

## PROLOGUE

On the morning of July 10, 1987 I was waiting for an elevator on the banquet floor of the Marriott Hotel in Chicago. Along the wall to the left the WAVES had established an information center that buzzed with activity. Everywhere in the immediate vicinity were women: in uniform, in mufti, young, middle-aged, old, all sizes and shapes. It was my first time and first day ever to participate in a reunion of Navy women.

I stood near the elevators, plotting how best to locate Chris, assistant to the reserve officer who was responsible for the logistics of this meeting. I had met her the night before and she had suggested that we go together to the memorial service to be held this morning in a nearby church. The service would honor all women of the Navy who had died in the year just passed.

Suddenly a buxom woman of commander rank emerged from the elevator, stopped just before me, and looked startled. She said, through nearly clenched teeth, “Weren’t you the first, first---?” then faded away, unable to complete her query. Her companion, younger, of lower rank and evidently better mental health, tried to help. “Go ahead. Just spit it out,” she said, the first black officer in the WAVES?”

“Yes.” The Commander repeated now, almost firmly, “the first black officer in the WAVES?”

When I answered “Yes,” she said without inflection, “You’ll be on the dais at lunch.”

Several hours later I was there—on the dais. The commander, presiding, was at center stage behind the speaker’s stand. From her left to the end of the stage where I sat were a captain, an admiral, a state senator, a yeoman from World War I, and the lieutenant in the reserves who was in charge of arrangements for the entire conference. All of us faced, at their dining tables, about seven hundred other women of the Navy, active and retired, waiting for the program to begin.

The commander stood to introduce the dais guests and had no problem until she came to the very end—me. This time she was able to say without hesitation, “the first black— but then, after a pause, she finished with “yeoman.” Someone nearby must have sent her a strong signal because she corrected immediately, in firm tone, to “officer.”

That morning in front of the elevators, when the commander had had such a difficult time asking me a simple question, I had thought: Forty-three years later and she still has not accepted the idea that we were all in there together. Now, on the dais, as my anger rose, I thought of Harriet Pickens, my roommate at Northampton where we had trained. We had been roommates not only because we were the only black officers who had come in immediately when the Navy had invited us, but also because, by the time of our arrival three weeks after the class had begun, everybody else had a

roommate. Harriet used to say every morning during those arctic November and December risings when we would pry our frozen washcloths off the ends of the metal bed frames, “Here we go again.”

After more than four decades, I thought, “Here we go again.”

In the intervening years, there must have been hundreds of African-American WAVES. There was something bizarre, I thought, while the speeches droned on, that this woman in charge had been left so far behind.

## PHILADELPHIA

On that Sunday in October when I was born in the house on Warnock Street, my grandmother Wills is said to have explained my mother's absence at morning church service (Mother Bethel A.M.E. North Philadelphia) by saying that her daughter-in-law, Nellie, was "not feeling well." Perhaps the delicacy of grandma's language was normal for those times, but I have often thought that Grand-mom might have sounded more excited about the imminence of my arrival.

One of my most vivid memories of that house on Warnock Street where I spent my first three years was descending from second to first floor via the spiraling back stairs. As with all backstairs in row houses, these were squeezed into such a narrow shaft of space that each triangular riser disappeared completely into the wall on one side. Negotiating them was not easy, even for an adult. Mama enjoyed recalling that when I was still less than a year old, family members sitting around the kitchen table would often hear a thump against the closed backstairs door. Someone would say, "There's Frances," and whoever was nearest would open the door.

Four houses away from us on the same side of the street lived Mrs. Emily Laws, who had been pregnant at the same time as my mother. The two mothers-to-be spent hours together (I was told). Beulah (always called Tootsie) and I were born within days of each other. My mother and Tootsie's mother became even closer while Tootsie and I were infants.

Mrs. Laws was the first person I ever knew who stammered. She was a tall, thin, brown-skinned lady with beautiful silky hair, but she always had a hard time saying certain words. I remember being told not to "stare" while she struggled to speak.

My Cousin Alex's mother, Aunt Eva, lived across the street with her second husband. Uncle Richard was solidly built, had thick, wavy white hair and a large white mustache. Because he was browner than any of the Willises, his white hair and mustache made him quite handsome.

Alex lived in the same house with my grandmother, papa and mama, and me. He was a teen-ager when I was born and began to work as a chauffeur before I was three.

Alex was my favorite person in the Wills family after Grandma, I guess, because he used to carry me up to his room on the third floor and put me in a big chair on one side of the radio, which he kept on a table. I would be so

surprised that music and talk would come out of that little box. Years later, I learned that Alex had one of the earliest short-wave radios in existence.

The other thing that Alex and I did together was to pick fruit from the huge glass bowl that Grand-mom kept on the sideboard in the dining room. That bowl was always filled with what Grand-mom bought from the huckster who came down our street about twice a week, yelling out what he had. She would come back from a visit to his wagon with her apron filled.

Alex always took a banana while I, from his shoulder, would pick an apple. Neither of us ever took an orange—too much trouble to eat.

Grand-mom was always busy. I never knew exactly what she did inside the house, besides getting the meals. But every morning she would be outside, scrubbing down the white marble steps. All the houses on our block had the same kind of steps but grandmother must have got out earlier than the other housewives because I don't remember seeing others doing that job each morning.

Aunt Ada was a medium and had lots of people coming to see her. They were all Caucasian ladies, never any men. Most came in their own large cars. There would be seances around the dining room table. Sometimes I would be allowed to sit beside Aunt Ada. Everybody held hands and Aunt Ada talked to the spirits.

Some of the women came alone on different days. I was not allowed in those meetings.

Aunt Eva was a hairdresser and I used to go across the street and watch her in her shop, which was really her kitchen. I never knew where she cooked.

One day, Aunt Eva had a little girl customer who, when she was finished, had a beautiful head of long curls. I watched all the time and when the little girl's mother had come and taken her away, I asked Aunt Eva if she would fix my hair that way.

Aunt Eva herself had dark brown hair, which she wore in a full bun. She said, 'Of course. Sit in the chair.' And I was so excited.

I sat quietly through the washing, drying, straightening, and curling. When Aunt Eva had finished she gave me a mirror.

I looked and was devastated. "But I wanted long curls, like that other little girl," I wailed.

Aunt Eva explained patiently, "But you have to have long hair to make long curls."

That was the first of a lifetime of disappointments with hair.

In our backyard lived Teddy, the big, black and white English water spaniel somebody had given my mother when I was a baby. I was not allowed to go in the back so I never got to play with him. But after my mother moved away, Papa would get cinnamon buns for our breakfast every morning. He always got one extra for Teddy and it was my big thrill to give it to him through the window. He would stand on his hind legs and wag his tail when Papa opened the window.

One snowy day when I was about two, Papa took me out on a sled with a little back. Even with a small blanket, that was the coldest ride I ever had. When I finally got back in the house, my fingers and toes were frost-bitten and I never wanted to ride a sled again.

Papa had no idea how cold I was, I'm sure, because he generally did nice things for me, like taking me to the drug- store to get a soda and to the firehouse to visit with the firehouse dog, a Dalmatian. I would pet the dog while Papa visited the firemen.

My grandfather Wills came from South Carolina one day to live with us. He was a minister, I was told, but he didn't have a church in Philadelphia because he never went out Sunday morning. He had Alex's room on the third floor. By then Alex had gone to work as a chauffeur for a family in the suburbs and lived on his job. Sometimes he would come back and take Papa and me for a ride in the big car he drove.

Grand-pop was an artist. He did a portrait of my grandmother, which she must have sat for when they were first married. Her hair was brown and her face smooth and slender. She was very beautiful. The one of Grandma was in Alex's house and his friend gave it to me when she was emptying the house after he died.

## OTHER FAMILY

It must have been the next spring after that ride in the snow when Aunt Leah came to Philadelphia to take me to live with my other family, in Dover, Delaware. Aunt Leah was my godmother I found out later.

During that ride, my first on a train, Aunt Leah put me on the window-side where I sat clutching my doll and watching the country pass for the whole trip which seemed much longer than it really was. Before that time, the farthest I had ever been from Warnock Street was to Fairmont Park on a picnic. That was still in Philadelphia. I never dreamed that one could ride for as long as it seemed we did that day to Dover and see nothing but trees and grass.

As I stole glances at Aunt Leah during that trip I thought her the most beautiful person I had ever seen-this lady with the lovely smile, warm brown skin and long black hair which she wore in a knot on her neck, like Aunt Eva did. But she was thin, unlike Aunt Eva and browner even than me.

Everything about Dover was different from Philadelphia. My family's house stood all by itself in the middle of what seemed to be a huge field. There were a few trees but no close neighbors. At the end of the long yard, far, far away from the house, grand-pop kept chickens in a coop. A little way from the chickens he had a vegetable garden. And there were some fruit trees. Finally I knew how the huckster got all those fruits and vegetables on his truck to bring around to people's houses.

Grand-pop Dorce' was a minister but, unlike my Grandfather Wills, he had a church and I had to go to church three times on Sunday, on account of Sunday school.

In Dover I met relatives I had never even known about when I lived in Philadelphia. Aunt Nin, for instance, whose name was really "Eugenie," after grand-pop's sister. She did not seem like an aunt because she was only a big girl, just a little taller than I was.

Grand-mom Dorce' did not seem like a grandmother, either, because she never did anything in the house, like cooking.

## WEST CHESTER

In West Chester, besides starting school, I also began piano lessons. I was excited when the teacher came to our house and I had to sit on the piano stool while she sat beside me, watching. There was no doubt in my mind that I would soon be playing like grand-mom. (She could move her hands on the keys for what seemed like hours without any music at all in front of her.)

In Philadelphia there had been a victrola and I had thrilled to the voice of Caruso on that machine but there was no piano in grand-mom Wills' home.

Nobody ever faced the truth, that I was not destined to be a pianist. Lessons continued all the time we lived in West Chester, then started again in Harrisburg.

In West Chester, too, I guessed that grandpa was Santa Claus. I never saw what he did on Christmas Eve but I knew that he was only one in the house who could possibly carry a tree as large as the one we always had.

Grand-pop as Santa required considerable rearranging of ideas about my grandfather. He never seemed like a Santa Claus. When he was not in his pulpit preaching, I thought of him in his study preparing his sermons. Books lined all the walls of that room. Once when grand-pop was out I went in the study and took a book down from a shelf. It was "The Last of the Mohicans." I don't remember now, of course, what made me choose that one. But a cursory examination convinced me that I would not like it and I put it back in its place before I should be discovered.

Grandpa did his best, though, to make certain that I did not grow up ignorant. One day when he was sitting in the backyard in West Chester reading and I was playing nearby, he called me. He looked up from his book and said, "Child?" That was always his name for me as long as I could remember.

I was not far away because I tended to play close to the backdoor of the house, having been told not to go near the out-house which was in the middle of the yard near the neighbor's fence. It had not been in use for as long as anyone knew and was covered with a honeysuckle vine, possibly for that reason. After they told me that snakes liked honeysuckle, I never went near the out-house any more. Before I heard about the snakes, I had enjoyed opening up the flowers to suck the honey from the base.

When I came close to grand-pop on this day, he said, "I want you to listen and repeat after me." Then he read:

"Blow, blow, thou winter wind  
Thou art not so unkind  
As man's ingratitude."

I stood beside him and did repeat the lines exactly as he had said them, although I did not understand why “wind” had to be said to rhyme with unkind.

When I had finished, grand-pop smiled and said, “Good. That’s from Shakespeare, possibly the world’s greatest poet.”

We never had any more poetry lessons but that seemed to be the beginning of a closeness between us which lasted for as long as grand-pop lived. Once, years after that brief lesson in Shakespeare, I confessed to my grandfather who had fallen asleep over his reading in almost the same part of another backyard that I supposed I was getting old because I found myself sleeping also when I was supposed to be studying, sometimes—worse—right in class.

A beatific smile wrapped itself around grand-pop’s face. “It has nothing to do with getting old,” he said, “I used to do the same thing when I was your age.”

I felt relieved. If grand-pop had done it, it must be all right. It did not mean that I was aging prematurely.

Grand-pop was disappointed and expressed it frankly when I told him after college that I was in social work school.

“I had always hoped you would be a doctor,” he said. I did not tell him but if he had only let me know that was what he had in mind for me, I would probably have worked like a Trojan to achieve admission to medical school.

I had, after all, begun college with a major in Biology. I had gone through all the business of dissecting various small animals. But then I had gone off the track into Speech and Dramatics when practically pushed by Mr. Spadino.

I always thought of my grandfather as being as man of few words except when he was in his pulpit, but from time to time he surprised me.

I had graduated from college and was pursuing the hobby of knitting to pass the time when I was sitting around in conversation with nothing to do. Just prior to graduation, in fact, I had visited my grandparents when I was working on a pink sweater which had no less than eight sections, needing to be sewn together at the end. I remember, especially, two pockets with flaps.

After graduation, a long while after, when I was again visiting in the Dorce’ home, grand-pop noticed that I was still at work on that sweater. He inquired wryly, “Do you think that you will ever finish that project?” He smiled gently, when he said it, but I had the distinct impression that he, like me, had seen enough of that garment.

“Gentle” was how I always thought of grand-pop, in stark contrast to his unquestionable authority in the pulpit and the respect his wishes always commanded in the house.

I remember one day when the women were out of the house and grand-pop had fixed his own lunch. He had found it necessary to go back into the kitchen after he had put a plate with two chops on the dining room table.

Both the long-haired black cat, Jetty, and her white poodle companion were drawn to the dining room from wherever they were by the pungency of the food. Grand-pop was just crossing the dining room doorsill when he saw Jetty take the remaining chop in her mouth. Pierrot was already enjoying the other one which she had dropped on the floor for him.

Grand-pop’s immediate reaction was, naturally, to speak harshly to both the animals. But after only seconds, he began to laugh, saying between his laughter, “Imagine that.” She threw one down for him, then took the other for herself.”

In 1947, when my grandfather was in the hospital—for the first time and what we all knew in a few days would be the only time I went to see him. He was delirious but did not appear to be suffering. He did not know I was there, but was smiling as he said, “The rabbits are in the cabbage.” As it had been all of his life, he was still full of love for small things.

## A FREE SPIRIT

My mother was the most adventurous of the four Dorce' sisters I knew. There were four in the picture taken when they arrived in America from Haiti, all solemn looking in their long coats whose hems met high top shoes. But the youngest in that photograph, Naomi, died when she was only eighteen, not long after the family had settled in Pennsylvania. When I was old enough to know who was who, the fourth sister, the "baby" was Nin, christened "Eugenie" after her paternal aunt.

They were still in Haiti, playing in their backyard, when mama, according to an oft-repeated story, once caught and cooked a frog—long before she heard the French had made that creature a delicacy. She served it to her sisters, telling them it was chicken. Leah and Maybelle remembered that mama had not joined them in the treat.

It was many years later, one summer when mama came to visit us in Harrisburg that a bat got into the house. Panic reigned. Aunt Leah and Nin were running around with hands up to cover their heads. Aunt Leah, always soft-voice, was near to screaming when she said, "If it gets in your hair, it'll make you crazy."

Grand-pop and grand-mom must have already retired by then because I remember only my two aunts fleeing in panic from the bat. I was there, in the midst of the confusion because it was an extremely hot night and my mother had brought our bedding downstairs to the middle room. She must have known that there would be a draft straight through the first floor. (Our front room flowed into the middle one and the door from dining room to kitchen was never closed.)

When mama pursued the creature with the broom she brought from the kitchen, her aim was perfect. He was soon put out of commission and everybody could go to bed.

Another time when mama had arrived in Harrisburg for a brief stay, her visit coincided with that of a traveling minister who was beginning the second day of his sojourn at our house.

Aunt Leah, probably preoccupied with plans for her wedding was totally without ideas for dinner. (Meals had been her responsibility for years.) But this time she could think of nothing which would be simple, quick and tasty.

Mama had an answer right away. "How about Egg Foo Yong? Have you ever had that?"

Chinese was not spoken in the Dorce' kitchen but Aunt Leah was curious. "No. What is it?" she asked.

Mama said, "It's a Chinese dish. It's delicious and easy to make."

"Good." Aunt Leah was delighted to be relieved of having to think of something. "Do you want to fix? What do you need?"

Mama was not ready to give a list from her head. She would know what she needed as she cooked. She answered, “You probably have everything in the icebox. Don’t worry. I’ll yell if I need anything.”

Aunt Leah left. When she came back into the kitchen sometime later it was too late to change the menu. She discovered then that the family was having for dinner exactly what she had served for breakfast—omelet. It looked a little different but there was no question about what it was.

“Why didn’t you tell me what Egg Foo Yong was?” she wailed to my mother. “We had omelet this morning.”

“Maybe the guest won’t remember.” Mama hoped.

“Papa will. You can be sure of that.”

They served the egg foo yong buttressed with a variety of vegetables followed by a luscious dessert. Even grand-pop did not bring up the fact that he had been eating eggs all day.

## LAST DORCE' HOME

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania was the last Dorce' home in which I lived.

When we arrived there, the parsonage was undergoing renovations so for awhile we stayed with Mrs. Copley, one of the members of grand-pop's congregation. Her home was on the same street but about two blocks from the parsonage and church, going towards the center of the city. It must have been a large house because grand-pop and grand-mom, Aunt Leah and I all lived there for what seemed a long time. Nin had stayed in West Chester so she could finish the school term.

Mrs. Copley's house was a double one with marble steps. It reminded me of Philadelphia. Mrs. Copley had no children, only a little black and white dog. My acquaintance with him was brief and sad. Mrs. Copley explained one day, holding back tears, that her dog was sick and old and would have to "be put to sleep." It was my first experience with putting down a pet. Mrs. Copley went out of the house before the man she had called would come to end the dog's life but she instructed my aunt to be sure to put on "his little blanket." (It was spring.)

Living in the adjoining house was an orthodox Jewish family. I learned what "orthodox" meant one weekend when Hannah, the little girl in the family who was about my age, asked if my grandfather was home and could he come to her house.

I went inside and called grandpa. He was much easier to reach in this temporary housing than he had ever been before because he had no study. He was sitting, reading, in Mrs. Copley's big living room chair near the window. I went inside and stood in front of him until he noticed me.

"The little girl next door would like you to come to her house." I told him.

Grand-pop did not seem surprised, nor did he ask why. He got up, came outside and crossed the slight dividing hump between the two stoops. Then he explained to me that he had been called to turn on the gas. Hannah's family, he told me "were Orthodox Jews. Their religion forbids them from operating appliances on the Sabbath." In those few minutes I learned a little about being Orthodox, and that their Sabbath was the day before ours.

Neither Hannah nor I were allowed to leave our stoops so in those spring days when my folks lived with Mrs. Copley she and I became good friends, sitting next to each other every day after school and longer on the weekends. But when we moved two blocks away into the parsonage, I never saw her again. She went to private school and neither of us was allowed to travel the two blocks which separated our houses.

In Harrisburg, I acquired my first pair of skates, a prize for selling a certain number of newspaper subscriptions. The required number of sales must have been small because I was not bold enough to approach strangers as a salesperson. I do remember that grand-pop took a subscription – it was undoubtedly he who had discovered the sales campaign and chosen my customers as well.

For some reason, the narrow street at the end of our backyard was steep, quite unlike the front. With more bravado than good sense, I decided one day too soon after I had mastered the trick of merely staying upright on my skates to skate down that hill in the back.

When I reentered the house by the kitchen door after a speedy trip on wheels which landed me smack against the brick wall at the bottom of the hill, my Aunt Leah, getting dinner in the kitchen, was understandably curious. I had no obvious injuries, but must have given the appearance of a battered person.

“What happened? she asked. “Skating over so soon?” She turned from the stove to give me a good once-over.

I had hardly taken off my skates since I had received them but Aunt Leah must have glanced out the back window and seen me carrying them up the long walk from the gate at the end of the yard. Most of the area between the next house and our back walk was taken up with a grapevine and normally I would have stopped to pick a few on the way to the kitchen.

“I fell—in the back.” I could not tell her that I had skated into a wall.

She did not seem surprised but neither did she scold me as I had anticipated. She only said, “You must learn to be more careful.”

Mama came to Harrisburg only once that I remember before the time when she took me to New York.

On that visit she decided to do the family laundry. It was summer and she chose a spot in the backyard between our house and the church. There was a spigot under the kitchen window and she must have heated water to pour in the tin tub under the window, then let the cold run in from the faucet on the wall. (It was many years later that I understood that mama was full of energy and had to be doing something, other than just visiting, even with her family.) I remembered that laundry day because there was a lot of laughing between mama and my aunts afterwards. Somebody who did not know my mother must have seen her when they peeped through the slats in the back fence and in no time at all the rumor had spread that the minister had a “white washerwoman.”

Papa came to visit twice while I lived in Harrisburg. All the Dorce's left us alone for the whole time he was there. It took quite awhile before I understood that, for their own reasons, my mother's side of the family did not like my father nor his people.

One morning at breakfast while we were all sitting around the big dining room table, somebody said, "Northern Negroes are no good. They have no ambition."

Somebody else said, "Things come to them too easily in the North. Those from the South have more drive."

Even though I did not know how or why the subject had come up, I knew they were talking about my father.

What the Dorce's did not know was that Grand-Mom Wills was a Southerner and had come with her three children to Philadelphia from South Carolina.

In Harrisburg, every Sunday morning about 11:30, I went to church with grand-mom. My aunts would have gone earlier, on time. I think now that grand-mom's inability to get to church at 11 was her protest against having had to become (by marriage) a Methodist. Furthermore, she never attended weekly church sessions, such as "class" or "prayer meeting." Nor did she participate in church fund raising activities or festivals. Aunt Leah did all that for grand-pop. Grand-mom managed, remarkably, never to set foot inside the church except on Sundays.

By the time grand-mom and I left the house, all the rest of the family would already have arrived at church—in time to sing the opening hymn. Grand-mom and I would come after the service was well under way and try to be inconspicuous going down the aisle to our regular seats—in the second row. I was not yet wise enough to know that the congregation would not hold me responsible. Even now I can remember that humiliating walk from the front entrance down to the second row. It always seemed miles long.

My social life in Harrisburg was limited to school and church. School was only two blocks away, just down from our house but on the other side of the street.

I went to the YWCA once. To get there you made a left turn at the corner on our side (away from school) and walked for two blocks.

That sole visit to the YWCA was made in order for me to join a class in ballet. Esther Harvey, whose father was an Episcopal minister, must have been enrolled in that class for my family even to have thought it proper for me.

Esther had come one day to play with me and Aunt Leah had asked her how her father's church was prospering. The Harveys had been in Harrisburg only a short time.

Just as though she knew she would be asked, Esther answered, with a smug little smile, “When we first came, the congregation was small, but it is growing nicely now. My father is quite pleased.”

As soon as Esther had left, Aunt Leah commented, “You heard how nicely she answered my question about her father’s church. She speaks so well. If somebody had asked you the same question you would still be hemming and hawing.”

I was shocked and hurt especially because Aunt Leah hardly ever criticized me. I hated Esther then and forgave her only grudgingly many years later when we met as freshman at Hunter College in New York.

Despite the air of respectability Esther’s participation in dance classes, I was allowed to go only once. When my grandfather learned that I was enrolled in a dance class, he put his foot down. It was against the tenets of his church. Kind and loving as he was, he made no distinctions between boy and girl dancing and ballet lessons for little girls.

Some weeks later I discovered boys. Or, more exactly, boys discovered me—briefly. I was sitting on the stoop one evening after dinner just as darkness came. Two of the neighborhood boys who were big enough to be allowed out after dinner came by and we were talking. They stood on the sidewalk close to our steps but below where I sat on the guard stone. We were not even within touching distance, only close enough so that we did not have to yell to have a conversation. But from her bedroom, just above the front door, grandma heard our voices. She called “Frances” from her room, without even opening the screen.

“Yes, grand-mom,” I answered, looking up at the darkened window.

“It’s time for you to come in now,” was all she said. My sitting outside in the evening was cut off permanently as of that moment.

Another hazard in Harrisburg which had nothing at all to do with strangers was sharing a bed with my aunt Nin (whom I always called just “Nin”).

Although Nin must have seen me as an unwelcome little sister—we were close in age and she had been the baby in her family for so long—we did not have problems in our relationship in West Chester. We had separate bedrooms. During those years we went to the same school and had an important bond—our mutual distaste for the long underwear we were required to wear in winter.

Every morning on the way to school we would stop long enough to roll down the long stockings and roll up the long underwear to above the dress hem where it could not be seen. On the homeward trip we would reverse the process. For two years this was our secret and only bond.

In Harrisburg came the large-sized problem of sharing a bed. It seemed that always once, at least, each night I would move without meaning to, closer to Nin than she could tolerate. Then she would kick me, to adjust my position to her satisfaction. Learning came hard. I never got used to being awakened in that fashion.

Packing all the household belongings for the move from one parsonage to another—which happened three times during the years I lived with my Dorce' family—would take all of Aunt Leah's time for days. Grandpa packed only his books. He would be shut in his study for long hours every day before the movers came. When we arrived at the new house there would be another few days in which grand-pop was seen only at dinner time. I knew that he was busy then unpacking all the books he had put in the barrels.

For one of those moving sessions a young minister whom grand-pop had befriended came to help with packing the dishes. Aunt Leah watched, wide-eyed and nervous looking as he wrapped several dinner plates at once in a few layers of paper and then piled them onto the last group he had just put inside the barrel. Finally, she asked, "Aren't you afraid something might get broken that way?"

As I stood, so charmed that I was unable to move, beside my aunt, the young packer continued to jam the dishes in the barrel. He answered, "Miss Leah, I wasn't always a minister, you know. I had lots of jobs to get through school. Packing was one."

In the new house when Aunt Leah unpacked, she found that a number of pieces had not taken the trip well. She suggested, in language even I could understand, that perhaps the young minister had had too many jobs to get through school. Packing was one he had not learned well.

Dr. Costin, grand-pop's close friend, was as different from the packer minister as anyone could be. Dr. Costin visited only a few times while I lived with the Dorce's, but at each visit I would fall in love with him all over again. He looked old enough to be the father of the packer and not only sounded beautiful but was handsome. He was black, the blackest person I had ever seen. His blackness was topped with a full head of white, white hair.

Then, after his good looks, there was the thrill of hearing him speak. When Dr. Costin was in the pulpit I had little notion, of course, of the meaning of what he was saying, but his voice was like music and his speech like poetry. He

never shouted the way some of their other guest ministers did. Grand-pop was himself soft voiced and would look uncomfortable when preachers began to yell from his pulpit.

Grand-pop and Dr. Costin had been classmates when they were young students at Wilberforce College in Ohio. My aunts and grand-mom all called him “Doctor.” When I wondered how he could be a minister and a doctor at the same time, Aunt Leah explained to me about a doctor of philosophy. Until then, all the doctors I had known were those who took care of sick people, except for doctors of divinity, like grand-pop. (But all grand-pop’s parishioners called him “Reverend.”) For awhile I was truly confused.

Because Dr. Costin was the first doctor of philosophy I ever knew, I was much older before I learned that not all people with that degree would sound as beautiful as he when they spoke.

One of the stories Dr. Costin told at our dinner table and which I never forgot was about the first time that my grandfather saw snow when they were both in school at Wilberforce. Grand-pop had lived in Haiti until he came to the United States to go to college. That first snow impressed him so much that he had all his classmates laughing when he told them that he wanted “to go out and get some to send home.”

It was in Harrisburg that I came to know grand-pop as not so stern as I had always thought him. His study was at the back end of the second floor hall and had a balcony from which you could see all the way to the end of our backyard and many of the houses on the street beyond our yard. Grand-pop used to let me stand on the balcony and enjoy that view.

Grand-pop could come out of his study and go right down the back stairs to the kitchen. In cold weather he was taking that trip to the basement often because he seemed to be the only one in the family who knew what to do with the furnace.

I learned in Harrisburg that grand-pop would give me pennies for candy. It was really only one penny at a time and my asking was always preceded by long periods of sitting at the top of the back steps outside his study door, gathering up my courage. Grand-pop never said “No” but it always took me a long time to ask.

My fortune would be spent at the candy store near my school. Occasionally, a friend of the family would give me a whole box of candy. I was allowed one piece a day. I was fully grown before I knew that some people ate several pieces of candy in one day, even within a few minutes. Because of the way candy was treated in our house, I never really

became a candy lover. But the candy I bought with the pennies grandpa gave me was important and tasted divine because of its source.

On rare occasions, grand-pop would prepare the evening meal. His specialties required, above all, that the women in the family be out of the kitchen. Even to my undeveloped taste, grandpa's cooking was much more exotic than Aunt Leah's menus.

Fish cooked in a court-bouillon, for instance, was one of grand-pop's favorites. I always wished I lived somewhere else on the nights when my aunt cooked fish but grandpa's recipe had nothing at all to do with the fish we usually had.

One day all the other adults were away and I had been left in grand-pop's charge. A visiting minister, one of a number who always seemed to find our house, was there and grand-pop had served him some brandy. Grand-pop came into the dining room where I was playing and offered me a sip, advising me as he held the glass to my face, "Don't tell your aunt." Of course, I never did.

My times alone with grand-pop must have happened (I now realize) when Aunt Leah was getting ready to be married. She and grand-mom were out on frequent shopping expeditions in those days just before the wedding.

The wedding took place right in our living room. I had never before seen so many ministers all in one place. Aunt Leah's soon-to-be-husband "Doc" Henry was the priest at the Episcopal Church in West Chester. It was in West Chester where they had met long before we moved to Harrisburg. Uncle Henry had lots of young priest friends who had gone to Lincoln University where he was on the faculty. One performed the ceremony, another was best man and several others came as guests.

When Uncle Henry was courting and he and Aunt Leah had gone for long walks in the spring evenings, Aunt Leah had often taken me along. Those trips always ended beside the riverfront across from the capitol building. We would sit at the top of the steps leading down to the river and they would seem to forget about me. Then I could look across the water in the dark and imagine all kinds of animals swimming underneath.

Somebody must have told me what would be happening on the day of the wedding but it was still like being in a fairy tale. Grand-pop gave the bride away, of course, but before that I watched Aunt Leah come down the stairs in the center room in that fairy-princess dress grand-mom had made. I was the flower girl and waited at the foot of the stairs to

begin strewing petals as Aunt Leah went through the middle room to the front where there were all those ministers waiting.

Later, when the newlyweds had already left for their Atlantic City honeymoon, I was upstairs in the front bedroom with grandma. Only she and I were there. I had taken off my tight new shoes and was enjoying walking around in my stocking feet when I stepped on a needle embedded in the rug. My white sock began to show red and in that moment the whole day turned into a disaster. Although I did not know it then, that needle stab was prophetic, the beginning of a complete new life for me. Soon after the wedding my mother came and took me to live with her in New York.

## NEW YORK

In the summer of 1923 when my mother brought me to New York, she and Quincy Day and his son, “little Quincy,” were living in Spanish Harlem on East 117<sup>th</sup> Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues. Mama and Mr. Day had worked together in New Jersey. Now she was caring for little Quincy, four years old. His father was employed as a chauffeur.

I thought Mr. Day the most handsome man I had ever seen. He was tall and thin, had dark brown hair with a little gray and a wide smile. His skin color was light but different from mama’s, with more tan. I had not remembered how he looked when I had seen him in New Jersey during the brief visit on which mama had taken me while I was still living in West Chester. But then, of course, I had no idea that he would come to be such an important person in my life.

Being with mama and the Days was like having a whole new family. There were so many things which were different in New York. Strangest of all was living in an apartment building with no space at all between it and the houses on either side. Only the next day after I had come to live in that apartment I was looking out the back window and a little girl about my age called across the courtyard which separated us, “You Panish, too?” I shook my head to say “no” but secretly hoped I would see her in the street so we could get to be friends. I never did, not surprisingly, because the entrance to her house was in the next block from ours.

Mr. Day used to bring home small sized Mason mints in their silver paper with the blue lettering. Mama would put them in a glass dish on a table in the living room. In all the time I had lived with my grandparents I had never seen candy in a dish. Sometimes family friends would bring a box of candy from which I would be given a piece from time to time, but not every day.

Going to a big movie house was another thrill about life in New York. It was a cold winter night the first time Mr. Day took us to the Roxy, one of the two largest movie houses in the city. We had to wait in a long line, winding around the block. After only a short time on line, I wished we could give up and be at home. But once inside the theatre there was the great organ that came up out of the floor like magic right in front of your eyes.

Another time we went to the Roxy to see Charlie Chaplin in “The Gold Rush.” That was the first movie whose story I remembered. Papa had taken me to movies but I always fell asleep on those.

We lived on East 117<sup>th</sup> Street only a short time. By the time school started in September we had moved to a larger apartment house on St. Nicholas Avenue and 125<sup>th</sup> Street on the same side of the street as the school I would attend in the next block. In fact from our living room windows you could look across 126<sup>th</sup> Street right into the school yard.

Our house had a large inner courtyard with a fountain in the center. It also had the first elevator I had ever seen inside a house. In fact, except for churches and schools I had never before been inside a building as large as our house on St. Nicholas Avenue.

I was in the fourth grade which must have been dull. One day I drew a Little Lord Fauntleroy with the required knee pants, a ruffled shirt and long curls. As an afterthought I added a penis.

My teacher noticed how busy I was just when I had completed my drawing. She ordered me to come up to her desk and bring my paper.

After she had given me a piercing look she said, "I want you to take this home and have it signed by your mother."

I said humbly, "Yes, Mrs. Braun."

I did take my artwork home and give it to mama but only after I had removed the feature which I knew had disturbed the teacher.

Mama looked at the little boy for a few minutes before she said, "You're not in school to draw." Then, without further comment, she signed.

I restored the deletion before I returned the signed piece to my teacher. As she took it from me, she asked, "What did your mother say?"

Without hesitation, I lied, "She gave me a whipping."

Mrs. Braun said nothing but her face softened just a little. She was satisfied, but not really. A few days later a man came to our classroom, took me with him to a smaller room down the hall and gave me a lot of pictures and people shapes to play with. Only later did I know that all that playing was really testing.

Later I overheard the examiner telling the teacher the results of his session with me. She must have decided that the naughty drawing was merely an aberration because of whatever else he told her. I was careful not to do any more drawing in that class.

While I was being regarded as “strange” by my teacher I became a minor celebrity, skating on West 126<sup>th</sup> Street after school. My collision with the brick wall in Harrisburg had spurred me on to achieve real skill with skates. Another girl in the block about my size was a whirlwind. I was goaded, of course, as a newcomer, to try to top her skill. I succeeded and thus broke the ice of being the new kid on the block.

Bradhurst Avenue and 154<sup>th</sup> Street, across from Colonial Park and only a block from Polo Grounds, was one of the places where we lived, which, for many reasons, is sharper in my memory than some of the others.

I never went to Polo Grounds then, but did have some happy times in Colonial Park. Once, while we were still living across from the park, there was a heavy snowstorm. Mama took me out the next day, bringing along a heavy metal tray which we used to go down the snow-covered slope in the park. That was only the second time I remembered playing games with my mother; the first had been in New Jersey when we rolled down the grassy hill behind the big house where she worked.

In the spring and summer time I often played “house” in the park with friends. Equipped with dolls and their dishes we would spend long hours, but we never had real food. (Except for when I had gone on church picnics when I was still living with my grandparents, eating outside the house had always been discouraged. It was, in fact, a real “no-no.”

While we were still living on Bradhurst (top floor front) mama and Mr. Day opened a restaurant. It was on East 66<sup>th</sup> Street, far, far away from where we lived.

On the one day when I made the long trip to the restaurant—on the subway, by myself, I must have been a little nippish long before the time at which mama had directed me to leave the house. (Quincy was no longer with us. Nobody told me but I guessed he had gone to live with his mother.) Anyway, I had decided to have a hardboiled egg. Then, no doubt overly excited at the prospect of taking a new and strange trip all by myself, I forgot about my cooking project, just left the house with egg and water still on the stove.

Mama was the cook at the restaurant, so once she had greeted me, I saw little of her while I was there. Mr. Day was host, waiter and cashier.

When we were on our way home, I asked, “Why do only men come to your restaurant?” In all the time I had been there I had seen no couples or women by themselves.

While my mother only smiled, Mr. Day answered. It had been his idea to locate in that neighborhood because he knew that many of the chauffeurs, waiting for the hour when they would return to pick up their employers, tended to pass the time in a nearby pool hall. “They’d rather have some place to sit and even eat, if they feel like it.”

It had been a long day. I was happy when we came to our stop on the subway. We had about three blocks to walk before we arrived at our house.

As soon as we reached the top floor, you could smell the strange odor coming from our apartment. Once inside, mama wasted no time getting to the kitchen. When she came out, I could see that she was angry. But it was only when I saw her face that I remembered the egg.

“What were you trying to do, burn down the house?” she asked, facing me as she stood in front of the stove, holding the pan full of ashes.

“I was hungry,” I said. Only then it sounded strange even to me—to be hungry on my way to dinner.

For just another minute or so mama continued to look at me, unbelieving. Then she yanked me toward her and for the second time in my life, gave me a wallop which really hurt.

A long time after that I was home alone one day when a friend who lived nearby came to visit and for some reason we decided to perch on the sill of one of the living room windows with our legs hanging outside.

Luck was not with us. One of the neighbors saw us and told my mother. Punishment for that was less severe than for the egg burning, but sufficient so that never since have I given thought to sitting in a window, even from a ground floor room.

It was while we were living on Bradhurst that Mr. Day and mama separated. There was no argument, or at least, nothing I was told about why he left. There were no more restaurants and one day he was just not there.

Christmas that year was not so merry. We had no tree. Mama went out, instead, on Christmas Eve and collected branches which had fallen to the ground around the merchants’ stands. When she brought them back into the house, she arranged and tied them with a large red satin ribbon. Then she hung all that in the center of our front room between the two windows.

In the next year we moved again, this time to 148<sup>th</sup> Street and Bradhurst Avenue. Then I went to P.S. 147 on 147<sup>th</sup> Street, about two blocks east of Bradhurst. That school had the first woman principal I had ever known. Her name was Mrs. Louise Ayers and she was African-American. There I finished the sixth grade.

When my friend, Lydia Edwards, who lived just down the street from us on Bradhurst, learned that I would be going to Junior High School 136 in the Fall, she told me that that school was full of “dykes.” She had to explain—to her obvious surprise and disgust with my ignorance—what dykes were. But if she were right about the number of lesbians in my school, I never knew. While there I ran into nobody who seemed so different from the others.

Lydia was the same age as I but had picked up a good deal of knowledge which had passed me by. She pointed one day to her middle and told me that was where babies came from—through their mothers’ stomach. Although we were the same height, Lydia was thin and wiry. I was impressed when she ran a finger down her front and said, “You know that line that goes from your belly button down?” and waited for me to find the exact location. “They cut through there and that’s where the baby comes from.”

It was many years before I was able to correct that piece of misinformation.

In J.H.S. 136 I had my first experience of being in a club. Membership in a “club” was not an option to take or leave in our junior high school. It was a requirement, just like wearing a white middie and blue skirt. (Different grade levels were identified by the colors of their ties.)

During my first year I chose the gardening club. We planted bulbs in the three feet or so of soil which separated the school building walls and the sturdy link fence on the sidewalk. I have no memory of what we gardeners did while waiting for the bulbs to become flowers. Or, even if we held some kind of greeting ceremony at their arrival. My only recollection was of putting the bulbs into the soil.

In my second and last year in Junior High School the club experience was more exciting even though it began badly. Despite my aborted ballet lessons in the third grade in Harrisburg, I still yearned to be a ballerina. For those of us in ninth grade there really only two possibilities—dance or dramatics. Both groups would have a part in the graduation program. I selected the dance club and was told the first week that I had made it. Mama took me to the store the next day to buy me “toe slippers” as we, the uninitiated, called them. She seemed as excited as I.

At the first meeting of those who had been chosen for the dance club, the blow came. The teacher announced that too many people had made that choice and some would have to be dropped. It seemed only fair, she said, to start cutting at the end of the alphabet. “Wills,” of course, was a sure loser. (In high school I would have a classmate named “Ziegler,” but most of the time throughout school; I was either last or next to the last on the roll.)

Being eliminated from the dance club actually turned out far better than I could have anticipated. The drama club, to which I automatically moved, performed a play in the Chinese style, with a character called “The Chorus” who was the narrator and on stage throughout the action. I was chosen to be the brother in a brother-sister team, the two next large roles after the Chorus.

Soon after we began rehearsals our drama teacher arranged to take those who had parental permission and the price of a ticket (all of us managed both) to see a play on Broadway done in the Chinese style. The role of the chorus was being played in the famous actor, Charles Coburn.

Although I had attended many concerts and recitals, sometimes sponsored by my grandfather’s church—both Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson had performed in the church in Harrisburg—this was my first time to see professional actors. Our seats, the cheapest available, were, of course, in the balcony. But just being in a real theatre was entry into a whole new and strange world.

All of our performances on graduation day were up to what the drama teacher had hoped for and far more exciting to our parents and friends than even we could have anticipated. I was a long time coming back down to earth.

Some time before I entered Junior High, my “best friend” Aida Harrison, had recruited me for the Girl Scouts. Earlier Aida and I used to walk each other home between 148<sup>th</sup> Street and Bradhurst Avenue where I lived and 146<sup>th</sup> Street and Lenox Avenue where she lived, right next door to the famous old Cotton Club.

“Polly” Parrot was our Girl Scout leader. We called her “Miss Parrot,” of course, but her nickname fitted her well. She was slight, quick like a bird in her movements and had a long, thin nose with a slight crook in the middle. Her fortitude must have been extraordinary to enable her to remain for as long and as happily (it seemed) as she did the mentor of an assortment of teenage girls, unpredictable and probably unreasonable as we must often have been.

In season and sometimes out (for me) hiking was our thing. A climax of those long tramps in the country was always the preparation of lunch over a campfire. The mystique of making a fire eluded me (and most of my companions) for my entire Scout career. Miss Parrot would show, explain and demonstrate but in the end a useable flame would arise only under her hand.

One concoction heated over the campfire which even now remain a happy taste memory included equal sized cans of corn and of tomatoes, with chunks of American cheese cut up into it. None of us ever really brought the makings

of the hot lunch, however. It was always Miss Parrot who provided the ingredients of those mystical concoctions which we prepared under her direction, all the while believing, no doubt, that we were great cooks.

On one trip the gustatory excitement was all about jellied apples. My memory of those is enduring: sticky hands in the making and strain on the teeth in the eating. Once scouting days were over—once, in fact, that particular outing had ended, I never touched another apple on a stick.

By and large I preferred indoor activities. “Hiking” always sounded exciting but the reality never matched the anticipatory thrill.

Besides the trips outdoors, those scouting days included learning to swim, learning to “keep house” (i.e., “clean house”) and many other activities which would lead to merit badges and moving up the ladder in Scoutdom.

In preparation for the education in housekeeping Miss Parrott provided us with booklets entitled “A Cleaner House by Twelve O’Clock.” The title stays fixed in my memory, no doubt, because the idea is one which I have always admired but have never been able to achieve.

Our leader discussed with us some of the book’s teachings during our regular meetings, then, for our “finals,” (as it were) the test to see whether we had really learned anything about “keeping house,” we were taken to the home of Mrs. Bearden. This gracious lady, mother of the artist Romare Bearden, lived in a two story house in the West 130’s in Harlem. The second story had an iron railed porch reminiscent of those I had seen only in pictures of New Orleans.

Mrs. Bearden, aside from being charming, must really have been a close friend of Miss Parrot to have allowed a group at least eight young, inexperienced cleaners to invade her home.

I was assigned, along with another scout, to wash windows. I do not remember how many windows we did but since I have no recall of the back of the house at all, we must have specialized in the front. Newspaper, wet with ammonia water, worked as well on Mrs. Bearden’s windows as we had been told it would and had earlier proved by testing on our windows at home. (I think we learned the ammonia trick from Miss Parrott, not from “A Cleaner House, etc.”).

