Chapter 17: No Hidin' Place

TO CROSS the Mason-Dixon line going North is never quite the same as going South. Not if you are a Negro. There is not much difference in tangible things that we write down in a ledger. No things like laws that give the northbound traveler sudden freedom. No rights that are inviolate and may no longer be taken away. No, these are not the things that mark the magic boundary that supposedly separates two ways of life. The difference is in the mind and spirit and nerves. It is the dissolving of tension. The depressing feeling of living with *all* the odds against you begins to let up. The fear of physical harm lessens. Militancy becomes less synonymous with foolhardiness. You begin to feel that you can "talk back."

That is what I thought when I got off my train in Kansas City. This, I told myself, is the difference between Kansas City and Knoxville, St. Louis and Savannah, Louisville and Little Rock. But I knew that the difference is neither so great nor so glaring as night unto day. Only the conditioned Negro mind, sensitive to the lesser subtleties of human affairs, can measure this change. This same Negro mind knows that the step across the boundary really is a barely discernible transition from flagrant displays of bigotry to the more subtle, surreptitious variety of prejudices. You begin to realize that you have found freedom only because freedom is a relative thing.

I was hungry when I reached Kansas City. I knew that the Fred Harvey restaurant at the train station was one of the few places in the city that would serve patrons of any race.

"They don't bar anyone there," I had been told, "but they'll Jim Crow you graciously if you allow it."

I stood at the restaurant entrance for several minutes. Each time a Negro entered, the hostess met him with a broad smile. She led each Negro to a rear table where the employees eat on changing shifts. That was what I had been told would happen. I walked in and she smiled at me, asking: "One, sir?"

I nodded, yes, and she asked me to follow her. I followed a few steps behind until it was obvious that she was taking me to the rear table. I stopped and sat at the counter near the front. She took several steps before realizing that I no longer was following her. She turned, and this time I smiled graciously. She did not bother to give me a menu, as she had done for other patrons. My waitress was very courteous, however. Probably only the hostess and I realized that another small battle was being fought in a sort of cold war of the races.

It continued in St. Louis, where I got caught downtown in a snowstorm. I didn't know which streetcar to take to my hotel. I stood on a corner for fifty-five minutes and watched white taxi-drivers go a few feet past me to pick up a white fare. Finally a Negro cab-driver picked me up.

I knew that what happened to me was important primarily because it was multiplied in our land a hundred thousand times daily in a thousand cities and towns. Sure, St. Louis has her reputation for subtlety. I recalled the swimming-pool riots of nearly two years before, when policemen were sent to guard pools and lockers after the courts ruled that all pools had to be opened to Negroes and whites alike. The city then set aside separate days on which girls and boys could swim. On several occasions, Negro girls would return to lockers that they locked before going swimming. When they opened their lockers black cats would jump out. This occurred despite the fact that policemen were guarding the entrances, locker-room custodians were in the room, and the lockers had to be opened by someone. Here was a subtle official protest to Negroes swimming there.

But St. Louis was not alone then, and it is not alone now. America's Noah Brannons would have to realize that. They would have to see that *virus prejudice* is in the national blood-stream,

and that "doctoring" promises a cure only when men in the farthest, biggest cities and the nearest, smallest hamlets become "doctors." I had seen hope for this even in the Deep South, and that hope existed in St. Louis. The pools were open, and a generation of subtleties would never change that. This was another of the chinks in old racial armor which I had seen so much of in the South of 1951. True, I had not found a "New South," for I had found too few new ideas in the minds of the South. Only among a courageous few of a passing generation, and among wisdom-seeking youth who stand to control a coming generation, had I found an admission that racism has been the Southland's mental illness, her epidemic. I had begun to have a glimmering of hope that an increasing number of the people were quietly desirous of a cure.

Despite this hope, I knew that I was leaving the South, land of my birth and childhood, never to return. And as I looked at the hundreds of Negroes milling about the train stations of cities along the boundary, I knew that I was not alone. Thousands of other Negroes were, and are, leaving the South.

Even as far South as Birmingham I had walked into the waiting-room to buy my ticket to Montgomery, where I stopped briefly en route to Laurel, and the room was crowded with Negroes. I was concerned about whether there would be enough seats aboard the train to Montgomery.

