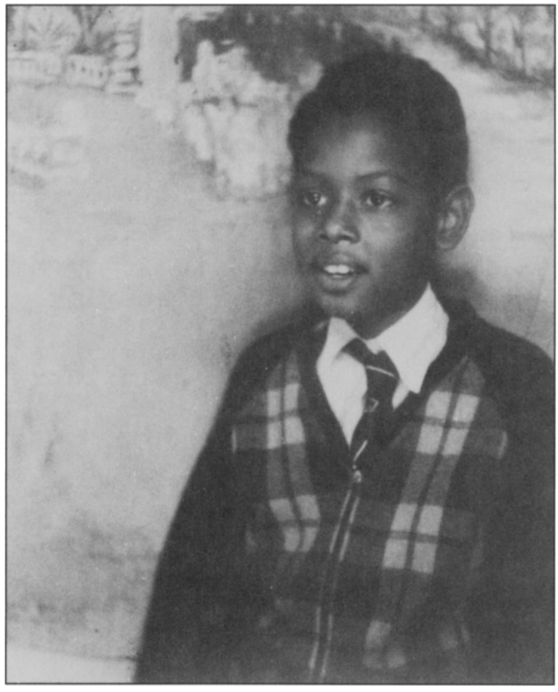
My first glimpse of New York above ground was a fire escape hanging from a building next to the 146th Street exit of the 145th Street subway station on St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem. We lived just across the street, in a five-story building that seemed so tall—and so imposing. Harlem still retained some of the appearance of the middle-class neighborhood it had once been.

That first day, Lacy also took me for a walk over to Riverside Drive, a very lovely place in those days, to see the Hudson River. It was the first time I had ever seen a river or a ship. There were many things to see and do for the first time in New York, and Birdie, Lacy, and Ruth took turns showing me where things were in the neighborhood, or took me sightseeing on the double-decker buses which regularly drove up and down St. Nicholas Avenue.

We lived on the top floor of our building at 720 St. Nicholas Avenue. The front room, looking out on the street, doubled as a living

room and as Birdie and Lacy's bedroom. The furniture was new and looked to me so impressive and modern. I was amazed to hear sound coming from one of the end tables. It was a radio as well. We had electricity again—and a gas stove, hot running water, and a built-in bathtub, all for the first time. The back room was for Mama and me. The middle room was supposed to be for Ruth, but she worked as a live-in maid, as she was to do for many years, so we did not see as much of her.

Mama and I spent a lot of time comparing things in New York to what they were like in Charlotte, always to the disadvantage of Charlotte. To have mentioned any touch of homesickness would have been like treason. But, when all was said and done, I was still a new kid in a strange town, where I knew no other kids—and where the other kids were still in school while I hung around the house all day. It would be a long summer before I would join them in school. Moreover, I was



Here I was about nine years old, shortly after arriving in New York.

not allowed to hang out in the streets, where I might fall in with the wrong crowd or get into the many new troubles and dangers of a big city. Mama was very strict and Lacy warned me not to associate with "roughnecks."

Even crossing streets was something they did not want me to do by myself at first, since I was not used to the kind of traffic in New York, and had not dealt with traffic lights before. Fortunately, the block on our side of the street was a long one, stretching from 145th Street all the way up to 150th Street, so I could take quite a walk without crossing a street. There was a grocery store and a news stand on our side of the street, so I could also be sent on errands, which I liked.

With all this, however, time still hung heavy. One day, as I was looking out the front window at other kids playing across the street, I began to cry and Mama relented to the extent of letting me go downstairs to bounce a ball against our building—but not across the street, where the other children were. I was also limited to how long I could stay outside, usually no more than an hour, and Mama hung out the top floor window, keeping an eye on me.

Along with a concern for my physical safety, there was another, longer-range concern in the family that I heard, especially from Lacy, Birdie, and Ruth. They had never had the opportunities that I would now have in New York, including an opportunity for a good education, and they wanted me to make the most of those opportunities. All this was a little vague to me at first, but it was a theme I would hear again and again over the years. Even before I arrived in New York, Birdie and Lacy had picked out a boy they wanted me to meet—a slightly older, more genteel, and more knowledgeable boy named Eddie Mapp. They obviously wanted me to become more like him and to choose such company, rather than the "roughnecks" Lacy warned me against.