Whatever the chores to which we were assigned, we all came off well. Not one of us failed to earn her “Housekeeper” badge.

Another of the challenges Miss Parrott presented us was “The Thirty Day Loveliness Test.” Who in her teens could resist the opportunity of becoming “lovely” in only thirty days?

Methods by which to achieve this goal came in a small booklet published by who else—the Ivory Soap Company. Miss Parrott made certain that each of us was provided with her own copy of this gem whose form I still remember—a booklet about 5 by 7 inches, with a delicate blue cover. Its theme, naturally, was to wash oneself and one’s clothing as often as possible with Ivory soap.

I do not recall whether I was able to persuade my mother to buy Ivory soap but I do recall that, whatever soap we had in our bathroom, I began at that time to take a bath with it every morning and every night, just as the little blue booklet had advised.

It was during my first year in college, long after I had grown out of scouting, that I suddenly developed an itch which would not go away under any of the treatments my mother suggested. There were no marks to show bites or other injuries, just an insistent need to scratch.

Finally, when mama must have grown weary of watching me forever digging at my skin, she took me to a dermatologist. Since both of us had always enjoyed excellent health, I suspect that she must have asked among her friends even to find such a fancy doctor.

The office was on 138<sup>th</sup> Street, between Seventh and Lenox Avenues, dubbed “Strivers Row” because all of the brownstone houses were one-family and occupied by upwardly mobile “colored” people.

I was struck when we entered the waiting room, by the magnificence of its furnishings. There were several leather chairs among the straight-backed wooden ones, wall to wall carpeting and magazine holders with expensive breeds of publications.

Even before I could decide on which of the glossy magazines I should choose first, a patient emerged from the doctor’s office, then the doctor himself appeared in the doorway and nodded to indicate that he was ready for us.

My mother sat and watched while he passed his fingers over my skin in several spots. Afterwards, indicating by a nod that I should sit and himself taking his place behind his desk, he leaned back in his chair and said, “Now—tell, young lady, how often do you bathe?”

I answered proudly, “Twice a day, morning and night.” That was, after all, the formula for “lovely.”

“Good Lord! What are you trying to do—wash yourself away?” He seemed to be considering my problem as he continued, leaning back. “Nobody needs two baths a day unless—“ I never did discover who those “unless” people were because the doctor finished with “Well, you don’t anyway.” He prescribed no medicine, only recommended cutting in

half the number of complete ablutions in which I indulged daily. And, sure enough, my skin returned to normal within a few days.

The most demanding lesson to which we submitted in order to climb steadily upward in the scouting world was swimming. Our training arena for becoming skilled in water movement was the pool at the old public bathhouse on 134<sup>th</sup> Street, between Lenox and Fifth Avenues. Originally the bathhouse had been, as the name implied, a boon for those in the community whose tenements did not provide proper bathrooms. It had not been used as a true bathhouse for years but the pool was maintained in first rate condition for the enjoyment of the local citizenry.

Inevitably some among our group of city raised kids took to the water with more enthusiasm than others. They most certainly had been exposed by their parents to nearby beaches. (By subway, almost every New York kids has an easy ride to a beach.)

I had never learned to love sun or sand, but that pool probably posed a challenge just because it was so different from any swimming area I had ever seen. All of us splashed around determinedly under Miss Parrot's direction. And after what seemed a far longer time than it probably was, we were all water-wise, able to make the required number of trips from the shallow to the deep end of the pool. Nobody had been faint-hearted enough to quit.

What I recall as the most excruciating part of obtaining that badge was the continuing struggle most of us went through with our hair. There were ongoing consultations and exchanges of tips for ways in which to keep the water out of the rubber caps. To this day I do not understand the value of a cap, except perhaps for marathon swimmers, to control long hair which might impede their progress.

Certainly, for those of us without "wash and wear" hair, damage control after swimming went on into the night if one were to be presentable the next morning.

## UNCLE RIENZIE AND BLANCHE

For a long time after mama and Mr. Day separated, Uncle Rienzie mama's half-brother was the man in my life. For awhile I thought he was a kind of Santa Claus because he always visited us at night and left money under my pillow. But deep down inside I knew that he was real because he came all year round and always kissed me before he left.

Uncle Rienzie had worked as a waiter for as far back as anybody could remember and must have been a good one because I heard the big folks say that he had always worked in first class establishments. By the time I was old enough to take notice he was settled in New York and worked at the old New Yorker Hotel on 34<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway. That was the place from which he retired. He was nearly bursting with pride when he showed us the gold medallion he had been give, along with its accompanying citation. What I did not learn until I was almost grown was that when he had finished work, Uncle Rienzie's habit was to go to the racetrack. He had been lucky on the times when he came to our house laden down with gifts—not just cash, but ice cream, cookies and other goodies he knew mama and I would like.

Even after I was old enough to know Uncle Rienzie as a real person, I still adored him. He was handsome, browner than any of the other Dorce's, except for grand-pop, his father. His smile warmed the whole room and he was trim and lean, like a young man, even when his hair was grey.

I always thought of Uncle Rienzi as having a store of hard-to-come-by knowledge right there in his head. One time he had come to our house for dinner and brought champagne, as he often did. There must have been a celebration that night because in addition to our having the champagne, I was wearing a new silk dress in my favorite color, aqua. When I managed to spill champagne on my dress, I was truly stricken as I regarded the damp spot.

Uncle Rienzie said, watching my face and my dress, “Don’t worry. It won’t stain.” He was smiling but I knew he was serious. He went on. “Beer—now that would leave a bad spot—but not champagne.”

He was “without a doubt” (one of his favorite expressions) quite right, I discovered. Within minutes the champagne spot had dried and left no trace. Not only was I happy about my dress but I became an instant authority on the subject of alcohol stains, ever at the ready to display my wisdom for the benefit of anyone unfortunate enough to have sustained a spill. Actually, I had the opportunity only once in many years, but always felt smug knowing I was in possession of such knowledge.

Although Blanche, Uncle Rienzie’s longtime love, did not join him in visits to our house until I was much older, they had been together for many years before she became his wife. They married only just before they came to live with mama on Lenox Avenue, to occupy the hall bedroom which had been mine and which I would repossess when they moved into their own apartment. I was old enough then to know that the legalization of their relationship might have been for my mother’s benefit. Moving into our apartment during those depression days must have helped both bread winners—Uncle Rienzi and mama. (As long as I knew her, Blanche never worked.)

Before Blanche and Uncle Rienzi came to live with us, members of the Dorce’ family other than mama, spoke of Blanche, if at all, only in critical tones. Aside from her sin of living with my uncle without benefit of marriage, which had gone on for longer than anyone knew, she was overly fond of the ‘grape’. Although she was never “under the influence” while visiting the Dorce’ family, they knew that she drank and their attitude was censorious. From the time I was old enough to know Blanche’s name and that she and my uncle literally “went together.” I knew that she could never really be a part of the Dorce’ family.

But from the first day I met her I thought Blanche one of the most beautiful people I had ever known. She was not only more stylish than the women in my family but from pictures taken in her early years, she must also have been even more the “grand lady” when she was younger. She was always slim, for instance, while most of my female relatives seemed to have put on middle-aged weight early. She had finely chiseled features in an Indian brown face.

Shortly after Blanche and Uncle Rienzi came to live at our house, she had to have most of her teeth removed. She never complained during the long stretch in which she was obliged to eat soft food. But on the day that she came home fitted, finally, with upper and lower plates she brought with her a thick steak which she cooked and sat down to enjoy immediately. As she cut a slice from her plate, she glanced up at me for just a second and said smiling, "I've been waiting for this day for so long."

I watched, fascinated. Grandma Dorce' had never, never worn her teeth at home as long as I had known her. Until that moment I assumed that everybody kept store teeth for dress occasions that they were supposed to be functional. A few years later when I was already out of college and Blanche and Uncle Rienzi had moved to their own apartment, I was visiting one day when Blanche offered me an exquisite nightgown—low-cut, lace trimmed and slinky. I thanked her and said what I thought would be a joke. "It's so beautiful. It's a shame nobody else will see it."

Blanche's eyes opened wide in disbelief as she sat back in her chair and stared at me. "Do you mean to tell me," she asked, "that you're a God-damned virgin?"

I was lucky though: she did not take back the gown.

Although I never knew what Blanche's life might have been prior to her meeting Uncle Rienzi, I was certain that however she had lived, it had been with panache. She was as natural as sunlight, loving as she lived, never complicating her scene by trying to accommodate to the prejudices of others. She was closer to mama than to anyone else in the Dorce' family probably because mama's philosophy, like Blanche's, never articulated but constantly demonstrated, was to accept everybody as good, honorable and loveable until they proved themselves otherwise. It never occurred to her, in fact, that there would be an "otherwise" until it happened. Neither Blanche nor mama had concern about what others thought, nor whether one acquaintance or another were within her "circle." Their circle was all the people they knew.

Mama had only one friend who I saw remove herself from favor in a few minutes without realizing what she was doing and how far from my mother she was distancing herself.

Mrs. Caton was a short, dark woman with a slightly humped back. She was telling my mother one day while we all sat in our living room, how she had had the good luck to find a wallet in the street. I was in Junior High School then and was only present during their conversation because I was waiting for an opportunity to tell mama that I planned to go to the nearby library.

"It had about fifty dollars in it and some snapshots," she smiled happily.

Mama, looking worried, asked, “There was nothing with her address?”

“Oh, sure,” Mrs. Caton answered, smiling. “Driver’s license, credit cards, all that stuff.”

My mother’s face clouded over. “I guess you sent the pictures back.” I could see by her expression that she did not believe that at all. And as I watched Mrs. Caton’s face I was beginning to dislike her intensely.

She laughed, a sound which was not happy, but mean, almost like the villain in an old-fashioned drama. Then she looked right at my mother and said, “You’re not serious, are you? That rich old white woman? I should take the trouble to send things to her?”

Mama was upset, I could see. “But those snapshots were probably her grandchildren. She might not miss the money, maybe. I could hear in her tone that mama wasn’t even so certain of that. “I would have sent the pictures back.”

Mrs. Caton just sat there, swinging her legs which did not reach the floor, smiling. “I threw it all away—except the money, of course.”

Although mama did not discuss her relationship Mrs. Caton with me, naturally, I do not recall ever seeing her in our house again. When I learned many years later that she had died, I did not feel anything at all.

## HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

When I first became a pupil at George Washington High School, we were living on Edgecombe Avenue near 148<sup>th</sup> Street, on the other side of the same Colonial Park I had enjoyed so much a few years earlier. The neighborhood was considerably more upscale, however. Although it was still Harlem, many of the residents in that long stretch block from 145<sup>th</sup> Street up to 155<sup>th</sup> liked to think of themselves as living in “Sugar Hill.” The fantasy is easily maintained because the neighborhood was in stark contrast to that area just below the park. At 155<sup>th</sup> Street and Edgecombe Avenue one found large apartment house which, to some, marked the real “Sugar Hill” and in which still reside many of the African-American famous, along with many would-be famous.

My journey to school each day involved going down to 145<sup>th</sup> Street and St. Nicholas Avenue to board the uptown subway. This I would ride until I reached a stop at whose corner I would take a bus the rest of the way to 192<sup>nd</sup> and Audubon Avenue where my school was.

Several of my classmates from Jr. H.S. 136 were also students at George Washington but the one I remember best is Yvonne Mason (now Williams). I remember her not only because she was one of the prettiest and most sparkling members of the rapid advance class in Junior High School but most of all for her famous tale of when her English teacher in High School asked that each pupil write his or her autobiography.

Yvonne’s eyes would sparkle more than ever as she related, straight-faced, “Many years ago, on this plantation, the master looking upon his slaves, saw my grandmother and found her fair.” Now, many, many years later, Yvonne and I

live in the same area during summer. We do not meet often but whenever we do I always remember high school and her autobiography.

Forever in my memory also is Jimmy Rizzo, George Washington's star football player for my sophomore and junior years. I was not a football fan. The most important games were always played in frigid weather, as I recall. It is possible that I saw Jimmy once on the football field. But we were in the same English class in my sophomore year. He sat opposite me, in the next row. And despite being in the front of the room, exactly under the teacher's eye, Jimmy would always manage to communicate to me (dramatically) the fact of his hunger (that class met just before the hour when we were both scheduled to have lunch).

I brought my lunch always. There was probably not enough loose change around for mama to give me lunch money—only late in my school career did I have an allowance—a small one. An egg sandwich was what I would slip to Jimmy sometime during almost every English period. No doubt mama always had eggs in the house but they were so regularly my lunch fare that I have not had an egg sandwich in my life since high school.

Jimmy was one of the most handsome boys I ever knew. And to say “I knew” exaggerates more than a little. He looked hungry. I proffered sandwich. He rewarded me with an incredibly beautiful smile. And that was that. At the first moment the teacher's gaze was fixed in the back of the room, Jimmy's dark curls would bend down to the sandwich. He ate with the same stealth he must have employed in passing the ball on the field. We were never caught.

I made a friend, of a sort, and at the same time made certain that my mother's delicious egg sandwiches were appreciated. Jimmy treated them as food of the gods.

In that same class we were called upon from time to time to give “oral reports” on whatever we had been assigned to read. That was a performance for which I was called frequently and which I enjoyed giving. Jimmy, sitting so close, would gaze at me intently all the while I held forth. Even though I knew the light in his eyes about a sandwich, it did help to know that one person, at least, was entirely caught up in my presentation.

Sometime during my last year at George Washington, we moved from upper Edgcombe to much lower, in the thirties, where a friend of my mother's had a brownstone.

Mrs. Coleman was a large woman, but not much taller than average, just with more girth. She was good-looking, with regular features and café-au-lait color. She appeared to be older than mama and must have had a caring attitude for her. What happened that had forced us to leave our apartment I do not recall, if I knew. But thanks to Mrs. Coleman, we

were able to move into two rooms on the second floor back of her three-story house. The bathroom was on the hall but right next to our living room. There was a small cupboard-like affair at one end of the living room on top of which was a two-burner gas appliance. That was our kitchen.

There must have been a bath incorporated within the front bedroom because, as I recall, we had exclusive use of the one on our end.

I do not remember our bedroom in that apartment, but it was separate from the living room, a narrow little space, no doubt, squeezed between the large front room and the back room on that floor.

There was one problem. Roaches in numbers I had never seen before had established a beachhead in our combination living room, kitchen. They were so bold they did not wait until dark to appear.

I do not remember how I learned about sulfur candles, but that was the cure I decided upon. Having made my purchase from the local hardware store, I came home with more than I needed, no doubt, lighted and placed them in what I considered strategic locations in our rooms. Then I went out for several hours.

Whichever gods look after the adventurous stupid, they were on my side that day. When I came home all my mother's plants had curled up and died and Mrs. Coleman, the landlady, said just in passing that there had been a strange odor in the house. Fortunately for me, she had not been able to identify it or discover from whence it had come.

My mother gave me "what for" but only gently. After all we had no more roaches.

Except for math, I had always found that most of my school subjects were conquerable without too much study. As the end of the semester approached, however, I knew that history was still one great unknown to me.

On the morning of the final examination in that subject, I rose well before dawn, went into the living room-kitchenette so as not to disturb my mother and began to read the textbook I had been carrying back and forth all year. I was unable to get through the entire text, as I had hoped, but the effort did pay off.

Several days after all tests had been completed and we were, in fact, close to graduation, my history teacher met me as we passed in the corridor. She declared, without preamble—

"Your problem, Miss Wills, is that you're just lazy."

She was a tall lady and was now firmly planted before me, her face stern, her brown eyes piercing as though she had never seen me before and now that she had, disapproved intensely.

She continued “I can’t give you much more than a passing mark because—well, you know why. But if you’d been doing as well as you could have all term—“ Her voice trailed off as she shook her head in disbelief, turned away and continued down the hall.

Three hours of fast reading had been insufficient, however, to put me into the top ranks on the New York State Regents examination in mathematics. When I learned that without high Regents grades in both geometry and algebra, I would have no chance at all of being considered for college, I was devastated.

I do not recall feeling, at the time, that I had been overlooked by the school system. Later, when I realized that there were people called guidance counselors in all the schools and that there must have been one or two in George Washington, especially since it was among the more highly rated schools, I was angry. Whoever had the job had not cared at all that I was there. It must have been true—what people in the African-American community always said—that no effort was made to “guide” us because it was assumed that we would go to trade school or get a job—any job-- on leaving high school.

It had never occurred to me that I would not go to college. I wanted to be a journalist and had heard that the University of Pennsylvania had an excellent school of journalism. I had not shared my thoughts with my mother but in my head nurtured a plan which seemed reasonable enough to me—to go and live with my father’s family so that I could, as a state resident, attend Penn without paying tuition.

Even before I was ready to propose to my mother that I move to Philadelphia in order to attend college, I learned that I had been in error about the tuition, but I broke my news anyway, that I should like to go to the University of Pennsylvania.

Mama, astonished that I did not know, then told me the truth to which I should have been sensitive all along, that she could not be responsible for even a modest tuition. She was still working as a presser in lingerie. Although she was the one who pressed the samples which would be displayed in the showroom, she received the standard union wage.

Hunter College, I learned then, was open to all New York City residents who had sufficiently high grades in those Regents in which I had done so poorly.

I learned also that I could repeat my math courses and try for better marks in the Regents by enrolling in the nearest high school which was Wadleigh on Seventh Avenue and 114<sup>th</sup> Street. Going there was for me, nevertheless, an

act of desperation. Rumor had it that it was a school where the atmosphere was "rough" and the instruction uninspired. But, without choice, I enrolled there for night classes.

In contrast to the population at George Washington where the African -American student population was miniscule, Wadleigh's student body was predominantly African-American (not surprisingly).

By the end of the semester when I had completed review of the two courses in which my Regents grades had been poor, I had learned a lesson which would stand me in good stead for a lifetime—to wit: one should not believe gossip without solid evidence.

What had been neglected earlier in my preparation for college was well taken care of at Wadleigh even though I was a night student. My teacher led me also all through the necessary paper work to enable me to at Hunter. I was probably more surprised than she at the nearly perfect score I achieved on one examination and the 90 on the other.

In the fall I entered Hunter College of the City of New York.

Hunter in 1934 was the largest woman's college in the world, with 8000 full time students. (It became co-ed after World War II.)

There were two buildings in different boroughs: the old historic original at 68<sup>th</sup> Street and Lexington and an annex (for freshman and sophomores) in the Bronx, at 192<sup>nd</sup> Street and Riverdale Avenue.

Hunter's curriculum included journalism major but students were not permitted to enroll for that until their sophomore year, by which time they had presumably demonstrated a degree of competency in freshman English. For the waiting time, I chose Biology, with a Natural Science minor.

Long before the end of that first semester at Hunter I had abandoned my aspirations toward journalism for the simple reason that the women who "taught" my class in freshman English had succeeded so well in discouraging interest in her subject. That semester's study was "olde" English, principally Beowulf. Our teacher's method of imparting the joys of Beowulf was to fill the entire time of each period with reading from a huge notebook set in the center of her desk.

It was not Beowulf itself, but her notes on Beowulf to which we were subjected for the whole fifty minutes of each period. I cannot remember that lady walking, or even standing as she droned on at her class for the entire period. She sat behind her desk, as though graven in stone, giving her entire attention to turning her notebook pages. Some of us joked about that large notebook being the same one in which she herself must have recorded what her teacher had said during his or her effort to disclose the mysteries of Beowulf. But after careful consideration, we realized that she could

not have taken that many notes as a student. There was no doubt that they had all been prepared for the express purpose to which they were being put.

I learned after the first marking period that one's grade in "olde English" was dependent solely on the quantity of the teacher's readings which one was able to record and give back. From then on, tedious as it was, I forced myself to write constantly as she read.

In the second semester of that year I was automatically enrolled in Speech and Dramatics, another course required of all students. My teacher for that subject was as creative as the Beowulf lady had been dull.

Mr. Spadino, thin and intense looking, straight as a soldier, upon his first meeting with our class, stood in the front of the room, surveyed the group and announced:

"There are too many of you here." In truth the number of students, as one glanced around, seemed not unusual. No one was without a seat. "Anyone who wishes to request transfer to another teacher," Mr. Spadino continued, "has my full approval."

Several of us stole glances to the back and from side to side but no one in the group stood or walked towards the door.

Mr. Spadino, who had not changed his soldier-like stance in front of us from the moment he had spoken, continued, "You should know that I demand a lot and give few high marks."

Still not a soul rose to leave. Finally, Mr. Spadino began the day's session.

There was not a dull moment in the whole period— not that day or in any of our sessions with Mr. Spadino.

As we were leaving the room at the end of the hour, one student commented that she had heard that Mr. Spadino had married the only student to whom he had been known to give an "A" for her final grade.

When my final mark for the semester was an "A" I decided to request a change of minor from Natural Sciences (which was paired by the college with my Biology Major) to one of Speech and Dramatics.

One day shortly after the beginning of the new semester, post-summer vacation, I ran into Mr. Spadino in the corridor between class change. He advised me to try out for the Intercollegiate Poetry Reading to represent Hunter. This event, held yearly, included students from all the Ivy League colleges and Hunter. It was not widely advertised and I should not have known about it if Mr. Spadino had not called it to my attention.

As I stood before him, trying to digest the information he was giving, he said, in his usual delicate manner, “If you don’t try out, I’ll break your neck.” With that he turned and walked away.

I did not register for the trial readings and was successful in being chosen to represent Hunter. From that moment until the night of the presentation some weeks later, I was under the tutelage of Helen Gertrude Hicks, then head of the Speech Department at Hunter. Stephen Vincent Benet’s book length saga of the Civil War, “John Brown’s Body” was the work from which Miss Hicks chose the piece she recommended I use for the poetry reading.

Miss Hicks was never my classroom teacher but in addition to having had the benefit of her coaching in preparation for the reading, I was later a member of her reading chorus which was heard weekly on Public Radio, the city station. For a long time after that, I did occasional secretarial work for her while she was writing a book on choral reading.

I remember neither the actual contest—reading for the judges at Hunter as an aspirant for the honor of representing my college, nor the formality of being chosen. Except for the great night of the reading, all that remains clear about that experience was being received by Miss Hicks when we met after the tryouts with a warmer welcome than I had ever had for any accomplishment: then the days, spreading out to weeks, of reading for her and being coached for what seemed hours on end but which, in the total context of my school program was not really that much.

As the great night approached, both my mother and my Aunt Nin, (then living with us as she did for sometime while a graduate student at Columbia and later, between jobs) began to be concerned about what I would wear—for what would certainly be the most dramatic event of my life up to then.

Mama said, “For this you ought to have a dress prettier than any you’ve ever had before.” Then, with her usual way of facing problems head-in, she finished with “But I just don’t have the money.”

I had just been through what must have been at least the tenth reading of the piece with my mother and Nin as audience when Nin said, “I think I have a dress you could wear.”

My heart did not leap for joy. Nin was at least three sizes larger and considerably taller than I.

But when she brought out the dress she had in mind, my spirits rose considerably. It was a dreamy color—neither peach nor apricot but a warm blend of the two.

Mama worked magic on that dress which had to be taken in, as well as shortened. There was something to be done around the low neckline, too. Fortunately, it was only after the program when we were on our way home, in the

subway, that I looked down to see a few basting stitches remaining in the neckline seam. If I had made that discovery before my turn to read to that special audience, I doubt that I would have had the courage even to rise.

A small room off a library in one of the Columbia University buildings (on West 116<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway) was the scene of the reading. Mama and I were the only persons of color among the audience and participants. Miss Hicks was present, of course, along with the coaches for students from all the other colleges. It seemed a tiny audience in light of the effort which all the participants must have put into preparation.

The coach from Mt. Holyoke complimented me warmly at the end. She wrote Miss Hicks later, suggesting that she thought my reading the best of the group. Miss Hicks gave me the note which is still among my most treasured memorabilia.

My friendship with Miss Hicks continued even after graduation from college. I participated in her choral reading sessions, broadcast over the city radio station and did some typing to help in the preparation of her book on the subject of choral reading: "The Reading Chorus" (published in 1939 by Noble and Noble).

Helen Gertrude Hicks was a person so full of joie de vivre and nevertheless, so down to earth that working with or for her was an exercise which added more than I can describe to my life, both as our relationship happened and later, in retrospect.

When Miss Hicks left Hunter she went to live in a retirement community in Washington. She wrote me a beautiful letter from there, indicating that she was happy but had been stricken with cancer. A short time later I read her obituary in the New York Times.

## NEGRO HISTORY CLUB

There were only a small number of African-American students at Hunter College during my years in attendance. At the annex in the Bronx, several of us who had gone to the same junior high and/or high school sat together at lunch time. In the middle of our sophomore year someone had the idea to form a “Negro History” club. For a short time we met once a week at lunch hour in a classroom.

I became close Marguerite Petioni who had been one of the organizers of the club, possibly even the creator. At one point I suggested that we might be able to attract more participants and plan more diverse and stimulating programs if we became a Minority Affairs group. She stated with a passion that I still recall “That’s not the kind of group which will preserve our heritage. The whole idea of the club was that.”

I could not resist pointing out to her then that she would never be claimed by any real Negro with her long, straight hair and café-au-lait complexion. Furthermore we were being infiltrated, threatened with takeover, in fact, by Young Communist League members who, at that time, in our school, were all white. Young women none of us had ever seen before began to appear, uninvited, and sat with us in the lunchroom. They had also begun to attend our meetings, in phalanxes, always smiling but contributing nothing at all to the discussion.

I said to Marguerite and from time to time to some of the other members of our group “We can’t tell them we don’t want them but if we are to be truly a mixed group, then we should try to absorb them in a meaningful way.” As she listened, Marguerite’s eyebrows raised in a gesture by now a familiar warning signal to me. I added quickly, “Maybe we could be a minority affairs group.”

Marguerite disagreed with me to the end. The “end” was the elections which we had reached by then. For those, we were truly cabalistic, changing the meeting place at the last moment without telling the Y.C.L. members the new room number.

Our dirty politics worked so well that we were solidly “colored” (as we were called then) for the elections. The comical aspect of the actual process, however, was that the membership split right down the middle about what kind of group we should have and what our goals should be. As a result, it was impossible to assemble a majority for the candidate of either side—those who wished to keep a Negro History Club or those who wished to become a minority affairs group. I had not made my views known to anyone except Marguerite. As a result, I believe, I was chosen as a compromise candidate. By election time nobody really wanted the job, anyway—we had become so much at odds with one another that my assumption of the presidency was by default, not by acclaim.

What our little group lacked in focus, it more than made up for in creativity. On one occasion we were fortunate enough to arrange to have as speaker, Adam Clayton Powell, then the only African-American representative in Congress and highly respected even before that as minister of Abbyssinia Baptist Church, Harlem’s largest, where he had succeeded his father. Those of us who had persuaded him to come were beside ourselves with excitement for days preceding the big date. But on that day, as meeting time approached, it was apparent that we would have a less than a crowded classroom. We began to worry that the Congressman might be anticipating a meeting in the auditorium. He was, after all, accustomed to addressing hosts of devotees.

Fortunately, the Congressman did not arrive early. The few of us who had assembled before the scheduled time were able to make a hasty survey of the grounds surrounding the building where we were to meet. There was construction work going on, as there was almost all the time at this fairly new institution. Without formal discussion, two or three of us fell upon one workman and persuaded our victim to bring his lunch inside, rather than eat wherever he would have ordinarily. It was not difficult. Soon we had corralled several more. What we lacked in political skill we more than made up for in being young and not without the art of beguilement.

With steady propagandizing we were soon able to fill the classroom. In all truth, it was probably not so much our persuasive powers as the comedy of the idea which led the first workman to give assent. After the first, it was not difficult as each in turn was intrigued by the idea of a bevy of young women trying to capture him. In much less time than we had thought would be necessary, we had captured enough workmen to fill the classroom.

It was probably Mr. Powell’s love of oratory, no matter who the audience, that explained why he never even asked about all those white men in a lunchtime meeting of a minority affairs group at a women’s college.

It was a splendid meeting, even though no member of the work crew came up to the Congressman after the speech to ask questions.

## PROBLEMS

Near the end of my first year at Hunter, I was called down to the dean's office. The summons did not indicate why.

"Miss Wills," the dean said, after she had invited me to sit, "your work in mathematics has fallen to a point where it appears you may not be passing at term's end."

The course referred to, the only one required of freshmen was an omnibus type, including advanced algebra, trigonometry, even a bit of calculus. It appeared to have been designed especially to defeat people like me who had never been able to master even simple mathematics.

I had no answer to the dean's pronouncement, so I sat, looking down.

Then came the words, blunt and delivered with emphasis, "Think about it, Miss Wills. This course is required of all freshmen. But (and here a long pause) It's the last mathematics course you will ever be required to take."

I looked up then to see her smiling. "Do you think that for the sake of a college degree, you could study enough to pass this freshman math?"

In that one question she had convinced me and I did.

My other encounter with the dean—not the same one—happened the following semester at registration time. My friend, Myrtle Facey and several others of us were sitting around our favorite table in the lunchroom waiting for our alphabetical places in the registration line. With roughly two thousand students in our year, the wait until the powers that reigned reached the W's promised to last until late afternoon. I conceived what I considered a brilliant idea at the time. Since I would have to be there all day, I said to Myrtle, "Why don't you go home and I'll register for you?"

Myrtle agreed, of course, that that was a splendid idea and we said “goodbye” until we should meet on another day when I would give her the program.

At the proper time I presented myself on the “F” line. My disgrace was almost immediate. I had already put Myrtle’s papers on the table between the registering person and myself when I was asked to give my name. (Myrtle’s name, that was, of course) for check-off. Automatically, thoughtlessly, I began “Frances--”. The first syllable had hardly passed my lips when I attempted to take it back. But the person in charge of registration at that table was quick to spot a criminal.

“Are these your papers?” she asked, holding them aloft and, at the same time, piercing me with her look.

“No. But I just—“

“Never mind the ‘just.’ What is your name?” She was a formidably tall lady and glared down at me while she added “and get off the line.”

She proceeded to write down my name, of course, while the genuine “F’s” awaited their turn and I was dismissed to sit out the afternoon until the “W’s.” Even though I was not thrown out of school, as I feared I might be, both Myrtle and I were lectured sternly by the dean right after registration.

What I found most depressing for the rest of the afternoon while I sat waiting for the “W” line was that I had not only failed my friend but that she, too, would be dressed down for my absentmindedness.

Long after the event, when I told this story to a friend, I learned that in her small, private college, one did not even have to stand in line, let alone register alphabetically. I felt truly underprivileged when I heard that young women who were more affluent were able to complete the whole process by mail.

Another twenty years passed before I met a graduate of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, a school for which I had much respect. He would say to me from time to time, giving me an odd look, both admiring and unbelieving. “So you went to Hunter College. Well now--.” He made even the embarrassments seem to have been worth the journey.’

In my last year at Hunter, I took as an elective a course in 18<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature. That was as exciting as Beowulf had been soporific. The instructor, Dr. Eleanor Grace Clark, was a specialist in Robert Burns. She had lived in Edinburgh for some time while working on her dissertation and made Burns come alive for all of us by her stories about his romances and his insouciance in regard to the fathering of children by assorted young women. From Dr. Clark we

learned that unlike other lovers, Burns sat in the front facing the congregation “right alongside his lady loves when they were forced to be on display as punishment for their dalliances.”

One of Dr. Clark’s favorite teaching devices was the open book examination. Although I learned later that skilled teachers often used this method, I had my introduction to it in Dr. Clark’s class.

She explained for the benefit of those of us who were wide-eyed at her approach: “I don’t care at all how good your memory is. I want to teach you to think about what you’re reading.”

She was also free with assorted bits of information not connected to Eighteenth Century Literature.

During one session (probably related again to Burns and his proclivities as a lover) Dr. Clark stated categorically that one should plan to have a child no later than age nineteen because each year after that the birth process became more hazardous for both mother and child. Most of us, to be nineteen soon after graduation, were catapulted by this pronouncement into a state of shock.

Years later, in the middle of a conference at Bureau of Child Guidance, I remembered Dr. Clark when the psychiatrist opened the discussion with the words, “We are considering the problems of a six year old who was born to an elderly mother.” (The patient’s mother had been thirty-five when he was born.)

Nowadays when it is not unusual to read in the newspaper about women of fifty giving birth. I remember Dr. Clark and wish that I could hear her comment on present developments. I doubt that she would be appreciative of medicine’s progress or as skeptical about the health of the child.

Early on the morning of graduation I received a telegram which said, “Voyez les roses et ne coryez pas Schultz” (President of Hunter at the time);. The message was unsigned but I had no question at all about who had sent it.

## MISS PARROT

Even though the course of my whole life was to be changed by Miss Parrot's friendship and guidance. I had to be much older to recognize how formidable were her skills and sensitivity in dealing with adolescents. She remained a force in my development long after I had outgrown scouting—until I was almost out of college, in fact.

One of the mother-daughter struggles which Polly Parrot resolved was that which arose when I was invited, even before I was a senior in college, to a formal dance. I did not, of course, own a ball gown, never having had need for one but to have been asked seemed so important at the time that I thought I would just die if I could not go.

My mother, whether by plan or accident, I never knew, happened to mention the invitation and her conflict around it on a day when Miss Parrot was visiting us, on what business I do not recall. But I do remember clearly that Polly Parrot persuaded me, easily, that the world would not come to an end if I did not go to that dance. She finished by saying, smiling, "There'll be lots of others." And, of course, there were.

I knew for certain how impressed with Miss Parrot my mother must have been when she allowed herself to be persuaded to take the necessary steps leading to my enrollment in the National Youth Administration, one of the programs designed by the Roosevelt Administration to help young people.

The way into the NRA was via "Relief" as it was called then, or financial assistance. Although mama was stretching her pennies while she worked only on and off as a presser in lingerie, Miss Parrot had to apply a considerable amount of persuasion before mama agreed to go to the Welfare Office.

When she did I was assigned under the NYA to the Harlem Young Women's Christian Association, located then, as now on 137<sup>th</sup> Street, just off Seventh Avenue. That assignment was, no doubt, maneuvered by Miss Parrot who knew the possibilities for growth which one could experience working under the Y's department heads, all the while I

continued to do odd jobs around the offices of the “Y,” answering the telephone in the Employment Office and later learning to operate the switchboard as well.

That switchboard was located in the residence whose physical plant adjoined the Business building part of the “Y” but whose organization was completely separate. One night, with the residence a-hum because of a special program, an emergency occurred which resulted in my volunteering to run the elevator. Mercifully, the job lasted for about fifteen minutes only. When I returned to the front, helping the regular desk clerk, I prayed that Fate would never again put me at the controls of an elevator.

While I acquired secretarial skills most of my time was spent in the Business office. I liked taking orders from prospective employers and even being permitted, after several weeks, to match workers to employer requests.

On one otherwise quiet day, an employer called to register a complaint about a maid we had placed with her. She wanted us to know that the employee, though efficient, had complained about-her-the employer. With considerable irritation the maid had showed the lady of the house a finger from which she broken a nail.

I could only suggest that if the caller planned to replace the long-nailed housecleaner, we would try to find her someone else. If the dismissed worker returned to us, we would certainly try to persuade her to wear shorter nails or to use gloves at work.

Another time a young mother and university professor (by her own introduction) called to hire a nursemaid for her six-months old daughter. One of the questions on the printed form which we always completed on a job order for household help was “number of rooms.” The caller answered to that question “three.”

“Where would the nursemaid sleep?” I asked.

“On the couch in the living room, of course.” Indignation and impatience with my dull wit crackled through the receiver. “You don’t think I’d have her sleep in the bedroom with my husband and me, do you?”

With only a few more words I completed the conversation as well as the YWCA’s relationship with that lady.

On the upside, by contrast, was an episode with a woman known from her employers’ testimony, to be a laundress of rare skill. I had had to do all but beg to persuade her to fill the request of a business man staying at the YMCA (just two blocks from our YWCA). He would not be in the city long enough to have his laundry done at a commercial place of business, even if he knew one.

We knew from other employers that Mrs. Clark's work was top-notch. But as we stood facing each other, I with the job order in hand, her face showed grave doubt about collecting laundry from a client who was living at the YMCA.

It took more than a few moments to persuade her.

Two days later Mrs. Clark was back in the office, ready for another assignment. Her face glowed as she greeted me with a wide smile.

"It went alright, then, Mrs. Clark?" I asked.

"Let me tell you, Miss Wills, I never saw such beautiful linen handkerchiefs—and his shirts—" she paused, her expression reflecting pure delight. "Such fine cloth."

We were busier than usual in the office that day so I could not wait to hear Mrs. Clark's description of the rest of the gentlemen's washables which she was obviously a-titter to relate. I did say that I was happy that she had gone out on the order and had enjoyed the work as much as she had.

We never discussed the reasons for her initial reluctance, but I knew that she had been unable to imagine one of her own people with both the taste and income to acquire such elegant linens. That idea saddened me but I was happy that she had finally had the experience of meeting a successful African-American businessman.

Other more challenging and tiresome duties included assisting whoever was taking receipts for the day to balance the brown cash envelope at closing time. I had always known that numbers were not my forte, but the end of the day envelope was the most challenging test to which I had been subjected in the Education and Business Department.

Most frustrating was the occurrence, nearly every night, of one two or three cents over or under the amount totaled on the front of the envelope. My constant, nagging fear was that one night I would not be able to find the missing pennies or to explain the overage. I pictured myself entombed in the Employment Office—or, at least, having to stay overnight until someone who could help resolve my problem would arrive the next morning.

Then, luck smiled upon me and Elizabeth Hairston came into my life. For several weeks our hours of work had not coincided but then came the wonderful day when I met Elizabeth—beautiful, vivacious and comfortably stout; older than I but younger than Mrs. Johnson. She came to work by train all the way from Poughkeepsie and was brilliant with numbers. She saved my sanity and added to my education in only a few seconds on one of those vexing nights.

Taking the envelope from me (whenever she was there she always checked it anyway) she studied it briefly, then said:

“Now watch.” She looked up at me, smiling mischievously. “When you have a few pennies over—more than the figures total on the front, you just put them in the desk drawer. Then when you’re short—“ Her smile said it all. “No need to agonize over two or three cents.”

I entertained a deep skepticism about Elizabeth’s method the first time she explained it. Despite the face that she had never had any trouble with her receipts, I worried that the next day after I had tried her system I would be summoned to the bookkeeper’s office. I would stand before that lady who was famous and feared because she had never been known to make a mistake. I would be known publicly and forever as the idiot I always felt myself when it was counting time.

Everybody in the institution who handled money stood in abject fear of Mrs. Lawrence, the bookkeeper. Not only had she never been known to be in error but she never failed to uncover goofs by others. “Others” included not only employment and business office employees, but especially clerks who worked on the front desk at the residence. They had ongoing responsibility for collecting both weekly and transient rents. I had once seen Elsie Freeman, a tiny, smiling young woman who seemed to have easy solutions to all problems, reduced to tears after having been summoned to a conference with Mrs. Lawrence.

One Saturday morning in late spring of 1938 when I was alone in the Business Office, free from all tension because on this day nobody would be giving me money, I looked up to see a gentleman in the doorway. He was somewhat less than average height, with a wide smile in a warm tan face.

A few seconds passed before I was able to say “Good-morning” because I had never seen a prospective employer in the office. And that was what he had to be.

In response to my greeting, he came into the office, stood before my desk and said “I’d like to have a secretary.”

Filling out the card necessary for the files, I learned that the gentleman was Langston Hughes, renowned poet, lecturer and soldier in the frontlines of the never-ending fight for racial justice.

With difficulty I refrained from saying “How happy I am to meet you—“ or some other banal comment and promised Mr. Hughes that he would hear from us early on Monday.

At nine o’clock on Monday I presented myself to Mrs. Johnson, head of the Employment and Business Office. I pointed to the job order card which I had left on the top of the pile on her desk and said, “I’d like to go out on that one, please.”

“Now, Frances—“ Her voice was low and gentle, as always. But she was staring at me with raised eyebrows. “You know I can’t truthfully say that you’re a secretary.”

“He said it doesn’t have to be a stenographer.” I had completed the course in typing and shorthand in the business school only a few weeks before. Both of us knew well my amateur standing in the secretarial field.

Mrs. Johnson was a kind lady. After only a few seconds in which I knew she turning over my qualifications in her mind, she filled out the usual referral slip and put my name at the top.

Mr. Hughes looked surprised when he opened the door of this Aunt Toy’s apartment at 634 St. Nicholas Avenue and saw me standing there. He was staying there, I soon learned, because he had just returned from Spain where he had been living with and reporting about the Lincoln Brigade in its struggle against the dictator, Franco.

“Oh,” he said. “You’re the young lady I talked to in the office.”

With what I hoped sounded like unflappable poise, I said “Yes” and smiled. Naturally I gave not indication that I had fantasized the whole weekend working for him. He smiled the broad grin which I would come to know so well.

“Good. I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

If I had known then that he was sure of nothing of the kind. Not only was he an eternal optimist but also he never wanted to cause hurt. He did not ask about my job at the YWCA or how I could just walk out of it. In truth, as he explained later, his need for a secretary could be met on a part time basis.

A grand piano was the most prominent feature of the room. While Mrs. Hughes was taking my coat, I could not miss the framed photograph of a beautiful young woman, signed “Elsie” which occupied the center of the piano top. I assumed for months that she was the lady in his life.

When he had put my coat in a hall closet, he came back to outline his philosophy about mail as he placed a box of letters on the card table already set up with a typewriter. “If you let it go long enough, you won’t have to answer at all.” He smiled, but seemed deadly serious. “By the time you open the envelope whatever they wanted is over. Especially if they’re inviting you to things.”

Being invited to “things.” I soon came to know, was a major hazard for Langston unless the thing was a small party with close friends.

My duties, for the first few days, were mainly opening the mail which had accumulated during his long absence and learning what still needed to be answered. After we had had a few sessions together he suggested that I compose the

answers and type the letters for his signature. Those letters which he chose to answer in his own words, I took directly on the typewriter.

“Most important, “ he said one day, grinning broadly, “is to look out for checks.” He reviewed again his idea of handling piles of correspondence by not hurrying. When he had first said that if you let it go long enough, there’s no need for an answer, I took it as a joke. Later, I learned that it was an excellent formula for management of accumulated mail.

Early on, I apologized for my feeble stenographic skill. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I’ll talk and you type.”

Hours of work were moveable but the day never began early. One afternoon Langston suggested, looking serious, that I come in early the next morning.

“Nine o’clock?” I suggested.

His face reflected horror. “Oh, no, not that early. Say about 10 or 10:30?” Usually, even when slated for an “early” start, we actually began work closer to 11 o’clock, and would work right up until dinner time. Toy Harper, Langston’s “Aunt Toy” whose real name was Ethel, would then invite me to stay.

Toy had come by her nickname naturally. She was under five feet tall, thin and impish looking. She had run away from home to join a circus when she was still an adolescent, had soon moved into acting in the theatre, finally became interested in costume design. From there she went to dressmaking at home.

As a consequence of her early stage experience she had a host of friends who were famous old-timers. One forgettable evening when Langston was not even in the city, Toy invited me to join in a party to which she had asked many of her companions from stage days. Eubie Blake, the jazz pianist who lived to be almost a hundred, was the one who made magic almost all through that night. Toy, in the midst of being hostess became, from time to time, performer, standing beside the piano singing, with all appropriate gestures, while Eubie Blake played.

It was in Toy’s apartment during those early months of my working for Langston that the “Suitcase Theatre” was born. Earl Jones, the father of the current stage idol, James Earl Jones, was star of the first production “Don’t You Want to be Free?” Hearing his voice, even repeating the same lines over and over, made tingles all up and down my spine. Much of the excitement went out of my workdays when the theatre was able to obtain an upstairs hall on 125<sup>th</sup> Street for the theatre and rehearsals moved there.