"Don't worry about the crowd," the agent said as he handed me my ticket. "They're all going north."

So it is in scores of cities. Negroes with an eye to the promised land of the West and the industry of Northern cities are flocking out of peanut patches and cotton fields and off the overworked land of tenant farms.

I looked at the throng in St. Louis: old men with gray hair and bent backs, the productive days of their lives already spent; young women with babes in arms, clothes in shopping-bags, pasteboard suitcases held together with twine, spirits held together by the promise in a letter from a relative reporting that

white families of the North pay twenty dollars a week for a cook; young men with no luggage, no change of clothes -just a cheap new suit on their backs and a few saved dollars in their pockets, chasing down the report that Detroit needs men to build tanks to defend democracy.

These, I felt, were twentieth-century pilgrims, many of whom would find no Plymouth Rock north of the Mason-Dixon line. But their departure made them happy in the sense that a daydreamer is happy; and it made the white South happy, for the white South long has argued that the excessive number of Negroes in Dixie accounts for the racial conflict. It is easy to extend democratic privileges to a few, but it is impractical for a large number, I was told several times. The speaker always made it clear by either implication or plain statement that "you end up with Negroes bossing whites, when there are too many Negroes with white man's rights." So this migration, which reached an almost staggering rate during World War II, is supposed to be the cure-all. The white South forgets, however, that the Negroes who leave are those with a spirit of venture, with "get up and go." Because of this loss in men with the initiative and self-confidence needed to pick up everything about their set lives and stumble into a strange, fast, new environment, the South will suffer in the long run. But the South cannot be expected to realize this until it concedes that no society prospers, or even survives, unless each of its members is producing to the limit of his capability. For many reasons, the Negro never has been allowed to contribute his utmost to society, either in the North or South.

I knew what would happen to these modern pilgrims, venturing into a North to which I returned not because I could praise it and profess an honest love for it; not because I felt that it was steeped in the tradition of human equality; but because I was choosing the lesser of two evils. To put it positively, I was returning North because I knew that it held a brighter immediate future for me -one those pilgrims hoped it would

hold for them. After all, there had been enough opportunity-channels open in the North for a barefoot boy who daydreamed at the food of the Cumberland Mountains, with nothing but daydreams in view, to be working for a daily metropolitan newspaper less than a decade later.

But this had not blinded me to the evils of the North, and I knew that because of these evils many of these pilgrims would not be so lucky as I had been. Some would get caught in the undertow of big-city brutality -brutality that I had seen in many forms and had learned to despise. Others would find themselves too accustomed to the paternalism of the South and thus grossly unprepared for the hard knocks of a dog-eat-dog society, especially when that society is ridden with moral dishonesty and racial subterfuge.

As I watched these migrants in Kansas City, St. Louis, and Cincinnati, I realized that although I was leaving the South my report to America's Noah Brannons had not ended, for part of the story of what it means to be a Negro is in the minds and souls of citizens across the nation -in the doings of the people of the state and city that I had left to begin my report.

I remembered a November night in 1948, my first on the job at the *Tribune*, when two white reporters asked me to have dinner with them at the Commerce Club. We went there and sat for several minutes, but no waitress came. Finally one of my companions went to the manager and asked why we were getting no service.

"They've stopped serving meals," was the message my companion brought back. We looked about us and saw waitresses serving meals to other patrons. We walked out and I asked my companion for the truth, a truth that I would not find shocking, for I had faced it scores of times by then: "It was because of me that they wouldn't serve us, wasn't it?" He replied that it was. We went to another restaurant and ate without unpleasantness.

Even with the Commerce Club I had a recourse: I could have sued, for a Minnesota law makes it mandatory that individuals be served in such public places without regard to race, creed,

and the like. But the first day on the job was no time to get involved in a racial controversy, I decided, so I let the matter drop. My two companions did not, however. Without ever mentioning it to me, they spread the word among fellow workers, many of whom ceased to patronize the Commerce Club. Those who didn't stop were forced to, a few days later, when the Commerce Club burned down. Strangely enough, a new policy apparently went up with the new building, for I have visited the Commerce Club several times since and have received service, sometimes with a smile.