These ambitions of theirs were only partly fulfilled. I met Eddie Mapp and we saw each other from time to time, but we didn't have enough in common to become close buddies. He played classical music on the piano, for example, which put him in another world, as far as I was concerned. However, he also introduced me to Chinese checkers and to comic books, and showed me a store where you could

trade comic books after you read them. Most important of all, he took me one day to a kind of place where I had never been before and knew nothing about—a public library. Impressed but puzzled as to why we were in a building with so many books, when I had no money to buy books, I found it all difficult to understand at first, as Eddie patiently explained to me how a public library worked. Unknown to me at the time, it was a turning point in my life, for I then developed the habit of reading books.

No one in the family read books except Birdie, who read detective stories. Lacy, however, was an avid follower of current events in the newspapers, and he would listen to a couple of hours of news broadcasts every night, at a time when news broadcasts were only fifteen minutes long. After a while, I became familiar with the names of all sorts of newscasters—Elmer Davis, Gabriel Heatter, Stan Lomax (sports), and eventually the greatest of them all, Edward R. Murrow. Every Sunday, Lacy would send me down to the news stand to buy two newspapers, which was considered something of an extravagance. However, this not only gave me something to do, it provided me with two sets of comics to read.

* * *

I was astonished one day when a grocer asked me if I were from the South. "How could he have known?" I wondered. It never occurred to me that I had an accent. However, with the passage of time, there was not only a natural and gradual adoption of the ways of New York; there was a concerted effort on all sides to get me to become a New Yorker. Mama became Mom, for example.

Lacy, especially, liked to take me around to places like Central Park or down to Washington Square on the double-decker bus, explaining things as we went along. It took me a long time to get used to seeing so many white people in New York. Some of them even had yellow hair. One day, Lacy rented a bicycle and put me on the handlebars as he came down the long hill on 145th Street. It was a wild ride that we both laughed about many times in later years.

Lacy was a cook for a wealthy family called the Whitneys. He must have talked about me on the job because Mrs. Whitney asked him to

bring me to work with him someday, so that she could meet me. What I most remember about the visit was seeing Lacy make butter balls in the kitchen. I had never seen butter balls before—and was far more impressed by that than by a piece of furniture in the living room that seemed to have a tiny movie in it. It was one of the earliest television sets. Mrs. Whitney and I sat in the living room talking about whatever nine-year-old boys and middle-aged ladies talk about.

Birdie, Lacy, and Ruth all worked in white people's homes and all at one time or other discussed me with their employers. A family that Ruth worked for, for a number of years, had a boy and a girl who were slightly older than me. All sorts of toys, books, and games that they outgrew found their way to me, giving me a sort of second-hand middle-class lifestyle. When I was just a baby, I received a baby carriage that way from one of Birdie's employers. What also found its way to me through Birdie, Lacy, and Ruth were tidbits of middle-class culture in such things as table manners and vocabulary.

As my world began to expand in New York, I slowly but steadily began to move beyond Mom's world, which seldom stretched beyond a radius of about five blocks, and never reached into the realms of books, ideas, or current events. She became, and remained over the years, ambivalent about my progress—proud of my advancement and yet resentful of being left behind, inconsistent in word and deed, tenaciously determined to assert her authority, however arbitrarily, and yet with a premonition that our relationship—never the strongest—was completely unravelling. Sometimes she recalled a song that said, "Oh, where is my wandering boy, tonight," and wondered out loud whether someday she would be singing that song. Occasionally it brought tears to her eyes.

* * *

In September 1939, I was enrolled in Public School 5 in Harlem. Again, it was not Mom who took me. This time it was Birdie, who was working part-time. There was a question as to what grade I would be put in. The school back in Charlotte had promoted me to the fourth grade, even though I didn't stay to finish the term, but there was no reason to assume that the promotion would stick in New

York, where black children from the South were routinely put back a grade.

As the bureaucratic process of registration dragged on, the time for Birdie to go to work was fast approaching. Her main concern was whether I could find my way back home and, when I assured her that I could, she left me there to finish enrolling by myself. When a school official told me that I would be put back to the third grade, I asked to see the principal.

After a long wait, I was brought into the principal's office. He was a sympathetic man and was favorably impressed that I had the spunk to bring this matter to him. When I told him that I thought I could do fourth grade work, he gave me a few arithmetic problems to solve and then, after I finished them and we had some further discussion, the principal was willing to let me try it. I was assigned to class 4A3, the A meaning the first term in the fourth grade and the 3 designating the third-best class at that level.