Even before the beginning of the “Suitcase Theatre” Toy’s apartment was always abuzz with activity. Her husband, a cornet player, frequently practiced in the kitchen while Toy was seeing a client in the foyer and Langston and I operated in the living room.

One day while Toy awaited an appointment with someone who was coming for a fitting, she had hung the lady’s garment from a hook in the foyer. The fabric was so stiff that it resembled something which might have been worn for protection, rather than for stylish cover. Langston, glancing out into the foyer, caught a glimpse of the dress and began to laugh. As he continued to steal another look from time to time at that dress, standing almost by itself, his laughter grew louder. Toy finally emerged from her bedroom to see what was so funny.

She looked at Langston doubled up with laughter and at me watching him, smiling.

“You just better not let out one peep when my customer comes,” she warned, looking stern and including both of us within her glance.

“But Aunt Toy—“ Langston was again bent over with laughter.

I had never seen Toy so fierce with Langston. She must herself have found that fabric unpleasant to handle, but she was bound, after all, to create a positive atmosphere for her client’s try-on.

“If I hear one titter—“ She never finished because just then the doorbell rang. She solved the problem by closing the living room door with us behind it before she went to open the front.

Shortly after I had begun to work with Langston, Toy embarked on a course of smartening up my wardrobe. On the first day when I appeared at her door I had worn a Sheffield-type black woolen coat which I considered fashionable as well as practical.

One day several weeks later when we had begun to talk about all sorts of things in Langston’s absence, Toy said, “It makes you look old.” Fortunately it was already warm enough to shed the garment.

Not too long after that, she said, “Why don’t you let me make you something?”

By then I had become so fond of Toy and so full of admiration for her skill that I would have said “Yes” to whatever she proposed.

Within a few days, Toy had bought the makings of the dress she had in mind and completed it when I was not around. On the day when she brought it out from her bedroom, really the sewing room during the day and her center of operation—my heart sank. It was a little girl dress. The fabric was white dotted Swiss. The dots were aqua which was my favorite color, but it was all ruffles—around the neckline, the sleeves and even the hem.

Aware of Toy's joy in having made that dress for me, I could not let her know that I believed it several years too young for me. I was profuse in my thanks.

I wore the dress once to St. Nicholas Avenue so Toy could see me in it. It was a long time before I understood that Toy had made me a teen-aged dress because she regarded me as a daughter but she did not want an adult daughter.

Langston sailed for France that summer to attend a conference and Toy invited me to go with her to see him off. As the liner was pulling out of its berth and friends on shore waving last good-byes, Toy happened to look towards the back of the crowd and I followed her glance. There was the beautiful lady who I had known for months only from her photograph on the grand piano. She was far in the distance, moving as fast as she could, handicapped by a limp.

Toy, looking over her shoulder, said softly, "You're too late, lady." In that instant I knew to be untrue what I had always imagined, that, because of Langston, there must be a special bond between Aunt Toy and the pretty lady. It sounded as though Toy did not like Elsie at all.

During the time Langston was away, Toy suggested one day that we go downtown and pick fabric for a summer suit for me. That trip was probably the most memorable lesson I ever had in dressmaking. We went to Macy's, which like all department stores in the 1940's, carried an impressive assortment of fabrics. But to my surprise, we went right past the floor with dress fabrics and up to the upholstery fabric section. There Toy chose an unpatterned, sturdy weave in orangish-tannish cotton.

As soon as we were back inside the apartment, Toy began to cut while I worked in the living room at a small pile of Langston's correspondence. She stopped only once, long enough to fix dinner. It was while we were eating that I wondered aloud how she could be such a good cook as well as a top-notch dressmaker. With not one moment's hesitation, she answered, "Whatever else you do, you have to eat," she paused, then added with the firmness she showed most often when we were engaged in a sewing project, "so you might as well learn to do it decently." By eleven o'clock that night the suit was ready to be modeled. It met with Toy's approval and in a few moments we were sitting at the kitchen table, as we usually did at the end of a sewing session, enjoying Toy's strong coffee, she doing the day's crossword puzzle.

### **WILTWYCK**

On a day which was lead to a profound change in my life, although I had no way of recognizing it when it happened, Mrs. Johnson came out of her cubby from which she managed the "Y's" Employment Office to talk to me in the outer, or Education section of the Business Office.

As always her voice and manner were warm and enveloping.

"Frances," she said, "I think we have finally found a job for you." Until that moment I had not known that she was always on the lookout, hoping that something suitable for me would appear among the job calls received.

"You'll have to operate a Dictaphone but we have one in the business school. It shouldn't take you long to learn."

As she talked she was leading the way down the long hall toward the classrooms of the Business School. Anna Thompson, the young woman director of that unit, was standing in the front of the room while the forty or so typewriters she faced clacked away, at assorted speeds.

' When she glanced up and saw Mrs. Johnson, Anna came over, smiling, to stand before us.

"How nice to have a visit from the front office." She said, not too loudly, although it would have required a thunderclap to disturb the clatter of the students' typewriters.

“It’s not really a proper visit from the front office.” She said, not too loudly, although it would have required a thunderclap to disturb the clatter of the students’ typewriters.

“It’s not really a proper visit, I fear.” Mrs. Johnson said, “I only wanted you to meet Frances who would like to practice on the Dictaphone when your classes are over.”

She explained then that she planned to refer me to a job which asked for a Dictaphone operator. She thought the principle requirement was good typing skill.

“That’s right.” Miss Thompson said, looking directly at me then. “If you’re a good listener, speed comes very soon.”

After my introduction to the machine at the end of the student day, I stayed for sometime, transcribing the learning cylinder.

Mrs. Johnson came to watch me for a short time, then she sent me to the job on the following day.

Wiltwyck School, my destination, was an institution for delinquent boys, one of the projects of the New York City Mission Society. (The boys were all remanded to the School by the Juvenile Court.) I had never heard of it until I went there, job order in hand, hence gave no thought at all as to why the Harlem Y.W.C.A. received the request.

After only a few days, however, I became aware that all of the boys who were sent to Wiltwyck, located in upstate New York, were African-American. I recognized then that Esther Hilton, the Director of the city operation, had called the Y.W.C.A. in Harlem because she thought it only fitting that an agency which ( at that time) served only boys of African-American descent should have at least one secretary of the same color.

One of the two social workers on staff was also African-American. Both she and Miss Gaither, the other social worker, appeared to be in their early thirties.. Miss Drummond was round faced, light brown and well padded. She was tall enough, however, so that one would never have thought of her as “fat”. Miss Gaither, by contrast, was shorter and slimmer. Her hair was an undistinguished brown and arranged in an immediately forgettable fashion. Both radiated warmth which came across even upon first meeting.

There were two secretaries on the job when I joined the Staff, Charlotte Thorndike North was the young woman in charge of the office. Charlotte was tall, slim and attractive in a classic, unadorned manner. She wore her light brown hair in a long straight bob and used little makeup. Her speech, like her appearance, was without adornment..

Charlotte commuted daily from New Jersey. Only after she had had one particularly harrowing morning with a stalled train, followed by sharing a bus with a load of irritable travelers, did she describe to me in detail her daily travel pattern. Between the time she closed her front door at home and when she arrived at the office she was obliged to use three different modes of transportation.

Soon after I began at Wiltwyck I was asked to accompany Miss Hilton and the caseworkers to the institution for two days each month in which time they held conferences with house staff, teachers nurse and whoever else on the grounds had contact with each boy. The director of the institution, a priest, chaired the gatherings. He was young and surprisingly unsolemn... The doctor responsible for the boys' health was also an important member of these sessions.. He was thin, wiry and between discussions on the boys at which times he would be serious and obviously thoughtful, was a confirmed jokester.

Despite the fact that transcription of notes taken during those meetings occupied all my time for two or three days after I was back in the city office, I enjoyed being on the grounds, seeing the boys and associating, even in passing, with the school staff.

In the city office it was Charlotte who kept everything under control. In addition to operating the switchboard, installed within reaching distance of her desk, she had as one of her most demanding tasks the completion of the monthly statistics report required by the State Department of Welfare of all child caring institutions. The information called for included each boy's name, birth date, date of entry in the institution and probable date of discharge, parents' names and other data sufficient to travel across a page fifteen inches wide. Charlotte dubbed it the "Oh Boy" list. She chose that title one month when she realized that preparation of the document involved at least two days of "sturm und drung".

One incident related by Miss Gaither, was in response to a question Charlotte had posed in order to fill in an item on the “Oh Boy” list, citing the number of visits home made by the child.

“I called Mrs. Brown,” Miss Gaither answered “”to ask whether she planned to have Tommy home for Christmas.” We were then about a month from that holiday.

Standing in the doorway, looking tired, Miss Gaither continued, “she said, Oh, Miss Gaither, Christmas comes so soon.’ I guess she’s not ready. Poor Tommy, I don’t know if she’ll ever be ready to have him home again.”

The other secretary, Ella Brady, was a speed demon on the Dictaphone. For several of my first few days I was intimidated by the ease with which she transcribed cylinder after cylinder. Her person appeared to go with her performance. She was a bit under average height, thin and wiry and wore her hair pulled straight back in a tight bun. Her age, as they say, was “uncertain” but both Charlotte and I had the impression that she hated us both only because we were younger. Her chilly attitude helped bring Charlotte and me together in short time. Except for “Good morning” and “Good night”, Ella rarely favored us with any conversation, either together or separately.

Charlotte and I exchanged such dreary thoughts about Ella, in fact, that when she became ill and had to be hospitalized, only a short time after I had joined the organization, both of us suffered severe guilt pangs and prayed (I am certain) that, despite having to be in the hospital, her problems would not be serious..

Our offices occupied the whole second floor of ancient building which, in its time, had probably been a mansion. The first and third floors were mysteries to us but we did occasionally see a priest going to the third floor. We assumed then that the whole structure was owned by the City Mission Society.

Miss Hilton’s office and those of the two caseworkers were in the front, facing Lafayette Avenue. Wide sliding doors gave access to the back of the floor where we three secretaries occupied on huge room which started near the middle of the floor and went all the way to the back of the building. From our windows we

could see an attractive backyard which was never, ever crossed by anyone. It was as though fairies tended the plants.

There was a state-of-the-art bathroom at our end of the hall. Charlotte and I often joked about the pleasure it would be to put Ella there under a cold shower.

Miss Gaither and Miss Ford, as physically different as two people could be, shared even tempers and unflappability. Miss Gaither, thin and under average height, with streaked blond hair and a ready smile, was not talkative but had a charming wit. She loved to tell the story of her father's utter disbelief in polls, no matter who or what organization conducted them.

“My family has been in Gaithersville (Maryland) on the same farm for at least four generations but my father has never been polled. He wonders how the sample area is decided upon if all the Gaither land is left out of every poll.”

Both social workers were sensitive, of course, to the fact that Ella, Charlotte and I did not operate on the same wave length, even though we worked only a few feet from each other. One morning there was a blow-up of major dimensions between Ella and Charlotte. Charlotte had asked, in her customary genteel manner, that Ella not store her finished cylinders in a spot which both Charlotte and I found to be encumbering. There were, after all, many feet of space between her desk and the other two. The resistant anger and tension were strong enough to be felt even up to the front of the long floor. This we learned only when the social workers returned from lunch.

Charlotte looked up from her typewriter at one point to see Miss Gaither standing in the hall doorway to our office, peeping in and asking, in a voice barely above a whisper, “Is it alright to come back now?” She could see, of course, that Charlotte and I were alone. Ella had gone to lunch.

Miss Gaither was the first person I ever knew who could knit in the dark. Occasionally during our overnight stays at the institution we would go to the local movie after dinner. Millie Gaither would not miss one

scene of the picture as she knitted while watching the film. When I marveled at this skill, she threw off my amazement. “What’s to see? You’re just doing the same thing over and over.”

Charlotte and I usually lunched together. Our favorite spot was an Italian restaurant in the basement of the building adjacent to the City Mission Society. After we had been pampered there by our favorite waiter, Jesus, (the only time I had heard the name outside of the Bible) there were many days when we would go to the first floor of Wanamaker’s department store, then located at Astor Place, only a block from our offices. There we would listen to the chimes of the grandfather clocks which stood in majesty all around the walls of the store’s Lafayette Street entrance.

Charlotte was, above all, possessed of great dignity. My earliest and most eerie impression of the advertising industry came from her story of her one brush with a large agency in that field.

“I was told when I was hired that I would work for the president of the firm.” She told me over lunch one day.

“They put me in an enormous room near the president’s office. You can imagine how large it was when I tell you that there were sixteen desks lined up, eight to a side, the length of that room.” She did not smile as she provided this information for me to mull over.

“All but one, the last one, of the desks was occupied. The person who brought me into the room, pointed and said, ‘That’s where you’ll work. Be happy.’ Then she left.”

At that moment our lunches came. We began to eat but Charlotte continued her story between bites. Although our restaurant seemed prosperous, it was never truly crowded, so we felt no urgency to finish quickly.

“I sat at that desk for three days” Charlotte continued—“with nothing at all to do. The person in front of me did the crossword puzzle and read a lot, I noticed, so the second day I brought a book. But all of a sudden in mid-morning of the third day, I said to myself, ‘this is crazy’.

What Charlotte did then I could picture as she related it. She arose from her desk and in all of her five feet nine dignity, strode down the aisle past the seven desks on each side.

She went to the president's door and knocked. A deep voice responded "Come in".

There, at a desk which seemed to be about a city block from the door through which she had entered, sat a young man (Charlotte thought he looked too young to be the head of a firm) before an almost clean desk. He watched her approach with interest but when she was standing directly before him did not invite her to have a seat. "Yes?" he asked.

"I said" she continued her story to me. 'I've been sitting outside with all those other secretaries for three days now. Nobody has asked me to do anything.'

The young executive looked puzzled. "What would you like to do?"

"Mr."—Then I realized nobody had even bothered to tell me his name, only that he was 'the president'. He at least noticed my pause."

"Curry" he said. "I'm Tim Curry."

"Mr. Curry, I was hired as a secretary. That's what I'd like to do—anything secretarial. Take some dictation, open up my typewriter, and make telephone calls for somebody—"

He interrupted. "But there hasn't been anything for you to do. When there is, I'll call you. That will be when all the other girls are busy. In fact, sometimes when we have a big job, two or three are working on the same project."

At this point in her tale, Charlotte's eyes now focused on an object far in the back of the dining room, as though she were picturing herself again in that enormous office, with nothing at all to do.

I said, "Then I'll have to leave, Mr. Curry. I'm not used to sitting around all day doing nothing."

He seemed puzzled. "But you're getting paid well, aren't you?"

"That's it." Charlotte responded. "It's sinful, to put it mildly. I would like to feel I was doing something useful."

"When we get busy enough, you'll have something to do."

Charlotte said “I don’t think I can wait.” With that, she opened the huge door and left, saying “Goodbye” over her shoulder.

I could well imagine the dignity with which Charlotte made her departure from the advertising firm. I had seen this displayed in Wanamaker’s during our lunch time visits. Once when a salesclerk saw us standing in front of one of the huge grandfather clocks, he approached and asked if he could help. Charlotte, smiling graciously, said “No, thank you. We’re just listening.” I had never before heard a refusal to become involved proffered with such dignity and charm.

During another lunch hour were riding the Fifth Avenue bus, having done a special errand in connection with work. (At that time all Fifth Avenue busses had top decks.) We were upstairs. I rang the bell as we neared our stop then hustled downstairs in great haste to make certain I would be at the exit before the bus stopped. Charlotte, rushing to keep up with me on this day, said clearly enough for all the passengers to hear “You don’t have to do this, you know. You could fall. Ring the bell and wait until the bus stops. Then go downstairs.”

From that day on I followed her instructions and discovered that the bus would indeed wait.

Charlotte came by her great poise naturally. She was the child of a proud New England family. Her maternal grandfather had been a hymn writer. “You’ll see lots of his hymns in the Episcopal hymnal” she told me one day. After that, I could never resist, whenever I found myself with hymnbook in hand, looking to see if the one we were singing had been written by Charlotte’s grandfather Thorndike.

One of Charlotte’s sisters was an editorial writer at TIME Magazine. That she told me, not boastfully, but in loving admiration because, she said, that sister’s salary made it possible for a third sister, ill with tuberculosis, to be kept in a good sanitarium upstate.

Charlotte herself was a skilled artist. She had created a design of matchstick figures which she had posed in skiing scenes, then photographed and sold to a greeting card firm. The creations made charming Christmas cards. I learned that the design was by someone I knew only when I turned to the back of the one she had sent me in order to learn the source of such an original idea.

After little more than a year on the job at Wiltwyck I was suddenly invited by a telephone call (in the middle of the work day) to become secretary to the minority leader of the City Council. I did not know why or who had chosen me, since I had no political connections. But, excited about the possibility of being close to city government, I went in to discuss the offer with Miss Hilton.

When she saw me in the doorway, Miss Hilton turned from her desk piled high with papers, smiled and waited. Despite the fact that she was a lady of infinite charm, I was suddenly awkward. How could I propose the idea that I wanted to leave to pick up on something about which I knew little and which seemed to come out of the blue.

Miss Hilton, of course, sensed my unease. She nodded toward the chair next to her desk and in the same instant, swiveled around so that she could face me directly.

“I’ve been offered a job with the City Council.” I shot out. “It pays \$100 a year more than this one.”

She was not impressed. Even with the raise which would have made a respectable salary for that time, she pointed out, that unless I had political ambition, this would be a dead-end job.

Then, after a few seconds in which she only continued to look at me, she said “: I had been thinking about you, Frances, before this came up.” Another few seconds passed before she said, still regarding me intently, as though to read my thoughts. “What are you going to do with the rest of your life?”

I hesitated. Until that instant I had not really thought about my longtime future.

Miss Hilton continued, still regarding me intently. “If you plan to marry soon, then this is a good job for you. At the end of the day you just close your typewriter in the desk and forget about it until the next day.” Then, after another moment, she said “On the other hand, if you have no such plan, this is not a job to have indefinitely.”

With a few more words she was asking if I had ever thought about becoming a social worker. Much as I admired both Miss Gaither and Mrs. Ford (the first people in the profession I had ever known) I had never thought at all about entering their field.

I applied within the next two days to the two schools Miss Hilton suggested—the New York School of Social Work and the University of Pittsburgh. The latter made what seemed a generous offer: full tuition and \$75 per month living expenses. I had only fleeting regrets about not being able to stay in New York. I responded immediately to Pittsburgh.

Miss Hilton, when she left Wiltwyck, not long after I went off to school, became the dean of the School of Social Work at New York University. In that position she must have exercised considerable influence on the lives of many young people. It was my great good fortune that she came into my life when she did.

My mother, who had never tried to influence me at all in career choices, thought that going to social work school might be a good idea. If she had concern about my leaving her alone in the city, taking away the small amount with which I helped out at home, she expressed not the slightest reservation.

When I shared the news with Toy whom I still saw frequently, her first thought was, of course, that we would have to get me properly outfitted. Whatever school I was going to and whatever the outcome of the education, if she had anything to do with it, I would be dressed for the life.

From the moment I told her until the day before I left the city, Toy was as busy as though she were being paid for the task of selecting fabric, finding good buys in ready-mades which went with the basics she created and generally behaving like a fond mother.

I still remember, possibly because it was the first and only time I acquired an entire wardrobe in a few weeks, the outfits Toy either created or influenced me to buy. A tweed coat, essentially beige, brown and wine, with a velveteen collar, for which she made a matching tweed skirt, was the outfit on which the rest of the wardrobe was coordinated. There was almost a trunk full of other goodies gathered during concentrated shopping jaunts. And Toy was nothing if not “concentrated” when she was in the market.

Shopping for fabric in the quantity and variety which we did was as exciting as watching Toy cut and assemble those garments. I felt like a fan in the trail of a star when I saw her greeted like an old and valued friend by so many downtown merchants.

In those few weeks before I left for Pittsburgh there were many late night sewing sessions at Toy's.

When I returned from school she enjoyed hearing how much admiration my (her) wardrobe had elicited.

She especially enjoyed what I told her Ermer, my classmate, had said. She had related one day, laughing softly (Ermer did everything softly) that some of the other students had suggested, judging by my clothes, that I must be "rich".

## **PITTSBURGH**

In my first year at Pitt., Marion Tanner and I shared a spacious, sunny bedroom in the home of Mrs. Wilson who rented only to students.

Our room, even with its twin beds, was large enough for both of us to be in motion at the same time (important for early classes) with lots of space left. There was a large desk in front of a bay window which looked towards the University and two straight back chairs.

On the floor above us lived Ermer Brewer and her roommate, Anne Tanneyhill, both also first year social work students. Across the hall on our floor lived Moses Jones, working on his doctorate in physics. Marion and I saw little of Mose because – we soon learned—when he was not in school, he was working in a steel mill or playing poker in Homestead, a small industrial town a stone's throw from Pittsburgh. We assumed that he must be of genius caliber—to keep three unrelated activities going simultaneously with evident success.

We four women enjoyed an arrangement for cooking which was, as far as we knew, unique to Mrs. Wilson's house. She must have considered that her student tenants would need to pinch pennies, therefore had provided cooking facilities.

In order to reach Ann and Ermer's room on the third floor one passed through a middle area of baronial proportions. It was, in effect, almost all of the third floor, was furnished with a family sized stove and Frigidaire, a dining table and several chairs. Missing were a sink and running water but the advantage of being

able to cook at home soon made us unmindful of the trips down to Mrs. Wilson's kitchen to fetch water and afterwards, to empty.

Marion and I alternated each week being responsible for dinner. We were lucky to have been directed to a butcher in the neighborhood whose willingness to cut exactly one-half pound of meat elasticized our \$75 monthly incomes. Not only did that gentleman take pride in his skill in carving to the fraction of an ounce, but he also shared our pleasure when we felt rich enough or celebratory enough to be big spenders.

"You're having a party" he would say. "Good." He was young, slim and handsome, unlike the textbook notion of a butcher. His eyes would light up when we asked for the size cut he was probably accustomed to sell regularly to other customers.

Mrs. Wilson's son, Bryan, also a student at the University, was the only other member of the household. Bryan was a handsome young man of light complexion, finely chiseled features and straight brown hair. He greeted us politely when we passed in the hall but his demeanor was always sober, as though he bore a great sorrow. Not one of us ever had sufficient nerve to ask, nor did Mrs. Wilson volunteer any clue as to what Bryan was studying.

It was, therefore truly unsettling to have her comment one day as I passed her on my way upstairs to the kitchen.

"I heard you laughing in your room." Evidently she knew that I had been alone. "You must have been reading." She sighed then. "I wish Bryan could find a book that would make him laugh like that."

I shared the title of my book (one of the few I read in those days which was not on the required list from school,) It seemed unlikely that Mrs. Wilson's relationship with her son was such that he would take her advise on what to read. They appeared so unlike that they might have come from different planets.

During the spring semester, Bryant invited me, to my amazement, to share an evening of symphony. We had never discussed music or any mutual interests, not even in school. He was a charming host. I was not unaware that women seated nearby were stealing sidewise glances at us. This, of course, added to my pleasure.

But the evening did not sparkle. Bryant's expression for most of the concert was as sober as it always was at home.

Among our classmates was one young woman from Hawaii. She was the only non-Caucasian besides me and my three housemates in the class that year. After only a few days at school all four of us had developed speaking acquaintances with others outside our own little household group, but none of us had ever had a conversation with our Hawaiian classmate.

For the Thanksgiving holiday one of the professors of social work, Dr. Douglas, who lived near the university invited rather a large group of students to her home. We were seated at card tables for dining. Marion and I chose to separate ourselves.

Sometime after the dinner party we realized that our Hawaiian classmate who had formerly passes us by as though we were invisible, had become sociable, even initiating conversations.

Marion laughed as she agreed that there had been a dramatic change. I guess she decided that if Dr. Douglas could mix us all together, it was safe for her to talk to us."

"It's good to know her as a person, not just a face." Marion said. "But to tell the truth, I had not really missed her, just thought she was a broody type." Marion, herself, was as down-to-earth, a no nonsense person as anyone could be.

At the end of our first year both Marion and Anne decided in favor of careers other than social work. Ermer and I, almost without discussion, became roommates for our last year of school. As comfortable as Mrs. Wilson's lodgings were, we decided to look for a room with the possibility of its own kitchen or at least a kitchenette nearby.

One of our friends outside school told us about a young couple who had just bought a house and wanted to rent a part of it. In contrast to the arrangements at Mrs. Wilson's they had a furnished kitchen on the same floor which went with the room to be rented. Accustomed as we had become to being water carriers in Mrs.

Wilson's house, the prospect of having our own kitchen with running water right next to the bedroom was irresistible.

When we visited the Burton's house we were charmed. Mrs. Burton was young and bubbly. She was under average height, dark brown skinned and quite pregnant.

The bedroom we were shown was conveniently at the head of the stairs on the second floor, a large corner room with windows on two sides. It was full of sun but void of furniture. The kitchen, right next door was fully equipped. We both wished (we confirmed later) for a fairy godmother to fill the place with beds and dressers, at least.

Mrs. Burton, watching as we surveyed the empty bedroom became somewhat downcast herself. She said "I know you don't want to buy furniture, but perhaps you could find something used."

Our faces must have continued to be long. She added "We'd be willing to buy it from you when you leave. It's just that with the baby coming and all, we're in about as far as we can go right now."

Ermer and I stood there, enjoying the sunshine which flooded the room and looking back and forth for a few seconds. Then Ermer said, "Could we have a day, at least, to think about it?"

Mrs. Burton answered without hesitation. "Of course, we'd like to have students and it would be convenient for you. We're just a five minute walk from the university". (That we had noted and commented on as we were approaching the house.)

As so as we had said goodbye to Mrs. Burton, Ermer confided her thoughts about furniture.

"I'll talk to David. He might have an idea where we could get beds and a dresser for not too much."

David was director of the pre-nursery school program to which Ermer had been assigned for her required group work experience. They had become good friends.

David was able not only to lend us two cots and two chairs but arranged also for a trucker who worked for the nursery to deliver them. An added surprise bonus we discovered when the cots came was a small dresser.

After only a few days in the Burtons we found that we did not miss Mrs. Wilson's quality mattresses and bedding half as much as we did the sturdy desk she had also provided.

One day at school I was telling Dr. Douglas about our new lodgings and mentioned that we had only one great lack—a desk.

Dr. Douglas looked thoughtful, then said, "I think I may have one you can use. We bought it when we were first married. It's a casual piece but it does have drawers and a good writing surface.

She was saying as delicately as possible, we knew, that the desk was not of the same quality as the rest of her household furnishings. She did not know, of course, that we were sleeping on borrowed cots and sitting on institutional chairs, so any desk would be a boon.

Ermer and I made an appointment for one night soon thereafter to pick up the desk. Dr. Douglas was visibly surprised when she realized we did not have a car. In those days we knew hardly any students with cars and my erstwhile "beau" , Hubert, who had taken me on dates in his mother's rather splendid Cadillac, had been drafted.

Even if Hubert and his mother's car had been available it was doubtful I could have shared our moving problem with him. His dignity was inelastic. He had volunteered one Saturday morning to take me to a flea market sale when I was searching for small kitchen utensils. On the day of the sale, the weather was warm and I had worn anklets with my casual dress. When I came out to the car Hubert looked down at my legs and asked (pointedly, I thought) "Are you ready?"

I had laughed. Strange as the question was, I understood the unspoken part.

"Yes, of course. Nobody dresses up to go to the flea market."

"Well— "he began, then evidently decided against pushing too hard and started towards the car. I followed then, docilely, but not completely "put down."

Now Dr. Douglas asked "How will you carry it?" She was smiling, but still obviously puzzled.

“It’s light, isn’t it?” Ermer asked. We lifted it together and it was light. Ermer said, in the matter -of-fact manner at which she was gifted ,” We’ll just take it with us.”

Dr. Douglas looked skeptical but was evidently too kind to voice her amazement.

During the trip to the Burton house we were forced to make frequent stops to put down our burden just to laugh. If any of the residents of the lovely homes we passed that night happened to be looking out of their windows they were too well-bred to come to the front door and stare openly.

Crossing the three lane highway which lay between the Burton house at the top of the hill and the conservative neighborhood from which our desk had come posed the greatest challenge of the whole trip. Even more daunting than the traffic were the stairs up to the hill when we had finally crossed the busy street below.

Our luck held all the way home. We met no one. And even the Burtons had retired by the time we came into their house and tiptoed with the greatest of stealth and skill—bearing even a light desk while tip toeing was not easy—from the vestibule up the stairs to our room.

Once inside safely, we closed the door and each collapsed in laughter on our cots.

For the remainder of the school year we were as content as bugs in a rug in the Burton’s sparsely furnished room.

There was just one morning when we awoke to the usual smog and darkness which characterized Pittsburgh mornings and from our respective cots, compared feelings and agreed that we both had had more than enough of Pittsburgh’s weather.

It was Friday and the following Monday morning would be a holiday. The thought of three days of possible morning sunshine beckoned irresistibly.

I asked Ermer “Wouldn’t you like to take a trip to New York? There won’t be any smog, I promise you.”

Ermer’s whole face glowed, in a way that happened whenever she had a happy thought. She said, smiling broadly, “That would be wonderful.”

If we had been on our way to Europe or someplace equally exotic, we could not have been more excited than we were—through the whole day. Next morning we packed light, took a cab to Pennsylvania Railroad Station, bought our tickets and installed ourselves in seats on the train, each aglow as though we were about to begin a magic trip.

And it almost was. Both of us looked out the window for almost the whole four hours, foregoing reading.

I had telephoned my mother Friday night to tell her to expect us, so we had a royal welcome, even though mama was puzzled as to what had occasioned the visit.

“You just decided suddenly to come to New York?” she asked, as we all sat in the living room.

Ermer and I looked at each other. How could one explain that mornings in Pittsburgh were always dark, that one never knew until noon what kind of day it was going to be, that the hems of slips and bottoms of curtains were always gray with soot and that not even quite halfway through the school year we both just yearned for a bright beginning to a day.

Mama treated us like long awaited special guests, even with the little preparation time we had given her. Ermer was as impressed with her welcome as she was with the city itself. It was her first trip to New York.

On Sunday we went downtown, to walk down Fifth Avenue and see some of the landmark buildings. While for Ermer being in New York for the first time may have been the most exciting recent event in her life, for me it was possibly even more satisfying to be able to show her around downtown Manhattan. There were no stores comparable to those on Fifth and Madison Avenues in Pittsburgh.

On Monday after we had said goodbye to my mother we detoured on our way to the station for a fast look in Lord and Taylor. We bought nothing, of course, by then completely out of funds.

In the train back to Pittsburgh, we agreed that the weekend had been worth every cent we had invested.

“What would we have done with the fare money if we had not come?” Ermer wondered, smiling, as the train chugged along.

I shrugged. “Now we’ll never know. But that way, we won’t miss it either.”

Another memorable adventure that year came early in the spring of 1943, soon after our New York escape. A friend of Ermer’s who was head of a social agency in New York came to Pittsburgh on agency business and took us out to dinner. That in itself was high living but after dinner he took us to a bar which featured among its orders a huge pitcher of beer. Neither of us had seen this before. While we laughed and exchanged stories—he about his work and we about school—our whole pitcher disappeared. We could not believe that we had drunk all that beer until our host dropped us at our door. We staggered up the stairs and with no discussion at all retired to try to undo the night’s damage. Fortunately the next day was Saturday.

As we approached the end of our second and final year in school, Ermer and I agreed that we owed ourselves a celebration. I had told her about the restaurant on the second floor of Klein’s, a fancy food store in downtown Pittsburgh to which my supervisor had taken me at the end of my year in her agency. Ermer agreed that it sounded like a fitting place for a final celebration.

Lunch was as satisfying as I had remembered. The food was excellent and the service unobtrusive. We gave ourselves credit for having chosen so wisely as we were getting ready to leave.

We were at the cashier’s booth and the young lady inside was giving us change when a short, stout man appeared, looking angry as he stood beside the booth.

His face was contorted as he sputtered “Don’t you come back here.”

After a second or so I was able to ask “Why?”

“You don’t belong here.” He hissed. “You belong up on the Hill. That’s where you should eat.” He was angrier than I had ever seen any employee in a public place.

The Hill was a neighborhood populated by many Afro-Americans and, in fact, one section of it abutted the area where we lived.

“We go to school at the University, not on the Hill.” Ermer said.

“It doesn’t matter.” The information that we were students appeared to have calmed him momentarily, but he was still seething.

“After all,” he said “I can’t go to the Pittsburgh Athletic Club.”

Until those words we had both been surprised by the attack that we had given no thought at all to the man’s possible background. Nor did we know anything about the Pittsburgh Athletic Club other than the fact that it was a splendid stone building near the University. The man standing before us did not have the look of an athlete but if denied membership in the Pittsburgh Athletic Club it must have been because he was Jewish. That rumor we had heard.

Ermer and I exchanged glances in which we both acknowledged that it was futile to prolong the discussion.

I picked up the change still lying in front of me on the counter and turned toward the exit, but still facing our angry man, said “We’ll be back. This is not a private club. If we can buy food downstairs we should be able to eat upstairs.”

On the first level of the establishment we looked for the manager, assuming that he would be the employer of the man who had confronted us upstairs. He was apologetic and assured us that the store had no policy of discrimination in the restaurant.

Outside, as we walked towards the University, we tried to discuss the incident sensibly. It was the first time either of us had met discrimination face to face.

“I wonder,” Ermer said “if the Pittsburgh - Courier knows about this.” The Courier was one of the oldest African-American journals in the country.

I said “We should certainly tell them.”

The Courier, it became apparent when we were able to reach the editorial desk, did not consider the story important or newsworthy enough to become involved. The person to whom I spoke promised to look into the problem and let us know what resulted from his exploration but we heard nothing more after the call. In the days

immediately following the incident, getting ready to return to our respective homes, we did not follow up. We could only assume that if the newspaper had investigated, they had learned that the man who had confronted us was conducting his own private crusade.

## **LEARNING SPACES**

My first student placement by Pittsburgh's School of Social Work was in a Children's agency, whose caseloads were largely children in foster care.

For my second year I was assigned to a Family Agency where the learning experiences were vastly different, even though many assignments were concerned with children.

I had not been in the Family Agency for more than a week when one of the regular workers (young, chipper and able to laugh easily) whose desk was near mine related, without laughing, that one of her clients, an unmarried mother, had just called to report that she had finally found a place to live. She had been looking for several weeks.

"I'm so glad." I heard the social worker say. "Tell me about it."

After a long pause during which the social worker was listening intently, she said, "You'll be able to work that out, I hope." Then she replaced the phone in its cradle, looked out at the room with three other people working there and observed dryly, "She's found a room. It's only four dollars a week and it's got bedbugs."

Not one of the three of us (one was a student, like myself) quite knew what response to make to Agnes' statement, said without inflection of any kind. She solved our dilemma in another second.

"At least she got out of the place she was in which was miserable (even without bugs)."

By my second year I had become accustomed to confronting the problems of unmarried mothers and trying to help them work out solutions, but Mary E. was unlike any of the young girls whose lives I had tried to make easier during my time at the Children's Agency.

Mary E. was twice as old as any of the teen-age clients I had had during my first year. She claimed that the father of her child had been killed in the bombing of the first ship hit at Pearl Harbor. She was working as a housemaid when she applied to the agency but her employer understood that she would leave soon.

### **THREE TO LEARN**

On the day Mary E. was to begin living at the Home, I had located for her; she came to the agency office with her suitcase and a jaunty air. She had not brought all her possessions from the home of her employer. She and "the lady" had agreed that she might come back for the rest when she was satisfied that she wanted to stay in the home for unmarried mothers.

"And if you don't like it then what?" I asked. New as I was in the field, I had no idea what my next move would have to be in case the placement failed to go well.

Mary E's air was confident, her expression serene. "Then I'll have to think of something else." She was in charge, no question about that.

Buoyed by her security, I taxied in confidence to the place which would be her home for the next several months. Six, she estimated, from what the doctor had told her.

The neighborhood was a good one; stately old houses with wide lawns and tall trees—middle class residential. As we climbed the front steps, I sensed that Mary E. approved also of our choice.

In response to my pushing the doorbell, a woman who could have been no other than the lady-in-charge came to the door. She greeted me with "Yes?" Her expression suggested that she thought we were lost.

"I'm Frances Wills from the Family and Children's Agency and this is Mary E. Smith, about whom I called you."

It was evident from her expression that if I had said that we had just stopped by on our way to Mars, she could not have been more surprised.

“Come in,” she managed after several seconds of simply studying us. While we stood in the front hall, she closed the door and preceded us onto an inner room. Along the way, she stopped long enough to say to Mary E., “You wait here,” pointing to a small bench alongside the wall.

With only a few more steps we reached a door at the end of the hall and she ushered me into her office. She did not say, “Have a seat,” but accosted me, in effect.

“She’s so—so—old. I don’t see how she can fit in with the other girls. They’re all—“

“Not only young, but white” I finished for her, with a boldness come upon me quite suddenly to fit the exigencies of the situation.

This tower of strength, this lady of Amazonian proportions, then blushed.

“I was not going to say that. But she would be the only one and she’s a woman. The others are girls. How do you think they are going to get along?”

She anticipated my answer to that and looked away.

“Just give her a try, please, Mrs. Coleman.” I pleaded. “I think she’ll fit in. She’s wise about a lot of things.”

Mrs. C. said nothing more but opened the door to the hall and as we went outside, nodded to Mary E. to go into the room from which we had just emerged.

“I’ll call you in a few days.” I said. “But you know how to reach me if you should have to.”

Because Mary E. had entered the home on Thursday, four days passed before I called. Friday was too soon and I would not call on a non-work day which would certainly have revealed my nervous state. On Monday when I returned to the office, I dialed the number of the Home and waited, agonizing, while the telephone rang.

Finally, Mrs. Coleman was there.

“Mrs. Coleman—how is it going with Mary Ellen?”

“Wonderful. That’s all I can say—‘Wonderful.’” Her voice said the rest. There was some warmth which had barely been hinted at in my first conversation, but which had disappeared before the end of that meeting.

I was able to squeeze out an answered “Good,” before she went on, her words tumbling out. “She’s such a kind person and she knows how to do everything so well. She’s already become something like—well, I don’t know how to say it. The girls all look up to her. They’re all trying—well, almost all—to do their household tasks as well as she does hers. And she helps them, you know.” Here there was a long pause. “She’s kind of like a mother.”

The idea required some adjusting to. I knew that Mary E. was a warm, loving person. The magnitude of her problem had not changed her, but for her to have become the housemother in Mrs. C’s establishment was more than I could have envisioned in my most optimistic thoughts about her adjustment.

“I’m so glad.” I was finally able to say. I have often wondered how it came out for Mary E. and her child but at the end of the school year which was close upon us when I took her to the home, I was forced to say goodbye, leaving her with the assurance that another social worker would be in touch soon. It was she who reassured me that “everything will be all right.”

It was many years later that I encountered the second situation where a client might have received less than she was entitled to if a third person had not been in the picture.

This time it was in the school system in New York almost twelve years after the Pittsburgh incident. I had taken the examination for school social worker in 1952 and began to work in the school system one year later.

I waited in the outer office while the secretary told the principal of my presence. It was evident from the principal’s expression when she greeted me that she had not expected a social worker of color. It was possible she did not know we existed. But when she came from her office to the more public space she looked all around, even though I was the only one waiting.

Mrs. Goldenson had given me over the telephone a long list of misbehaviors exhibited by the little girl who would be my client. When we began to discuss the actual nature of the child's problems, it became apparent, subtly, that her biggest problem was that she was the only child of color in her class. Her actual misdeeds were vague, or vaguely described. I spoke to the child when she was brought to the office but more effective were the long talks I had with the principal from time to time in the next few weeks. Curiously, we did not even speak so much about that particular pupil as about the principal's problems with the parents (in general) and a few, in particular, who must have sensed her antagonism without their children having done anything to justify her attitude.

My third most memorable interview in the area of race was with a principal, white, with whom I had several sensible discussions until, during a session in his office, he objected to my use of the word "blackballed." Long after our discussion I learned that he was married to an African-American who had been his assistant principal.

He asked "why are there such terms as "blackguard," blackout," etc?" When I had recovered from my surprise I suggested that which I had assumed he knew—that the "blackball" has to do with the game of eight-ball. Should we change the color of that ball out of respect for the feelings of persons of color? Presumably, the varied colors of the balls employed in the game represent colors commonly recognized by the majority of the population. Black certainly stands out among the pastels and weaker colors. How much would the game be influenced if the black ball were changed to a yellow or a pink ball? Black is the only color or lack of color dramatic enough to stand out among a host of other paler colors.

## **RIVERDALE**

Riverdale, the first institution to which I applied for employment upon graduation from social work school hired me immediately. At the time I failed to recognize that it was not so much that the Director was impressed with my credentials (straight out of school) as that it was not easy to find qualified staff who were willing to travel so far.

There were at least four miles between the institution and Harlem, the area from which most of the children came. The building it was impressive: the surrounding grounds well kept and inviting for those who, unlike the boys committed there were present by their own choice.

I did not meet my office mate, Claire, also straight out of social work school, nor my supervisor, not inexperienced like Claire and me, but new to the city, until my first working day.

All three of us were under the supervision of the Director, Henry Carter, whose previous experience had been engineering, Claire and I, after we had become aware of Mr. Carter's background, often joked about the theory we developed, that he attempted engineering techniques in running the institution.

Our worst fears were realized when we were summoned day to the Director's office—together, only a few days after we had been assigned our case loads, of ninety boys each.

I wondered aloud, after I had put back the phone, now what?

Claire smiled. She was not easily rattled, and I had to admit to myself that, actually, we had not reason yet to be concerned. We went into the hall (the Director's office was only steps away across the corridor) knocked and waited.

Mr. Carter was sitting majestically at his desk when we entered. He looked towards us and said, "Come in, ladies."

We advanced, one behind the other and stood side by side in front of his desk. He did not invite us to be seated but began talking immediately.

"One of the boys has run away. We do not know exactly when he left but it was sometime after the end of classes and before dinner yesterday."

Both Claire and I made sympathetic sounds.

"I am asking that you find the little"—in his pause one had the impression that he had stopped himself from saying "devil"—"wanderer and bring him back."

I asked, "What's his name?"

Mr. Carter glanced down at his desk. "Jason Miller is his name."

That was a name I remembered seeing on my sheet, one of the ninety children for whom I was responsible. I had talked with him but had not yet been able to see his mother.

"Where would you suggest we begin, Mr. Carter?" I asked. "I would suppose that the school staff has already combed the grounds."

"Of course." His tone suggested that it was difficult to talk with retarded people.

Claire entered the fray then. "Mr. Carter, there's a lot of space between here and Harlem where he probably lives. Wouldn't it be better—"

She was not allowed to complete her thought.

“The child must be brought back. And when I see him again, he is to have a good whipping. That may teach him not to go off and worry everybody like this.”

Mr. Carter had not said but both of us knew who would administer the punishment which he thought fit the crime.

“But Mr. Carter,” I pleaded. “Jason must have run away because he was unhappy. I don’t think whipping will help at all.”

By the look on his face which had been shocked into regarding me quite directly, it was obvious I had said something truly ridiculous.

“Thank you, young ladies. I shall check with you in the morning.”

We went out of his door and across the hall to our own office. It was in that moment, I knew, that we arrived at the same conclusion. Difficult as it was to look elsewhere for employment being kept in; as it were (all new caseworkers were required to sleep on the premises for one month.) Claire had managed to escape that mandate by pleading that she had only recently become engaged and needed to be in the city near her fiance’.

We had made friends with Mr. Carter’s secretary who told us, laughing, the next day that he had been on the telephone the instant after we had left, talking with two senior Board members. He had told them that his case workers wanted to be “psychiatric” social workers. In his book “psychiatric” equaled opprobrium.

My little boy came back later that night, brought in by the policeman to whom he had appealed , when he realized that he was lost. I saw him as soon as possible when I learned that he had returned and was happy to know that he had not been harshly punished by the Director. I had no illusions that it was my plea which had been responsible for Mr. Carter’s holding off on the beating; rather it seemed that by the next day the spirit for the walloping might have gone.