Racism of the poorly concealed variety comes in many forms in the North, I remembered, and it is only a vigilant few who prevent the disease from spreading. It is common knowledge among Minneapolis Negroes, and a considerable number of whites, that Negroes are far from welcome in Charlie's Café Exceptionale, and that Negroes must be served in a private room or, with only the rarest of exceptions, not at all.

One day I was asked to lunch with a few white friends. We called Charlie's for a reservation, and were informed that they didn't reserve tables for lunch, but that there was plenty of room. On our way to the café we discussed its racial policy and decided that two Negro members of our party should go in first. We did, and I asked for a table, informing the head-waiter that two others would join us later.

"There are no tables available. You may have a private room," he said.

"What do you mean, no tables?" I asked.

"All reserved," he said.

"But we were just informed a few minutes ago that you don't reserve tables for lunch."

"Must have been a mistake. You can have a private room," he replied.

I rejected the private room and stepped toward the door so my white friends would know to come in. They passed by as if they never had seen me before, and asked the waiter for a table.

"Oh, yes, your reserved table . . ." said the waiter, leading them into the dining-room.

"What do you mean, reserved table?" asked the white couple. "Why is it you have a table for us but didn't for our Negro friends?"

The half-startled, half-angered waiter suddenly decided that he was mistaken about who they were. He thought they were another couple with a reserved table. They, too, would have to use a private room. We all walked out and went to another place where the food was no less tasty and the atmosphere, if not quite so ritzy, was less expensive.

The practice at Charlie's is no secret, not even among official Minneapolis. When Senator Humphrey was mayor of Minneapolis he became angered by reports of this policy and asked William Seabron, a Negro social worker, to have lunch with him. They went to Charlie's.

"I'll have my regular table," Humphrey said to the head-waiter, not even waiting to see if he would try the private-room story, and he and Seabron walked into the dining-room. That was the first, and last, known time that a Negro has eaten at Charlie's without being ushered into a private room.

This happens, not in Mississippi, but in Minnesota, at the top of the nation, as far as an American of any color can get from the Mason-Dixon line. And it is part of my report. It is more important, as a part of this final report to all Americans, because of the way citizens of the upper Midwest reacted to the report, as run in the Minneapolis *Tribune*.

Reaction was overwhelmingly favorable -far more favorable than I had dreamed it might be. Less than an hour after the first edition carrying the first article was on the streets, a parking-lot operator called to let me know that he was "on you people's side." I could use his parking-lot without charge as long as I lived and was able to own a car, he said. There were hundreds of letters to the paper, more than five hundred to me personally. "Shame, shame on our nation," cried the vast majority of them. There were pages of sympathy, and

some two hundred promises that the writer or caller would "pray for you and your people." I was mailed the cross of a Catholic order by a woman who said God is on the side of the Negro and eventually justice must win out. Transplanted Southerners -an architect, a Bible-school student, a truckdriver, a housewife -called to say that I had written the truth. One such Southerner, a woman who works behind the bar at a tavern near the *Tribune*, told reporters: "Only two people ever told the truth about the South. That's that colored reporter for the *Tribune*, and Erskine Caldwell."
To me that was unwelcome praise, for in that remark was the significance in the way Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and North and South Dakota residents had responded to the articles. To them I had simply written the "truth about the South." Naturally, some of these residents objected to the articles, a few with bitterness and for many reasons. A North Dakota chain-grocery-store manager said nobody ever would convince him that Negroes do not stink, and he would always favor segregation of the races. A South Dakotan called me "a left-wing Democrat, trying to embarrass the Republicans." A Minneapolis Negro said I was "playing footsie with a Republican newspaper in a plot to embarrass the Democrats." Two weekly Minnesota newspapers figured it all was a scheme to promote passage of a fair-employment-practices-commission bill that was to come up before the Minnesota legislature. But above the muddle of conflicting criticisms stood a throng of indignant citizens, crying that the South "still is fighting the Civil War." They felt nobly democratic in contrast to the Georgia about which I had written. They could praise the report as "the truth about the South."

So there arose the same kind of righteous indignation that swept across the nation when hoodlumism erupted into lawdefying violence in Cicero, Illinois, or when an American who gave his life in defense of his country was denied burial in a Sioux City, Iowa, cemetery because he happened to be an Indian -an American Indian. These indignant ones were the

people who asked me for speeches, who wanted to know more about the indignities suffered by an American Negro who returned to his native land.