Birdie was astonished that night to learn that I had not been put back. As it turned out, I probably should have been. From being at the top of my class back in Charlotte, I suddenly found myself at the very bottom and hopelessly confused as to what was going on. It was a very painful experience. Many unhappy afternoons were spent agonizing over my homework, and sometimes crying.

Social adjustments were no easier. Although we were all black kids in Harlem, I was from the South and talked "funny." Besides, everybody "knew" that Southern kids were "dumb"—and reminded me at every opportunity. In addition, fighting was more frequent, more fierce, and more important than it was back in Charlotte—and was more likely to involve gangs, rather than just individuals. At one point, getting home for lunch safely became such an ordeal that a friend would lend me his jacket as a disguise, so that I could get away before anyone could spot me.

Somehow, both the social and the academic adjustments were slowly made. At the end of the term, I received a commendation card from the principal as the "most improved student" in the class, though at that point I stood no higher than midway in the class. I was promoted to 4B4—the *fourth* best class in the second half of the fourth grade.

* * *

Somewhere during 1940 our family split up again, at least in the sense of no longer sharing the same apartment. I don't know exactly why, though it had something to do with a quarrel that developed while Lacy's relatives were visiting. Birdie and Lacy remained together in a new and smaller place but Mom, Ruth and I now had lasting differences in our living arrangements. For the next couple of years, Mom and I were rooming in other people's apartments—not an uncommon way of living in Harlem in those days, but definitely not like having your own place. Ruth, as a sleep-in maid, was less affected.

Although I no longer had daily contact with Lacy, I had already picked up enough of his pattern of keeping up with current events to continue doing so on my own. This was the year when the Nazis' bombing of London was at its worst—and when Edward R. Murrow's broadcasts from the scene made vivid not only what was happening, but also its fateful significance for the rest of the world. I talked about such things with Lacy when I saw him and Birdie on weekends.

Although I was beginning to take an interest in serious things outside of school, in the school itself I was beginning to retrogress somewhat. My social adjustment was a little too complete, in that I was now hanging out with a mischievous bunch. We didn't do anything terrible—certainly not by today's standards—but we were full of pranks and were disruptive in class. Once we went around the neighborhood, tearing down Wendell Wilkie's 1940 election posters. This was probably my idea, as the only one in the gang interested in politics.

Academically, I cannot remember learning anything in 4B4. The teacher was kept busy trying to maintain order, which often meant keeping after me and my classmates to be quiet, sit down, come back into the room, etc. This class, incidentally, was in a newly built school—P.S. 194, a few blocks from P.S. 5. If anyone thought that an attractive, modern building was going to have a favorable effect on student behavior, he was sadly mistaken.

Normally, students from 4B4 would be promoted to 5A4, but I was promoted to 5A3, perhaps to break up our little band of troublemakers. There were a couple of really tough kids in 5A3 who made life

miserable for the rest of us. However, we were all sufficiently mischievous to make the classroom a bedlam anytime the teacher left the room. Although teachers in the New York school system were not supposed to use corporal punishment, some of them did anyway, and the teacher in 5A3 was one of them. He was white, as were virtually all the other teachers in the school at that time.

One day, he returned to class to find that some mischief had been committed while he was away. Convinced that I had done it, he grabbed a long ruler and took after me, with anger written all over his face. I dodged and skipped across desk tops, with him in hot pursuit, until I tripped and fell on my back across a couple of seats. As I lay there, he gave me a whack across my arm that later raised a large welt from my elbow to my wrist. He came after me again, and this time I kicked him as hard as I could in the lower belly—only because my aim was bad.

He doubled over in pain and threatened to take me to the principal, which I dared him to do. By this time, I knew that teachers were not supposed to do anything they felt like. It was a standoff, and afterwards we were both very wary with each other. Yet, strangely enough, this man must have seen some sign of promise in me, for the next term I was promoted to 5B1—the first time I was put in with the best students.

* * *

The teacher in 5B1 was a West Indian black woman—the only black teacher I had during all the years I spent going through the New York City public school system. Aside from being black, she was a remarkable person in a number of other ways. Although a little austere and distant, she was plainly dedicated to getting the most out of the black kids she taught, and was openly critical of the low expectations and low standards of the white teachers. She had the cultivated bearing of a lady, but she could also be a very aggressive, no-nonsense lady when the occasion demanded it.

When we were preparing to put on the class play, she insisted to everyone that there were footlights in the stage of the school auditorium, even though no one had ever seen any, and a number of peo-