Claire and I both submitted our resignations at the end of the month, but the experience of Riverdale was not all negative for me.

Blanche Pierce (later to become Blanche Berry) was working in the accounting department of the institution when Claire and I arrived. Our friendship endured even though Blanche would go to Washington not too long after we met, attracted by the unusual job opportunities constantly arising there because of the war. Riverdale staff gave her a tremendous send-off but was happy that she found Washington life not to her liking and was back within a short time.

At State Charities Aid Association, the adoption agency to which I applied next, the Director had no difficulty at all accepting the idea that Riverdale had been rather much for a beginning case worker.

In contrast to Riverdale's location, State Charities was in the heart of the city, only a block away from one of the largest centers for social work in the city. Three of us shared an office for doing desk work, but there were separate interviewing and dictating rooms.

My supervisor, Grace Louise Hubbard, was an older woman of considerable experience. Early on she helped me through one case when I found it difficult to accept the city's requirement that the prospective parents be of the same religion as the child. After all, so many of the children needing homes had been foundlings or had been abandoned by their parents. It seemed to me more important that they should have loving parents, no matter what their religion.

In one instance I had become acquainted through the Department of Welfare with a charming little girl of three who was in foster care. Remarkably, she had apparently not been too traumatized by her experience of abandonment. The interested couple I had interviewed and thought would be ideal for this child were of mixed religion. The father was Catholic (as was the child, according to her birth certificate) but the hopeful adoptive mother described herself as without religion.

Miss Hubbard helped me to accept the fact (after several sessions) that either the prospective mother must become Catholic or the child would have to be placed with another family.

I have never forgotten the would-be mother in this instance. She was such a warm outgoing person that she did not even become upset with the agency requirement, that, in effect, she “get a religion.” After consultation with her husband’s priest, she agreed to begin training to become a Catholic.

Unfortunately, I left the agency before the hopeful mother’s training was completed. The probability was that she and her husband were not able to adopt the child I had in mind for them anyway because of the agency’s goal to place each child as early as possible.

Miss Hubbard was not only my supervisor but became a good friend. It was she who introduced me to the game of “Scrabble,” then fairly new. Even after I left the agency we kept in touch (after I was discharged from the service) and had regular dates for Scrabble. Early on we played in Miss Hubbard’s backyard when she had what was then called a “garden apartment.”

Later, when she moved to a regular apartment house, we continued our Scrabble dates and on one occasion, at least, I was able to entice her to come to Brooklyn for a game.

## **ENLISTING**

I had wanted to be a ballet dancer but had hardly got past the first lesson because grand-pop, an African Methodist Episcopal minister, considered dancing, even ballet, sinful.

In my last year at college in New York I had represented Hunter in the Intercollegiate Poetry Reading. Held yearly, it included student readers from all the Ivy League colleges and Hunter. I began then to think seriously about a career on the stage. I was already a member of an amateur group whose leader, Venezuela Jones, did not really admit the word “amateur” to her thinking.

Venezuela had taken me on, after I had been with the group for sometime, had seen that I photographs made and found me an agent. I succeeded, after a tryout, in getting the ingenue role in “On the Wharf,” starring Canada Lee. That summer I stayed in the city to continue rehearsals. My mother went, as usual, to visit her parents. When mama explained to my grandparents why I had not come, grand-pop advised her to come home

and take me out of that “nigger mess.” It was not grand-pop’s use of the word I had never heard from him which got me out of that play, but other problems.

I had no idea of how my family would receive the news of my joining the Navy but it seemed safer not to discuss it.

In that month of October 1944 our country had been engaged in World War II for close to three years. Still fresh in my memory was the day, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941, when I heard President Roosevelt on the radio declaring December 7<sup>th</sup>, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, “a day which will live in infamy.”

It was near noon and I was in Kaufman’s, Pittsburgh’s great department store. I had gone there to dream away a free period in my schedule as a graduate student at the University. When the President’s words came over the radio, every shopper on the premises seemed to stop motionless to listen.

From that day on all our lives changed in ways we could not have imagined. First, the young man I was dating was drafted. Then his close friend who had tried to keep me from being lonely was also called up. Moses Jones, a graduate student in physics who lived across the hall from my roommate and me was drafted and sent to Chemical Warfare School in Maryland. He had invited Ermer (who had grown up with him in Kansas City) and me to his graduation.

After all the excitement of the ceremony, the most moving moments of the day came when the formalities were over and Mose introduced us to some of his fellow graduates. (He was the only African-American in his class.)

One of the men saying “Goodbye” and “Let’s keep in touch” turned to Ermer and me and confessed, “When I first found I was going to be sleeping on a cot next to Mose I’ll tell you I wasn’t happy. And I wasn’t alone.” He paused, a wide grin came over his face. “But you know what we found out—he snored just as loud as the rest of us—and was lots smarter than most.”

Long before our friends were being called up, Ermer and I had been obliged, like all adults, to acquire coupon books in order to be able to buy sugar and coffee. It was in those months, of course, that both of us became coffee drinkers. If those books were so precious, we thought, the stuff had to be drunk.

In October 1944 when the Navy said it was ready for me and I said, “Take me,” I was not consciously making a statement about race relations. It was true that in the adoption agency where I was employed I was one of only two non-white social workers. My African-American colleague and I were probably in the same numbers to total staff as we were in the population overall. I doubt that this ratio had been planned, but since the numbers of persons of color who applied to adopt children were small, we experienced minimal pressures from work demands in contrast to the rest of the staff which was obliged to handle a large volume of applications.

We were able to complete our home studies with prospective parents, organize and dictate our findings, get acquainted with children available for adoption, match them with families, arrange for child and hopeful parents to meet, place and supervise after placement—all at an easy pace. We did not initial interviews. All first interviews, whatever the color of the applicants, were conducted by white social workers.

### **FIRST BATTLE**

My second meeting with Harriet after our joint swearing in at Third Naval District Headquarters was weeks later on the platform of the railroad station at Northampton, Massachusetts. Neither of us knew at that moment that we were beginning our training three weeks later than the other members of the class with which we were expected to graduate.

We had hardly any time to wait in the brisk November weather before a young WAVES officer appeared, greeted us and led us to a station wagon parked nearby. We were driven forthwith to the uniform supply depot—only weeks later would be learn that this operation was under the famous Filene’s Department store of Boston. We were measured for uniforms, raincoat and dress coat, but when we finally emerged from the

ministrations of the fitters we were changed in appearance only by the brand new Navy blue hats which marked us unmistakably as Navy property.

Collected anew by our Navy escort and ushered back into the van, we were driven to the mess hall which was within hiking distance of the dormitory and only about a fifteen minute ride from Filene's. (These vital facts we learned within a few days.)

Dinner was already in progress when we were brought to the wide entrance of what appeared to be a ballroom fitted out with dining tables. Our escort pointed out two vacant seats which seemed to be in the exact center of the room—about a mile away. At that moment all those women in uniform looked exactly alike and from another planet: two brown-skinned women, one a head taller and a little darker than the other, in city suits and Navy hats.

Next day I realized that we were seated according to our room locations in the dormitory. We also marched approximately in this order when we went from living quarters to classes or meals. "Approximately" because we were expected, while in formation, to be more or less in size places. After that first strange afternoon and evening Harriet and I never found ourselves marching or walking side by side. She was several inches taller than I.

On my left for the ensuing five weeks, marching to and from classes and meals, would be Nellie, from Georgia. She lived across the hall and we were about the same height. Her name I learned instantly and have never forgotten because it was my mother's.

During our second dinner at "Hamp" I discovered that Nellie dearly loved pecan pie which seemed to be served at least once every week for all the weeks we were in training. Because it was not one of my favorites, Nellie had an extra piece each time it was served.

Pecan pie, in a sense, bonded us even for a short time after graduation. Nellie and her roommate, Anne, were the only members of our class, except for Harriet, I ever saw after graduation.

Our rooms were furnished minimally—metal beds, one atop the other, one small desk and two straight chairs. Harriet was gracious enough to offer to take the upper bunk, suggesting that “It’s easier for a tall person.”

We learned on the second morning after arrival, that books, leaning up against the wall at the back of the desk, were to be placed strictly in size places. This was an arrangement of which I came to be fond. Clothes were to be hung in the closet in size places—in order of length, that is. Deviations from these guidelines could cause problems at inspection, we were told by Nellie and Anne.

We dusted everywhere right from that first waking morning, mimicking our classmates across the hall who were generous in offering tips on the favorite places in which inspecting officers would search for dust.

Inspections, even though not conducted every day, were occasions for acute anxiety. One attack occurred during our second week when I overheard comments in the lobby while we waited to begin our march (in formation) to the buildings which housed our classrooms. There was some talk about daily scrubbing of the deck of the head. Until then, Harriet and I had done exhaustive work on the head (with countless sheets of tissue paper) arranged toilet articles—limited to tooth brush, toothpaste and soap—with mathematical precision on the shelf and scoured all exposed surfaces, except deck and bulkheads. All that seemed natural. To do floors had never come into our minds.

We never had time to investigate the recreation areas during the five weeks we were given to become officers in the WAVES. We were always poring over books when the other women were pursuing leisure time interests. From the day of our arrival we were regularly scheduled for make-up classes. In these we studied what we had missed because of our late admission.

It was only a matter of days before we no longer stood out as the only women in mufti. But it was not until the day before graduation that our schedules were the same as everyone else’s.

We wasted little feeling in resentment, however. We knew the score and we knew that the only we could win the game was to continue to break out the books at every possible opportunity. At one point we tried to

invent an opportunity by studying in the head after lights out. It was not a good idea. The head too cramped and the light was not for studying. Something seemed also to happen to the heat in the head at “lights out” time.

“Here we go again” Harriet would announce without inflection each morning of the five weeks we awoke in the cold dark morning of Northampton. It was an irritant and a stimulant. I knew that “goes again” meant that we had one more day to try to make it through those constantly challenging hours; from the rising signal to “lights out” time. Harriet’s “Here we go again” was without perceivable emotion but there was something in the way she made the announcement each day which made it effective in rousing me to battle one more time.

Certainly it worked for her. Coming into class as late as we had, Harriet nevertheless was among the first five graduates in a class of two hundred.

Mornings were the worst. First, it was necessary to pry the frozen washcloth by main force from the end of the metal bed where according to Navy “regs” it had been hung. Then , showering, one anticipated the frigid march from the dormitory to the building a quarter of a mile away where we had classes. There could not have been snow on the ground each of those thirty-five mornings, but tramping through the white stuff is what I remember best about day’s beginning at “Hamp.”

Long before then Harriet would have said, dryly, “The uniform of the day is—“repeating the announcement which came over the loudspeaker every morning—‘blue suit, blue hat and overcoat’—for a change.” There was never any change but occasionally when, for some reason, we had failed to hear clearly, a few minutes of cheer could be had by asking Nellie across the hall “What’s the uniform of the day?” She would giggle and in her soft Alabama drawl tell us “Blue suit and overcoat—same as yesterday.”

Of all the studies required of us on the way to becoming Navy officers, plane recognition, I was certain during every hour that I spent in that class, would be the wall too high for me to climb. I had been drawn to the Navy because the sea had always held a fascination for me. But when I sat in that darkened classroom at Smith,

trying to identify the tiny planes projected by film onto the blackboard—then I knew, without any doubt, that the Navy was much, much more than “ships at sea.”

Identifying ships went better, not only because they plied the oceans I had always loved but also because there seemed to be a smaller number of variations among models than there were of planes. Variations in size and shape were almost obvious compared with the tiny details which distinguished one plane from another.

Naval History was the only other subject in which I suffered minimal pain. Sessions spent in that classroom were, in fact, the most pleasurable of all the study day, if anything in those highly pressured days could have been described as “pleasurable.” It seemed logical to be filled with large doses of background about this organization to which one had voluntarily and suddenly pledged allegiance for an unknown portion of one’s life.

Each Sunday morning during training we were required to attend chapel. That was the one mandatory activity on the Day of Rest. The services were non-doctrinal but the simple ritual was for me one of the highlights of our training time.

As a child who lived with a minister grandfather, I was required to attend both church and Sunday regularly. By the time I joined the Navy I had long since given up regular church attendance. But now I found that marching to chapel and singing hymns along with my classmates was a renewing experience.

Even now that which is called “the Navy Hymn,” beginning “O Heavenly Father, strong to save—“ and ending with “O hear us when we pray to Thee for those in peril on the Sea” arouses a host of memories. I knew that hymn long before I associated it with the ending of Sunday services at Northampton. It is included in the hymnology of several variations of Christian faith. But ever since December 1944 it always takes me back to Northampton where I am standing; with a chapel full of other uniformed women on Sunday morning. Without ever having had anyone in “peril on the sea” I continue to be moved each time I hear those lines.

Although it seemed to believe in the first days that this grind would one day come to an end, graduation day finally arrived. That morning Harriet, climbing down from her bunk, instead of “Here we go again,” said,

“We made it, friend,” and smiled a big one. And she did not even know then, of course, that she had achieved 3<sup>rd</sup> place standing in our class.

We all thought, at the time, that the finishing date had been arranged, to permit the new officers to have Christmas and a few days at home before reporting to their assignments.

Only many years later did I learn that ours was the last class to have trained at Northampton. The last day was undoubtedly planned for the convenience of the personnel who would be responsible for the actual decommissioning of the station.

Navy photographers were everywhere. Harriet and I were asked to pose pushing down together in order to close a suitcase. Although the photograph itself was first-rate and has been shown many times in the years since that day it was entirely fictional. By the time that the photographer approached and described the shot he wanted, both Harriet and I had long since stowed away all our gear and were waiting with the same undisguised eagerness as all of our classmates for train time. It was not difficult to smile a happy smile.

### **TO SEE IT WHOLE**

Nellie, Anne and I had made arrangements to meet in New York early in our leave. Neither of them had ever been in New York, having come directly from their hometowns to Northampton. We were all excited about our plan to find and explore the Brooklyn Navy Yard. (At that time Brooklyn was as much far country to me as it was to my out of state friends.)

We planned to do what our instructors had advised—to visit the Navy Yard for the purpose of seeing a real ship.

Our first target was a battleship, probably because it was the largest vessel in port and the one we had always recognized instantly in “Ship Recognition” class. We walked up the gangplank as though we had been doing it for years, returned the duty officer’s salute and requested “permission to come aboard.” We were immediately impressed to discover that our formula was working just as we had been told it would while we were still in training.

The gentleman standing before us probably had the shock of his military life at the sight of three women in uniform standing on his ship’s gangplank but he never blinked as he said “Permission granted” and had us piped aboard.

We explained, taking turns at talking, that we were fresh out of training and had been advised to see a “real ship.” The petty officer designated by the officer of the day to give us a tour made full, clear explanations all along the way. He took us down into the engine room where we saw the legendary coffee constantly on the make from the boiling water which dripped from the boiler valve of the main engine.

Going up the steep narrow stairs from far below with our guide politely in the rear did strain our dignity. When we were able to compare notes later, we all confessed that we had had difficulty restraining giggles and, to a woman, had thought how much better it would have been to have been wearing pants on the stairs. But, naturally we had come on this important trip in full dress uniform. Not only were we paying a formal call, but, in point of fact, we did not own Navy blue pants. They were not standard issue for women officers. It was a relief when we had finished all the stair climbing and were back on the broad main deck with our guide on our level.

As we walked back down the gangplank and away from the battleship we were all silent for a few steps, each probably trying to remember the size and implied capability of the vessel.

Anne broke the silence by asking, “What shall we do now?”

It was not yet noon and as we walked along the waterfront, passing ships all the while, the answer became obvious. Our first stop had gone so well that it seemed unthinkable not to repeat.

Nellie pointed to what she thought should be our next target, a destroyer. It was docked not far from the battleship and its compactness made it seem less threatening to our dignity, at least.

Now assured that the magic words would work, we approached the destroyer without hesitation and were welcomed aboard just as though WAVES boarded the vessel every day of the week. Our tour of the destroyer was physically easier than that of the battleship because of the considerable difference in height. Stairs were at a minimum and distances between decks shorter.

We were lucky that we had chosen to visit on Sunday. The duty roster, including officers, was low and the officer of the day invited us to stay for lunch.

The normal officer complement of a destroyer is twelve. There were only half that number aboard on this day so that our little group fitted easily at the wardroom table. Nellie and Anna sat opposite me with an officer between them. On my side I was in the middle, flanked by an officer at each end. The arrangement resulted in my facing the Dutch door opening into the galley. This door was in the corner of the room behind Nellie and Anne.

All of us must have been wide-eyed as we contemplated the assortment of pills of various shapes and sizes which rested beside each place setting. One of our hosts, probably the senior officer since he was at the end of the table, answered our questions before any of us had gathered sufficient courage to ask.

“They’re vitamins.” He seemed amused at our curious survey of the pills.

“Every meal?” Nellie asked. Her eyes were wide with astonishment and even with those two words; her accent lay on the room.

The head man smiled again. “No. Only once a day. At sea we’re liable not to get any sun for days, you know. They the pills make up for that—and I guess a lot of other possible problems.” He paused, evidently to allow us to think about what he had said. Then he finished, “Have some. They’re good for you.”

There was no way to resist such an invitation. Each of us took glass in hand picked up the pills, one at a time, until they had all disappeared. Our hosts joined us. It would have been ungracious, at the least, to say “No, thank you. No pills.”

While I was swallowing the last of the collection I became aware of a brown face, staring, wide-eyed from the galley opening. I tried to appear casual as I smiled lightly in his direction. The face disappeared and another brown one took its place immediately, equally wide-eyed.

Seconds later, it seemed, the soup was brought to the table. The steward who had seen us first, came to me. Nellie smiled across at me, obviously trying to hold onto her dignity because she recognized that I was beginning to be embarrassed. I thought that any moment she would fall into giggle but both she and Anna watched and waited demurely until the steward crossed to their side, as if this were the expected way to be served.

Only after the passing of the third serving plate did I realize how I had almost missed a reaction which I would soon become accustomed to see in various places, with different people. It was the first time that these stewards (the only job available for many years for Afro-Americans in the Navy) had seen a person of color in officer’s uniform. It may well have been the first time that they had seen WAVES of any color since they had just returned from sea duty. It was not until nine months later that WAVES with sufficient service time would be permitted overseas duty.

I never saw Nellie nor Anne again. Both had requested and been given duty near their homes. When asked, near the end of our training, to state a preferred location for assignment, I had written “East or West Coast.” After I had completed my entire Navy duty no more than forty-five minutes from where I lived and had signed on, except for three days temporary duty in the distant ports of Philadelphia and Washington, I often wondered if my Navy experience might have been altogether different had I written “West Coast” first.

## **ARRIVAL ON STATION**

On the morning of January 6, 1944, Harriet and I reported for duty to the WAVES training center in the Bronx. The grounds had formerly been the annex to Hunter College, my alma mater. The main building—for juniors and seniors, located at 68<sup>th</sup> Street and Lexington Avenue had been partially destroyed by fire early in 1936, just when I was to have transferred there from the Bronx.

Because of the unavailability of the classrooms in the historic old building at 68<sup>th</sup> Street, those of us who would have gone there were sent to a large office building at 34<sup>th</sup> Street and Park Avenue South for some of our classes. Other classes were held in the areas of the college building which were still intact. The school day, as a result, was interminable. In order to allow for class changes between 68<sup>th</sup> Street and 34<sup>th</sup> Street, in the heart of Manhattan, some of us began classes shortly after the crack of dawn and continued until 5 o'clock.

My fondest memories and sentiments of "college" were all attached to the Bronx grounds and buildings where we went after the trying time at the Main Building.

Now, in 1944, the grey stone structures looked on the outside exactly as they had eleven years before. Inside, however, the Navy had worked its well-known efficiency for a conversion so complete in most areas that an innocent might have believed that the structure had been erected especially for Navy use.

Harriet and I reported to the Executive Officer (called the Housekeeper aboard ship) to be assigned living space in Officer's Quarters. The Executive Officer was a beautiful lieutenant, prematurely gray with beautifully coifed short hair and dark eyes. With no word at all she handed each of us a key to the apartment we would share. Only later did I learn that the customary greeting to those arriving at a new station, as to those visiting a ship, is "Welcome Aboard."

It was several weeks later that I learned of the seriousness of the beautiful lady's problem. When the Commanding Officer of the Station had announced in a meeting of all officers that the two newly commissioned Afro-American officers had been assigned to duty at Hunter and would arrive soon thereafter, the Exec had stood and announced that if "either of them ever sits beside me in the mess hall" she would get up and walk out. The commanding officer of the U.S.S. Hunter at the time, Elizabeth Reynard, formerly dean of Barnard College, had replied in firm tones that should the lady take such action, she should plan to continue walking to the C.O.'s office to submit her resignation.

The lady (from Georgia, like my classmate, Nellie, at Northampton) never ran into me in the mess hall. At midday when most of the staff would have had to avail themselves of the Navy mess, one tended to come in

with office mates so that the question of who sat next to whom never arose. Within months, however, a conversion did occur. On the few occasions when we found ourselves in close proximity in the Officer's Club, the Exec did not move away. She began soon to initiate conversation. She took reserve status before the station was decommissioned. On her last day she told me "Goodbye" in the same way she had all those around me, with a firm handclasp, and added "It's been good knowing you."

The apartment to which Harriet and I fell heirs, like those of all officers quartered at the station, was in a building only five minutes walk from the college grounds or business part of the installation. An entire block of apartment houses had been requisitioned by the Navy to provide living space for trainees as well as for officers.

Harriet and I shared a two bedroom, two bath apartment on the fourth floor. The rooms were spacious and well furnished, including a well-equipped kitchen. Furnishing for the kitchen as well as linens and blankets had all come from the luxury liner the Queen Mary, which, because of the war, was no longer in service.

The enlisted women's apartments were within a block of our but the difference was that there were no living rooms. All available space had been furnished with double decker beds, usually six to a normal sized living room.

Without hesitation Harriet chose the bedroom and bath in our apartment near the front entrance. Consequently, I saw little of her for all the time we lived together in the Bronx. She left early, probably to breakfast in officer's mess. After I began to work in the Classification Department, my co-workers and I usually had breakfast together.

In the days immediately after my arrival on the station I was assigned to take charge of visual aids (Visual Aids had been requested by Lt. Elizabeth Reynard, head of training at Hunter: a Link Trainer, various airplane models, aircraft engine models, a tail gun, aerological instrument, parachute packing table and parachutes: a voice recorder and instruments to test voices for control tower aptitude, airplane dashboard equipment—all were in place at Hunter by Lt; Reynard's foresight for better classification of recruits.) which the enlisted women in the Education Department employed in their lectures to the new arrivals. At my initial

encounter with those cards—small enough to be stored in the “cubbyholes” of metal cabinets which occupied three walls of a room about six by six. I was impressed with the inventiveness of the person who had designed the cards. Each bore a drawing of one of the signals a seaman should know for the rest of her service life no matter where she might finally be assigned. And compact as each was, its overall presentation was still large enough to be seen from the back of a classroom.

My involvement with the flash cards was marginal. For the few days that the assignment lasted, my sole responsibility was to sit in the cubby-holed room and watch enlisted women remove the cards which they would require for the class they were teaching, then watch again as they returned and stored the cards in their proper pigeon-holes.

If some imaginative seaman had withdrawn twenty cards and returned only fifteen, I would have been none the wiser. If someone else had opted to store flag signals in the cubby for light signals, that, too, would have escaped me. My job, I had been told, was to sit and watch, no more. Despite the fact that introduction to the assignment had included the words “in charge,” it would have been insulting to the talented young women in the department, most of whom had preceded me by many months, to ask them to check out their materials with the new kid on the block. They all handled the material, I observed on my first day, as though they had grown up with it.

My other job in those first strange days at Hunter seemed as important as the first was non-essential but was equally irreconcilable with my background and lack of experience. I was assigned to lecture the brand new recruits on “The History of the Navy.” In addition to one lecture presented in the auditorium to the entire body of each new class, I was also programmed to give talks on Navy history to smaller units which met in classrooms.

Once I had recovered from the shock of being assigned, as the newest and lowest ranking officer on the station to lecture on Naval History, I set to work to accomplish the impossible.

I supplemented what I had learned of Naval History at “Hamp” with extensive reading for each of the few nights I had before I would meet my first class. I made notes on 3x5 cards, tried to memorize them but finally relied upon the security of just having them in hand when I stood before my students.

I had extravagant fantasies about how much more than dignity was at stake. Could failure in this task be fatal to my career? What awful destiny lay ahead for brand new officers who washed out in their first assignments?

Helen Strauss saved me from ever learning the answer to that question. She estimated that, coming from social work, I might have something to offer in Classification. I do not remember how many lectures I gave but they were few enough not to produce permanent trauma.

## **DELIVERANCE**

My cubby-holed kingdom was directly across the hall from the room which served as main office for the Classification Department. The senior WAVES officer in charge of that department was Lt. Helen May Strauss who would not only rescue me from the flash card cubicles and naval history lectures but would also become one of my closest friends.

Classification was actually, on paper, headed by a gentleman officer. Since he had held a position of prestige and responsibility in the field of education prior to his Navy commissioning, he might have been expected to assume easy command over a cadre of women. But neither previous experience nor Navy training had prepared him for the actuality of working with the highly talented women in his department. It was a long time, in fact, after Helen had maneuvered me into the department before I actually met the titular “boss.” His office was on the same floor as those of the women in the department, just around a corner. But he could go back and forth to interact with his staff. And he did. His problems with women were reflected in his persistence in addressing all the women officers in his department by their last names, without title. In this way he put them on the same level as the enlisted women for whom such form of address was protocol.

In the years since life aboard the U.S. S. Hunter I have often thought of how much consideration Helen must have given about ways in which she might help Harriet and me fit into life at the station. As it developed, not only were we two nor a package, but Harriet seemed to need no special help in her assignment. Her position of leadership as a civilian, combined with her earlier stardom in athletics at Smith College undoubtedly helped those who were making assignments to see her as a “natural” for the physical training program. She worked with physical training of the young recruits, newly arrived on the station from the beginning of our arrival at the U.S.S. Hunter and continued in that assignment except for the temporary recruiting jaunts we both had now and then.

I was fortunate to have been taken in hand (as it were) by Helen not only because she had concern but also had a good deal of time to think and put strategies into action. Her husband, a physician, had been drafted into the Army early on and was stationed in Europe when Harriet and I came to the Bronx. One of my most vivid memories is that of Helen sitting cross-legged on the couch in her apartment with her portable typewriter resting on her knees, one of her great collection of classical tapes playing while she typed a letter to Fritz.

It was Helen, who, when our acquaintance had grown into friendship shared the story about the Executive Officer who had problems with persons of color. Or, more precisely, with the idea of “colored

people” since later developments seemed to indicate that prior to her Navy experience she had not really known any of us except by sight.

Helen had been a student at Barnard College while Miss Reynard was Dean there and had, in fact, been encouraged by her to join the WAVES, so she took particular delight in recalling the confrontation of that meeting.

The work of the Classification Department, vital not only to the experience of each woman in the WAVES but even more so to the effective functioning of the corps, was rewarding in all respects. After the enlisted women, specially trained for the task, had administered the classification tests in various areas, including general intelligence, mechanics, mathematics, language—among the basics which would give some indication of the seaman’s potential the results would be scored by those same young women.

Hospital corps and yeoman were among the jobs always needing large numbers of assignees, but there were also important assignments to barracks administration and other managerial slots, specialties to which WAVES might be assigned after basic hospital corps training. There were a smaller number of subdivisions in many of the other specialties but the responsibility of the Classification Department was to determine only to what specialty the graduating seaman should be referred for further skill acquisition. It would then be up to the training school at which she received her specialized education to make the decision on final assignment.

After test results were available in those early weeks, decisions about the next stage in the seaman’s progress were made not only by evaluation of her overall performance but also, in assignments requiring special talents, by individual interviews. These were conducted by all the officers of the department and were one area of the job which I especially enjoyed, possibly because there I had the opportunity to employ some of the skills which I had practiced as a social worker.

Among the billets to which, after basic training, WAVES might eventually go were hospital apprentice, pharmacist’s mate, parachute rigger, radioman, electrician’s mate, storekeeper, (technical and disbursing) ship’s cook, baker, printer, ship’s serviceman (L,T and B) for laundry man, tailor and barber, control tower operator,

personnel supervisor (barracks administration) specialties in recreation and welfare and yeoman (secretary). We were always required to send large numbers to the last billet.

The number of persons chosen to continue training for a special job were, of course, fixed for each class.

Qualifications varied greatly for each billet but there were always consistently high numbers of persons sent on to become yeoman (secretary) and hospital corps members.

### **SOCIAL LIFE AT U.S.S. HUNTER**

Freddy was the first person I ever met who had a photographic memory. She was not a skilled cook, having difficulty even with coffee. Once, when Helen complained, ever so gently, about the brew we were drinking for breakfast in Freddy's apartment, Freddy said, looking puzzled and frowning, "But I have a Silex."

(The Silex, first of the two part coffee makers, was then the star of the field.) Helen pointed out, gently as possible, that even a Silex demanded a certain quantity of coffee in relation to the amount of water in order to produce a flavorful brew.

Before I was aware that Freddy's talent for cooking was notable for its absence, she asked me one Sunday afternoon when we were visiting with Helen, if I had ever made a certain entree which combined veal, celery and mushrooms with other ingredients to make a delicious "Pot Roast of Veal." I admitted that the recipe was unfamiliar to me and wondered how it went. At that, Freddy recited the whole recipe from start to finish, including cooking time. I was more than impressed. I was dumbstruck.

"You must have made it often." I said, "to know it so well."

Freddy smiled beatifically. "I've never made it. I saw it in the New York Times this morning."

As soon as I could get away without seeming to rush, I went upstairs to find my own New York Times. In the Magazine section printed exactly as Freddy had recited it, was the recipe. The ingredients were listed in the same order and quantity: preparation described in the very words she had used.

I could hardly wait to report this remarkable happening to Helen. She, of course, was not as impressed as I had been. As a psychologist, she had long been familiar with the phenomenon of the photographic memory. Besides she had seen Freddy demonstrate the gift many times.

Helen was the only daughter of an upper middle class Jewish family. She and her brother had been exposed by their father early in their lives to people of different race and religion. She told me once, smiling at the memory, that they had attended a Presbyterian church when they were small because it was within two blocks of their home. It was left for them to decide when they were mature to which religion they would claim allegiance.

As free of strictures as was Helen's life religion, it was equally free of hang-ups about race. Except for descriptions of the tensions displayed by some officers of the Hunter crew at learning of the imminent arrival of

Harriet and myself. I recall no discussions with Helen about race. It is possible, of course, that we had conversations which were not memorable simply because we had no disagreement.

There was one weekend when I had begged off on a social engagement on the Station because, I told Helen, I had to clean my apartment. She was distressed to think that household chores should keep me from socializing and volunteered to try to get her cleaning woman to add to her work load the apartment occupied by Harriet and me.

Several days later Helen reported, obviously distressed and perplexed, that she had told Lucy that Harriet and I were in need of help and wondered if she could give us some time each week. “She said, ‘I don’t want to do that.’” Helen frowned slightly. “She said, in fact—I can’t forget it—that she could not.”

As I listened intently, Helen continued “I asked her why. I didn’t think she was that busy or had so many people on her schedule.” Helen continued to look unhappy, remembering the conversation with Lucy. There was a really long pause, then Helen continued, “Finally, she said, “because they don’t belong here.”

After a somewhat confusing discussion, Helen said, it seemed that what Lucy meant was that Harriet and I should not be living in the same building with the white officers.

As Helen related this, her eyes opened wide as they must have when she had first heard it from Lucy. Then she said, “I asked her where she had got that idea. I know she’s very religious so I asked if there was something in the Bible which—well, was there something in the Bible.”

She said, “No, M’am.” Helen had tried to draw Lucy out so she could try, at least, to understand her point of view, but all in vain. She had finally abandoned the discussion but was left puzzled, as she related, to this moment.

My interaction with the officers I met except for the small group of Helen’s friends, with whom I socialized at her place in the evenings, was limited to luncheon conversations and passing in the hall.

I was asked after a while, to be responsible for balancing the checkbook for the officer’s club which I suspected was a job nobody else wanted because it was dull, even if important. Apologetic as I had always been

about my lack of skill in math. I wanted to beg off, but on the other hand, felt I could not refuse because it was the only thing I had been asked to do in the “social” area.

That responsibility turned out to be most agreeable. The other officer with whom I shared the job was chatty and we gossiped happily between checking off and adding up. Since the club, despite the number of women (and a few men) involved, turned out to be a decidedly parochial affair, and keeping the books was the punishing assignment I had anticipated.

Harriet and I had been on the station for about four months when the officers decided to have a party—a big one. It was the only gathering to which, as I recall, we ever invited outsiders.

When I mentioned the upcoming affair to Harriet, she indicated no interest at all. It seemed important to me that one of us be there. It would be equally important, I thought, to bring a guest. I asked Langston who, I knew, always loved a party. As I had anticipated, he agreed, had a good time and fussed over by all the ladies.

The scene of the gathering was the Officer’s Club itself which was actually a room about two blocks square on the ground floor of the Administration Building. In the days when the structure was still being used as a college, it was probably a refuge in bad weather and a kind of “village square” for the students between classes.

Our club bar, of course, offered whatever might strike a guest’s fancy. It took no time at all for the gathering to become one big, happy group.

When we said goodnight to the others, Langston and I went up to my apartment for a postscript, enjoying again some remembered bits of conversation each of us had had with others. Langston had difficulty, at one point, recalling someone who had made a comment which I thought worth repeating. Finally, giving up, he said:

“Oh, come on now. You know all white folks look alike.” He was grinning, of course, and both of us knew what he meant. Just for a second I recalled the evening Harriet and I had faced the other trainees in the dining room at Smith for the first time.

Years later, telling Ellen Wright some of my experiences at Hunter when it was the U.S.S. Hunter, I repeated that story. She not only failed to see the humor, but was annoyed, in fact, that I had thought it worth retelling.

Aside from the fact that she should have known that Langston had said it tongue in cheek, it made me sad that the irony of the situation seemed to have escaped her. This I found disturbing since, with African-Americans in the place of white, the line had long been a famous rejoinder for Caucasians to explain their inability to recognize, remember or identify us correctly.

Late 1944 had been my first time to hear the expression. I was on line during a visit to the liquor department in Macy's store in New York. Macy's had been among the first establishments in the city to make certain that its customers had access to some of the precious drinking alcohols which were then rationed because of the war.

On a day which would not otherwise have been memorable I was waiting my turn on line when an African-American gentleman ahead of me was refused service.

When I became aware of the standstill on the line, the salesman was saying "You were here before." He had not raised his voice, was as polite as he could possibly have been but was calmly determined that this customer should not be sold another bottle of whiskey.

The gentleman to whom he was speaking, a tall, brown, good-looking, middle-aged person, retorted without smiling. "Oh, come on now. You know we all look alike to you."

Macy's man was shaken. He did not smile, nor lose any of his dignity as he replied firmly, "Not to me you don't." After a pause during which he moved on to the next customer in line, he said, "I remember you well."

Left with no further choice, the customer, accompanied by chuckles from many of those in line behind him, admitted that he had been bested by leaving to make room for the person behind him.

Helen had not gone to the party and after Langston had left, I stopped by her apartment to fill her in on the evening. As usual, she was sitting on her sofa bed, cross-legged, typing a letter to her husband, Fritz. She listened to my story of the party and agreed that it sounded like a successful evening.

When I was leaving, after only a few minutes, I narrowly missed colliding with the wall in the foyer. Helen laughed, surprised, and said, “You’re looped.”

I said happily, “I guess I am. Good night,” and wove my way carefully to the door. As I entered the elevator I reflected that altogether it had been a splendid evening.

At another gathering, in summer, Helen, Freddy, Rosemary, Lou and I were all eating watermelon in Helen’s apartment. We were enjoying it out of hand when one of the group suggested that we had a historic opportunity—to take a picture which would be a documentary. Perforce, I was elected to be the photographer while all the others posed on the sofa, watermelon slices at mouths. Afterwards, we all laughed for a long time at our idea of having pictorial evidence that Afro-Americans were not alone in enjoying watermelon eaten out of hand.

On a day early in spring of 1945, President Roosevelt, accompanied by several far Eastern potentates, visited the U.S.S. Hunter. On that day every man and woman on the station, whatever his or her rank, was to appear at the designated hour on the parade grounds wearing dress whites. The President would, of course, review the troops.

Ever since the day in 1927 when my mother had taken me to downtown Manhattan to join the thousands of people gathered there to hail Charles Lindbergh on his return from that historic solo flight to Paris, the very word “parade” had aroused hosts of negative feelings. Forever associated with the idea were masses of people twice as big as I, all around me and the sense that they were absorbing all the air and soon I would no longer be able to breathe. The memory included also noise of a volume I had never before heard or imagined.

When I considered the prospect of a parade on the grounds of my station, I knew perfectly well that this time nobody would be pushing me to the back of the crowd and, above all, order would prevail. Everybody would have sufficient moving space to the right and to the left, front and back. Nevertheless, the idea of “parade” and one in which I would be obliged to participate, produced dreary thoughts.

I suffered extreme anxiety the whole day before and all of the morning leading up to the parade hour. We had a run-through which only served to heighten my sense of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. During all the months after graduation from Smith in which I had been a part of the proud corps of WAVES I had never had such doubts about my decision as befell me on Parade Day.

As an officer it would be my fate to be alone at the head of a group of seamen. Each of so many small cadres led by an officer were for cosmetic effect, I was certain. They would easily have been consolidated to form larger groups marching behind officers who were assigned to training and would know, therefore; with certainty, what they were about from one step to the next. It would have been a far less risky presentation for the weak marchers like me to be behind another officer.

As I made my way to the spot assigned my group on the parade ground, wearing my beautiful white dress suit for the first time, I kept remembering high school gymnastics when the teacher had said to me at the

end of a test in the Swedish drill, consisting of a series of continuous movements which I always believed myself to be executing as well as the next one, "I just cannot understand, Miss Wills, how you can manage to be a half beat off during the whole exercise."

But my guardian angel worked overtime that day. The weather was threatening. For that reason, undoubtedly to save the President (who, we learned later, was already ill) from having to sit in an open car while two thousand and more women and men marched past him, our positions were reversed. The President's car drove the length and breadth of the parade ground. All the ship's company stood at attention and there was, of course, not a single glitch.

Dinner that night was positively festive.

One person who did not march or even appear on the parade grounds that day was the ship's doctor whose most important job was taking care of those women who had washed out upon examination when they arrived at the U.S. S. Hunter.

When the President's upcoming visit had been indicated, the uniform of the day for all aboard on that date was announced as dress whites. Dr. Vandermeer had appeared early in the morning to stand before the commanding officer and say that he could not wear his whites because they no longer fitted him. The commanding officer was adamant. This would be THE DAY in the life of the station, to say nothing of the experience of its crew.

For weeks after the President had come and gone, Dr. Vandermeer had a rapt audience each time he told of the developments which followed the C.O.'s ultimatum. Dr. V's dress whites dated from his Navy service many years before. At that time he had also been assigned to a reception center. He had "re-upped" with visions of sea duty. Instead he was destined to care for all these women on a "ship" which was incapable of movement from the Bronx, New York, nowhere near the sea. Dr. V. had been denied service on a real ship because of his excess weight. As jolly a person as he was, he was nearly barrel-shaped.

As soon as possible after the unsatisfactory session with the C.O. in the matter of his uniform for President's day, Dr. Vandermeer reappeared in her office clad in his dress whites. This time he needed no words. His jacket buttons barely met buttonholes, threatening to pop at any second. Pants bottoms were far short of meeting shoe tops. In Dr. V's account of the confrontation, the C.O. was momentarily speechless at the sight of him in his whites. When she had regained her composure she said, "All right, just try to be inconspicuous. In fact, it might be a good idea if you stayed in your quarters until the parade ends."

Dr. V's principal assignment was to guard the health and welfare of those young ladies who, on closer examination than their hometown enlistment offices had given, were found unfit. They lived in the infirmary until such time as they could be returned home. Dr. V. was especially sensitive to the fact that to remain in such an environment for day after day when one was not ill was at least dull and might even seem harsh punishment. He reasoned, humanistic, that the failed recruits were not in sick bay to be punished, only to be held in waiting. (They were always shipped out in groups.)

So, whenever Dr. V. went for coffee in mid-morning he was always trailed by a coterie of young women like, some people said, a mother duck with ducklings in tow. Dr. V. was treating, of course (the rejected ones, not in the corps, could not even use the ship's service.) The non-coffee drinkers had whatever else they chose and when they left the commissary, they would be led by their temporary caretaker on explorations of the station grounds, providing exercise at that same time as they were getting a view far more interesting than was possible from the window of the infirmary. Dr. Vandermeer was ingenious about discovering varied paths to take to the same destination within the station's limits. All the other officers were sensitive to the fact that, because of Dr. Vandermeer, the routine of the failed recruit, waiting to be shipped home, was not nearly as dreary as it might have been.

One of Dr. Vandermeer's favorite stories was about the recruit, who, when she arrived at the station was found to be pregnant. It was his task to break that news to her, along with the information that she would, of course, be returned home as early as the Navy could arrange. As Dr. Vandermeer told the story of his session

with the young mother-to-be in his office, we could all imagine that he made her comfortable in his easiest chair before he put the question to her.

“How did this happen, my dear? How did you become pregnant when you had already signed up to join the Navy?”

“I don’t know,” was the recruit’s answer.

“You don’t know? Do you mean to say that you really have no notion of how it happened?”

The failed seaman looked straight at the doctor and continued to shake her head.

Finally, after the doctor had waited several seconds, the young woman asked, “Could it have been from using public toilets?”

Dr. Vandermeer did not believe he had heard what had just been said. But after a long pause he found a suitable response. “My dear young lady—I’ve never been using public toilets all my life and I’ve never been pregnant.”

That young woman then joined the little group of six or eight who traveled part of every day in the good doctor’s wake. During one period the cadre included two young women from the rural South who had refused the Navy chow and went regularly across the street from the station to harvest and eat whatever grasses they found growing there. Apprehended and questioned, one of them described the food they had been offered in the mess hall as “funny stuff.”

Two other brand new seamen protested that they could not live in an apartment with an African-American young woman. They were sent to the infirmary to await transportation back home after it had been explained to them that their choices were to share living quarters with whomever the Navy had assigned or to forego Navy careers.

## **NON-MILITARY ENCOUNTER**

During my stay at Hunter, lasting for more than a year, I had only three assignments off the station. Two involved travel to nearby cities on recruiting missions. The third (which was really the first) was certainly not prescribed in Navy protocol and had to be unique for me alone in the whole 70,000 woman Navy.

This task could have fallen only to the most junior African-American woman officer on the station. (There were actually only a small number of men on the station, including officers and enlisted no blacks at all.) Since Harriet and I were the two the first priority for the Navy would be that of teaching the new recruits how to move and getting their flabby, civilian bodies in A-1 shape. Harriet would not have had the same rank. On the other hand, I, as the most junior of all the officers aboard and the only other Afro-American was the logical one for the job assigned me early in my second month at Hunter.

The African-American enlistees had come with the first class to arrive at Hunter after Harriet and I were there. The beauty parlor had been installed, with great fanfare, a short time before. It was, in fact, just beginning operations when we arrived. But when one of the new, different color trainees wanted to have her hair done, it was discovered that state-of-the-art as was the new installation (and the Navy would have accepted nothing less) there was not one operator, nor any equipment available for doing “colored” hair.

My assignment, then, was to get appointments for hair-dos (washing, straightening and styling) for nine seamen, all on the same day, as close as possible to the same time. There were actually more than three times that number of enlisted women in that first class but the others were evidently able to do their own hair or required no special service.