As I had feared, only a very few viewed my report as part of a shadow cast by their own lives. As I moved about the state, in the wake of my report to a sailor whom I remembered although I had lost all contact with him, I had to remind Minnesotans that although Noah Brannon was a real, living man, to me he had become but a symbol. A symbol not of Texans who dislike Negroes out of ignorance, or of prejudiced people south of the Mason-Dixon line, but of Americans everywhere whose tainted souls and thoughts and acts put our whole nation south of freedom. I reminded them that a decade earlier a Negro lad had leaned against the bank building in his Tennessee home town, dressed in an overcoat so close to tattered that his classmates named it "Strings." This lad had waited for the men who guarded the gates of opportunity to let him pass through. A decade later, when this same Negro sits at a desk a thousand miles away in a shiny newspaper building in downtown Minneapolis, he has escaped "Strings," but not the implications of that overcoat.

This reporter sits at his desk when word comes in that "a flood is sweeping Mankato"; or "there's been a terrific explosion at Rochester," or "there's a big train wreck at Winona." On orders from the city editor, he jumps into his car and heads for Mankato . . . or Rochester . . . or Winona . . . or any of hundreds of towns in the upper Midwest. As this Negro reporter drives along he wonders how long he will have to stay in the town. If overnight, will the hotel rent him a room? Will he be able to buy food at the restaurants? That is, eggs without shells in them, coffee without salt in it? Does Montevideo, Minnesota, really have an unwritten law that no Negro can remain in town overnight? What about Hibbing and some other Iron Range towns -are they that way, as reported? These are the things this Negro must wonder about -along with whether or not he will do adequately the job assigned

him. He knows that, to some extent, he is at the mercy of the people about and for whom he writes. Therefore the people of Montevideo have become custodians of the gates of opportunity, just as the people of McMinnville once were. A reporter who can't get a story is of less value to his paper than a reporter who can, and it makes no ultimate difference if one reporter fails because, as a Negro, he is resented by news sources, or if he is barred from a hotel room or a town, and denied access to the news. It simply means that an editor must send a reporter who *can* get a hotel room or remain in a town overnight; thus the Negro has suffered an abridgment of opportunity that is just as effective as if he never got the job. That is what I told the people of Minneapolis and St. Paul and other Minnesota communities.

So I knew that my report, or any subsequent report, could have little lasting effect until the people realized that hatred is the common denominator of small people everywhere. Prejudice is no ailment of the toe, or of the Southern extremities of mankind; it is near-gangrene of the body, the whole body, and what is needed is a wonder drug, a tonic for the national bloodstream, not amputation of any apparently less-healthy part of the body.

But as I talked of the two-facedness of the North, the wickedness of sordid tenement rows in Harlem, brutal riots in Detroit, inhumanity on Chicago's South Side, and biased employers in Minnesota, I had to remember that there was a difference between all these things and what I had written about the South. I could stand in an open meeting of Minnesotans and talk about Minnesota prejudices, and white citizens would come and listen without fear of direful consequences. This was not true of the South that I had left. There I would not have dared to say the things that I had written, and citizens would not have dared to come and listen. After the *Tribune* began to run my articles on the South the word reached McMinnville. White people, reportedly led by policemen, distributed cards with the Klan cross and the words, STOP CARL

ROWAN, on them. I got a message from "a McMinnville policeman" that he had a "friend in Minneapolis who is going to fix things for you." This was an attempt at the intimidation that is possible in the South. It is possible wherever little men are backed by big laws, and that is the difference in the North and the South. The McMinnville policeman, accustomed only to McMinnville's way of doing things, was not aware of this difference, for "fixing" a Negro does not come so easily where enough people have respect for human dignity to have it entered in the lawbook. So in the North the fight is against small men who manifest their hatreds and antipathies by guile and trickery; in the South the struggle is against little men with the towering club of law, and it is impossible, often, to negotiate either with law or little men with towering clubs. The North, in resorting to subterfuge, has at least negatively acknowledged my rights, leaving me to contend only with the wily nonconformist. I have a fighting chance. The North may not always play by the rules, and that makes it a bad sport; but the South refuses to make any rules in which I am recognized as part of the game.