The rendezvous for beauty would be on a Saturday, of course, in order not to interrupt the seaman’s training. The Navy would provide transportation but I was responsible for making the appointments, seeing that they were kept and returning the newly coifed recruits to the station.

My own hairdresser was the first, of course, to whom I appealed. She knew that I was in the service and would, I knew, do all that was possible to help. When she could accommodate only three young ladies in her shop at the same hour, she set out to help me find other beauticians who would take the remainder.

We were back and forth on the telephone for nearly an hour, but finally it was arranged; three at her place and the other six at two other salons at the same hour.

An hour before the time of the appointments the young ladies and I boarded the Navy station wagon and I gave the driver the address of our first stop. There we dropped off the first three seamen (sea women would certainly have seemed more appropriate on this instance, but they were never called that.) Thence to the next address where three more seamen descended from the van; and so on until I was alone with the driver. He took me then, as previously agreed, to my mother's apartment house where I spent the next two hours alone, telling myself that nothing could go wrong now.

At the end of two hours the bell rang and I went down to board the van and retrace our trips to the several beauty emporia. (Elmo H. Zumwalt, Jr. in *On My Watch*, p. 203, "Sailing Second Class," indicates that as late as 1970 there were still problems with lack of adequate barber and hairdresser facilities for blacks on most Navy stations. Admiral Zumwalt took on this problem as he had many others, involving unequal treatment of women and minorities in general.)

It all worked as though somebody "up there" cared about us. Each of the WAVES we had dropped off was transformed, beautiful and happy. After two more stops we were on our way to the Bronx. It was plain that all the newly beautified ladies regarded me, when they could stop admiring each other, as a miracle worker. Never before or since had I the experience of making so many people so happy with only a few phone calls.

All of this was, of course, in pre-historic times as far as beauty aids go—before the days of the "relaxer" which is now offered to clients of all colors and hair types in all state of the art beauty parlors.

The other two special duty assignments which broke the routine of my days at Hunter were recruiting jaunts to Philadelphia and Washington. The trip to Philadelphia was for one day only; away in the morning, home by bedtime.

My assignment was to speak at a luncheon meeting of sorority women of color. The idea, I supposed, was to interest them to become WAVES. However the idea had originated, it must have seemed top notch at the

time to the one who had conceived and planned it. In actuality, I enjoyed a good lunch—not as good as Navy fare in the Bronx but excellent for a civilian meal.

The response of the assembled young ladies was contained, which is the kindest way to describe their reception of my message. Those in charge were undoubtedly given credit for having obtained the services of one of the two African-American WAVES officers as luncheon speaker. But, as far as I knew, nobody rushed from the luncheon table to the recruiting office. They were polite and clapped when I had finished my presentation. They even laughed in the places I had planned to be funny. But there was not a great crowd around me asking questions about the Navy when I had finished my message.

A similar assignment, only a few weeks later, was to go to Howard University in Washington to make the same kind of speech.

My anticipation about Washington was high because 1) it would be my first visit to the Capitol, 2) it would be an overnight stay and, 3) best of all, the mother of a friend from post college days was housemother at one of the dormitories and my friend had called to ask her to receive me.

Jane Day and I had known each other from the time when we were both just out of college. I was then working at the Harlem YWCA Employment Office and Business School in the NYA program when Jane came in one day with what seemed at the time a remarkable idea. She had met a gentleman who worked for one of the larger airlines. His company, he had told her, had the idea of recruiting young African-American women to be stewardesses—as they were called then. He was eager to see the idea implemented and believed he could help by soliciting those he thought might be eligible.

Jane and I met all the requirements. According to our informer, nurse training (previously required of all stewardesses) was no longer to be essential. All one would need was what we had—a college degree and a pleasant manner.

By that time the glamour of flying as well-paid attendants may have begun to wear off for the young white women who were qualified. It was also probable that too many were being lost of marriages born in the

skies. Jane and I concluded later that our sponsor, at the beginning of the '40's, must have been decades ahead of his employers. Only by the sixties were both men and women of color being employed as airline attendants.

But innocents which we were, both Jane and I were in a frenzy of anticipation for days after our meeting with Mr. Airlines. Our young solicitor had promised to notify us soon as to where and when we were to meet for interviews with representatives of our prospective employers. We talked about little else whenever we met.

Time passed and then more time passed, as it were. Finally, after weeks had gone by and nothing had happened, Jane said to me one day, "Well, what do you think?"

I answered, "It's hard to know what to think but it doesn't seem good."

After only a few more days we both decided that the dream had died.

Although the young man from the airlines never came into Jane's life again, our shared disappointment seemed to have forged a bond between us, ripening our acquaintance into friendship.

When I mentioned to Jane that I had been scheduled by the Navy to visit Howard University, in Washington she told me that her mother was on the staff, somewhat like a housemother. She was then gracious enough to ask Mrs. Day to look out for me during my visit.

How effective that visit, like the one to Philadelphia, was in recruiting I never knew. But the young ladies at Howard, perhaps because they were a somewhat older class than the group I had addressed in Philadelphia, did demonstrate more excitement about the idea of the WAVES than had the others. Whether one, two or more decided at some late date to postpone graduate school or marriage for a career in the service I will never know. But a few did invite me to discuss life in the Navy in more intimate detail than had seemed practical at the luncheon.

On my way to the railroad station the next morning I mentioned to the cab driver, an African-American, that this was my first visit to Washington. He half-turned toward me and said, "You don't mean it." His inflection implied that nobody could have lived that close to the Capital without having seen it.

"Would you like to have a little tour?" he asked then, over his shoulder.

I said, “Yes. I would love it.” I had told him my train time, of course, so he knew exactly how many minutes we would have for touring. It was immediately evident that he had a long-standing love affair with the city, was knowledgeable about its history, planning, and monuments and so forth.

“Our streets are laid out in a circle all around the capitol building. Did you know that?” he asked, after we had been moving for awhile. As he drove along, he pointed out buildings of particular interest.

“It was a colored man who made that design—the streets circling around the Capitol building—a man named Charles l’Enfant.” His delight in contributing to my education was as enjoyable as was the opportunity to see a tiny bit more of the city. I thanked him warmly.

On the train back to New York, I sat beside a chief petty officer whose hash marks indicated that he must have enlisted as soon as he had reached the eligible age. He was asleep so that in addition to his well-marked sleeve, I was able to notice the extravagant display of his eyelashes. I had never before seen such long ones on a man and could only think “what a waste.”

Soon he awakened and we began to talk. He volunteered that he felt “awful” because he was on his way to a new station without his papers which had somehow been lost at the post he was leaving. (This paper could certainly not happen in our present everything-computerized age.) He was visibly distressed about the prospect of having to “have all those shots again.”

To change to a happier subject, I asked where he was from.

He said, “Kansas, ma’am”.

“Kansas?” I thought of plains, no waterways or even small boats, let alone ships in sight. How did you happen to join the Navy?”

“To get away from the cows,” he answered, without smiling. It seemed a solid, logical reason.

There were two other encounters with enlisted men which remain vivid even now because they might be considered “of a different kind.” The first occurred in Bloomingdale’s store in downtown New York which, in

that era, catered to customers who appreciated style and quality but were not necessarily the big spenders who are now wooed by that emporium.

It was in the glove department at the time of year when Mother's Day was fast approaching. Standing only a foot or so away from me was a young sailor, who, it was plain, was in deep conflict about his purchase. A smiling clerk waited, at the ready, to take his order but it was apparent he had a real problem. While I watched, trying not to look nose-y, he examined the gloves on the counter alternately several times. Then suddenly he turned to me and asked, "Please, ma'am, could you help me. I'm getting these for my mother. Which ones do you think she would like?"

I was touched. I hoped I did not look old enough to be his mother but assumed that he had chosen me because of the uniform. When, after a few seconds consideration, I chose the pair he had been holding, his smile and warm "Thank you, M'am" were enough to brighten all the rest of my day.

The other incident was considerably less intimate but perhaps more in the spirit of the service. It happened in a crowded subway. I was in an awkward spot, far from the overhead rail and with too many riders between the center aisle pole and myself to reach out for that support. Suddenly a blue uniformed arm thrust its way through the bodies between me and the pole reached for my hand and placed it firmly on the pole. It happened so quickly and effortlessly, despite all the people between us that as I smiled and said "Thank you" none of the riders around us seemed aware of what had happened. Only the happy, half-smile on the sailor's face revealed how pleased he was with himself.

He could not have saluted in response to my nod without embarrassing me since my saluting arm was now firmly attached to the pole but he smiled and touched his fingers to his cap in a half salute.

Except for the mess man on the battleship whose day Nellie, Anna and I must have made when we were first out of training, I encountered no African-American men, of any rank, during my year and a half in the service. Even on the two stations where I was posted, it was rare that I met an enlisted man. When that did happen, it was usually in the long underground passageway between the two buildings in the Bronx. It was

impossible for us to exchange salutes, since we were always without hats, but it was both amusing and satisfying to note so often the startled look, followed usually by a quick “Good morning, M’am.”

### **GREAT DAY**

One day in August, 1945, which in the morning, seemed like any other day, all of us in Classification except, of course, our male department head (who always avoided fraternization with us) went picnicking in Van Cortlandt Park, not far from our base. The idea, the date and all the planning for the outing had been

Helen's. It was the first and only time we had socialized as a group. The weather was perfect, bright and sunny but not overly warm.

After we had stuffed ourselves with the usual picnic fare and were sitting on the grass, too well fed to do much else than relax, Denise, the pretty blonde from the mid-west, who had stretched out on the lush green carpeting said, "They never told me that life in the Navy would be like this."

Sarah, from Los Angeles, with a model's figure and as pretty as Denise but dark haired and olive-skinned, agreed, "Imagine all this time at the station and we never came to this beautiful spot before."

I had been to Van Cortlandt Park only once before. The occasion was unforgettable but not one to induce nostalgia. On that May Day in the late thirties, this park had been chosen by our botany professor at Hunter College to be the scene of our practical exam for the course.

From the trees in the area, including many which had been descendants of those standing in the park when the Dutch had come to New York centuries before, we were asked to identify fifty. That was one-half of our final tests. I had not wanted to return to this park ever.

How different this day, I thought as I sat on the ground enjoying the leafy canopy above me, just for itself, not having to know one tree in the group.

Suddenly, just when we were thinking of gathering our effects and ourselves to leave, there came a thunderous melange of sounds—whistles, bells, chimes and others too varied to be sorted out.

We were all struck dumb for just a few seconds until it came to us that there could be only one meaning of what we were hearing. Then we were all on our feet. We embraced, we laughed, and we wept. We gathered up our effects in a hurry to get back as quickly as possible to our friends at the U.S. S. Hunter to join their rejoicing.

Our station was decommissioned almost overnight, it seemed, after V.J. Day. There were sudden, stark reductions in what had been a stable population for over a year. The majority of the WAVES stationed at Hunter at war's end had sufficient time in service so that they could be released almost on demand.

Helen had a letter from Fritz only a few days after V-J Day, saying that he would be discharged by the time the word got to her. She asked immediately for her own discharge and left Hunter long before those of us who had insufficient time to be discharged were even reassigned.

She stayed at Hunter long enough, however, to witness my astonishment at the sight of vans pulling up the apartment building where we were housed and being filled with the furnishings of some of the officer's apartments. I could not believe what I was seeing.

“But that's stealing.” I said. “How can these people do that?”

Helen smiled at my naivete. “All the furnishings in these apartments will go into storage in some faraway place. God only knows even where and after a few years, it will all be thrown out to make room for more discarded artifacts.”

I listened, unable to reply, literally dumbstruck.

“You mean that eventually they'll throw it all out anyway?”

Helen looked at me, smiling, trying to understand how I could be so naïve. Then she said, “You got it.”

One van appeared before our building with license plates from a state in the Deep South. I knew that one of the officers, a former tennis champion, came from a town in that state. I could not believe that she would need to furnish what must have been an elegant country house with furniture from Navy stock.

“What will happen to all this stuff is that it will go into storage indefinitely and finally, when they need the space for something else, just be destroyed, totaled?”

That was only the beginning of my understanding of why military budgets were so large even when we were not at war.

In no time at all, it seemed, after V-J Day, those of us who had not been eligible for discharge were moved out of Hunter to the discharge center opened at 79<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway in what was a formerly a single-occupancy hotel.

It is possible that some women who were far from home and had not the stamina to look for a place to stay in New York chose to live at that building where we were to work but if so, I did not know them.

Rosemary, who had only a short time before she would be eligible for discharge, rented an apartment at One Fifth Avenue (a fancy address in pre-war days) with another WAVE officer. The rooms were large and location excellent but the apartment itself was in dire need of redecorating. Rosemary referred to the color of the paint on the woodwork as “shit brindle.” She laughed gleefully when I visited and was unable to think of another name for the color of the moldings and door frames.

I moved back into my mother’s apartment after I had seen what might have been my lodging at the hotel. It would have been dreary enough, living and working under the same roof, but people of my rank would have been assigned one small room, with a bath where even the bathtub was abbreviated. I had never before seen or imagined a tub in which one could not stretch out.

In truth, I knew of no one who took advantage of the Navy’s offer of housing in that building where our offices were. All those rooms for which the Navy was paying probably went unused while we received our housing allowances—another shocking example of waste (small as it was) in the Service.

There was actually little to do in our new location and with our new “berths.” Inspection was the big event of the day and immediately after that came working on the New York Times crossword puzzle. I learned something from the discharge experience with the crossword puzzle which has stood me in good stead all these years since. Rosemary, looking over my shoulder one morning, exclaimed in disbelief, “You don’t put the ‘esses’ in right away for the words that are plural?”

I looked up at her and said that I never had. I recognized immediately how much that would advance the solving of the puzzle. Rosemary and I have met several times in the years since then but between meetings I think of her frequently, almost every time that I put an “s” before I know the front of the word.

Cathy Davis was one of the few people I had known earlier of whom I saw a good deal after we had left the Bronx and had begun to work together at the Discharge Center.

I had met Cathy when I had been at Hunter about two months. She was one of the younger officers and had stopped me in the corridor just outside the mess hall after lunch one day. Her face was aglow. I had not thought of her before as especially animated or pretty but on this day she seemed lighted from within.

She began, I wanted to tell you. I'm taking a course in "Human Relations" at New York University. I presented my paper last week and I used our experience here to show how much we have learned and how much we have come to appreciate each other, being thrown together like this."

Several thoughts chased each other rapidly through my mind. First, I was glad that Cathy had had a learning experience in "living with" Harriet and me for these months. "Living with" was a slight exaggeration. Although we lived in the same apartment building (as did all the officers) we seldom met in its corridors because we were on different floors. Cathy's office was in the business part of the station, some distance from Classification. True, we both took our midday meal in the officer's mess, as did everyone who was not dieting. Occasionally we met in the Officer's Club, but we had no continuing association such as I had with the women with whom I worked in Classification.

"It's good, Cathy." I said, "That you could use this experience for a paper." I groped for the right words to say the rest. "But it's you, not 'we' who have learned from our being together. Harriet and I have been learning from our being together. Harriet and I have been learning—had to—since we were small children, to live with people whose skin color was different."

Cathy demonstrated when she answered me that she had learned something because she seemed to relate to my sentiment immediately. "I guess that would be true. I have to admit I never thought of it that way before."

At the discharge center our offices were next door to each other so we lunched together almost every day. We discovered after two to three meals that the food at the hotel in no way resembled what we had become accustomed to in the Bronx. The difference, we decided, was probably in the fact that the hotel cooks had stayed on after the Navy took over the hotel, whereas in the Bronx we had been spoiled by the skills of both dietitians and cooks trained by the Navy. We were soon going into the neighborhood for more interesting eating places.

Cathy and I had many conversations about African-American and white relationships. She had been a grade school teacher in her South Carolina town before enlisting in the Navy. Her father was a plantation owner. When the United States entered the war many of her father's field hands had left to take jobs in factories, manufacturing war related articles. Cathy saw their leaving as rank disloyalty. It was impossible, through many discussions, to persuade her to look at the wholesale departures not as disloyalty or desertion, but as a means, for the people involved, of moving upward.

"They didn't go because it was important for the country," she protested. That, to the teacher who had joined the Navy would have been excusable. "I bet most of them never thought of that. It was just for the money."

"Then why didn't your father offer them higher pay?"

The unsaid, because Cathy never answered, was that much as he needed them, her father would not consider offering "those people" more money.

"But they just left daddy with nobody," she would say, as if it had been a sinister plot. They had even moved to the city to be closer to their new jobs. That meant that the prospect of their returning to the plantation after the war was most unlikely, especially since new jobs were now opening up for them. In one conversation Cathy said, "They even want to run buses."

"What's so bad about that?" I asked.

She did not have a good reason for African-Americans not running buses but when I asked if she would object to seeing me as the wheel of a bus in her hometown, she laughed.

"That's silly. Why would you want to be a bus driver?"

"But just suppose I did. Just try to imagine that all my life I had a fantasy about being the wheel of one of those long buses."

Cathy took a moment to ponder that, then said with conviction and in all innocence, "But you're different. It would be all right because you're different."

I tried to explain to her that she saw me as different only because she knew me. Not only did we share jobs in the same organization and building, but more important, we had found common interests in the theatre, in books and even in clothes. (We did extensive window shopping in the neighborhood of our offices during lunch hour.) More important, perhaps, we usually agreed without discussion on which nearby restaurant we would patronize.

I was as blunt as possible in explaining to Cathy that the phrase, “You’re different” said by a white to an African-American means only, “I know you. I like you.” The rest of us were unknown, hence scary. Everybody looks different from a distance, perhaps even a “bad” different. I could not be certain that I ever convinced Cathy, however, that I was “different” because I was the first African-American she had known as a friend.

Business at the discharge center was not brisk, so we had time to explore many topics. And we did.

From time to time the day would come when a group of discharges were processed. My job was to sign the discharge papers which came with what seemed ten carbons. As important as these papers were to the young women about to receive them, signing them was still a dull job. It had fallen to me, no doubt, because I was the lowest ranked of all the officers at the Center.

My reward for all those signings came several years after I had been out of the Navy, but before I had married. In Saks Fifth Avenue one day I had made a purchase and was using my credit card. Standing near me was a pretty young lady waiting to be served who watched as I signed my sales slip. I was unaware of her nearness until she exclaimed, “Oh, my gosh—Ensign Wills, you signed my discharge papers.”

The remarkable part of the meeting was that the former Navy woman was from a small town in Wisconsin. Visiting New York for the first time since her release from the service. We exchanged a few words about what she had been doing in real life and she said as we parted, “Wait until I tell them back home who I saw.”

For some reason which has long since escaped me, my other duty at the discharge center was to edit a small bi-monthly paper which ran gossipy items for and about the station. That I enjoyed. It seemed a plum for

the most junior officer on the scene and was easy because the others were constantly bringing me tid-bits. There was not even the more skilled part of editorship involved, deciding what to cut. In the course of two weeks just enough material would pop up to fill the four pages.

Cathy and I must have talked for hours each week while we were together at the Center. Although each officer in the building had her own small space, Cathy and I were to be found together more often than not, especially after my closer friends from the Bronx had been discharged and left for home.

Soon after we were installed at 79<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway the garbage workers of New York City went on strike. Cathy, following the course of the action in the newspapers each day was incensed that the sanitation men were actually asking for increases which would result in their earning more than school teachers in her hometown. During the hours we spent discussing this problem I maintained that people were willing to pay what they believed to be the worth of their public servants. If the garbage men succeeded in getting what they were asking, it would only show that the public cared more about having the waste taken away than it did about having good teachers for its children. It was not the fault of the garbage men that, if they succeeded in achieving the raises they were asking, they would be earning more than the teachers. On the other hand, there such disparities in salaries of public servants in New York City and Cathy's hometown that the whole argument made little sense.

In the intervening years I have, of course, shed my innocence about the public's perception of its servants, from sanitation to senators and how frequent and wide may be the gap between service rendered and compensation granted.

On another important occasion at the discharge center Cathy and I were not together but I had gone upstairs to the penthouse for a cup of coffee. As I came into the room, one officer was saying, "Let us raise our cups to Robert E. Lee." Janet Gordon, the toaster, I knew, was from Virginia. Until that moment I had always thought of Virginia as one of the more relaxed Southern states, as far as preservation of the old symbols was

concerned. But Janet was not laughing. Every one of us in the room raised our coffee cups to the General, on this, his birthday.

It did not hurt at all. These were my friends. If the general being toasted had been Grant instead of Lee, I think the response from the assembled group would have been the same. On the other hand, I had not before, nor have I since, heard a toast to any general so long dead.

That same sunshine-flooded room on the top floor was soon afterward to be the site of another gathering of a kind not unusual in the service. Virginia rose to the next rank early in the spring of 1946. It was only after I had been in the service for several months that I learned promotion is a matter of time, unless one has done something outrageous or been in the unfortunate position of filling a billet in which there is no need for higher ranking officers. There are exceptions, of course, when an officer may for some meritorious action or for the convenience of the service, be upgraded early.

This party was my introduction to champagne and brandy cocktails, the standard brew for “wetting down” new stripes. The toaster touches the new stripe with a finger tip which has first been dipped in one’s drink. Even when consumed in modest amounts it tastes of innocence right up until the moment it becomes lethal. For one young officer the party did not end until the next morning when she was discovered (fortunately by a friend), head on desk, in her office. She had apparently gone downstairs with the intention of retrieving her coat and continuing toward home, but must have felt the need for just a little rest before undertaking the trip.

Her awakening next morning was by a gentle tap on the shoulder by the friend who happened to be inspecting officer of the day. It was, of course, well past her usual wakeup time. It was also an unwritten rule that the seaman who accompanied the inspecting officer told no tales. This story was judged too precious, however, not to be told.

The accompanying seaman made it a part of her log of unforgettable stories (names omitted, of course).

## **PARIS**

All the Joe business seems now, light years later, comedic, if not unreal. There was so much which was difficult to understand, even when I knew, as I did four days after our marriage that I had bound myself, legally and all too practically to a textbook illustration of a character disorder, formerly known as a “pathological liar.”

When an older friend commented, long after the marriage had been dissolved, “You were too young for that job,” I resented the implication that I had got myself into such a bizarre union as the only honorable way of pulling out of my position as Director of Kathy Ferguson Home. But who knows?

That friend's observation was communicated to me late, more than five years after Joe and I had tied and untied the knot. I had done a lot of living, made a host of new friends and was back in New York when I learned from my old friend, Vincent Malveaux that Joe had arranged to go abroad when he did to escape a charge of statutory rape. He had known precisely when the bell would toll for him. His veteran status would allow him to go to school, as well as provide a small maintenance.

Our relationship had begun with Joe suggesting, after a casual meeting in the course of pursuing our respective jobs, that I would be a good candidate for a spot in the probation department of the court where he had been employed for several years. He had volunteered to coach me for the upcoming examination.

Perusal of the material he brought me for study ended the slight interest he had sparked in court work. He switched then to being a suitor.

Enrolling as a student under the GI Bill, with paid tuition and living expenses made good sense. Taking along a wife who qualified for the same benefits was in the genius mode. Joe had told me that he planned to study veterinary medicine. There was neither announcement nor discussion when the switch was made to people medicine—psychiatry, in fact. We were already into divorce proceedings when I learned of the change—if change there had really been.

We completed all the legal preliminaries in a few hours, not only getting a license, but prior to that, obtaining papers to show that we were disease free (for which we went to a town in New Jersey—one which Joe knew specialized in fast health clearances.)

I had telephoned an excuse to my agency in the morning, and then put my small bag in Joe's car on that sunny afternoon of July 29<sup>th</sup> when he appeared at my mother's door—the day after the New Jersey jaunt. We would be legally joined by a justice of the peace somewhere in Long Island en route to our honeymoon destination—Quogue. I realized later, might have been witness to several of Joe's honeymoons.

“She'll love you,” he said during the drive. “She's fond of me.”

He turned toward me as he said that. His brown eyes looked directly into mine. He was the same light brown color as I, not tall, not short, with healthy weight for his height. One side of his mouth was a tad higher than the other, more noticeably so when he talked than when he smiled. Only long afterwards did I realize that I had never met a healthy person that is one who had not suffered some nerve damage or had a serious illness, who had this same characteristic.

We were driving along smoothly on Route 95 after the ceremony with the justice of the peace and his wife (witness) and before our arrival at the home of Joe's Quogue friend who would "love" me when Joe turned toward me to say, "I think I should tell you. I've been married before."

I had laughed. Why was he telling me now something we had discussed thoroughly early on. "But, of course. You've told me about spending time with your son and that your first wife's name is Claudia."

He smiled his crooked smile and turned his eyes back to the road. "No, not that one. I was married again after Claudia and I were divorced."

Bells did ring in my head that time, but not loudly enough. I did not even say, "Tell me about that one." That was history.

Three days later we were back in Harlem in Joe's apartment. It was near dinner time when we arrived and Joe declared his intention to prepare French onion soup. "It's one of my specialties," he said. "It's a very different one I make. You'll love it. Why don't you take a nap in the living room while I work magic in the kitchen?"

I had been lying on the sofa in the living room for what seemed only seconds when I heard the telephone ring. Joe answered from the kitchen. His voice was low but his words came through clearly. He was saying, "I had to—she was pregnant."

Incredulity at the size of the lie blended with a flood of other sensations. It was as though I had been shot into a completely strange land. When I had talked with Joe about my intention to visit the doctor early on for a protective device he had laughed at my "planfulness".

“They’ll love you in Paris with a fat little stomach,” he had said.

I had replied that I had no intention of testing the idea. I thought there would be challenge enough just living in such a different setting. Soon after that discussion I had visited Dr. Myra Logan’s office. She had been interested to know we were going to Paris and told me about her visit there with her husband in the spring when it had rained all the time. I had enjoyed the discussion and I had been fitted for the diaphragm.

As I walked the short distance from the living room couch to the kitchen door, my head was whirling. I could take my bag, not yet unpacked and go back to my mother’s apartment. Fast on that thought came another. Only a few days before my mother had said, referring to one of my friends who had just been married for the third time, “Susan just can’t seem to keep a man.” And mama had seemed so pleased, once over her initial surprise, when I had telephoned her from Long Island to give her my news. She was always so wistful, as she talked about friends who bragged about their “grands.” There would be no “grands” but at least she would not have to explain to all the friends she probably already told that I was married, that the union had lasted only four days.

The idea of going right back to 113<sup>th</sup> Street fled as quickly as it had come—in the few steps I needed to totter to the kitchen door.

When I asked Joe from the doorway, “Why?” he did not answer. He glanced at me but his expression was bland. He continued, as though nothing at all had happened, to cut up onions.

After a few mumbled words which made no more sense than what I had already heard, he proposed that we get out of the apartment, drive into the country. My head continued to spin while I followed him downstairs and into the car. None of this is real, I kept saying to myself.

During the long time in which we rode, Joe finally said in response to my repeated “Why’s” that he had been among a group of children studied by a famous psychologist from Stanford University who were identified as having genius qualities. This came right after his flat statement, “I guess I do have a problem.” He seemed to

be suggesting that geniuses should not be expected to behave in the same way as ordinary people would in awkward situations.

“I plan to get help as soon as we get to Paris.” He said later. That was only the second largest fabrication in the series which would flow unchecked from Joe for as long as I knew him.

Joe had planned his departure from New York to be early as possible after our marriage. Even though I did not understand his reasons at the time, I was glad that after this night we would have only one more together before he left. Nothing at all was resolved, of course, by that ride into the country.

It was the magnificent H.M.S. Queen Mary on which I sailed to Europe four weeks later. The ship happened by luck, not by plan. The Queen was the next liner bound for France by the time I had pulled myself together sufficiently to seek passage.

My mother helped me find a small trunk which we decided was needed to supplement the luggage I still had from my school experience in Pittsburgh.

By the time mama and I arrived for me to board the ship, the famous cry, “All ashore that’s going ashore” or its modern British version had already been sounded. I appeared to be among the last of the arriving passengers.

I had not thought about a shipboard party so the magnum of champagne which Uncle Rienzi had brought me was resting in lonely splendor on my berth. That spot must have been chosen as mine because all the other occupants of the cabin had arrived and installed themselves at a reasonable time by the hour at which Uncle Rienzi had decided to go below decks and look for me.

Getting settled in, I immediately made my first and dumbest mistake of the voyage. I asked the cabin boy to store the champagne for me since there was no one aboard with whom I wanted to party. I anticipated opening it with Joe and whoever else he might invite when I arrived in Paris. Naturally, on the morning of our

putting into port when I asked for the bubbly, it was as though I had only dreamed of having had such a bottle left for me when I boarded. The same cabin boy looked at me as though I were daft.

I had never had difficulty waking in the morning since the day I had missed a class in Pittsburgh because I had depended on Marion to wake me and she, no doubt weary of that task, had let me sleep. But mornings aboard the Queen were full of anxiety.

Before leaving New York I had had to consult Dr. Logan (sister-in-law of Wenonah Bond Logan, my mentor at the YWCA so many years earlier) about a problem which developed shortly after marriage. She had prescribed a medication which was to be used in the bath. Since I was the only one in our cabin not taking showers, the attendant would draw my bath early—it always seemed to be about dawn—and if I did not set foot on the floor instantly at the sound of her first call, she would set up an anguished wail, “M-a-d-a-m. Please.” My roommates remained friendly throughout the voyage, but I always thought they must have hated me from the first morning of the attendant’s pitiful cries.

In the dining room I sat at a table with a mother and her six or seven year old son. Our places could not have been more pleasant—alongside a porthole, near the center of the deck. But we had two days of unusually rough weather during which my table companion would sit and stare out the porthole, watching the waves as though transfixed. I would try to make conversation and she would respond politely but after each small exchange would return to gazing out at the troubled sea.

The waiter, at every meal, during those bad days, pleaded earnestly with my tablemate. “Please, madame, please do not look out.” She would turn her gaze to him while he said those few words, smile weakly and then, the instant he moved away; go back to gazing, as though hypnotized, at the roiling waters. Then usually just after the waiter had brought the first course, she would smile weakly, excuse herself and leave the table. Her son would look across at me, smile and after I had smiled back, we would proceed to eat. He, poor baby, was no doubt escorted safely back to his cabin by a dining steward. I never knew where mother and son lived or saw them except at meal times.

It was a lonely voyage. I walked a lot, days and evenings, too. Sometimes during the first day, one of the staff asked if I were related to Jimmy Dorsey, the famous orchestra leader. When I smiled and said, “No,” he returned my smile and departed. I understood that if he had been right, that recognition would have made him, momentarily at least, quite a fellow among his co-workers.

Joe met me at the train from Cherbourg with Alan, a tall, blond Adonis who he later told me was heir to the Quaker Oats fortune. Alan had brought a bouquet. In response to my surprise and pleasure at the flowers, he joked, “This stodgy, unimaginative galoot was coming to the station empty-handed to meet the wife he hadn’t seen in five weeks.” As he took one of my bags, he continued, “How dull can you be?” Joe smiled absently as though Alan were talking about someone else. I understood, of course, why he might not be in a festive mood.

As Alan drove through the heavy evening traffic he asked about my voyage, how I had enjoyed traveling on the Queen Mary, who my roommates had been and then switched to indicating points of interest which we passed. Joe wore his crooked half-smile and said little for the duration of the trip.

Joe had installed himself in a small hotel, the “Hotel Delavigne” named after the street on which it was located. Only a block from the Sorbonne, it was well kept and especially welcoming to students. The owners were an American who had been in World War I and his French wife. They greeted me as though I were the one guest they had been awaiting all day. It was evident that Joe had worked his charm on them.

Richard and Ellen Wright lived on rue Monsieur le Prince, just around the corner from our hotel. Joe had already made their acquaintance in his unerring way of allying himself with whoever might later be used. In this instance, his facility for cultivating important people turned out to be a priceless gift for me as it led to an enduring friendship with Ellen.

On my third day after school—Joe saw to my being enrolled immediately in a language school which was just around the corner from our hotel—I was in our room waiting for him to return from his far longer day at the Sorbonne when there was a gentle rap on the door. I opened it to see an attractive young white girl who smiled and asked for Joe. She seemed only slightly taken aback to see me.

“We met on shipboard.” She said. She radiated fresh young beauty, looked just old enough to have finished college.

“Of course.” I said, trying to indicate that I understood as well as I did. “And he didn’t tell you he was married.”

While I watched her face change, I was impressed and startled to recall once again the smoothness with which Joe operated.

Within two or three days after my arrival, Joe suggested that he would buy me a bicycle so I could get around in Paris.

“Why?” I asked. It was only about four blocks to school.

“If you had a bicycle”—he said, with his mouth going up on the side, the phenomenon to which I should be then have become accustomed, but which I still found startling, “You could go anywhere you wanted to.”

“But where would I go without you?” I had observed on the brief car ride from the station to the hotel the abandon with which French drivers threw themselves into the traffic.

“Anyway,” I said, trying to put an end to the bicycle discussion, “it’s been ten years or more since I was on a bicycle.”

Joe continued to insist for several days on the practicality of my having a bicycle. Only after he seemed to have given up the idea did I come upon a small slip of paper stuck between the pages of a book resting on a head-high shelf at one side of the room. They were all textbooks, so I had never examined them. On the slip of paper were two columns, headed “T” and “2” under which there were listings “Rent,” “Food,” and “Insurance.” By that time, the tension between us was already too much for me to ask aloud why, on our tight budget, he would be buying insurance, but I was glad I had not tried bicycling in Paris.

Apart from one sparkling day when we were invited to join Alan and his lady for dinner, preceded by marketing with them for the makings of the meal, life with Joe for the brief period we were together in Paris continued to be full of unwelcome surprises.

One of our major disagreements was around a linen towel which mama had given me the last moment. It had been part of her trousseau and she had embroidered her initials on one end. Our hotel, agreeable as it was, was not so posh as to supply hand towels, so I had taken out my towel and hung it in the bathroom.

I never understood why ownership of that towel became such an issue. Joe insisted on referring to it as his towel.

“But you can see,” I protested, showing him the letters embroidered in pink thread against the white linen. “It says ‘NWD’ for ‘Nellie Dorce` Wills.’”

Another silly argument which was ongoing during the brief time we were together was about wine. Before I arrived Joe had bought a bottle of red wine. We were each to have a sip before going out to dinner.

“But I like to have it with dinner.” I would protest each night.

“This way is cheaper.” He would explain. “Two glasses in a restaurant cost almost as much as a bottle from the store.” His face clouded on each of the two nights when he had to explain to me about the practicality of wine in the room before dinner.

On the third night, I declined to join him in the pre-dinner economy drink. “I’d rather not have any,” I said, “if I can’t have it with my meal.”

We had been together for about three weeks when I came home from school one afternoon to be greeted by the patronne who told that “monsieur est parti.” Evidently she was preparing me for the half empty room. She did not think I should worry, however. “A lover’s quarrel,” she said. I smiled with her, pretending to agree.

Madame continued to be gracious to me for as long as I remained under her roof, but I often thought she must have wondered what on earth I had done to that charming gentleman to drive him to such a sudden departure.

Richard Wright was in South America making a film of “Native Son” in those days. Ellen, when she learned I was alone, took me on, in a real sense, as a big sister might have.

Ellen had once, long before her marriage, been a model for hats. With her almost perfectly molded features, a smile which lighted up the room and the nearly black hair contrasting with her skin, it was easy to understand that any merchant of hats might have seen her as heaven-sent to display his wares.

After Joe's departure, Ellen began to invite me to accompany her on small errands which gave me, in a short time, a real sense of the city.

On one of the evenings when Ellen invited me to join some friends at her apartment. Jean-Jacques M. was one of her guests. Jean-Jacques was a teacher of Greek in a middle school for boys in Geneva. He was on sabbatical and sharing an apartment with an African-American friend of Richard and Ellen's. That young man was a newspaper writer at home, but apparently in those days, like so many young Americans, especially veterans, was just soaking up atmosphere in Paris.

J-J was average height but so thin that he gave the impression of being taller than he was. His hair was brown and luxuriant, his features almost classic. He smiled easily, even though I learned from Ellen later that he was in the throes of recovering from an unhappy romance with an American girl who had become enamored of a newspaper publisher. J-J could not compete, of course, with what he might offer.

Although his English was elementary we seemed to understand each other without difficulty almost instantly.

At evening's end J-J walked me to my hotel—just around the corner from Ellen's house. Then, after a brief stop at the entrance and without discussion, we walked past the hotel and continued to walk and walk. When he finally brought me back to the door of my hotel, we both knew that we would meet again—and again.

After I had completed the simple language course at my first school, I moved on to "French Civilization and the Language" an omnibus course at the Sorbonne. The first part—history, geography and art were all taught from the stage of the auditorium by a series of lecturers—specialists in each phase—at a pace foreigners might follow. This program was recommended for all students under the GI Bill. I discovered soon after the early sessions that there were not only Americans, but a substantial number of other foreign students enrolled.

It was in French Civilization that I became friendly with a young judge from Norway. His English was flawless and unaccented (as I discovered later was not unusual with Scandinavians). His manner was so boyish and open that one would never have guessed that he was even a lawyer, let alone a judge. He was blond, of course, blue-eyed and surprisingly, under average height.

Soon after we began sitting together during the lectures, Torvald invited me to dinner. We continued to see each other for awhile after the course had ended but he remained in Paris only a short time longer. For sometime after his return to Sweden, even when I was back in New York, we corresponded. His last letter to me was almost poetic. He had married and he and his wife had had a “honeymoon baby.” Sometime before his marriage he had also been promoted to chief judge. That fact stated almost casually. It was understandably minor compared to marriage and fatherhood in such rapid order.

When I had completed the Sorbonne’s language course I sat for an examination to determine my aptitude to become a teacher of French. Four years of French in high school and college and two months in Paris enabled me to achieve only a little better than average grade on the examination. My disappointment was keen. Later I realized that many teachers of French in the public schools in New York might have begun with no more than I had then, but I could not contemplate embarking on the road to becoming a teacher with an “average” rating.

In that first language school in Paris, the one Joe had got me into almost upon arrival, the instructor had declared that only when we began to “dream in French” would we have a firm grasp of the language. That state had eluded me but I was ecstatic on the day when I recognized that, without trying, I was eavesdropping on a conversation between a mother and her small son.

A crowd of us were waiting for a light change at a busy crossing when I heard a voice saying “Tiens-le-haut,” I turned, automatically, to see what was supposed to be held “high.” I saw then that the child was carrying a balloon on a string.

Our teacher had said nothing at all about the quality of French one might be speaking at that magical moment when the dream came in French, only, that one would know, etc. I discovered a few weeks later, at a dinner party to which J-J had taken me that true fluency was still escaping me.

The company was stimulating, the food superb, the music soft and the conversation lively at the restaurant where the “happening” was held. It was the animation of the exchange between the other guests, in fact, which suddenly produced a feeling of complete isolation unlike any I had ever experienced before.

The guests, about twelve of them, all of whom seemed to know each other well, leapt from one topic to another with no time at all for a foreigner even to make the crossings. By the time I had phrased a response in my head it was too late to use it. The conversation had moved to another area.

Just when I had decided that my only solution to feeling so lost would be to ask J-J to take me home but could not bring myself to do that because he was having such a good time. I was rescued by Andre, a newspaper reporter friend of his who spoke perfect English. From the other side of the long table, not even directly across from me he pantomimed dancing.

On the floor he said, “You’re not having much fun, are you?”

I told him the truth that I had not been with the conversation since shortly after the introductions. This was my first experience of being the only foreigner in a large group.

Andre nodded and then, without the least criticism of his friend, made me feel, as we danced, a part of the group. I was able to manage the rest of the evening comfortably.

Andre remained a hero for me even after another evening when Jean-Jacques and I had been guests at his home and dined and drunk our way through a delightful evening with him and his wife, Claire. There came a moment, suddenly, when Claire complained about Andre’s refusal to buy her a vacuum cleaner.

I took it to be an inside family joke until Andre, deadly serious, turned to Jean-Jacques and me and asked, “Why does she need a vacuum cleaner when we have a cleaning woman?”

Claire pointed out with what seemed to be remarkable patience (I realized later that she must have been through this dialogue many times) that the cleaning woman came only once a week.

“If I had a vacuum cleaner I could get through the housework faster, take Claude (their two-year old) to the park and still have some time for myself.

Andre’s expression seemed to suggest that her idea was ridiculous. “The woman does the cleaning. You take the baby out.” For him it was an open and shut case. A wife did not need time for herself.

I learned later that Andre’s position in this argument was a common one among French husbands. To my delight, Jean-Jacques was on Claire’s side and spoke with feeling to indicate that he understood her desire for the machine. I was never certain, though, that his support for Claire and opposition to Andre’s stand had not happened only because he always enjoyed a good argument.

### **ON MY OWN**

Early on, after Joe and I separated, I discovered the piquant sense of humor of the merchants in the street markets. I had learned that, even in a hotel room sans kitchen there were a few meals one could manage with the right vegetables. But all purchases had to be modest since I had no refrigeration.

One day I asked for half a kilo (one pound) of tomatoes, then the least expensive vegetable in the market. The vendor looked me straight in the eye as he bagged my purchase and asked, smiling, “Are they for a baptism, Madame?”

On another day I asked a farmer why beets were always sold cooked. This time my teacher said, with infinite patience, “Nobody eats them uncooked.” It took me a while to understand the full significance of that statement of obvious fact. The light finally dawned when I took into account how long beets needed for cooking. The farmers were simply making certain that their product did not go unsold because a housewife might be reluctant to kite her fuel bill to cook them.

I remained at the Delavigne well into the divorce process which took far longer than it should have had Joe not been so imaginative about the manner in which he tried to manipulate not only me but also the lawyers who were handling our case.

Only a short time after he had moved, we met to discuss some legality and he told me that he was living with “a friend.” In the course of more discussion, it became clear that the “friend” was the person to whom he had given the highly imaginative story about why he had married me. She had followed him to Paris, obviously as early as possible.

Joe’s plan for the divorce proceeding was that he would provide me with all the necessary evidence by giving me letters which would supposedly have been written by him to his recently arrived lady love and which I would have found. How I would have come into possession of this literature was even more puzzling for my lawyer to understand than it was for me.

The proceeding was complicated not only by that false start but also by the fact that in France one needed two lawyers, in effect, to pursue a divorce. One was the gentleman to whose office I went regularly and the other was the one who actually presented my case in court. I was never required to appear.

In our situation there was a third necessary legal person, called a “sheriff” who, given the proper address, went to the love nest with a witness (also court appointed) and obtained the necessary evidence, i.e., that the would-be-ex-husband was already cozily established with another woman.

I had to admire Joe’s inventiveness, even while I chafed at how long the process was taking. Only a few weeks after the start of the action he sent me a letter saying that he would be unable to continue to help with the expense of the divorce (we had agreed initially to split the cost). His message to me was designed to go right to the heart. I would remember, he wrote, that he had a son back in New York whom he supported. That little boy was now selling newspapers, Joe had learned, to make a few pennies. He had forgotten, evidently, that he had informed me, long before our marriage, that the little boy’s mother held an excellent job. I knew well that if Joe’s son were selling papers it would be because little boys often enjoy doing that.

Some weeks later, when he had ceased to contribute anything at all to the divorce costs, Joe wrote me that his mother had died and he had, of course, to help with the funeral expenses.

It was not until 1960 that I learned from Viola Phoenix, a social worker in the Bureau of Child Guidance where I was then working, that Joe’s mother had been alive and well when he had “buried” her to avoid paying for our divorce.

Viola and I became engaged in conversation when I went to see her about funds for a camp placement (camp funds was her specialty). We had not met before and exchanged biographical notes. She was tall, solidly built, dark brown and gifted with the power to charm her listeners with only a few words.

While I stood frozen in bewilderment, listening as though to somebody else’s story...Viola indicated that she was well acquainted Joe’s family, all of whom were normal people. It was true. He had arranged for me to meet his sister, Grace, while we were “honeymooning.” She was delightful, gracious and relaxed in manner. She and her husband had converted an old schoolhouse near the area where we had stayed into a summer home.