Yes, there is a difference, both in the way two sections of our country invoke their prejudices and in the way they protect them. Yet there is a commonness in the way group animosities are perpetuated. Snobbery, everywhere, is the running-mate of bigotry. Charlie's café turns the unwelcome sign to Negroes because its operator wants to run a place for the "elite," and a generation of snobs has not become accustomed to thinking of the adjective "elite" as applying to the noun "Negro." Charlie's is a going enterprise. So is snobbery. Both will remain so as long as there are enough people who worship the dream of being a part of something "exclusive," even though the exclusiveness exists only in a narrow mind.

But it is not in our cafés alone that we have set snobbery up as a twentieth-century bail. We have worshipped this false god in our work, and in our play, in our moments of supposed worship to the Almighty, upon our sickbeds, and in the hallowed

earth in which we all go to rest and hope to meet our maker. And we have rationalized these practices with a facile blindness not unlike lynchers rationalizing their deed.

Ultimately we stand in the midst of chaos and bemoan our disunity. Each of us blames the people for a decaying national morality; seldom do we blame *we, the people*. Bigotry is not a disease of the people; it is a disease of individuals, and eradication of the disease is an individual responsibility, for the only ultimate cure is self-administered.

But we need men of courage. We need men like the Catholic priest who sat silent in a meeting of the Omaha Urban League and heard how white youngsters had stoned a Negro family as it left a home that it was about to buy in an all-white neighborhood. Whitney Young, Urban League executive secretary, was concerned about what might happen when the family tried to move into the house. He asked board members what the League might do.

"I know what to do," said the priest, who told the group that the neighborhood into which the Negro family had bought was predominantly Catholic. "What time are they moving in?" he asked.

The priest was told the proposed moving-time. He advised Young and other board-members not to worry. "I know what to do," he repeated.

At the appointed time the Negro family arrived with some of their furniture. Older neighbors pulled back curtains to peek. Youngsters eased away from their homes toward the Negroes, ready to hurl stones and insults. But before the first stone was thrown the youngsters saw a frocked gentleman walk off the porch of the home that the Negroes had bought. It was their priest, who had made himself an unofficial, one-man welcoming committee. He shook hands with the Negro man and helped him carry the first piece of furniture into the house.

Youngsters dropped their rocks in shame and turned toward their homes for advice from parents, who obviously had encouraged the first stoning. But the peeking faces disappeared

in sudden embarrassment. A Negro family had found a new home outside the blight and rubble that had been marked "for Negroes only." A few weeks later they also had some new friends -among the very neighbors who had expressed such great unhappiness at seeing them buy the house.

That is not an incident of great rarity. Men of such courage are acting and speaking out with growing frequency, although the number of such men still is far below the need. After the Korean War broke out, the 47th "Viking" Division, composed primarily of Minnesota guardsmen, was recalled to active duty. Among those returning to war was a white Minneapolis newspaperman. He learned that a Negro woman who was a member of his church was about to get married, and that she and her fiancé were looking for a home. He was asked if he would consider renting them his house. "Why not?" he said. "Why shouldn't Negroes live in it? That is a right they're calling me back to fight for." So he rented his home, in an all-white neighborhood, to the Negroes. Hours after the word got out a few members of the neighborhood had drawn up a petition seeking to bar the Negroes. They started out with the petition and found some signers. Then they went to one home where the father said he positively would not sign, and he lectured the petition-bearers.

"Do you want your property's value to drop to where you'd have to sell it at a loss?" demanded the petition-bearers.

"I didn't buy my house to sell; I bought it to live in," was the reply, and the door was shut. This nonsigner also was a member of the Methodist church to which the Negro woman and the white reporter belonged. He called the pastor.

Despite the knowledge that opinion in the neighborhood was against Negroes moving in, this minister began to walk the streets of the neighborhood, calling on members of his church. He told them that the Negroes in question were respectable citizens with every legal and moral right to live in the house. He would be very unhappy to know that any member of his church was trying to bar them from the neighborhood. Soon a priest

and a rabbi were out giving the same lecture to their followers. Their argument was morally convincing, but a few residents were unwilling to relinquish the property-values argument. Then a white man who not long before was president of a group of real-estate men, who have been the chief propagandists about Negroes lowering the value of property, got in a word. The property-values argument is all propaganda and no fact, he said. His word carried weight with even the most recalcitrant. The Negroes moved in. At last reports no buildings had caved in, no new, neighborhood maladies had sprung up, and harmony existed in the area to no less a degree than when the Negroes moved in.

So my search for the New South really had brought into perspective the near-omnipresence of racial animosities. I remembered a spiritual that was popular in churches during my boyhood:

> *I went to the rocks to hide my face;*
> *The rocks cried out, "No hidin' place."*
> *There's no hidin' place down here.*

So there was the real dilemma, the awful dichotomy of human affairs. Everywhere I saw the need for courage, for moral strength, and for reasserted belief in the Golden Rule, which for too many Americans has fallen into the unsophisticated, unglamorous, and laughed-at category of "Sunday School talk." Yes, the need is *everywhere*, and the South knows it, and therein grows the dilemma. Therein lies the barrier to a New South, indeed to a New America, for we lose our ideals in the muck of rationalism by acknowledging that "Everybody does it." Instead of progress from the South, we get talk about the mote in the North's eyes; from the North we hear wailings about the beam in the South's eye. This self-pride becomes a cataract through which neither the North nor the South can see the matter in its own eye. So we justify all that exists in the South, where written law is the antithesis of our Constitution

and our democratic ideals, by saying: "Well, at least they're honest about their prejudice." This is the same way that we pour our hearts out to a mobster who, because of some questionable code of honor, "is not a squealer -I can say that for him."

Perhaps we need new codes of honor as well as a New South, for with all of Dixie's "honesty" in making her hatreds readable, the result still is the searing of human souls and the warping of human minds. And we do need a New North; but we will have very little of this New North until we are nearer a New South, for despite the forces of division we are still one nation, and the mores of the North must to some extent reflect the mores of the South. Our boundary is too vague and too fluid for it to be otherwise. Hatred has but one source, and that is the diseased mind. Many are the minds of the North that embrace hatred; but in greater number are the minds of the South that both embrace and endorse it. We must discourage the endorsements to rule out future embracers.

And the future is our great hope. There are those among us who fear it, and many of us black folk live in it: almost all of us put our faith in it -never, however, accepting the Hegelian dream that history cures all ills as it creates all of them. We are not yet masters of our own fate, but we intend to grope and grapple with the present, and try to put a mold of our making on the future. And even the white South believes that, in large measure, we will succeed. Said the Jackson (Mississippi) *Daily News:*

> *. . . there is a new Negro in our land and the Southern lawmaker, or citizen, who fails to realize that fact is being stupid at his own cost. The new Negro has more education. He has better health. He has better clothes. He reads more newspapers. He is adopting the white man's customs, the white man's speech, the white man's standards and the white man's shibboleths. Now it doesn't make sense to assume that this new Negro is going to be content in the*

cabin of his slave grandfather. And it doesn't make sense to pretend that is where he ought to be. His eyes are on better things, materially considered. He is going to have a car and drive it. He is going to buy a home and live in it. He is going to step into citizenship and exercise its rights and demand its privileges. Indeed, our use of the future tense is merely to gentle the recalcitrant of our readers to the fact that the new Negro is doing these things. The new Negro is not a man of tomorrow. He is a man of today.

These are enlightened words from a paper in Mississippi, where, all but the liars will agree, the Negro is *not* a man of today. And too well does the Negro know the old proverb that "tomorrow never comes." But today is a long day for the Negro, and perhaps only the dawn is at hand. The wheels of justice *are* turning, and everywhere that old despot, custom, is on the run.

There is turmoil in the South, and it, too, has moved into the national bloodstream. This is how the late Samuel Chiles Mitchell, professor of history at the University of Richmond, explained the South's turmoil:

> *The 19th Century had three dominant ideas: liberty, industry and democracy. The ante-bellum South set its face against all three. Not liberty, slavery! Not industry, plantation agriculture! Not democracy, a contrived system of artistocratic rule! And in the pursuit of these false ideals the South lost the better part of 100 years.*

But North or South, black or white, we are but one, and we all lost those hundred years. We all race to catch up. This is our hour of bedlam, and through the dust and haze of turmoil I hope America's Noah Brannons -the people who "did not know" -can see what it means to be an American Negro. In our common hour of tribulation, as we stumble to a common destiny, I only hope the Noah Brannons really care.