Viola asked if Joe had shared the cost of the divorce. When I said “No” and told her the reason he had given, she smiled knowingly and revealed that Joe had by then buried his mother twice to avoid divorce expenses.

Not long after my legal “liberation” when I finally had papers in hand and was working for the Marshall Plan, I learned of still another of Joe’s marriages.

It was a Saturday morning when my telephone rang and the caller identified himself as an agent of the FBI.

What now, I thought. My only previous contact with that agency had been many years earlier when they had arranged with my employer (then the Adoption Agency) to interview me in my workplace. I was startled, at first, then amused to be asked about the background of an older woman acquaintance who was then Executive Secretary of the New York Young Women’s Christian Association—Central Branch. When he put the question, the agent had obviously been deadly serious.

“What would you say are the political beliefs of Mrs. ---?” This, after he had confirmed to his satisfaction that I knew her.

Several irreverent answers flashed to mind, but I only smiled and pointed out what I thought he should have known—that the YWCA was one of the most conservative organizations in the country. “Whatever political party she belonged to, she would be among the least controversial, certainly, of its members.”

My memory was that the interview ended with each of us obviously being severely disappointed in the other.

On this day the agent at the other end of the line wanted to know if he could arrange to come and talk with me about one “Miss Jean Dorsey,” daughter of my former husband. She had applied for a position with the State Department.

The thoroughness of the agency was certainly impressive, I thought, but we talked for several minutes before I was able to convince my caller that not only had I no information about the young lady but that until this moment I had not even known of her existence.

Joe and I had only one more face to face meeting. Late one afternoon in winter of 1952 when I was back in New York and employed by the Brooklyn Bureau of Social Services, I came off the elevator of the Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn where I had gone to visit a young woman client.

I had taken only a few steps toward the front door when Joe appeared suddenly in front of me, in his white doctor's coat, smiling and greeting me as though we were dear friends. He volunteered, with the same lop-smiled smile I had long ago come to associate with some new, highly inventive fiction "I'm married." While I contemplated what might be a fitting response, he continued, "She got pregnant—we had a little boy."

By then I must have been centuries away from anything that had happened between us because I did not even smile to myself at this famous story. I only said, "I see. Well, be happy."

There was never any doubt in my mind at all that the loyal woman who had followed Joe to Paris after he had married me was the mother of his child and that she had not become pregnant by accident. Somewhere along the rocky way I had learned that she was a nurse.

Six years later, on a fine summer evening, my husband, Charlie, and our friends Violet and Lester Gordon were returning from a weekend at Saratoga. We had stopped overnight at l'Auberge in the Catskills. Charlie and I had been introduced to that delightful bed and breakfast in 1957 by Joan fox (later Barnett) when she and I had been co-workers at the Bronx offices of the Bureau of Child Guidance. Now, all these years later, we had taken the opportunity on this trip to share the comfort and excellence of the food at l'Auberge with our dear friends, the Gordons.

This, however, was a new Auberge. The appointments were no less attractive and convenient but the dining room, for instance, had grown from the small intimate space we had known in 1954 during our first stay

when all the tables were within talking distance of each other to a hotel-sized area where even those with 20/20 vision might have difficulty recognizing friends across the room.

I would probably never have noticed the Dorseys, in fact, in that dining room if Dr. Dorsey had not been paged during the time we were there. As he rose from the table, I could not miss the handsome little boy of about six and a Caucasian woman possibly my age who was undoubtedly his mother. There was no possibility at all, from appearances, that this was an unplanned family.

## BAKER AND RENEE

During Dick's long absence in South America which began only a short while after Ellen and I met, she took me one night to the Folies Bergere to see Josephine Baker who had been the star of that production for many years.

It was my first time to attend real theatre in Paris and, having heard about Josephine Baker for as long as I could remember, I was in a high state of excitement that evening.

Baker was all that I had heard about her. The show itself was more a spectacle than a story and the actual physicality of the star more important than the plot (slim) or the songs.

We went backstage at curtain time and saw that the famed performer was just as beautiful close-up as she had been from a distance. I had wondered, in one intermission, what Ellen would think about my asking Baker who her hairdresser was, since I had not yet found one. Ellen saw nothing wrong with the question and said what seemed logical—she would tell me or not, as she chose.

Although I had read and heard much about Miss Baker's grace and vivacity long before I had come to France, it was nevertheless a revelation to be beside her. When I took the hand extended I was even more impressed than I had been with seeing her from the auditorium. Her hands were those of a young woman—soft and without a wrinkle.

Finally, after we had expressed our admiration in several different ways, I got to my delicate question.

“Miss Baker, I hope you won't mind my asking—I'm having a hard time finding a hairdresser her in Paris. Would you--?”

Before I could finish the question, she smiled her broad smile and said, “Oh, my dear. I wish I could help you. But my mother does my hair—always has.”

That settled that, of course. It would be many year before I would learn that the artist had a wardrobe of wigs probably unmatched by anyone else in the entertainment world.

When I told the wife of the proprietor at my hotel that we had been to Folies Bergere the evening before, she was pleased for me. As we talked, a happy smile gradually wreathed her face. She seemed to be having private thoughts on the Folies-Bergere.

I asked, "Have you seen it? Did you enjoy it?"

She shook her head. "No, I've never seen the show. But many years ago, I saw a great deal of Josephine Baker. She and----- (she named the son of a famous jeweler) stayed here often while they were amoureuuses."

"Really?" Up to that moment I had heard nothing at all of the busy love life which the star had always had. To learn that one of her lovers came from such a well known family and that the romance had prospered under this very roof made the spectacle I had witnessed the evening before that much more exciting.

Many years later one of Baker's adopted sons would write a biography which revealed that the affair about which I learned only accidentally from one who was a close observer—and which seemed to romantic—was only one of a string of romantic adventures in this busy lady's life.

It was not long after the theatre outing that I met the first French woman of color I had seen in Paris, or to whom I came close enough to begin a conversation. She was tall and slim, with lovely, even features and about the same brown as I. She was walking almost in front of my hotel as I came out and I moved faster so that I could catch up and begin to talk. I realized later that she might have been as curious as I had been. She probably knew, by her own intuition, that I was not a native.

After we had greeted each other I asked, "Do you live nearby?"

"No. I live in \_\_\_\_\_. " She named an arrondissement which I recognized as being a good distance from the University, although I would not have known how to go there. "I teach and my school is near there."

We were walking as we talked and by now had arrived at a corner Renee (we had exchanged names by then) identified as the one where her bus stopped.

Renee's subject was biology and I told her that although I had got away from it that had been my major in college.

She smiled a large smile. "We must talk more," she said. "Would you come to visit me sometime?"

I said, "I would like that very much."

Early on I had noted that her long hair was straightened, but it was not until we had talked for several minutes and she had even given me her address and telephone number that I said—

"I hope you won't mind my asking, but I would be so happy if you would tell me who your hairdresser is."

Renee Marsin (as she had introduced herself) did not hesitate. She took a slip of paper from her bag and wrote the name, address and telephone number of her hairdresser. He was in a different arrondissement from mine or hers and she explained to me how to travel to his shop.

We said goodbye with an agreement to meet soon again. The following day I telephoned her beautician for an appointment. That gentleman remained my hairdresser for all the time that I lived in Paris. Although he employed a marcel iron, rather than a comb, for the straightening, he did a good job and was an interesting conversationalist to boot.

Renee and I became close friends although I did not actually visit her until after she had married, which was not too long after we had met. In the interim we had tea or ice cream together several times at cafes near my place. (She was taking a course at the Sorbonne which was around the corner from my hotel.)

Renee married not long after I had met her. Emile, her husband was from Nigeria. He was above average height but seemed not to have an ounce of excess weight. He was black with well molded features. It was not hard to understand how Renee might have fallen in love with him almost on sight. He was a member of the diplomatic corps in his country.

I met Emile shortly after he and Renee were married when I was invited to their apartment for dinner. They looked beautiful together and their ways of speaking to each other sounded as though they were deeply in love.

A few months later Renee invited me to her home again. This time Emile was not there.

With what I thought remarkable poise, she explained, “We’re separated. He’s gone back home.”

I did not know what to say. She continued, “He wanted a child. He had to have a child.” Her eyes misted as she talked. “It’s a terrible thing, he said, for a man in their country to marry and not have a child right away.”

A few months later Renee told me that her ex-husband had married—an African woman—and that a child was on the way.

Only about a year and a half after that conversation I learned from Renee that Emile had come to visit her and brought his son. He had, in fact, left the boy with her for several days. Renee was happier than I had heard her sound for many months.

In later years, the visits continued from time to time. I often wondered how happy the second marriage was.

Renee did not remarry but in 1962, ten years after I had left Paris and a little longer than that since I had seen Renee (although we had continued to exchange letters) Emile telephoned and came to see Charlie and me in Brooklyn at 1046 Park Place. Charlie and I were both delighted to have him visit. He reported that Renee was well. It was apparent that they were still close, since he must have got our address from her.

## AUSTRIA

In the fall of 1949 Charlotte Panimon came to Paris on her way to a concert series to be presented by Pablo Casals in his adopted home where he had taken refuge when Franco became dictator in Spain.

Charlotte and I had met at the Veterans Service Center in 1946 through Vincent Malveaux who had been working there when I was discharged from the Navy. He had recommended that I try for a spot in the Personal counseling department. For a new veteran, it seemed right.

Charlotte was a psychologist. She confided, after we had been friends for some time, that she had once considered studying medicine. Charlotte would have made an extraordinary physician or would have been a resounding success in whatever profession she chose. Coupled with a warm, accepting attitude she has always shown a no-nonsense approach which enables her to break through gently but firmly when a situation borders on the unreal.

Our friendship at the Center soon led to enjoying an occasional movie after work. Usually the movie houses we patronized were located between our office on East 59<sup>th</sup> Street and lower Second Avenue where Charlotte lived. After the movies I would frequently go back with Charlotte to her apartment. To these visits I owe my introduction both to chamber music and double acrostics. Charlotte was devoted to both.

For the double-acrostics Charlotte gave me some invaluable tips about getting started, just as Rosemary had done in the Navy about putting in the “esses” on the plurals in the crossword even when one did not know the rest of the word.

Although I had not thought at all about taking a trip to Austria or any kind of trip at the end of that troubled summer of 1949, it seemed an excellent idea when Charlotte proposed that I accompany her to Austria and several other places to which she planned to travel after the Casals series. I had completed my initial study in French and was not engaged in other activity.

“All you have to do is pack and— this with a mischievous smile “pay for your tickets. I’ll pick them up. I already have rooms everywhere.”

This was an offer impossible to refuse.

Our first stop in Austria was Kitzbuhl, the ski resort whose mountain slopes were awesome. We stayed only overnight, however, since Charlotte was eager to visit Salzburg, home of Mozart and Vienna. During those few Kitzbuhl hours, we enjoyed the experience, new for me, of sitting outside, viewing snow-covered mountains but being comfortably warm in the sun with spring weigh clothes. We were evidently the only people in that part of Kitzbuhl who were not skiing, however, because we had the area set aside for tea all to ourselves, with only the mountains in the near distance to occupy our attention.

We traveled only a short time to reach Salzburg. There, en route to the Hohensalzburg, an 11<sup>th</sup> century “must see” fortress atop the highest peak in the town we were obliged to travel through a narrow street, crowded with citizens on noontime business. Until that day, although we had been objects of occasional curious stares we had met no overt hostility. This time, however, in the crush of pedestrians, one woman with an oversized bag managed to use it to deliver me a solid jab. She said nothing, did not even look as she whammed me, but it was clear that she had moved closer than necessary to obtain a proper poking stance.

From the first floor window of a house in the same street I saw a woman peeping. Her wall was within three feet of where we were walking and her eyes, close to the slightly pushed back curtains, were wide with wonder.

Later, while we waited for an elevator to descend from the fortress tower, another Austrian woman, standing on the platform with us, whispered not too softly to her companion, “Schwarze.”

Finally, when we had left the fortress area and were standing in the Mozart home in plain sight of the piano he is alleged to have played, all evidence of differences disappeared. We did not even whisper to each other. Nor were other visitors verbal. It was as if the idea of just being within these walls was enough to have struck us all dumb.

On the train to Vienna Charlotte met a professor from Rutgers, a Jewish gentleman who was going home for the first time since the end of the war. They chatted for miles and sometime before we reached Vienna, Charlotte had accepted an invitation to be the professor's guest at the opera in Vienna that same evening.

We had barely settled in our hotel room when I realized that I had left my raincoat on the train.

Our first hours in the city were spent trying to locate that coat. My high school German was not enabling but we had managed well, all through our Austrian trip, with Charlotte's Yiddish.

It did not seem fair to have Charlotte engage in the search for my raincoat when she should be resting up for the opera, so I set out alone to try to catch up with the missing piece. At the train terminal I used a phrase book and lots of gestures. My coat had not been turned in, but because the baggage handler noted that I spoke French he referred me to the four power military control center—staffed always by an American, an Englishman, a German and an Austrian. This center had been running the city since the end of the war in 1945. I followed directions from the gentleman in the “Lost and Found” section of the railroad and came to the four-power center without difficulty.

At the four nation directorate I talked with a Frenchman, middle-aged, paunchy and fatherly who was all sympathy. It seemed as though he was enjoying talking with an American who was not a soldier. I had the impression that it was not an experience which happened often in this job. He did have an Austrian friend, however, who he thought would enjoy meeting me and vice versa.

That evening, while Charlotte went to the opera, I went dancing with my handsome new Viennese acquaintance. He was tall and athletically built, fluent in French and his dancing was the smoothest I had enjoyed in years.

That night I became truly acquainted with the Viennese waltz. We rested only when the musicians did. My companion shared his life history while we danced. He was a soccer player (obviously his greatest pride) who had once represented Austria in an international contest. He had not achieved status in the Army because he was too dark.

Back at the hotel when Charlotte and I began to compare our separate experiences of the evening, it seemed for a few tense moments as though an enduring friendship were about to end.

“How could you have enjoyed being with a German?” Charlotte asked. “Dancing with him?”

“He wasn’t in the Gestapo,” I protested weakly.

“That doesn’t matter at all. His sentiments were obviously with the Army if he explained to you why he had not made it to the higher level.” Her next words were obviously designed to wither me completely. “Don’t you know about the Holocaust?”

I tried to explain that whatever my companion’s political beliefs, he was obviously not a Nazi. “How could he have been and passed the evening entertaining me?”

Charlotte told me then for the first time that she had had relatives who were victims of the Holocaust. With that, of course, I understood the depth of her anger at me, no matter. The remainder of the evening was tense and light on conversation.

The next day I seemed to be, if not forgiven, at least not entirely in disgrace. We had breakfast in a nearby café, coffee with schlagover and enjoyed watching the regulars peruse the morning papers with their morning fare.

After we had eaten we toured the city, using the tram and delighting to see the natives, having reached their stops, jump off without waiting for the car’s motion to cease completely.

Charlotte’s plane reservation for her return to New York necessitated her leaving Vienna a day earlier than I had anticipated. When we had begun our journey I would not have believed I would have wanted to stay alone but by the third day Vienna had taken hold and I felt no loneliness when we said “Goodbye.”

I had heard that that zoo in Vienna was one of the most impressive in the whole world. I had always been addicted to zoos and planned to visit Vienna’s on my one day alone in the city.

Although we had provided ourselves with maps in quantity, I found when I began to study them I could not determine at all how to reach the zoo. After I had gone onto the street and walked several blocks away from my hotel I approached a policeman at a traffic crossing and asked, "Bitte, wo ist der zoo?"

That he gave me complete, adequate directions I shall always be certain. All that I understood, however, was "richtig" and "linze." What came before and after those words was a mystery so knowing them was no help at all. It was apparent, however, that my informant had no notion of how little I had grasped as he gave me such a warm smile at the end. I said, "Danke schon" and went back to the sidewalk.

That moment, in which I stood wondering, literally, which way to turn must have been one of the loneliest in my whole life. The day was splendid, sunny and warm. People in the street were going about their business, knowing perfectly well what they were about and how they should proceed. There was I, standing on the corner with not the slightest idea of even which direction I should take.

I resolved to find that zoo whatever it required. I set off in the "richtig" direction (the first one I remembered being given by the policeman) and walked for what seemed several minutes, but was probably only one or two, wondering all the while whether it might profit me to try my limited German in another person who was not a policeman: therefore might not talk so fast.

I had walked for about fifteen minutes down a wide tree-lined street when I became aware that, from across the street, I was being observed, possibly even followed by an older, heavy-set man in clerical garb. At the same moment in which I noted his presence, he smiled. I smiled back. Without a moment's hesitation he then crossed over to my side of the street and fell into step with me, beginning a conversation.

"You looked as though you were lost. I would like to help if I may." He leaned down toward me. His expression was open and warm.

Without hesitation I said, "I wanted to visit the zoo. I love animals and there are probably some in your zoo unlike any I've seen at home."

My new friend smiled. It was clear that he, too, enjoyed observing the zoo denizens. “It’s not really far from here. If I were not on my way to work—I teach in a gymnasium—I would be happy to accompany you.”

While we walked he told me that he was a Protestant minister. “Protestants make up only about seven percent of Vienna’s population, you know.”

I had not known but when I told him that my grandfather had also been a Protestant minister, he was perceptibly delighted. I restrained myself with difficulty from adding that except for color, he might have been my grandfather—same height, same generous breadth and same warm, kindly manner.

We walked and talked together for several blocks until we reached the corner where my new friends had to turn off. He said “Have a wonderful visit to the zoo.” He had already half turned in the opposite direction when he stopped and added, “And a good trip home.”

Pondering and enjoying the conversation in recall after my friend had gone, I walked slowly back to the hotel, giving up on the zoo. My day had already been full to overflowing.

On the train the next morning, the conductor looked at my passport, smiled and said, “Bon. You’re going home.” Only then did I remember that I now had permanent status. That put a top on my recent happy twenty-four hours.

## NEW LODGINGS

When I decided to leave the Hotel Delavigne, both because I needed less expensive lodging and because I wanted to rid myself of everything associated with Joe, I was lucky to be introduced by Jean-Jacques to a young woman from Iceland who was returning home. The space she was quitting was on the third floor of an establishment called “Hotel des Bains.” J-J knew about this space through a friend who was close to Greta, the departing tenant.

Greta’s room was choice because it had its own kitchen/bath nook to one side of the large bedroom/living room. It was not truly a bath nor a kitchen but there, on a wide marble shelf were a two burner gas stove and an enamel basin which one could fill with water from a tap in the hall. Greta declared proudly that this was the only room in the establishment so equipped.

“You’ll be happy here.” She was eternally optimistic. In the few meetings we had had about my moving into her space, her round face almost always wore a smile, her voice was lilting.

While I watched her continue with packing, she rattled on about home. In less than five minutes I learned more about Iceland and the other Scandinavian countries as well, to which Greta had traveled frequently, than I ever thought I would want to know.

As she continued with her chores, Greta explained, “I’ll never be able to get all this stuff out of here in one trip. You won’t mind, will you, if I leave a few things in the closet. I promise to come back as soon as I can and move them.”

How could I “mind?” She was so bubbly and so full of love for everybody. Three weeks later I finally had the whole closet for myself.

Jean-Jacques leaned against the window, pretending to look at the scene which was engaging—rooftops and sky—sending a sly glance at the two of us from time, the faint smile never leaving his face.

Hotel des Bains took its name from the public baths which were adjacent to the hotel and part of the scene from the window beside which J-J stood all through the colloquy between Greta and me. Or, more exactly, the monologue to which I was audience. Curiously, there was not a single room with bath on the premises of the Hotel des Bains (unless there was one in the rooms occupied by the landlord and his wife). I was delighted, nevertheless, to inherit Greta's room because, with only a little ingenuity, possibilities for both cooking and keeping oneself clean were splendid. The little unit off the large room turned out to be the magic ingredient.

My social life took on new dimensions as I arranged with friends who were also coping with life inside apartments or rooms without baths to join me in patronizing the bathhouse. None of us was ever brave and confident enough to try the tubs but we found, over and over, that a session in the showers produced considerable elevation of spirit.

Almost as exciting as the kitchenette was the view from the top floor windows. That side of the building had no neighbor, so that one's view of the skyline and the ancient buildings in the immediate neighborhood was unobstructed. I could lie in bed (opposite the window) and enjoy the moon over the horizon.

In the room directly under mine lived a gentleman whose metier I never discovered. All I knew was that I would see him leaving each morning, usually when I was buying my breakfast croissant. He carried a briefcase like so many other natives I would observe on their way to work in the morning. (Jean-Jacques declared mischievously that all those business-like cases held lunch, but I did not wholly believe him because I knew he thought himself and other Swiss superior to most Frenchmen).

My downstairs neighbor and I passed occasionally in the hall but had never had a word of conversation until one evening when I heard a rap on my door. I went to open it and there he was, without briefcase, not surprisingly.

“Madame,” he said. Then there was a long pause. He was trying, evidently, in that interval, to arrange his thoughts. After several seconds he informed me, with utmost politeness, that I was making too much noise over his head. “I will bring you some soft slippers to change into when you come home,” he offered.

I was dumbfounded because I always came out of my street shoes as soon as I entered the room, just for my own comfort. I turned down his offer, but promised to tiptoe in the future.

Only a few minutes later Jean-Jacques arrived. I was happy to recognize his knock. He had promised to show me on this evening how to make a new rice dish would be the feature of our dinner.

When I told him of my encounter with the gentleman downstairs he was furious, wanted to go down immediately and give him what was what.

“No,” I pleaded. “Not now. Wait.”

We had reached the third stage of preparation with the rice dish, browning the onions when a light flashed on in my head.

“You know what I think?” Before J-J had a chance to say what he thought I thought I continued. “That man’s lonely. His approach today was just his way of trying to get acquainted.”

J-J’s raised eyebrow told me what he thought of my theory—far out. He said nothing for a few seconds, only leaned against the wall at the end of the little cooking-washing cubby and smiled. He was handsome in his lean and hungry fashion, in contrast to my neighbor-complainant who wore a stolid expression in a full face and a timorous manner.

J-J asked, “You think that?”

“I do.” He must have seen you at times on your way up here and knows perfectly well how often there are two sets of footsteps.

“Isn’t it an odd way to strike up a friendship, though?”

I nodded. “: But there wasn’t anybody to introduce us.”

Some weeks later we agreed that my thinking about my downstairs neighbor was right. He never rapped on my door again. It was evident that he confirmed his theory that I often had a guest but at the same time had faced the reality that there was nothing he could do to change places with J-J.

## TO WORK, TO WORK

During one of my musings aloud on the possibility of getting a job in Paris, a French friend had told me that social workers were used routinely in industry in France. She thought that I might find a job helping factory employees, for instance, which had health, family or child problems. The idea had considerable appeal until I faced an upsetting reality. If my French were only just adequate enough to consider studying to become a teacher of French to Americans, how could I deal with clients' personal problems in French? Certainly that would require more than ordinary acquaintance with the common idiom.

Shortly after I abandoned the idea of becoming a counselor in a French factory, I answered an ad in the Paris Herald-Tribune for a job with the Quakers. They planned to open a settlement house in the town of St. Lo. That village on the northeastern coast of France had been devastated by American bombing during the Normandy invasion.

The organization's small office was in the heart of the business district, near the American Express. My telephoned response to the ad was answered by such a warm, welcoming voice that I all but ran to the appointment.

A tall thin woman who appeared to be in her forties came to the door when I knocked. Her smile lighted her face with a glow which seemed to radiate all around the small room.

"Please come in, Mrs. Dorsey. I'm so glad you're here." She offered me a seat beside her desk which, with its two chairs, was almost the only furniture in the room. A small end table-bookcase with a few well-cared for plants on its surface was the other piece. Another plant, bearing tiny white flowers hung from a hook on the window frame.

Not unexpectedly, Miss Ellis said, once we were facing each other, "Now, tell me what you were doing before you came to Paris."

I had said in our telephone conversation that I had last been employed in July 1949.

After she had given me a broad outline of the Quaker program, Miss Ellis said, “Now—our mission in St. Lo is to continue to help rebuild both the town and the lives of the people whose futures were so changed when our forces went in on D-Day. Even though it’s been almost six years, there’s still much to be done.”

I was uncertain how I would even begin to operate in a position so different from any experience I had ever had. It sounded like community organization. “You remember that I said in our telephone conversation that my training and practice has all been in casework.”

She smiled. “I remember that well. But you did have some training in group work.” It was evident that she kept informed about the social work education scene. “Above all, we need someone who is flexible and ready to do whatever needs to be done.” She smiled then and said, “Tell me about yourself. How long have you been in France and what have you been doing?”

“I came in July 1949.” I paused then, trying to think how to recap the recent months. If I were to tell this lady, so reality based, the truth about how I happened to be in Paris she would probably size me up as unbalanced and there would go the job.

“I’ve been studying under the GI Bill and am in the process of getting a divorce.” There it was and then I told the whole story, omitting only the dreariest details.

Miss Gilchrist regarded me steadily for a few seconds before she said, “You sound like someone who would be adaptable to change. And we know there will be many and frequent changes at St. Lo.”

I nodded and she continued, “There will certainly be some direct help needed for families who have had their homes destroyed and lost their livelihood.” She paused and seemed to look as far away as St. Lo for a moment. “It’s been several years, but the bombing was truly devastating. Many people have not yet begun to get on their feet again. You may need to recruit teachers and set up classes right there in the settlement house.”

She continued to describe a situation which would demand help giving in many areas. Whoever took the job would live in the settlement house as well as work out of it.

After a few seconds I said, “I think I could do it.” She smiled as though we had just shared a secret. “Flexibility and imagination will both be much needed qualities.”

We agreed that I would take a day (she hoped not more) to decide. I would call her then and we could arrange a meeting in which details would be settled. There had been no mention of salary and only as I was leaving the building did I realize that my interviewer had not volunteered and I had never thought to ask for that information. Was it an omen that St. Lo was where I should be?

For the remainder of the day I fantasized about making my contribution in an area which I had never dreamed would be open to me. It would certainly call for creativity, imagination and the tapping of skills I was not even sure I had. But the opportunity to be of real service seemed unlimited.

I found myself off and on fantasizing about what the town would be like and how I would manage as possibly the only one of few, if not the only, English speaking person in the area.

That evening, having dinner with friends in a café near my hotel, I suddenly became aware that I had lost trace of the table conversation. I was busy trying to picture the town of St. Lo, the settlement house and myself in it.

From far, far away, it seemed my friend Joan was saying, “Come back, Frances. What are you dreaming about?”

Our other friends, Elaine and her fiance, Claude, sitting across the table from Joan and me as close as possible while still occupying separate chairs, both laughed and Joan said, “You haven’t been with us for a long time now.”

I had not told them about my day but in the moment when Joan brought me back to the present. I had been imagining myself far from Paris, almost as far north as one could go and still be in France, possibly the only English speaking person in town, with a job whose complexities I would not even be able to discuss with anyone else. My resolution had begun to fade. In the next instant I faced the truth that I was not the pioneer type.

To my dinner companions, I said only, "I was thinking about a job." They all knew that I was looking for work so the conversation went on quickly to other matters.

I did not tell them of my interview. In the morning I called Miss Gilchrist, thanked her and expressed my regret that I would have to turn down the opportunity to gain new experience at the same time that I was being a "good American."

What was left in the way of work seemed prosaic after my brief dream of service in a new town and in the mode of a true "giver?" I had heard that the Marshall Plan or ECA (European Cooperation Authority) whose Paris office was located near the American Embassy, was looking for a secretary. I applied and was hired forthwith.

I had been working for only two days when Isadore Bergner, who had interviewed and hired me and whose office I now share, asked me to take some dictation. As I sat beside his desk, pencil poised, waiting for his words, he smiled what might have been called an elfish grin, almost square and his frame solid, just a few pounds away from being overweight for his average height.

"You know there was another person who applied at the same time as you who I thought might have been just as skilled." He waited then, smiling still but less broadly, obviously expecting some response. I said nothing because I did not know what to say.

He went on, "I chose you because of your color."

I said then, "Thank you." I was too surprised to think of anything else to say to this cheerful gentleman who was apparently conducting a one-man equal opportunity crusade.

Only a few days later I realized that, in fact, I was the only African-American on the premises. Higher-ups, secretaries and unskilled help, were all Caucasians.

Thus began a friendship which has endured for all the years since. Although I never talked with other secretaries about the men for whom they worked (there were, of course, no women heading up divisions) I knew that we must have been considered an "odd couple." At coffee break time other secretaries went to the

refreshment area to bring back goodies for themselves and their “bosses.” Mr. Bergner insisted on fetching coffee for both of us. He had declared early on in our relationship that one of his goals had always been to reverse what he considered a grossly unfair custom, that of secretaries being used as “golfers.” He would return from his trips to the snack bar with a satisfied smile accompanying his two coffees and whatever. Only once during my year’s employment at E.C.A. did I have the opportunity to make the trip to the canteen. That was when I suggested firmly that I would enjoy, at least, seeing what the canteen was like.

Mr. Bergner demonstrated his convictions about fairness in another way when he returned from a week-long business trip which he took about a month after I had begun to work for him. He learned, his first day back in the office, that I had been requisitioned by the department head to take notes at an all day conference which he had held with representatives from several posts in Europe.

As he sat at his desk listening to how I had spent my time in his absence, Mr. B’s face clouded. He said, “He shouldn’t have done that.” Suddenly he declared, “Next time I go away, you go, too.” He sat for a few more seconds staring out the window at the passers-by on our busy avenue. Then he turned back to me. “I’ll let you know well ahead of time so you can put in your request for a leave.”

And that was how it happened that only about a month and a half later I went on a two week trip to Italy with Rita who worked for another mission head in the same organization.

We traveled during the end of April and early May which must be the ideal time to discover Florence, Rome, Genoa and Sicily.

Rita was also from New York, a Jewish girl who before coming to Paris had lived with her widowed mother in mid-Manhattan. She was red-haired, slim and bubbly. She also had a friend, Bob Ramsey, in Paris who was a travel agent. As soon as we had decided on the rough outline of our trip, Rita suggested, “I’ll ask Bob to make a schedule for us.”

And so he did.

Genoa was our first stop after we had crossed the Alps by bus from Paris. Once off the bus, we stood looking at each other, and then broke out together in laughter. “Well, here we are.” Rita said. “I can hardly believe it.”

Our joy at being in Genoa may well have been a result of the many moments of disbelief we had shared on the bus that we would ever reach Italy alive. We had boarded that vehicle in downtown Paris as simple, trusting travelers but once we had arrived in the south of France and begun crossing the Alps into Italy, we had several anxious hours. Our driver, who, we estimated, must have made the trip at least three times a week, appeared to have no respect at all for the cliffs which were with us all along the way, once we were outside Paris. More often than not, I, because Rita had been gracious enough to offer me a window seat, could not see the road at all, only bottomless space below the side of the bus and steep cliffs on the other side.

From Genoa we went by train to Florence. Bob had arranged for us to stay in the home of a gracious Florentine lady where the accommodations were splendid, except for one small problem. In the first two days of our stay, the hot water heater never seemed to be completely in sync with the added burden we must have imposed on the plumbing system.

On our second day I went first. Returning to our attractively furnished bedroom, I reported to Rita, “It’s still cold.”

Rita said, “Oh, darn.” Then, after a second of thought. “I’ll just wait awhile. Maybe we start too early.” It was true that no one in the family was yet stirring.

Waiting was awkward. We were so eager to be out discovering Florence that we had put our clothes out the night before.

When Rita finally went down the hall to try for a bath she returned to our room downcast. Still no hot water.

On the third day we were happily surprised to discover hot water. We agreed in almost happy discussion that “We were just not supposed to take a shower every day.”

One of Rita's goals for this trip, I learned on our first morning walk, was to acquire a tan. Since I had no such need, we became adept early on at spotting tables at sidewalk cafes where one chair was in the sun and one opposite in the shade.

On our second day in Genoa, after a full schedule of visiting places on our "must do" list, we went for dinner to the restaurant Bill had recommended on his travel plan.

Our waiter seemed to roll out a red carpet. It was as though he had been waiting for us all day. The evening started splendidly and continued so until we had finished our pasta and he asked what we would have next.

"Maybe some dessert?" Rita said.

I agreed. "And coffee."

"Shock" was a mild description for the state into which we seemed to have thrown our servitor. "You do not eat anything else, ladies? No meal?"

In that instant we learned that in Italy pasta is a first course. We, who all our lives had considered a heaping dish of pasta a meal, were suddenly educated and shamed into ordering a salad (small concession) to precede the dessert. Our waiter still did not seem happy but left to bring the small supplement.

Upon his return with the salad his expression was brighter. He told us that the gentleman at a nearby table wished to know if he might join us over a bottle of wine. The waiter testified that our would-be companion was a regular at the restaurant. He was a rug dealer from Genoa who traveled a lot, but always ate here when he was in Florence.

As soon as we looked in his direction the rug merchant was up from his chair and across the room in an instant, despite a slight limp. He appeared to be in his mid-fifties, was overweight, bore a discreet moustache and an air of gentility.

After a few words in which we exchanged small biographical notes and Mr. Merchant learned that we were first time visitors to Italy, he said that on the following day he planned a trip to Siena. His English was precise and almost without accent.

Our travel agent had not included Siena in our schedule, but our new friend was so enthusiastic that, as we listened, we became convinced that to miss Siena would be a serious mistake.

We said, as we sipped our gift wine, that we would certainly try to include Siena in our schedule.

Our friend beamed and leaned closer to us once again. “Come tomorrow—with me. I shall go by car. You have only to wait for me at your hotel.” He turned his beaming face from one to the other of us.

I said, “But we had planned to go shopping tomorrow.”

Our new friend clearly thought it ridiculous that we would miss Siena because of shopping. He practically ordered that we postpone the shopping trip.

Rita and I exchanged glances. As little as we knew about Siena, we were aware that it was historically important and full of ancient art to be found nowhere else in Italy.

“Let’s do it.” I said. Rita nodded in agreement.

We sealed the plans for the day in Siena with our new friend giving us his hotel address on the back of his business card. We would shop as early as possible the next morning and then go to the hotel to meet Mr. Merchant.

We did just that the following morning. At the hotel I asked the clerk to tell our host that we were there. Each of us was carrying a box with a pair of shoes.

Still holding the house phone, the clerk turned back to us and said that our friend wanted us to come up. Rita, standing near enough to hear, shook her head vigorously as I replied, “No. We’ll wait here. If we could just leave these boxes with you until we return.”

When the clerk relayed our message to Mr. Merchant's room, he sent back word that we could leave our packages in his room. We finally persuaded him, in this bizarre three way conversation, that we preferred not to "ascend," that it would be easier if we just all gathered on the first floor.

When our host finally greeted us in the lobby he led us immediately to a chauffeured car, large enough for a wedding party. It must have been waiting all during the delicate telephone negotiations.

The ride to Siena, about forty miles, was uneventful, except that the driver tended to drive at the same race course speed as our Parisian friends employed. En route we learned from our host about all the delights we might look forward to when we would arrive in Siena.

After he had driven us to what seemed to be a kind of picnic area where many groups were already lunching, the chauffeur took the car away.

Our host suggested that we might want to explore on our own. We were not at all averse to the idea since it seemed his uneven gait would make it difficult for us to cover much ground in the short time we had.

Rita and I traversed the main street which took us to the town square and when we had left that we found a flea market being held in the fields along one side of the main street. There we each bought a small souvenir.

When we returned to the glade in which we had left our friend, sitting on a bench, we found him in conversation with a woman who seemed to have more than a casual claim to his attention. He did not introduce us, only smiled to acknowledge our return. We sat on a nearby bench, re-examining our purchases and wondering in whispers whether the woman was girl friend or wife. It seemed unlikely that she was a wife if Mr. Merchant lived in Genoa. On the other hand—there was no doubt that she had known exactly where he had planned to be this day.

For the rest of the afternoon in Siena we exhausted all our ingenuity in keeping ourselves amused with little help from our host. One of our distractions was a puppet show.

Finally it was time to go back to Florence, we learned on one stop by the table where our friend was still sitting. When we proceeded to the car, the woman who came to the table was already waiting, sitting beside the chauffeur.

Conversation during the ride back was sporadic. Mrs. or Miss X apparently spoke no English. Mr. Merchant tried to explain to us at one point that she was but no introductions were offered. She was dropped off first. It was a relief not to feel like intruders while she directed remarks from the front seat toward our host. Even with our less than elementary grasp of the language we knew by her tone that the text was neither gracious nor loving.

By the time we reached our pension it was already dark. We tried to leave the car as quickly as possible, relieved to have come to the end of a strange day. But Mrs. Merchant insisted on getting out first, even though he had been sitting between us so that both Rita and I had easier egress. He, in effect, held me down while he climbed over my legs. He stood holding the car door until we were both on the sidewalk, then when we tried to say “Thank you and goodnight” he limped into the apartment house behind us.

While we waited for the elevator our friend tried to engage first one, then the other of us in a farewell embrace. At the opening of the elevator door both of us bounded inside without further goodnights. I pushed the button while Rita planted herself squarely in the center of the door.

Once we were inside the apartment and behind the closed door of our room, we began to talk and laugh at almost the same time.

“He was trying to take on both of us, you know.” Rita said, her voice rising high in disbelief.

“Of course. How could I not know? Imagine that, flirting with not one but two at the same time.”

Rita, sitting on her bed, looked across at me and wondered, “What do you suppose he would have done next if he had won?”

I could only look back at her. As she returned my gaze we both broke into what would have been gales of laughter if we had not made extraordinary efforts to stifle them. After all, it was late and our host family might be trying to fall asleep.

“Do you think he’ll leave our shoes where they are at the hotel desk or will we have to go up to his room and fight for them?” I wondered.

At that both of us were again forced to bury our heads in our pillows to suppress the laughter, lest we disturb our hosts.

Rita announced when she looked up, “No way will we go upstairs for shoes. Maybe one pair of shoes lost, virtue saved.”

Next morning when we approached the desk of Mr. Merchant-from-Genoa’s hotel, the clerk handed us our two bags with only a smile. We agreed later that the moment had been anti-climactic, to say the least, after all the hazards we had anticipated and ways we had devised of handling them.

## SOUTHERN ITALY

Once we had regained our shoes we headed toward the airport to travel to Palermo, the capital of Sicily. We were both in a high state of excitement about this part of the trip, having heard from many friends that we would find Sicily unlike any place we had ever visited.

Once we had checked in at the airline office we were obliged to stand in a line outside in the hot sun, waiting to board the plane. This we had never experienced before, nor, obviously, had the couple standing immediately behind us. She was a tall, slim, nearly red-headed young woman. Her bubbly laugh was that of a young girl. She wore little makeup on her flawless skin.

Mr. Davis appeared to be a few years older than his wife. He was short, somewhat plump. While we waited under the merciless sun he began to joke about his wife's insistence on bringing her new mink stole to Italy. It was he, of course, who carried the garment bag. As he smiled at her with obvious pride, he said, "She wouldn't believe me when I told her over and over that she'd never need it this time year in Italy."

One word led to another and we learned that they had been married only recently. She had been a Rockette. He had fallen in love with her with all that space and the lights between them, but he was persistent and stricken enough to meet her and so ended the story.

He had given her the stole as a wedding gift. She had not let it out of her sight since.

On the plane we were fortunate to have seats across from the Davises. We exchanged biographical information, learned that he was a liquor salesman, working out of the main office of a large company.

When he learned that ultimately we, too, were going to Taormina, Mr. Davis wanted to know where we were staying. When we told him he smiled, but made no comment.

"We'll be at the ----- . I travel a lot on my job and I've learned not to settle for less than first class hotels." He winked mischievously then. "Of course, it's true I don't have to worry about the fare most of the time."

We were both impressed, but did not mention the name of our hotel, not out of insecurity but because, we admitted to each other later, we couldn't remember the name.

Mr. Davis continued, "In the States I might take a chance on a B or C hotel, but not this far away from home."

We talked about less important matters, mostly with Mr. Davis because his seat was on the aisle, but when the plane put down and we said goodbye we knew that we were not likely to see them again.

Our hotel room windows in Palermo faced a large court on the other side of which was an imposing apartment house building. That first evening, while it was still sunny, we stepped out on the balcony just to have a bird's eye view of our neighborhood.

On a fire escape across the court two little dark-haired girls were playing. They may have been nine or ten years old. When they saw us they stood stock still and in unison shouted, "Hello." Both wore broad smiles. "Where you from?" the taller one called out in almost unaccented English.

It took a few seconds to recover from our surprise and delight to be so greeted by these little Sicilians. Rita called back "New York."

Our new friend, the one who had asked the question all but leaped into the air with joy. "I have a cousin in New York. You know my cousin?"

It was sad to say, "No" (neither of us having any Italian friends) since that ended the conversation. If we had no mutual acquaintances, the little girl seemed to suggest, what was there to talk about?

In our exploration of Palermo a little while later one of our most exciting discoveries was an ice cream parlor not far from our hotel. It was so reminiscent; we told each other with delight, of those we had known as children right in our neighborhoods in New York, with both a counter and small tables. Around the tables were bentwood chairs with curved backs. There must have been fifty delectable choices on the menu of this real Italian ice-cream parlor. We laughed at ourselves for repeating over and over that this was "just like we used to have" at home. They had long since all disappeared.

After we had each lunched on an incredibly decorated sundae, we strolled along the main thoroughfare, eliciting unabashed stares from the natives. If there had been American visitors here recently, they had not been women, we agreed, and certainly not an African-American with a Caucasian.

At one corner we approached, the taller of two teen-aged young men who had been keeping pace with us from the other side of the street called across, in almost perfect English, “Madam, can you tell me the time?”

Rita and I exchanged quick glances. We returned their smiles and agreed together that they had to be given credit for their directness in approaching strangers from who knew where.

Rita called back, “It’s just two-thirty-five.”

In response both young gentlemen smiled broadly and said “Thank you” in unison. We had a sense that their day had been made and that our slight encounter would be grist for their conversational mill for days, if not for weeks.

We continued to follow the schedule Rita’s travel agent friend had devised for us except for one happy mistake made the night we arrived in Taormina from Palermo. (Bob Ramsey had told us that Taormina was much more beautiful than Capistrano, the isle to which American tourists regularly flocked.)

It was dark when we got off the train and we were happy to see an elegant van marked with a familiar name. Neither of us remembered until we stood before the desk clerk that the name we recognized was that of the luxury hotel on the island. Bob had said that we must not miss having tea in their gardens. We were directed, on our schedule—which neither of us bothered to consult after we recognized the name of the place with the garden—to stay at a considerably more modest establishment.

We were inside the magnificent lobby, waiting to register when it hit us both at the same moment that we would have to be extremely lucky even to get a room here.

An American movie company was making a movie in Taormina, we learned later, and the stars as well as the rest of the cast and the crew were all living in the hotel at the time of our arrival.

When our turn came we approached the clerk together, suddenly twinned in our desperation.

“We would like a double room for two nights.” Rita said softly. I was surprised at how gently her request had been put. She had never ever been meek.

The clerk, impassive, did not dismiss us with an icy speech. He appeared to consider carefully, glancing over the register in front of him before he said, “At this moment I can offer you only something downstairs.”

Originally this splendid building had been a one-story monastery. The present luxury establishment had been erected atop the old structure. “Downstairs” would be the “cell” area, below the basement, now, but where the monks had lived originally.

Rita and I exchanged quick glances and she said, “We’ll take it.”

I fancied that I knew exactly what had passed through her mind in the slight pause before her answer. We were in no shape to set out now to find the place at which we had been advised to stay. It was late and dark.

A waiting porter took our bags into the elevator and in a second we were “downstairs.”

Our room was clean, neatly furnished with the basics but Spartan in its bareness. We unpacked and dressed for dinner, taking careful steps not to run into each other, and then climbed one short flight of stairs to the main floor and a short distance to the dining room.

I had seen such opulence only in photographs or movies and Rita’s expression indicated that this place for eating must have been a first for her also. Under shimmering crystal chandeliers, the tables were discreetly placed extravagant distances one from the other. Flatware and linens looked as one would have imagined to have been handed down from royalty.

We had hardly begun our appetizers when we caught sight across the room of the Davises. We were surprised and then not surprised. Where else would they have stayed?

Mr. Davis saw us at almost the same instant and in seconds he was at our table. “It’s damn good to know somebody here,” he said as he leaned over between us. He seemed truly happy to see us again. “Why didn’t you tell us you were staying here?”

Rita and I exchanged abased glances, and then she said, “We’re here by accident.” Then, sometimes talking together, we told him that we had boarded the wrong bus from the railroad station.

Mr. Davis flashed his big grin. “Some lucky accident, I’d say.” He looked us over again, fondly, as though we were long lost friends. “Come up and have a drink with us after dinner.”

We both nodded and murmured, “Thank you,” before he left to return to his own table.

After we had returned from our cell for freshening up, we took the elevator to the palatial atmosphere of the fifth floor. Even at a modest estimate the Davis’ room must have been five times the size of ours. Our room resembled quarters in a dormitory of a modestly endowed college while theirs might have been found in the most gracious, but luxurious private home.

There was a view of the ocean from the broad balcony. Mr. Davis invited us to see that immediately upon our entering.

“Ellies a little sniffly,” he said while pouring our drinks. We noticed that his wife was quiet, unlike the person we had talked with on the line at the airport. “Probably because she didn’t wear her jacket on the plane,” he added, smiling over his shoulder at her. Ellie did not protest his teasing, only returned her husband’s smile and winked at us behind his back. But because she did look droopy we did not linger after we had finished the drink Mr. Davis had poured.

Seconds after we were back in our tiny, low-ceilinged cell, with its over-modest furnishings, Rita and I faced each other across the room from our narrow beds and made a major decision, almost in unison.

“Let’s spend our four days in Taormina right here.” Rita said first. “But upstairs” we said together.

“Imagine having breakfast on the terrace and watching the sea lapping the shore just below your room.” Rita said.

“And think of having towels as thick as throw rugs in the bath.” Our bath was provided with all the usual equipment but was not larger than a generous sized walk-in closet. It had no view, of course, because it had no

windows. The air-conditioning evidently worked flawlessly but one did have a sense of being shut away from the world—obviously the basis on which these rooms were planned.

Rita's face clouded in the next second of our fantasy. "We'll never make it back to Paris. The Davises rent for one day is probably what we allowed ourselves for four."

There were a few seconds of constrained silence while we faced each other from the middle of our respective beds. Then I hit upon a solution. "We won't buy anything here." I contemplated the idea of a non-shopping vacation. It would be new, at least. "Fact is, we don't even know what there is to buy—so—"

Rita said triumphantly. "That's it. You got it." We almost knocked each other over in our haste to reach the door. Climbing the stairs took no time at all. At the desk we had a short wait for a party in front of us to complete their registration. During those moments we must have had all our fingers crossed.

We were in luck. There would be a room available upstairs on the following day. We went back downstairs almost two steps at time.

After breakfast when we had been installed in our new room we went out to enjoy the sun and sand. (I who had been avoiding the sun in all the cities we visited in Italy found its rays far less punishing in Taormina.)

As we strolled along the beach, congratulating ourselves on having arrived by error at a Class A hotel instead of the modest establishment our travel agent had recommended, we were approached by two young natives. They appeared to be in their early twenties, open-faced and bright looking.

"Hello," said the one who looked somewhat older.

We answered, "Hello" in concert.

"You are English?" the second asked.

"No," Rita answered. "American."

He introduced himself then as Dino and his friend as Tony.

"You like Taormina?" Tony asked.

By now we had assumed that the two young men were intrigued by the idea of finding two unaccompanied women, no matter the age, on whom they could practice their English.

One halting sentence led to another and we soon discovered that both spoke English well. They offered to show us around and soon we were being taken on a tour of the island.

We were finally able to convince our guides that we would enjoy having some time to wander on our own. Before we could say “Goodbye,” however, Dino suggested a boat trip for the next day through the grottoes which overhung the ocean in this part of the country.

We thought that sounded like fun and fixed a time for meeting.

Then when we thought we had been guided and instructed far longer than we might have had we hired someone to do the job, we were ready to part from our chaperones to go to lunch when the younger asked if we would like to know about an excellent place for dinner.

“What’s the specialty?” Rita asked. In silence I admired her cleverness in asking a question which sounded so traveled.

“Seafood—of course.” Dino said, smiling.

When we showed further interest, he gave us an expanded description of the restaurant’s menu. After we had exclaimed over all the possibilities he proposed that we allow him to select the menu for our evening meal. It would require preparation beforehand and we agreed that he would go immediately and tell the owner who was also the cook.

Dino and Tony had described their restaurant in such enticing terms that even if they were working for the establishment, we would have been snared. We agreed on a time and suggested that there might be two more of us. Without having discussed it, Rita and I both thought that this might be an adventure the Davises would enjoy.

Back at the hotel, before we went in search of a place for lunch, we left a note for the Davises.

At the hour we had agreed upon, the four of us were waiting in high excitement in the hotel lobby when Dino and Tony arrived. Ellie's cold had cleared up overnight and the Davises were delighted that we had asked them to join us at this restaurant introduced by a native.

Harold Davis had one suggestion, that we take a car to the restaurant.

"Ellie doesn't much like walking, even in the daytime." He laughed as at a wry tale. "It's remarkable how she danced all over that huge stage and looked as though it were great fun. Now she doesn't even want to walk to the corner if she can help it."

As usual, Ellie was just watching him and smiling as though she enjoyed every word of this exaggerated tale he told about her.

While we women chatted, Dino and our guides disappeared. Dino soon returned with word that a car was waiting for us. Our escorts arranged themselves in front with the driver and Harold sat on the drop seat, leaving us three women the spacious back seat. The ride took only minutes.

Our restaurant was tiny. There were not more than three other tables besides ours. The proprietor's greeting was gracious but not effusive. We all agreed later that throughout the several courses we were treated as though we might have been frequent visitors. We were the only foreigners present as far as we could hear.

Just before dessert time, Tony asked, "Would you like to go dancing afterwards?"

Ellie's face took on a glow as though a light had been turned on inside. She said, "Oh, yes. Where?"

Our guides knew of a club where there was dancing without pushiness about consuming drinks.

Harold Davis insisted on playing the role of papa. By the time we left the restaurant I felt like one of a family of six, even though we were from several different backgrounds.

At the night club, the orchestra's repertoire seemed to consist entirely of tarantella, Ellie was the only one of us bold enough and talented enough to venture onto the dance floor to that frenetic rhythm. She never stopped, having what appeared to be the time of her life, dancing alternately with each of our two young guides. Her husband watched with his usual undisguised adoration while Rita and I watched in amazement.

Even if our young friends were operating as unofficial steerers (rewarded by boat owners, the restaurant and the night club) they were always charming and low-keyed. Even on the day when, on one of our exploratory walks around the island, they contrived to separate us and each began making amorous overtures, it was not difficult to let them know that this part was not really expected.

## PREDATORS

Only after I had improved my living quarters considerably did I discover that there were fleas which afflict people. From the Hotel des Bains with no baths I had moved into a room in the apartment of Madame and Monsieur Theboux on the Right Bank, near the Arc-de-Triomphe. In contrast to the ancient buildings in which I had lived previously, this one was almost new, with the most modern bathroom I had seen in Paris, including a state of the art bidet. Madame explained graciously that the facilities were all included in my rental. The bidet would, in fact, be mine exclusively. I was impressed, but too modest to tell her that I was used to the shower.

There was an open cage elevator and central heating. This last refinement I never had the pleasure of enjoying during the brief time I lived with the T's. On the few chilly days we had while I was there, Mrs. T made a fire in the fireplace in my room.

My room was ideal for renting out, from both landlord and lessee's point of view. It was directly across the hall from the apartment entrance. On the same side of the hallway but some distance down was the kitchen and dining room. The landlady's bedroom was at the opposite end of the apartment, close to the bath whose facilities were being so graciously given over to me.

Mr. T, I learned early, was a car salesman, successful enough for Mrs. T to have a fur coat which looked expensive. She was an attractive woman with dark hair and eyes and an easy smile. She was not more than five feet tall.

I would never have noticed Mrs. T's coat if she had not said to me one day on her way out of the apartment, "If my husband asks, don't tell him that I wore my fur coat today."

I said, "Of course not." It would be a small lie but I could not help but wonder why she thought he would ask me, in all my weeks at the T's, Monsieur and I had exchanged no words other than to pass the time of day. But it was obvious that on this day Madame was not going out to buy groceries.

I had been at the T's for less than a month when I began to itch. Bright red spots appeared on my legs—two one day, two more the day. My concentration at the Sorbonne on French Civilization—the omnibus course which included language, literature, history and geography and which was recommended to all those active in the GI Bill study program—was almost completely destroyed by my unseen assailants.

It became more and more difficult to concentrate on the subject matter. While I scratched and worried about what disease was afflicting me, only a small part of my brain could be engaged in trying to absorb the information offered by the lecturer. There must have been two hundred of us, at a minimum, gathered together from all over the world in the auditorium of the University. I never knew how many, like me, were supported by their governments but at least one, whom I came to know well, was paying his own way to learn more about France. He was a judge from Finland and had included this course as part of his visit to France.

Finally, after days in school and nights at home during which I continued to be oppressed with what resembled an advanced case of hives. I visited a dermatologist whose name Ellen had given me.

My deliverer (I hoped) was tall and lean with a kind face and gentle manner. While I told him about my problem he reached for his magnifying glass and applied it to a red spot on my leg, then to another not far away. He looked up then from his efforts, put down his glasses and said,

“Madame, you have been bitten.” I must have stared back open-mouthed and unbelieving that I had paid to hear something I knew so well, but he continued. “The hole made by the stinger shows clearly under the glass—in the precise center of each spot. The distance between the bites leads me to think that they are those of a flea.” He was silent for a few seconds then, continuing to look, now without the magnifying glass, at my red spots. “Yes,” he said finally. “The jump of a flea is about that distance. Are there animals in your house?”

I said, “Yes.” There were two animals where I now lived—a dog, a lovely brown Irish setter, a hunting dog who suffered from “boredom.” Madame had explained because “Monsieur never goes hunting>”

The other animal was a cat that was “stupid” according to Madame because she knocked over everything she came near. She was the only awkward cat Madame had ever known. Madame felt oppressed, having to share her home with such a creature. (She never explained how they had come to be housemates.)

My room was immediately across from the entrance to the apartment while the animals stayed in the other end, quite away from me. Madame had been scrupulous about arranging for me to have privacy in my end—I never took advantage of her arrangements by entertaining in my room—but she seemed to expect that I would. I did go to the far end of the apartment where her bedroom was to use the bathroom facilities, but both cat and dog living in that part of the flat, never came to my end. We passed occasionally in the hall and I had seen the cat walking on the kitchen table but neither cat nor dog ever visited my room. (I had no kitchen privileges so were not affected by the sight of the cat walking on the table.)

I described for the doctor the delicate balance in my relationship with the animals. He listened but looked skeptical. Later I would learn that the animals in the house had no connection at all with my affliction. In the meantime, however, the doctor recommended regular use of DDT talcum.

I had never known that such a powder existed.

“Where do I get that?” I asked.

The doctor looked at me as though he thought it possible that my brains might also have been bitten. “At the pharmacy, Madame,” he said coolly.

When I left the doctor’s office, I went directly to the drug store for that which I hoped would be my deliverance.

Three weeks later, after twice daily sprinkling with DDT talcum, more baths than Madame must have thought reasonable for anyone (I had not told her that her pets’ parasites might be persecuting my) I left the house on the Right Bank for a summer sublet—a modern apartment which would be all my own. The owner was an older acquaintance of J-J’s who spent summers in her country home.

My new abode was on rue Froideveaux, opposite the Montparnasse Cemetery, in a neighborhood more like the one I had lived in when I first arrived in Paris. Even the prospect of moving again in the fall was not daunting because I had my own kitchen and bath and an enormous living room with windows all across the front, a bed in an alcove and no animals. It was Left Bank comfort above the average.

Some of my American friends teased me about living across from a cemetery, but as Jean-Jacques said, “It will be very quiet.” And it was. I observed after a few days that the only disturbance of any kind occurred late at night when horses seemed to be clopping down the avenue. After the second night I asked J-J what I was hearing. His answer made me sad for a long time and took some of the joy from having such a splendid habitation. J-J explained that my new dwelling was on the street which was the principal route to the glue factory. The clopping was of those horses who had been judged no longer useful and who were taking their last walk.

Two days after I moved into my spacious apartment, more angry red spots appeared. I continued, religiously, every night before I lay down to sleep, to sprinkle myself with DDT talcum and to trace with the talcum an outline in the bed which I thought was that of my body.

After several days I was certain that my old landlady’s dog and cat fleas had come with me to my new place and that their resistance to DDT was formidable.

Worst of all, this was not a problem which lent itself to discussion or could elicit sympathy from friends. One simply did not say, in answer to “Ca va?”

“Not so well, thank you. I have fleas.”

Then one day, Jane Morgan, the friend of J-J’s friend, Bill, for whom, in fact, J-J had had to move out of the roomy apartment he and Bill had shared—Jane became suddenly the dearest friend I had ever had.

We were having mid-morning coffees at our favorite café on Boulevard St. Germaine, halfway between her place and mine. We had taken to meeting there after we had had our separate morning walks. On this day Jane mentioned that she was the victim of some biting insect.

“I have these angry red marks, a new one almost every day. I never see anything,” she said, “though I’ve searched the bed and the clothes I’ve worn—and Elsa’s not getting them.” Elsa was her six year old daughter with whom she had come to Paris, en route to Switzerland to join her husband who was working there in the World Health Plan. Bill had been a permanent distraction.

I told her that she and I had a bond closer than any I knew in all of Paris.

“But before you told me, I thought it was just that they liked brown skin,” I said. I mentioned having discovered the problem with Ellen Wright who told me that her daughter, Julia, also was subject to be bitten by anything which crawled or flew. Ellen had never been bitten by anything in her whole life. Julia and I were about the same color. That sounded logical, even if unfair.

Jane was blond and blue-eyed but as we compared notes, the onset, persistence of attacks and effects were exactly the same, I was glad to be able to tell her about the number and virulence of our attacks. We discovered by various kinds of research that there was such a phenomenon as “people fleas” who evidently preferred humans to lower animals and could live for years, lying in wait in old buildings until a tasty human came along. They would then emerge and take up permanent residence with the new food supply.

All apart from education about microscopic, man-eating insects, the important development for both of us was that we were no longer alone. During that rainy summer, the dampness bothered us not at all. We comforted ourselves with our shared plague.

At some point within the next few weeks (probably a change in the weather) a miracle occurred and we found that both of us had stopped being bitten. The little devils left as mysteriously as they had come. After having lived with DDT talcum sprays for what seemed years, I noticed one day that there were no new itchy spots.

Later that fall Ellen had business in Spain with Dick’s publishers and invited me to accompany her and Julia, first to the south of France, i.e. St. Jean-de-Luz, which Ellen remembered fondly for its beaches? Then we

would cross the border to Madrid where she would remain for several days while she completed her business meetings.

I was out of school, having completed the course in French civilization, taken the tests and been given a certificate. I was delighted to be invited to travel and as a guest, at that.

A few weeks earlier I had gone to the police precinct for renewal of my visa. At that time someone in the office, for what reason I never knew, decided that I should be granted a visa which said “permanent resident.” Perhaps it had to do with the fact that by that time my French came easily enough so that one department store clerk, concluding a purchase for me, had commented that I must have been living in America for some time my French came easily enough so that one department store clerk, concluding a purchase for me, had commented that I must have been living in America for some time. He was proud to be able to detect a “slight American accent.” Louisiana?” he had queried, smiling.

For whatever reason, my benefactor at the precinct had concluded that I should have a permanent visa. I was grateful. As the agent had promised, I found that it did make travel easier.

St. Jean-de-Luz was all that Ellen had promised. The days were sunny, the beach as white as though it had been freshly poured. We spent hours walking along the beach, or sitting sunning ourselves. I had brought a bathing suit, following Ellen’s advice, but was not unhappy when she never said, “Let’s go in.”

We did a considerable amount of window shopping but went into only one store—one with spectacular earrings in the window. Both Ellen and I bought a pair—not the same. Julia watched all the proceedings, then pleaded with her mother, gently, for earrings for herself.

“But you have to have pierced ears to wear everything in here, baby.”

Julia was not discouraged. Still looking into her mother’s face, wide-eyed, she announced, “Then I’ll get pierced ears.”

The proprietor had said nothing, of course, during the dialogue between mother and daughter. But now she inserted, ever so politely, “We can do that, Madame.”

Ellen looked perplexed, looked at me, than at Julia who stood looking at her mother, wide-eyed and with a pleading expression. Finally, she said, “Please, mummy I want those earrings so much.”

Ellen was forced finally to give in. Julia sat on the stool indicated by the owner. She looked as pleased as punch. In an instant, the proprietor had sterilized the ear lobe and her needle and stuck the latter into Julia’s ear.

That resulted in a such a wail of despair, loud and poignant, as though the child had been subjected to the most cruel treatment possible on the face of the earth.

Julia, holding a hand to the “injured” ear, wailed, “I don’t want any more. Don’t do any more.” Her face was tortured.

“But, baby, you can’t go around with one hole in your ear.” Ellen tried, in as gentle a voice as I had ever heard, to reason with her injured child. “That will look strange.”

Several more minutes were required. All three of the adults in this scene stood and waited while Julia held her ear and considered. Finally, she said in the softest, most martyred voice, “All right then. The other ear.” As the words came from her lips, we could all see her resolve tightening. She looked exactly as one might have imagined the Christian martyrs did, but she was ready. The second prick, anticipated as being much worse than it must have been, produced no wail, only a screwing up of the little face. Then the insertion of the straws, the putting of the coveted jewelry into the little hand and the whole torturous scene had been played out. The rest of that day was spent sight-seeing.

We boarded the train for Madrid the next morning.

Border crossing came shortly after dark and the train stopped for the immigration officials to come aboard to check papers. Julia and I watched as other passengers stretched their legs walking along the station platform. They were all Spanish citizens or permanent residents who would not have to submit to examination.

Ellen and I were chatting, making observations about the walkers alongside the train when I noticed, looking at Julia, that she was scratching a spot on her leg. I had begun at almost the same moment to do the same. As I watched her, I knew that what lay ahead for us in the days to come was not a happy vacation.

I said to Ellen, “There are fleas here.”

She laughed her lilting laugh; usually such a happy sound but which gave me no comfort at all in this moment. “You’re imagining. It’s just impatience, boredom. You’ll see as soon as they let us through. You won’t itch.”

“Ellen,” I pleaded. “Look at Julia.”

She glanced in Julia’s direction but still seemed unconvinced.

As soon as we were settled in our hotel room, I found a pharmacy and purchased some DDT powder.

That night I powdered Julia before she got into bed. Because of the traditional ten o’clock dinner hour in Spain, my own powdering had to come later. The next day, morning and evening, I repeated the process for both of us. For the entire week we spent in Madrid I sprinkled Julia and me morning and night. We continued to itch all the while.

Somewhere on our way to France our tormentors, evidently loyal Spanish subjects, departed because neither Julia nor I had bites en route back to Paris. That trip was by plane.

I have always thought that I should like to go again to Madrid, especially to visit the Prado, the highlight of the trip for me. Perhaps if one traveled all the way by plane—perhaps fleas have an altitude limit.

In contrast to the visit to the Prado, there was, once one was again in the street, the wrenching contrast between the poor and the well-off, visible around every corner. I had never before seen women with babies in their arms—begging. Some more experienced travelers told me later when I lamented about this that the beggars we saw on the street were professionals, that some of the children the women carried had been hired for the purpose from their own mothers. It was, nonetheless, an indication of a degree of need which was disturbing.

Ellen and I shared the same feelings about the mothers (or even “pretend” mothers) in the street but because she was unaffected by the plague which followed Julia and me both, our broodings diverged widely during those few days.

There was immeasurable time to itch. Business offices opened at 10 o'clock. Ellen was an early riser and it tried her patience sorely to wait for a business day which began long after her accustomed breakfast hour. In the evening there would be another long wait until one could get down to serious dining at 10 P.M.

Julia's dinner was requested early, of course, and she usually fell asleep while Ellen and I waited the dinner hour. But during all those off hour days Julia and I never had time to suffer from ennui. While we waited for whatever came up next on the schedule, we could always powder.

## NEW CAREER-SHORT

I had been with the Marshall Plan for several months, long enough, in fact, to have asked for and been referred to a larger apartment—still a one roomer, but twice the size of the first, on the third instead of the street floor; therefore considerably lighter. Even the kitchen was a real room. The old one, albeit completely furnished, had been a cubby, not a workplace.

Ellen and I went one night, after I had moved and was feeling expansive, to a new “night club” in the neighborhood. It was the size of a generously proportioned living room, but comfortably furnished. There was an African-American gentleman, middle-aged and of somber mien, light brown-skinned, with a friendly smile. He was at the piano. Early in the evening when we hardly finished our first drink, we learned from the piano player, that the proprietor was looking for a singer.

“I think I’ll apply.” I said to Ellen when the gentleman had left us.

“Can you sing?” Ellen’s disbelief raised her voice several octaves.

“Well enough for here, I think.” I answered, trying not to betray the slight insecurity I felt, to keep it on the “joking” level.

We were ready to leave, after another glass of wine each, when I approached the owner who was easily located because of the size of the establishment. He was forty-ish, stout and gloomy looking.

His joy was almost palpable when I opened by saying that I understood that he was looking for a singer. Coming closer, he asked, “Do you know someone?”

“Myself,” I answered, hoping that I gave the impression of being more collected than I felt.

“Oh,” the proprietor said. “Where did you work before?”

“In New York,” I replied, quick as bunny.

“Oh,” he said again. “Where?”

I pulled two names from my head which I thought sounded appropriate for “boites.”

Mr. Owner considered my references only briefly before he said “Bon,” told me what he was willing to pay and said, “When can you start?”

“As soon as you like.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Entendu—domaiin.” He looked happy and I marched triumphantly back to where I had left Ellen waiting.

When I had reviewed the brief hiring session, she laughed but discreetly, just in case my new employer was watching us from the wings.

“Didn’t he ask where you had worked before?”

“Yes, of course. I told him. I gave names of places I had heard of.” Ellen’s eyebrows went up and I continued, “He acted as though they were familiar. Both of us have a pretty good act.”

Ellen only shook her head, smiling.

On the following evening I returned to the club alone at the hour Monsieur, the proprietaire, had suggested. Ellen and I had agreed that she would drop in later.

I discovered in short order that Nick, the piano player, was a jewel. When I told him the first number I would like to do, he asked (sensibly, I realized later) “What key?” This threw me into a state of near panic. I had no idea of what key.

Nick was more than a good pianist. He watched my face all the while we were talking, I stalling to think of what to say in answer to the question, “What key?” In no time at all he asked, “How’s this?” as he played, casually, it seemed, in exactly the right key.

He played an introduction. I picked up and began to sing. He looked up at me once smiling. That filled me with confidence. My first hurdle had been overcome.

On this, the night of my debut, the little club had only a few more customers than the night before when Ellen and I had shared the place with only one gentleman. Now there were possibly three other people sitting at one of the tables.

For the next twenty minutes, with Nick giving precious support, I went through all the popular songs I could remember. “Ellen arrived near the end of my “turn.” Not only did I need and believe I was by then entitled to a break, but I desperately wanted her critique.

Even before I had sat down at the table with her I could see by her expression that she was both surprised and pleased.

Her face mirrored my own feeling of satisfaction. The proprietor, having satisfied himself about my first night’s performance, had disappeared, so we had no anxiety. We were both feeling hugely conspiratorial.

“You really surprised me, you know. Your voice isn’t half bad.”

“Thanks a lot,” I laughed. If ever one had been offered “faint praise,” this was it.

“No. I mean, no worse than one hears in most of these place, especially the little ones without a name.”

That night, before I went to bed, I wrote my friend, Aida Richardson, in Manhattan, asking her to send me one of those sheets of popular song lyrics which I remembered having seen sold in the streets before I left. I told her about my new venture, hence my wish for a response of utmost speed.

She was evidently able to overcome her amazement quickly enough to locate and send me by return mail the very item I had recalled seeing. When I wrote I had not even been certain that they were still in circulation. I had been away for almost a year.

By the end of the week my little “boite” was filled with more than three times the customers it had had when I began singing. Ellen came almost every night—to make certain, I thought, that she was hearing what she thought she had heard the night before.

That weekend night when I joined her in my first break, Ellen said, “Don’t you think you should tell your other friends what you’re doing? If they all come you can ask for a raise.”

After we had talked about it longer, while we sipped wine, we both thought it would be fun to ask some of our friends to come.

We must have passed the word effectively because only two nights later when I arrived to perform I was surprised to see that the little club was nearly filled. By the time I came out for my first turn all the tables were taken. There were even seven or eight people crowded together at some spots which formerly accommodated five. Some of the new customers I had noticed the second night had evidently advertised to their friends.

When I told the piano player that I would open with “Stormy Weather,” he smiled and agreed. We both thought, it seemed that we could not go wrong with that one.

There I was then, with the lights low and so many friends right there so close to me. I sang the first lines and had reached the end of the line”ain’t together.” In the next instant I was not together. I was on the street outside the club, being carried by my friend, Jack, to his car. I was too embarrassed even to comment.

Jack said little, only made soothing sounds as he got me into the car and drove the short distance to my apartment house. When he had parked he asked, “How do you feel now?”

I said a feeble, “O.K.” still more embarrassed when I recalled my collapse than I could remember ever having been before.

“Are you sure? Can you make it to the elevator?” He had one arm firmly around my shoulder.

I said, “Yes.” Despite the fact that I knew I was with a friend, someone with whom I had shared many happy times, I was still feeling extraordinarily foolish.

Jack was as sensitive as he was smart and sturdy. He kept his arm around me all the way upstairs without my feeling idiotic.

Once we had reached my apartment, I collapsed on the couch/bed, not because I was still feeling weak, but out of sheer embarrassment.

Jack sat beside me and said soothing words. “You’re just not cut out for that kind of business. I was surprised when I heard but—I thought if that was what you wanted— He stopped and turned my head gently so that he was looking directly into my eyes—it’s not your thing, nightclubs.

“I guess I proved that.” I answered.

He continued to murmur soothing words and gradually we were into more than words.

By the time he left, despite still suffering from having made an idiot of me, I no longer felt that I would never be able to face any of my friends again, knowing myself for the overconfident one that I had been.

Despite Jack’s counsel, by the next evening, I felt that I had to try to redeem myself, so I trotted off to the scene of my previous evening’s disgrace.

Mr. Proprietaire was not happy to see me. He looked as though he could not believe I thought he would take me back. “But you fainted—right at the beginning of your number.”

Not that my collapse would have been any more acceptable if it had occurred halfway through, I could not help thinking, as I watched his unbelieving face and recalled my shame.

We settled finally for his paying me for my brief stint.

As I walked toward the front door, the piano player appeared from a side room. He came close to me and said, “That song—it’s a bad one for a lot of people. I don’t know what it is but I’ve known singers who had no trouble with anything else— He looked genuinely concerned as he tried to understand and let me know he cared.

I said, “Thanks. I’m glad to know it wasn’t just—well, I think I was just scared thinking that all those people had come to hear me. I don’t think it was the song.”

Nick smiled. He tried still to console me. Looking serious, he said, “Sometimes I think nobody but Ethel Waters should ever do it. Like it’s her song.” He smiled a warm smile.

“You’re probably right.” I didn’t tell him that I remembered some other singers who had performed that number with great success. I knew now that the trouble was—as Jack had said—nightclub singing was just not my thing.

As I went toward the door, I said, “You helped me a lot and I do thank you—for as long as I lasted. All the best to you.”

Little as I did for myself, my adventure into night club singing did a great deal for the owner of that small club I learned the next week that Eartha Kitt had followed me on the stand.

## GUERRE-LAVIGNE

In spring 1951, the department for which I worked at the EPA was phased out. J-J had been back in Switzerland for several months. Without job or “significant other” I began to think of returning to New York. When I learned that the Marshall Plan would pay my way home, even though I had been hired in Paris and that I could wait a whole year to use my ticket, I decided to go to school to study Dressmaking and Design.

I chose to study at Guerre-Lavigne School of Dressmaking and Design probably because of its location, near the American Express and the Avenue de l’Opera and within walking distance of my residence at that time.

Courses offered included designing and creating garments, making patterns and finally transforming the tissue paper into a wearable piece.

The American Express office on rue de l’Opera yielded not only mail from home but was almost equally famous as a meeting place. Not that I ever heard a displaced American tell another, “You can find me at American Express” but unplanned meetings of great potential were apt to happen there all the time.

On the day that Emma Dean Webb came into my life I had completed my business at the mail window and was on my way towards the large revolving door which served as entrance and exit when this African-American lady, a little overweight but my height and color, approached, smiling.

“Hello. You’re American?” was her opening.

When I answered, “Yes,” her face broke into a wide happy grin. She told me that she was a hairdresser and had just come to Paris from Brussels where she had gone to study a new straightening process.

I confessed that I had just completed a year as a secretary with the Marshall Plan and was now thinking about returning home.

My happy assumption, when perfect strangers speak to me, is that it is because I have an open, friendly face but I realized almost instantly that Emma Dean had chosen me as the nearest non-Caucasian in sight:

therefore most likely to speak English. (She had not been in Paris long enough to be aware of the vast numbers of non-French people of assorted colors who also resided there.)

Whatever her reasons, this sturdy lady with the direct, open manner was standing next to me and we were making conversation.

After we had exchanged the usual biographical notes in the course of which I confessed to having been a social worker in New York, I mentioned that I was thinking now of going to school to study Dressmaking and Design.

“That’s wonderful.” Emma Dean said, beaming as though she had always looked forward to meeting someone with such a plan. Her enthusiasm took me by surprise. I asked why she approved so heartily.

She smiled again but this time at me. I could see, not with me.

“How many social workers do you see driving around in Cadillacs?” she asked. By then we were standing to one side of the exit so as not to interfere with the constant movement of visitor’s normal for that time of day at American Express.

“I never thought about it.” The truth was that I never thought about Cadillacs or any other car, with or without social workers as owner-drivers. “None, I guess.” I said finally.

“Of course not but dress designers.” She raised her eyes to heaven and left the rest to my imagination.

Emma Dean’s motive in approving my choice of new career with such enthusiasm was not entirely objective. I soon discovered. Although smartly dressed, she was stout for her height. Even in New York where she had lived before going to Brussels, she had probably encountered difficulty finding attractive clothes. In Paris, at that time, if stylish stout garments existed, they were a well kept secret.

Our exchange that morning marked the start of a friendship which endured for several years. The immediate result of our meeting was that Emma Dean suggested she would like to have me make her a dress for casual wear. Two days later she came to my hotel. I took her measurements and advised her on the amount of

fabric she should buy for the style dress she wanted. Our friendship survived despite the fact that I never saw her wear that garment.

My enrollment at Guerre-Lavigne led to many adventures, one of the most positive was meeting Anna Bell Brunner, from Pennsylvania. Anna Bell, physically, was the antithesis of Emma Dean. She was not only Caucasian, but small and wiry with shiny straight brown hair and a ready smile. She was a native of Pennsylvania. It had been so long since I had heard a Pennsylvania. It had been so long since I had heard a Pennsylvania accent that it was possibly the magnet which attracted me instantly to Annabel. Even though she had traveled all over the world, she sounded like someone from my childhood. (She had also been in the Army I learned long after we were back in the States.)

Anna Bell's father had left her sufficiently independent that she was able to follow her travel urges with minimum restraint. She looked and sounded like the "go-go" girl she was, a constant talker, always brimming with new ideas.

We shared a lack of enthusiasm for hat making which was how our course at Guerre-Lavigne began. Both of us had a sense of being betrayed, since nowhere in the school's course description had it stated that "Dressmaking and Design" began with hat-making. The fine fur felts we were given to work were a sensual delight but the soaking, blocking and shaping were as close to drudgery as I had ever come. When we learned on our first day in class about the hat making, I fantasized soft fabrics, malleable, easy to cut and drape. Each day of our hat production we wished fervently for the conclusion.

When my hat was finally completed to the instructor's approval, I mailed it to my mother. I was proud of it but its dressy formality did not fit into my student life. I was certain that mama would be the best hatted member of her church congregation. Her thanks were less than I had anticipated and for good reason.

"Thank you for the hat," she inserted into the middle of her next letter after my mailing. Then she added, "I had to pay \$12 duty."

All that I would have needed to do (I learned too late) was to tell the post office that the package was a gift. Although \$12 was a small fraction of what that creation might have cost at retail in New York. It was easy to understand that it would be a strain on mama's budget, especially since she had not asked for it.

Both Anna Bell and I were more enthusiastic about our training when we began to make dress and coat patterns in tissue paper, ultimately sewing them into garments.

Designing for me was a brief and disillusioning experience. My first production was an evening gown with top of sheer woolen fabric, skirt of velvet. Our young teacher showed near horror at her first glimpse of my drawing.

“Non, mademoiselle, pas possible.” She declared, regarding first me and then my drawing with an expression which wondered how on earth we had arrived in her class. It was not just done; she explained when she had overcome her horror, combing velvet and woolen fabrics.

Several weeks later, reading about one of the famous designer opening shows, I noted that his most sensational piece had been one which used the very fabrics about which my teacher had been nearly apoplectic—in an evening gown—the same bizarre notion I had had.

Just in time, when we had reached the stage of stitching our tissue pattern pieces together, I discovered, hidden and forgotten in a “safe” place in my dresser drawer, a check which the Marshall Plan had given me at discharge. It was enough, traded in the black market, to purchase a portable sewing machine.

Anna Bell had brought a sewing machine with her to Paris, along with a printing press and a variety of other items not likely to be included in the luggage of most passengers unless they had not only traveled by freighter, like Anna Bell, but also had as varied interests as she.

Except for Suki, an Indian student from the Belgian Congo, Anna Bell and I were the only English speaking students in the class. We three became closer than anyone of us would be to other classmates.

Suki's father grew fruit for export. This we all learned only the day after Suki had received by airmail an enormous box of assorted fruits. She brought pineapple, bananas, and varied citrus fruits to class. Our regular

class intermission lengthened considerably that day because the instructor volunteered to assist Suki in slicing the huge pineapple. There was a large portion for every one of the twenty or more in the class. Anna Bell and I agreed that we had never tasted such luscious fruit.

It was the probably the first time for most of us to taste exotic fruit which had been tree ripened.

In the middle of another school day, we were suddenly invaded by the Coca-Cola company. Whoever had been in touch with school administration to obtain permission to distribute samples must have been of enormous charm, or, more likely (Anna Bell speculated) had come bearing dollars. There had been a like incursion until that day. Without announcement, in the midst of the usual nearly noiseless creativity with the tissue paper, there were suddenly cans of Coca-Cola on the tables.

Anna Bell, Suki and I, working at the same table, exchanged whispers.

“What on earth is happening?” I wondered, as the open cans were dealt out to each table.

“We’ve been invaded.” Anna Bell said, smiling as she pinned. They’re hoping to turn all the wine drinkers into Coca-Cola addicts.

Suki smiled and said, “You don’t really believe that they could do that, do you?”

A plenitude of nearly full cans left on window sills and on the floor far from our work tables was the end of the experiment. Those who had hoped to convert the natives were, at least, able to recognize that they had the battle. Almost as quickly as the cans had appeared, they were removed.

During our drawing, pinning and cutting we had the opportunity for all kinds of exchanges. Suki, who was almost as brown as I, told us one day while we were chatting softly as we worked, that she had always been the least favored child in her large family because she not “look Indian.” She could smile about it as she told us but she said it was painful for years. Because she was light brown skinned, rather than the rich brown of most Indians, she had often been made to feel like a “found” child. Later, thinking back on that discussion, I thought she had shared this secret hurt with me because I was possibly the first person she had met who was almost the same color as she.

When there was a vacancy in the building where Anna Bell lived, within easy walking distance of our school, in the hub of the busy downtown area and not far from the historic Opera House, Anna Bell had no difficulty persuading me to there. When I had been let go at EPA, I had, of course, to quit my luxurious sublet of studio, kitchen and bath which came with the job.

My new residence, like Anna Bell's was on the third floor of what was otherwise a five story office building. Our landlady had been enterprising enough to acquire and furnish spaces for living which had formerly been large offices.

Anna Bell was at the front end of the hall, I closer to the center but we both had a view from our windows of the five way intersection at Avenue de l'Opera and four other lesser streets where there were always two policemen, standing back to back, and directing traffic. On weekends there was always at least one crash. I would fly to my window to witness the carnage. There was never any. After excited four way exchanges between the drivers and the law, each driver would get back in his vehicle and drive away.

Roy and Betty, from Australia, had a place on the other end of the floor which was twice as large as Anna Bell's and mine. Roy was a painter who worked in a studio he rented elsewhere in the city. Betty worked as a secretary and was in an advanced state of pregnancy when I moved into the building. The baby was scheduled to arrive on Christmas Eve, as was an old friend from Australia.

Early on the evening of the big day, Roy took Betty to the small private hospital where she was to deliver by the Lamaze method. From there he went to the railroad station to meet his friend, coming by rail from Orly.

Celebration of his friend's arrival and anticipation of the baby's coming was a devastating combination for Roy. When we knocked on his door the morning after, Roy told us that the baby was a girl and beautiful. He had not been present for any part of the birth—so much for Lamaze. Looking totally done in by his reunion celebration with his friend, Roy said, "It was just a bloody mess," when he arrived at the clinic.

French law required that parents register the birth of a child at City Hall within three days of the event. Roy celebrated for a little longer than three days and remembered what he had to do only after he had said goodbye and put his friend on the train. December 28<sup>th</sup> was the earliest date he could give.

Despite the fact that she would always have a birth date a few days later than was real truth, Roy and Betty's baby was beautiful. She had her coming out at a New Year's Eve party where she lay in her basket, making no complaint throughout the entire noisy evening.

Only a few months after the baby's birth, Roy heard from a dealer in London who was planning to come to Paris for a look at his paintings. Betty, when Roy showed her the note from London, was transported into a high state of excitement.

In the evening of the viewing day, Betty flew to open the door when she heard Roy's key in the lock.

"Well, how did it go?" She could hardly stand still for excitement, she told us later. She had stayed at her job as long as she was able to "waddle to it." Since the baby's birth, they had been managing on their savings only by being extremely careful.

So there she stood, a little taller than Roy, but thin and imperious, having regained her figure. "Tell me. What did he buy?"

Roy was too composed, as he came through the door. The news must not have been good, she thought. He was trying to think how to tell her the worst.

Finally, Roy said, "It went fine. He wanted several." He was well inside the apartment by then and identified for her the pieces which had caught the dealer's interest.

Betty was beside herself. "When will he be coming back?"

Still too calm. Roy answered. "He's not. I'm not going to sell them. Those are my best pieces. They'll be worth a lot more when I'm dead.

Betty relating this to Anna Bell and me later, said she did not believe what she had heard. When she was able to answer Roy, she burst out with, "The baby and I will be dead long before then."

It was only a few days later, however, that a social worker from the government came to verify information which enabled all parents of newborn French citizens to receive funds provided for them whether or not the parents needed the help. If the family income were more than that under which they were entitled to assistance, they would simply make repayment with their taxes at year's end.

"Tiny" Cooper, a French citizen, would not have to depend on daddy's sale of paintings in order to eat and be clothed. Betty shared with me her excitement and relief after the social worker's visit. There were no such benefits in Australia. And it seemed likely that Betty had never before seen a live social worker.

We all enjoyed entertaining our friends, even in our limited space. Once, the Loewensons and Danny came to my place to enjoy crepes suzettes made by my friend, Alain, who had not been immodest when he told me that his crepes were extraordinary.

Our cozy domesticities in those rooms around the corner from l'Opera ended finally and almost abruptly when Anna Bell confirmed a thought she had held for a long time—that Madame, as we always called her—was overcharging us outrageously. Anna Bell thought we should complain officially. When we all agreed, she took formal action. When Madame received the summons from court she was furious. She summoned Anna Bell to her apartment and among other pronouncements accompanying her declaration that she had no intention of lowering the rent, she said that she did not like having a "Negre" (me) in her house anyway. She blamed Anna Bell (rightly) for that and assumed that Anna Bell would be sufficiently intimidated to see that I moved.

Anna Bell reported to all four of us, sitting in Roy and Betty's living room—on her conference with Madame.

Roy said, "She's a crazy lady." He laughed a big laugh for a small man. "We're supposed to get you out," he said toward me, "while we stay and pay too much rent."

With little further discussion, the Coopers and Anna Bell decided that we would all leave.

Roy and Betty were the first to move and had the laugh on Madame because they left in the middle of the night without having paid rent for that month. Anna Bell and I, less planful, left only when we had lived out our already paid month.

## DENMARK AND NORMANDY

My acquaintance with Denmark, certainly one of the most exciting trips of the several I made while in Europe, came at the invitation of my friends, Rosemary and Paul Bauer.

Rosemary had been a shipmate in the Navy. She was plump, dark-haired and had beautiful, classic features. Her special skill which she had exercised for the benefit of all her friends was hair cutting. She would apply this talent whenever requested while those of us not being shorn sat and watched in awe. I was not among her clients. Not only did I have the wrong kind of hair, but I had also acquired a “piece” shortly after coming into the service. This provided hair in the back under the imposing Navy hat. Cutting would have been my least required attention.

Back in California after discharge, Rosemary had met and married Paul, then a teacher of music in a public school in Los Angeles. While Rosemary barely reached five feet, Paul was more than a head taller than and as handsome as she was winsome.

My visit to the Bauers in Heidelberg, Germany where Paul was teaching at a school for American children was the start of the trip to Denmark, which began with a crossing from Germany by ferry.

During the day and a half we spent together before departure for Denmark, we enjoyed reminiscing about Navy people and events as well as getting caught up on what was happening in our lives.

Rosemary had a store of tales to tell about her efforts to acclimatize herself to a new country and language. Shortly after I arrived I admired some beautiful cut flowers on a table in the living room and asked what they were. Rosemary said she did not know. Then she told me of the time when she had asked the woman who cleaned her apartment to identify some blossoms which she had bought just because they looked so gay.

“Totenblumen,” the woman answered. In the retelling, Rosemary laughed as heartily as though she had just heard the witticism. Her cleaning woman had not even tried to be delicate in suggesting that the flowers, whatever they were called, were ready to be discarded.

On my second day we took the ferry to Copenhagen, Rosemary and Paul promised that this trip would be exciting and it was. We were blessed with perfect weather for such a voyage and the only time we spent not admiring the vista was passed in the bar, enjoying (I for the first time) Danish beer.

On our second day we took the ferry to Copenhagen. Rosemary and Paul had promised that this trip would be exciting and it was.

As soon as we had deposited our light luggage in the hotel rooms, we set off exploring Copenhagen which I thought the most beautiful city I had ever seen. With the waterways and the statuary there was nothing dull or prosaic in any direction.

For lunch we all had open-faced shrimp sandwiches—whether they had been suggested by our waiter or why we all chose the same fare I do not now recall but when they came we were all three impressed by the number of tiny shrimp the kitchen had been able to pile onto one slice of bread.

That evening we visited a cousin of Paul’s. Paul had telephoned when we arrived. We were urged to come at once.

While we were freshening up at our hotel we were all three first trapped, then awed by the ingenuity of the Danes in the area of plumbing. With the drain for shower plumb in the center of the bathroom floor, cleaning the bathroom must have been a snap for the maids, we decided, and would result also in considerable saving of water. Even more imaginative were the flushing devices on the toilets.

Soon after we had been shown to our rooms Rosemary knocked on my door. She was hardly inside when she began, in a state of agitation unusual for her.

“Have you found out yet out to flush the toilet?” she asked while walking toward the bathroom. “Paul is almost jumping up and down and any minute he will probably start cursing. How on earth does it work?” As she

talked she was staring at the two chains over the toilet. They were joined by a small metal cross bar. When one used two hands and pulled them together, nothing at all happened.

Rosemary and I had played with the knobs for only a few seconds when we discovered that they were labeled “small” and “large.” That which bore the “small” title produced a tiny trickle of water. We were delighted to find then that the “large” did exactly what it said, emitting a veritable waterfall.

Rosemary chuckled, as she left the room. “Wait until Paul hears about this.”

Paul’s cousin lived in an apartment house which, following her clear directions, we had no difficulty finding. When she opened the door I was struck with how much she resembled the picture I had always cherished of a real Scandinavian, tall, blond and robust. Her smile reached out to embrace all three of us in welcome.

When I saw the dining room to which she led us, the meaning of smorgasbord struck me as though I had been hit. For all of my adult life, as long as I had known the word, I had always assumed the translation to be snacks. When one went to a restaurant specializing in smorgasbord—did the natives really mean “bread and butter” when they said “smorgasbord?” Those were the words used when we had been invited.

At first glance it seemed there was not one inch of space left on that table. Never had I seen in one place such a collection of meats, fishes, cheeses, fruits and vegetables—to say nothing of breads—all, of course, cut or sculpted in sizes and shapes to be eaten out of hand. Then, of course, there were so many bottles of potables. The total effect was a picture whose shapes and colors might have been produced by an artist.

After each of us had been urged individually to sample each of the goodies which filled that table. Mrs. Gunersen then reached for the “schnappes.” By then I think that not one of us could have said, “No, thank you,” even though we were stuffed. It was perfectly clear that sharing something from at least one of the bottles would be the climax of the meal.

Just as I had always seen in the movies, if one were to be polite, the whole glass must be downed without pause. We all did.

All three of us must have been guarded that night by indulgent angels because, overfed and uncertain as we were, Paul was still able to get us to our hotel and even find the parking area.

In the morning we visited the home of Hans Christian Anderson and after we had stood a long time, recalling in silence the rapturous states into which reading his tales had thrown us, Paul announced that we would have dinner that night in the finest restaurant we could find. Neither Rosemary nor I offered objection.

We went to a supper club where there was an orchestra. Our meal was superb, the ambience perfect and we were at the coffee stage when a tall, well-proportioned native approached and asked Paul if he might dance with me. In my mind I was already on the dance floor, twirling under the leadership of this Adonis when I heard Paul saying “No” with a brusqueness I could not have imagined from him.

Rosemary and I exchanged glances. She had the faintest beginning of a smile, but when she turned to face Paul she was serious. We were all silent for a few seconds.

Finally, Rosemary asked, “And what did he do wrong?”

Paul did not smile. “Why didn’t he bring his own partner?” He looked as though he wanted to say more but desisted. Both Rosemary and I recognized that further discussion would be not only fruitless but possibly disagreeable.

We sat for a few minutes longer, enjoying the ambience and watching the dancers on the spacious floor. Paul had decided that it was time to leave and had just summoned the waiter when one of the diners from nearby, also obviously a native, approached our table.

Rosemary and I exchanged “not again” glances.

But this went differently. This gentleman, equally as blonde and handsome as the first, approached and began, “You will excuse me, but I have been watching you for some time. You are visitors, yes?” When he paused, Paul nodded.

“I should like so much to invite you to my club. It’s not far from here. Will you come?”

As we talked en route to his club, it became apparent that our friend knew a lot about our country and customs. He had visited in the States and seemed to have an enormous hunger to know what was happening in whatever part of the States we knew.

When we felt that it was finally time to say “Goodnight” Mr. X, was precise in his direction giving. We knew that, with such clarity, we should arrive home without incident.

We were ready to leave when our host took my hand and bending over, kissed it, as he said, “It has been such a pleasure to have you.”

I could not miss the sly smile Rosemary wore as we went to the car. As soon as we were inside the vehicle, she smiled openly and said, “You really took over the town tonight, girl.”

I did not know then what I learned some time later—that Scandinavian men, especially Danes, are particularly drawn to brown-skinned women.

During my last year at the Marshall Plan, just in time for my vacation, Rosemary and Paul, along with Paul’s sister, Mary, stopped in Paris to include me in a trip they were making to the Normandie coast.

Mary and I meeting for the first time at the start of the Normandie trip struck up an easy roommate relationship. Mary had been in the Army during the war. We did not discuss our experiences in that time, but the fact that we both had had them, was a bond.

Our trip was not only scenic, but also instructive, in that we learned that the natives of that area were no longer angry at Americans. As we drove through several small towns near the coast one would never have known that our troops had penetrated those areas.

The townspeople, clad in picture-book outfits, (their everyday wear) lined the sidewalks and waved to us. Paul, negotiating the car through the narrow streets with one hand, waved back. Long before we had reached the end of the welcoming throng, he said, grinning, “I like this. When we get back to California, I’m going to get a big car and go driving through the streets of Los Angeles so all the natives will wave.”

When Rosemary suggested that he looked as though he were running for office, Paul opined that he might have to do just that in order to get the folks back home to wave.

Mont St. Michel, site of centuries old monastery, was to be our last stop en route back to Paris. But, plebians that we were, equally important was the lunch we anticipated having at Mere Poulard, the restaurant near the monastery, famous for its omelettes.

We were all disappointed when we woke on our last morning to a pouring rain, the only bad weather we had experienced in our several days on this trip. We remained happy captives in the hotel lobby for a long time after we had finished breakfast while we waited for Paul to bring the car.

“What do you suppose has happened to him?” Rosemary fretted aloud at one point. She knew that he did not have to go too far because the parking area was immediately behind the hotel.

After what seemed hours, Paul finally came back to the lobby and told us brusquely to follow him. It would be too awkward to have to bring the car to the hotel door.

“Where were you?” Rosemary fretted. “It seemed you were gone for hours.”

Paul was still angry. “Even though I told them we’d be leaving early” he threw over his shoulder as he led us toward the front entrance “they must have parked a dozen cars in front of mine.”

“So what did you do to get out finally?” Rosemary asked.

“I jumped up and down and yelled, ‘Mouvez-vous, mouvez-vous,’ that’s what I did.” As we watched and listened, it looked as though he might just begin again, jumping all of his six feet “up and down” and yelling. He was still so angry. The three of us tried to look anywhere but at each other because the vision we had of Paul jumping up and down would not allow us to do otherwise and keep straight faces. And we knew that if we laughed at that moment we might never continue our travels.

During the hours it took to make the drive to the Mont, the rain never ceased. Mary and I had become expert; by the time we reached the site of the monastery, in balancing the paper cups we were holding aloft to catch the drops from two leaks in the car’s canvas roof.

Paul, after we had found a parking place among what appeared to be hundreds of cars near the monastery, stopped and we all sat for awhile, waiting for the rain to stop. After a few minutes he announced, "I'm not going anywhere. I'll just here and wait for anybody who wants to walk in the rain. I'm already damp enough."

He exaggerated more than slightly; of course, it was not raining onto the front seat. But he sounded as though his soul were wet.

Rosemary protested. "You would drive all this way and not even get out of the car to see what we came to see?"

"Yes," Paul's answer was even firmer than his earlier comments had been. "I'm wet enough."

Rosemary was laughing gently. "But, Paul, you're not wet at all. You haven't been anywhere to get wet."

It was true. The water dripping into the car was coming into the center, closer to the back seat and Mary and I had caught every drop with our paper cups.

Paul was still staring straight ahead. "Anybody who wants to see the Abbey can go. I'll just sit here wait."

Not one of us was eager to visit the monastery in what promised to be a damp expedition. But we had driven all morning after a deliberately light breakfast, in anticipation of enjoying one of the famous Mere Poulard omelettes, as described in the Guide Michelin.

After the three of us had conferred, Rosemary said to Paul, "We'll just go and have some lunch then. If you change your mind, look for us in the restaurant."

Paul only grunted to indicate that he had heard, then took out a book from the glove compartment and without even saying, "Bon appetit," began to read. The probability of his joining us seemed remote.

After we had worked out wet way up to the restaurant and waited to be seated we discussed the possibility of Paul's changing his mind and coming to join us. We agreed that it was unlikely, but, just for safety's sake we told the hostess when she was showing us to our seats that we might be joined by a tall, stout

gentleman. Rosemary said she did not know if he would ask for us by name. I added, in French, that the gentleman was my friend's husband, certain that if the hostess sensed a lover's quarrel and that a reunion might be effected over one of Mere Poulard's omelettes, we would have engaged her, heart and soul. From the way she smiled as she handed us the menus, I knew that the drama was proceeding according to our plan.

Our omelettes were all that the guidebook had promised. We ate slowly, with frequent glances toward the door, anticipating that at any moment Paul would appear and our little party would be complete.

When we had finished eating and had sat as long as seemed reasonable, we asked for a check, paid and left.

At the end of a muddy trip back to the car, there was no Paul. We climbed inside and rearranged us, Mary and me in our water catching positions. It seemed hours had gone by when Paul finally appeared—furious. Not only had he gone to Mere Poulard's but he had also taken the tour of the Abbey, expecting to meet us at any moment. He was now wetter and madder than when we had left him.

“But we told you we wouldn't take the tour?” Rosemary said.

“So where were you?” Paul was steaming, as he turned the key in the ignition. Rosemary explained that we had been at pains to tell the hostess top watch out for him and that we had kept our eyes on the door, almost constantly while we ate.

Paul said nothing. We never knew what happened, whether the hostess shift had changed before we left or if Paul had come while we were still there and been seated so quickly that he had no opportunity to glance over the large room.

The rest of the trip back to Paris was without conversation for many miles.

## ADVENTURES WITH ELLEN

After I began to work for the Marshall Plan, Ellen and I met often for lunch. This led frequently to various small expeditions. One day I was meeting her in a new restaurant. Long concentrated study of the dining room failed to reveal my friend. Finally, when I had become almost completely disheartened and was ready to leave, I caught a glimpse of someone about Ellen's height and shape in the distance, waving frantically. I recognized the wave and, soon, the face.

I almost ran towards her. I was so relieved. She began explaining as soon as I was within earshot.

"I wanted a new hairstyle." She was laughing so hard she could hardly talk. "I told the hairdresser after he had washed my hair. He got hysterical." By now we were being seated. "Madam—I cannot do what you want with all this black hair. It will not be beautiful—with black hair." Ellen was such a good mime I could see the scene in every detail.

"So finally I said, 'Make it lighter then' and he did."

With the explanation it all came clear. Within the last twenty-four hours she had become a redhead. But the difference was radical.

We had our lunches and by the time we had finished, I was becoming reconciled to having a red-headed friend. Well, not quite red, but light auburn—an unsettling change from black.

After lunch Ellen took me to one of the famous couture houses to see what goodies we could pick up from the end of season sale. I had expected to be awed and possibly intimidated because of the name and what I knew of the reputation of the house. When we reached the floor (one flight up) where the remainders were being sold, I went into a different kind of shock. All those beautiful garments which I had expected to see on hangers were thrown about on tables and customers were snatching by color, it seemed. There was no way to see whether a piece was becoming or the right size until it was extricated.

Ellen and I dug out several articles and I was in process of trying on a jacket while my own lay on the table because there was no place else to put it. Fortunately I looked around. At almost the same instant as I turned from the mirror in which I was checking the fit of the couturier piece, another customer had taken my jacket and was walking off with it. I almost wailed, “No, not that. That’s my suit.”

The woman looked at me as if I were someone just in from a crazy house. When she loosened her grip on my jacket sufficiently I took it and showed her that it had no price tag that it had another name than that of the house we were in and furthermore it matched the skirt I was wearing. She did have the grace to smile as she walked away.

Ellen had stood on the side watching the drama. When I said, “I don’t think I need anything here if my jacket looks good enough to blend in with the merchandise,” she smiled impishly and said, “I think you’re right. Let’s get out.”

It was not more than three days later that Ellen called me at home, at the nearly posh apartment I had been occupying since I had become an employee of the United States Government.

I was surprised because we saw each other so often that there was hardly any necessity to exchange telephone calls.

After “Hello,” her voice became strained. “Would you believe this?”

I could not resist saying, “I don’t know whether—until I hear what.”

“It isn’t funny. Your husband tried to come on to me at a party last night.”

I did not know what to answer because, of course, I was not as surprised as Ellen thought I should be. Tension prevailed. I laughed.

Ellen reacted almost angrily at my laugh. “It wasn’t funny. He knows we’re friends. It was a good party and I was enjoying myself until, all of a sudden—it’s not just that we’re friends. Dick helped him get settled when he first came” Her voice was becoming more and more strained.

“Ellen—what can I say? I guess I never told you enough about Joe.” It was only then that it struck me like a cold towel in the face that much as Ellen and I had come to like each other, she had probably thought until now that there must be something wrong with me that I could not have kept that charming man. Until last night, that is.

“If you can bear it, I’ll tell you more about Joe when I see you.” We had already arranged to meet for dinner.

Ellen said, “O.K. But I still think he’s crazy.”

“You’re right again.” I said. After only a few more words we ended the conversation.

One of the most bizarre, but equally fun adventures Ellen and I shared was the time when she invited me to see the summer place she and Dick had just taken in the mid-west of France, just across the border from Switzerland.

Julia was still in school in Switzerland but Ellen had arranged with the “bonne” who cared for Rachel, still not even ready for pre-school, to take Rachel home with her in the country. Thus, the “bonne” would have a holiday, in a sense, while Rachel would be cared for.

Asked if she knew how to get from Paris to her home, Candace, bright-eyed, intelligent and eager, said, “Ah, oui, Madame.” She said it with assurance which Ellen never thought of questioning.

Ellen’s mistake was not to have acquired a map before starting on the trip. She knew, of course, the best way to get out of the city and onto the road which would lead to Candace’s home. But that was all and that was the beginning of the problem.

When we had reached the first small town Candace named, Ellen turned to the back and asked, “Which way do we go now?”

Candace, honest face aglow, named another town. The road signs indicated that it was easily reached. Ellen proceeded onto that town.

When we had been following this pattern for almost an hour. Ellen drove up a hill road by mistake. As soon as the car was in the ruts not made by ordinary traffic she recognized her error and said, “Uh, oh.” To show how wrong we were, there in front of us in the road was a rabbit. He was sitting up on his hind legs, which the question on his little furry face, “Who are you and what are you doing in my neighborhood?” He was even too surprised to run. He looked, in fact, as though never before, in all his short life, had he seen an automobile.

Ellen turned towards me and together we enjoyed a laugh which may have been heartier than any either of us had had in days. After that, Ellen backed down from the rabbit’s road. He scurried away as soon as we began to move, even though we were leaving him.

“Candace,” Ellen turned and said, “Have you ever gone to Paris or come home from there by car?”

Ellen turned toward me and barely repressed her laugh. “You know now that we will have to make it make all the train stops on the way to Candace’s town. I just hope we make it before dark.”

Rachel, in happy innocence in the back, was the only member of our party who was having a good time. She had, as little ones will, picked up one question her mother had put to Candace and was repeating it happily, like a mantra, oblivious of whatever else was happening around her. “Nous allons a l’est ou a l’ouest? Nous allons a l’est ou a l’ouest?” She swung her doll in tune to her song and was unquestionably having more fun than anybody.

“Do you know what we’ve been doing?” Ellen asked, turning just enough from the road to catch my glance.

“I begin to suspect.”

“If you suspect that we are going to have to touch every little town on the train route to this child’s home, you are right.”

We were too far into the country without a map to change our route, so we made small forays into each place Candace remembered, until, at last, we arrived at her town. She was able, of course, to provide directions to her house where we happily deposited her and Rachel.

As soon as we had dropped off Candace and Rachel, Ellen's next move was to pick up a map from a gas station so that we would not have the same difficulty on the return trip. She commented as she looked at it fondly. "I don't know what possessed me that I didn't do this on the way out."

Julia, the older of Ellen and Dick's two children, was five and not a talkative child when I first met her. She smiled when she greeted me, but usually seemed preoccupied with her play things or, from time to time, would be reading a book.

One afternoon which started out the same as most when I was visiting Ellen turned into a surprise and a lesson for me. Julia, sitting across the room from me, suddenly came over to where I sat, placed her arm beside mine, suddenly came over to where I sat, placed her arm beside mine, so that both were resting on the arm of my chair, then said, her voice rising happily. "You're the same color as me." Her face glowed as she regarded the match.

I could only say, "So I am." But the meaning of her comment struck me with force and sadness. In all her five years, or at least for as long as she had been conscious of differences, this child had never seen anyone of her own coloring. There was her mother who was white and her father who was dark brown. Those friends who had come to the home since she had been old enough and alert enough to notice were Caucasian or, if of other races, not at all close to her color.

When I had absorbed the full meaning of what she was saying, I smiled and moving my arm closer to hers, said, "We certainly are the same."

Only a few days after that discovery, Julia had an experience which must have been much more exciting for her than finding that she and I matched.

Barbara de Passe came to Paris with her daughter, Suzanne, then about the same age as Julia. They visited Ellen and Barbara mentioned that she hoped to take Suzanne to the circus. She thought Julia might enjoy going along with them. On the day of that visit Julia was probably too shy to make conversation with someone she had just met, but she and Suzanne were exactly the same color and from across the room where I watched, it

was apparent that finding someone her own age like herself was considerably more exciting to Julia than discovering a light brown adult.

Ellen was happy to have Julia go with the de Passes to the circus and I was lucky enough to be invited also because Ellen was not free on the day Barbara had proposed.

That circus visit was one of the most exciting I had ever had, not only because I still found circuses as much fun as I had when I was the age of the two little girls, but more importantly, I had not seen Julia look so happy in all the time I had known her. Her gaze went back and forth from the ring and the activity above it to the little companion beside her. Later, when we had all gone our separate ways, I realized that Julia was probably the first child her own age, or perhaps the only child of any age Suzanne had met all during her first visit to Paris. It was no wonder that they were both so beautiful to watch together.

## LAST DAYS IN PARIS

My last apartment in Paris, fled to after all four of us had left the building owned by “Madame LaFarge” (as we began to call her) was above a shop owned by a friend of J-J’s.

On the first floor of her establishment Adrienne, J-J’s friend, had an “art” shop. “Art,” I discovered, meant that she carried all manner of goods which varied from the highly desirable and useful, such as vanity cases to the strictly fantastical or true “art” objects which it was difficult to imagine anyone setting out to acquire deliberately.

I found Adrienne charming when J-J took me to meet her and to look at the available apartment. She laughed softly and often. Later I would wonder if I should have been concerned about that laugh. I thought the apartment over the store adequate, although barely “furnished” as it had been advertised. Until the showing Adrienne had occupied that space herself. Neither she nor J-J said why she moved downstairs to a space off the shop but after I had been in residence for several days I learned that she actually had only one room on that level which was suitable for sleeping.

I said “Yes” to renting almost as soon as we had taken one look around. There was a living-bedroom, furnished with a pull-out bed which took on the guise of a couch during the day, a dresser, two straight chairs and one for lounging. The kitchen seemed to have all that one would need to operate effectively in that area.

The bath was heavenly, compared to other spaces provided for the same purposes which I had come across earlier in Paris.

Several days later when I moved into the apartment, it was somewhat disconcerting to note that most of the furniture had gone from the living-bedroom. The “living” part had effectively been wiped out. What remained was the couch-bed and a chest, somewhat smaller than the chest I had seen on my earlier visit.

My newspaper reporter friend, Jack, who had teased me mercilessly because I had not known that a Hunter College graduate had one year been “Miss America” came to inspect my new quarters, at my invitation,

looked around (one could make a complete survey of the whole apartment in one wide glance) and pronounced it “Spartan.” “It looks nun-ish,” he said, frowning a little.

He sat then on the edge of the couch, smiling. “You could give some rip-roaring parties here. Nearly everybody would have to sit on the floor.” He tilted his head while he considered the idea and a wry smile grew wider. “It would be pretty hard seating, of course. Did she take the rug, too?”

I didn’t answer that, judging it only rhetorical, but he discovered for himself when he followed me into the kitchen, that I had had to buy some essentials, just for breakfast preparation.

After Jack left my irritation began to grow and rose to the point where I decided to go downstairs and confront my landlady. She was smiley, as usual, until she learned the purpose of my visit.

“It would be nice,” I said, “to have at least one comfortable chair in the living room and maybe another straight one in the kitchen—just in case I want to have a guest sometime.”

Adrienne was no less cordial, outwardly, than she had been when she had shown me the fully furnished apartment, even though I knew well that she had taken the missing pieces downstairs for her own comfort wherever she bunked, behind the store.

“Oh, I’m really sorry.” She said, all smiles. “Of course you need some chairs. I’ll have someone bring them up later.”

It was by my third day under Adrienne’s roof that I learned that I could not receive telephone calls when she was not at home. My instrument was an extension of the one in the shop and when she was not there, only the message recorder worked.

I had thought it strange that in three days nobody had called me, but it was not until a close friend complained that she always got the answering machine, that I realized how “off” my place was.

It seemed “picky” to tell J-J about the manner in which the furnishings had been reduced but I was concerned about not being connected to a telephone unless my landlady was in her shop (or behind it). The telephone, after all, had been a solid selling point among the features of the apartment.

Several days of complaining were required to succeed in getting my extension in operation during the time Adrienne was out.

J-J expressed true chagrin when he recognized that his friend had wanted to collect the rent for her apartment (which evidently was badly needed because the shop was not doing as well as she had anticipated) but had been unwilling to make any concessions to her tenants.

His smile was wry (to put it mildly) when he said the day after we had finally arranged for me to be able to make and receive calls even when Adrienne was out of the shop. “I never imagined that she would be like that.”

“How much did you talk about the renting of her apartment?” I wondered.

“Not much.” J-J admitted. “She’s really a close friend of another friend. He told me she wanted to rent her upstairs.”

I felt a little better, knowing, at least, that I had not been flim-flammed by my good friend.

As the weeks went by, I began to appreciate more and more the positive aspects of a neighborhood which I knew and felt comfortable in—not too far from my early address before I had moved to the Right Bank. Then, except for the sad cries of the mourning doves which, for some reason, seemed to love the roof outside my living-bedroom, the atmosphere was pleasant. There were no buildings for some distance higher than the one in which I lived, so that in the morning I knew, even lying in bed, what kind of day it would be.

By the time I was ready to leave that apartment, I had even had some friends (only one at a time because of the limited seating arrangements) over. Suki, my classmate from Guerre-Lavigne, came one to show me how to make Indian bread. As limited as were my kitchen facilities, they were adequate for Suki to demonstrate her cooking skills and we enjoyed what might have been called “high tea” as a result of her labors.

One evening I had a call from a friend of my mother’s who was in Paris for the first time. He was a travel agent and had decided that it was time for him to see some of the places he had, for a long time, been sending his clients to visit. He asked me to suggest a place for dinner.

I had had no other such night in the nearly three years I had been in Paris. First, Mr. Lewis asked me to choose the restaurant where we would have dinner. He suggested that I forget that I had been living as a student. Accordingly, I selected a place where I had always wanted to go but was always wary about because, famous as it was, it was also reputed to be expensive.

I was relieved, once we had been seated and had had a chance to scan the menu to see that the prices were no higher than some of the places I had gone to with Ellen when I was working.

Mr. Lewis shocked me, however, when, after I had recommended several dishes (which I knew from other restaurants) he said he thought he would have a steak and French fries. “But you can have that anytime—the best—at home.” I was not just disappointed, but flabbergasted. I suggested one or two dishes which were truly French.

He only looked at me, smiling, but not buying. “But I like steak.”

“You mean there isn’t anything else at all on the menu which sounds interesting.”

He continued to smile, now looking at me as though he was considering whether it was I who had a problem.

It seemed better not to press further.

As we ate, he wondered when I planned to come back to the States. “Your mother misses you very much, you know.”

“I plan to return in the spring—by early summer, at least.”

“Good. She’ll be so happy.”

I explained that my job had ended quite some time ago, that the course I had been taking since then was now completed and that, for sometime, I had had no “significant other.” It seemed a good time to leave Paris.

After dinner Mr. Lewis suggested that we go to a nightclub. The idea had never occurred to me but there was one just around the corner from the restaurant. Montmartre, the section where we found ourselves, was famous, in fact, for its nightlife.

Modest and almost quiet as were the pictures and legends on the outside of the establishment, behind the closed front doors one entered another world, never to be imagined from walking along the street, like any other street in a working class area.

There was activity on the stage when we entered and it could be heard, though not seen from the lobby. Once inside, the atmosphere was reminiscent of a small private club. Tables were close, but just far enough apart to avoid the sense of crowding.

Pearls were evidently a trademark of the costumes worn during the sketch on stage as we entered. One had the sense that the whole place was filled with those tiny jewels. They were stitched on all the skirts which were long in the back, brief in the front.

Mr. Lewis ordered a bottle of champagne from the waiter who lingered after he had seated us, waiting to hear what he could bring.

I thought to myself, “You’re really whooping it up” but discreetly refrained from comment for which I was glad when, as soon as the waiter had disappeared, my companion volunteered:

“It’s better to just go all out at the beginning. It looks as though we might want to stay for the whole show. One drink won’t last long and the service will be better.”

He was absolutely right. We did stay much longer than I had anticipated we would. I had barely entered when I observed that there was a substantial fee demanded for powdering one’s nose, even if that were the purpose, literally, for entering that splendid little room.

“You were quick like a bunny.” Mr. Lewis laughed, when I came back to our table.

I admitted that I had retreated in embarrassment because in my surprise at seeing him and my delight at being asked out to dinner, I had not checked to see how much I was carrying in my purse. It was less than the establishment decreed as the worth of admission to their restroom.

Mr. Lewis was reaching for his wallet, even as he laughed at my description of my plight.

“No, thank you. That was dumb. Nobody should leave home without money...” I said.

By this time he had placed a 500-franc bill on the table.

“Nonsense. You should take advantage of all this place has to offer.” He laughed quietly. “Go back and bring me a full report.”

When he put it that way, I had no compunction about accepting his bill and going back up the elegant staircase. The trip was worth return. Not only did the furnishings go well with the pearl-studded costumes we had just seen, but the floors, the walls and all the equipment were the newest and most beautiful I had ever seen in any restroom in France or even in the United States.

I came back with the full report requested. “It was worth the price of admission.” I laughed.

“Aren’t you happy that you didn’t let modesty overcome you?”

“You bet I am,” I said. “The elegance of that place will stay with me for a long time.”

When we finally left the club, I had to admit that I had not spent an evening so full of surprises in all the time that I had been in Paris.

“I’m glad,” Mr. Lewis said, “And I was certainly lucky to have you for a guide. I’ll tell your mother she can expect you soon, but that you’re doing very well here.”

“Thank you for that and for the evening.”

Only a few weeks later, when I was ready to leave my apartment and Paris, I have what I called a “house-calling.” I explained to each guest as I extended the invitation that everybody gave house-warmings but I was proud of the idea which had come to me after considerable thought about how to dispose of what I did not intend to pack for transporting back to New York.

One friend who came to that evening was delighted to inherit my ironing board. I had learned how many ways one could find to do without one, but it had been an absolute necessity for my course in dressmaking. All the guests (there were only eight) were pleased, in fact, with what I had to pass on to them. Only Jack raised his eyebrows and looked quizzical when he opened his package of pine soap.

“Did you decide that I needed more washing?” he laughed.

I was flabbergasted. “Of course not. It reminds me of you—clean, fresh and woody.”

He accepted that, but still with some reservations. “Clean and fresh? Sounds like an advertisement.” He smiled then. “But woods and grass. Somebody gave it to me. It’s not very feminine.”

“Okay.” He re-wrapped his soap. “That last reason is a good one, I accept.”

Jack and I had always enjoyed small jokes at each other’s expense—mostly mine. On one date with him, I had left some knitting in his car. He had teased me about that on several dates after that.

“And what are you knitting these days?” he would ask. “Mittens for kittens? And where do you keep the kittens?”

When I was ready to pack for my return to New York I had only most of what I had brought, plus a few pieces of French clothing, one or two ceramic items by famous artists and a small collection of kitchen ware which I had had to acquire because Adrienne had removed hers. I was determined that she should not inherit them. They were modest but by the time I was ready to leave I had become quite fond of them. Besides which I had no desire whatsoever to contribute anything at all to relieve the bareness which had greeted me when I took the apartment.

## STATESIDE AGAIN

Re-entering the workplace in New York after three years abroad was not without its problems. But almost before I had unpacked, I began to look for work.

On the day after my arrival I had my first interview—with the head of an old established adoption agency. Mrs. Director was gracious and interested in my history but made little effort to conceal her doubts about the seriousness of anyone who would take three years off to “vacation” in Europe. I had not said I was vacationing but did not feel impelled to relate all the details of my life which had led up to and included those three years in France.

When I finally came to the Brooklyn Bureau of Social Service (later the Brooklyn Family and Children’s Service) I met a social work director of a different stripe. She said, “What a wonderful idea—to take three years off. You should bring a good deal which is refreshing to the job.”

I was hired as a social worker in foster care. In addition to publicizing the need for foster parents and recruiting suitable families—by means of printed material and speeches to club groups and churches, my job was to visit homes in which the agency had children, both to check on the child’s progress and to support the family if problems arose. Being on staff in foster care implied being available at all times to help new parents.

There were aspects of that job which remain intriguing even now. Would-be foster parents usually applied by mail, completing a brief questionnaire supplied by the agency. Mrs. Clemons, one of our most loving and effective foster mothers wrote in answer to the question “age child desired” that she would like a “baby.” Her children were school age and, she added at the bottom of the form, “We have a washing machine.”

When I visited in response to Mrs. Clemon’s application I met a bubbly Caucasian woman with two small boys living in a low-income housing project. Her address was in Bensonhurst, a long subway ride from our office on Schermerhorn Street. Mr. Clemons was a lawyer but had not yet passed the bar, was working as a court clerk.

“We can’t offer you a baby at this time.” I explained. “Not that many infants come into our care. But how would you feel about taking a little three-year old girl?”

Her face lighted up as I described the child for whom we needed a home. She said, “That would be fun. The boys will like having a sister.” Her sons, aged five and seven, had been standing on either side of their mother’s chair, faces all expectant, from the time of my arrival. She had kept them home from school this day so I could meet them.

Then came what I had anticipated would be the hard part. “You should know, though, that the little girl is American Indian. Both her parents are Indians. Until recently they all lived on a reservation.”

Mrs. Clemons’ response to that was, “Does she have two of everything she’s supposed to have—two eyes, two arms, nothing different from other children?”

I had to laugh at her manner of expressing complete acceptance. I said, “She’s a beautiful child but you should know that she will stand out as different.”

I gave further background about Linda, trying to prepare the brand new foster mother for what might be a difficult task, caring for a child whose parents were fighting each other for custody.

Not only Mrs. Clemons but also her husband and the boys were all delighted with the addition to their family, I learned on the first visit I made after I had brought Linda. Mrs. Clemons did not even want to throw in the towel after Linda’s father had come to visit, asked to take her out for awhile and kept her far beyond the time agreed upon for her return.

When I saw her after that crisis, our new foster mother did not try to disguise the anxiety she had suffered with Linda’s father’s visit. “I didn’t want to call the agency emergency number. I could see the police coming and my kids frightened out of their wits.” She spread her hands in front of her to indicate total perplexity. “So I chewed my nails until after dark.” (It was summer so “after dark” was pretty late.) My kids were both worried sick and trying not to cry. Then, just when I had decided I had to call the emergency number, the bell rang and there was Mr. Flood with Linda. She looked fine, just tired.”

Then Mrs. Clemons told the story of the remarkable night as told to her by Linda's father.

“He was so happy to see her again and looking so good that he took her all over New York to meet his friends. Two or three bars were on the route. That's where his friends were...” She tried to smile at the recollection of Mr. Flood's story but it came out as only a half smile. “He said that in the bars he would put her up on the counter for all the patrons to admire. He just didn't know how much time had gone by.”

When the Children's Court, a few months later, gave custody of Linda to her mother, we place with Mrs. Clemons a little boy about a year younger than her older son. His mother was psychotic and as a result of her problems, Alan had become an extremely insecure child.

It was apparent from the moment that we met in his temporary foster home that Alan felt he needed to work hard to make people like him. In the taxi which we took to the agency, he told me how to make French fried potatoes which he said he “loved.” “First,” he said, “you take some erl.” This was my introduction to an authentic Brooklyn accent. Even though I had often read about that phenomenon and heard those distortions of vowels in comedic plays about Brooklyn, Alan was the first person I had heard who naturally spoke this way. He described the entire process of making French fries in such a way that even a novice, following his directions, would produced a tasty dish.

With Alan who had spent most of his few years with a mentally ill mother, Mrs. Clemons gave the impression, even while telling me her feeling of being unfairly judged, that she probably exercised both delicacy and firmness in her response to Alan's mother.

At school the problems Alan had always had of not being certain he was loved and wanted, appeared in a new form. His teacher called Mrs. Clemons one day, puzzled that Alan insisted on kissing her every morning before he would take his seat in the classroom. The other children tittered and she was embarrassed. She wondered if the foster mother couldn't do something about that behavior.

Mrs. Clemons had to reassure Alan's mother each time she visited that he loved her more than anyone and to tell his teacher that, in time, Alan would be sure enough of her fondness for him that he would not need to kiss her every morning. Perhaps she could his demonstrations until that time.

Back at the office another social worker used to despair at the trials which befell a family she had worked with from the time the children were placed in foster care after their mother was hospitalized as a result of a severe heart condition. In happy contrast to so many of the families which came to our attention, this was one was intact. With the aid of the Welfare Department, mother, father and the three children were located in an adequate apartment when the mother was released from the hospital.

As the social worker related, no sooner had the family been reunited, than the mother's symptoms reappeared. Speculation pointed to the unhappy truth that the burden of a family was just more than she could tolerate. Lucille Hanson, responsible for the family, was one of the most skilled practitioners in the agency. Not only did she always seem secure in what she was doing, but she was often able to give a boost to a less experienced or wilting co-worker. Somewhat overweight for her height, brown-skinned and round-faced, Lucille exuded confidence and reassurance. She had been so happy to have the Watsons all together again, settled in their own apartment, that she brooded now at every visit over why Mrs. Wilson continued in ill health.

On a day about four weeks after the family had been reunited in the new apartment, Lucille came into the office after visiting them, more downcast than any of us had ever seen her. She told me when he tried to cheer her up:

"Now everything's going to fall apart. Mr. Wilson who seemed strong as an ox, dropped dead this morning." She looked as though the death had been in her own family.

Two of us shared the office with Lucille. We were both too shocked to offer any words of consolation.

It was only two weeks later when Lucille returned from another visit to the Browns.

Verdel, whose desk was nearest, said as soon as she caught sight of Lucille's happy face, "Something good happened today."

Lucille laid her bag on her desk but it did sit. Instead she turned toward us and proclaimed, “You bet it did. Mrs. Brown lost six pounds since her husband died. She had tried all kinds of diets and nothing had worked.”

Both Verdel and I had been ready to offer sympathetic words to go with our long faces. For a sick woman with three children to have her husband die—

Lucille read our expressions and exclaimed. “But you don’t get it. She has not even had shortness of breath since the funeral. She had a routine examination yesterday and the doctor told her she’s in great shape. She said even he was amazed.” Lucille’s smile was brighter than we had seen in weeks.

After a few seconds Verdel asked, “How long had they been married?”

“I don’t remember exactly,” Lucille answered. “But long enough to have those three children.” She paused. “Now I think—maybe too long.”

It was at BBSS that I discovered the phenomenon of J.P.T. or Jewish People’s Time. All my life I had known about C.P.T.—Colored People’s Time and had always assumed that it was a private restricted phenomenon. Ilse, one of the co-workers with whom I had developed a close friendship, was reviewing her weekend when we had a few moments together one Monday morning before our appointments. She said it had been fun, in a way, because she had been a guest of a wedding—a large, showy one. But she was so tired, she said. Festivities had gone for a long time after they had started—late. “You know, J.P.T.,” she said.”

“No kidding. You have that, too?” I asked. “I always thought it was our very own private sin.” We both laughed uproariously then.

Another staff member, Gerald, tall, handsome and newly married, was a frequent member of our small lunch group. One day after he had ended an interview with a client, Gerald returned to the large office three of us were sharing. He looked puzzled. One might even have said “troubled.”

He did not even wait for me to ask what the problem was, but began as he sat down, “That man I saw is a plumber. He makes almost twice as much as I do.” He rested his elbow on my desk and with chin in hand

stared ahead, almost as if in deep sadness. (One question included in an initial interview was always the family income.)

“But what’s so newsy about that? Have you had to hire a plumber lately?” Ture, the would-be foster parent was African-American and Gerald was Caucasian but I would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that Gerald had not a prejudiced bone in his body. It could not be that which had disturbed him so much. I said “Plumbers have always done well.”

Gerald turned then to face me directly and said, “I went to school for seventeen years. He finished high school.”

Our salaries were not magnificent but they were well in line with what most of our friends, in or out of social work, were earning. I was shocked to hear Gerald sound envious and disillusioned because his client’s income was greater than his.

I said what came to mind immediately. “You could have been a plumber, too, you know.”

He gave me a look which, described charitably, might have been called ‘withering.’

“Come on now. I didn’t say I wanted to be a plumber.”

“Of course you don’t So what’s all this moaning about your client’s income?”

“It just doesn’t seem fair.”

“Gerald,” I was beginning to be a little impatient with him. “Fair is what people will pay for what they want. You know that.”

He finally got up and went back to his desk but still wore a perplexed look.

One of the saddest days for me while I was with the BBSS was that on which I visited Mrs. Clemons and found her distraught because she would have to move from her apartment in the low rent project. Her husband had been promoted to a job which paid considerably more than he had been earning. Their income was now above “low” and so they were being asked to leave.

“Oh, no.” It was not a consoling answer but I found myself almost as distressed as she.

“They’ll give us an apartment in a middle class development—and they say it’ll be nicer, but—“Her voice trailed off and she looked down at the floor. Then she looked up at me in her usual open way. “I guess I should be happy. But the kids have friends here and some of the mothers depend on me to help them.”

Mrs. Clemons had more education than many of her neighbors. She had not told me that, but from her reading and her interests it was apparent.

She chuckled in remembrance of some of the things she had done with her neighbors.

“Some of the mothers are not that much younger than I am but they come to me as an older person (she smiled at that) and ask all kinds of questions—about food, housekeeping “She laughed again softly. “I guess it sounds crazy but I do feel as though I help them. Kind of like a big sister. I hate to think of leaving here.”

Only a short time before I had read in the newspaper about an experiment in Chicago where public housing tenants paid according to their income but whole buildings were not segregated by the occupants’ financial status. As a result, the morale of the whole community was higher than when everybody saw himself and his neighbor as damned because poor. Building walls were not used as blackboards and halls were kept clean. Tenants seemed to treat the projects as home, not as a prison.

I suppressed any impulse to discuss this with Mrs. Clemons, certain that it would only reinforce her feelings of sadness. I tried to think of something to say which would raise her spirits. Our “Goodbyes” that day were solemn.

## VETERANS SERVICE CENTER

In 1946, soon after discharge from the Navy, I began to work at the Veterans Service Center, a city agency located on Park Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street. A variety of personal services, including consultation on legal, medical and personal problems were offered to recently discharged veterans.

My placement was, of course, in the social service section where veterans might seek counsel for personal problems of any nature.

In addition to being staffed by a highly skilled and socially agreeable staff, the Center's other great advantage to some of us who worked there was that it was only one block from Bloomingdale's department store. Recently passed on into the great kingdom of expired department stores, Bloomingdale's in 1946 was a mecca for shoppers whose funds were received on the first floor by skilled receptionists who directed them to the proper department on the basis of brief interviews in which they described their problems.

One of my earliest and most startling requests for help came from a well-dressed, handsome young man who smiled as he stated matter-of-factly that he needed help in getting rid of the lice which constantly crawled all over him.

I must have been staring in absolute amazement because he said, "You can't see them. But they're there. I feel them all the time."

Gradually he brought out that he had been a prisoner of war. It was while he was held in Germany that he had first been attacked by vermin. Although those held in captivity had been given various kinds of disinfectants for use in ridding themselves of the pests, nothing had worked for him.

Upon being freed and returned to the United States he felt himself still plagued by the parasites.

All the time that he talked, this spanking clean, expensively dressed young man looked directly into my eyes. In every other way than his belief that he was covered with lice, he appeared one hundred percent normal.

“I’ve tried everything.” He said, continuing to look directly at me but his smile had faded. He now wore a sad, blank face.

“What have you tried—other than the solutions you were given?” I asked as gently as possible.

“I went to the Menninger Clinic. That was what I did last.”

“What happened there?” He could have tried no better. As I had concluded from his appearance, it was apparent that he did not lack funds.

“I stayed for several weeks, sat for lots of talks.” He smiled again, “like this. But nothing happened.”

My initial disbelief had been replaced by a feeling of sadness unlike any I had experienced for a long time.

“You know, of course, or you would not have chosen it, that at Menninger you were in the best of all possible hands.”

He smiled again and sat up straighter. It was apparent that by now he had decided that here was one more blind alley. “Yes, I thought so.”

When he had agreed that he had done as much as he possibly could other than to seek additional psychiatric care—he did not want that because, as he continued to insist, the problem was “real,” not in his mind—he rose and offered a gracious “Thank you.” He added, as he took a step away from my desk—“for listening.”

For the remainder of the day, even though forced to concentrate on other problems, often easily solved, I could not help but think from time to time about that young man and wonder how long and what it would take to remove the last traces of the trauma he had suffered from his imprisonment.

Another day I summoned from the waiting area a good-looking, well-dressed young man who did not have the worried air worn by most of our clients. He appeared to be in his late twenties, was clean-shaven, and had a healthy mass of hair and an attractive smile.

When I had completed the personal identifying information on our form which the receptionists were not asked to solicit, I asked, as usual, “How may I help you?” The space for “problem” had been left blank on the application form, indicating that the receptionist had been unable to put the problem into words.

“I’m looking for a school for my little boy.”

“You prefer not to send him to public school?”

“He’s too young for public school.”

“Then you want us to help you find a nursery school?” My client nodded.

“How old is your son?” I asked then, beginning to sense that there was something odd about this request.

“Two,” the veteran said, looking me straight in the eyes.

I took a second to absorb what I had heard, then asked, “But why would you want to send a two-year old to school?”

“Well,” he searched for words. “He’s just hanging around the house all day, not doing anything.”

More than a few moments of earnest persuasion were required to bring the confused young father to think in terms of babies needing to be with their mothers for awhile, even after they had learned to navigate without help. And that, at two, ” hanging around the house all day”, was a good thing to do.

On another day a veteran gave me my first introduction to a true, full-blown schizophrenic. Until then I had known about illness only by textbook discussion. Two years of field work, along with text book courses and a year’s work in a child care agency had not prepared me for the events which unfolded that day.

When I called “Mr. Rollins” he appeared at my desk and seated himself just as most clients did. He appeared to be in his forties, a well-groomed, brown-skinned, expensively dressed African-American, wearing stylish glasses.

The first question I asked, as with all clients, was why he had come to us. There was a blank space where the receptionist should have filled in “problem.”

“I don’t have a problem,” he answered flatly, staring at me as though I had offended him.

“Well, why—“

He stiffened perceptibly as he leaned toward me. “I know all about. You’re just trying to keep me from getting what I’m due. All of you are—in this place.” His hand described an arc around his shoulder to include the whole large room where two other interviewers were at work in their cubicles.

“What is it you feel you are due?”

In response to that question he leaned closer to the desk, “You can’t help me. You don’t even want to help me. I know your kind. You’re determined never to give anything to your own. When I get back to my organization—I’m the head of a large veteran’s organization—I’ll tell them about you.” His voice had risen and his expression was angry.

Only at that moment, because he had brought it to my attention, did I think about the fact that he and I were the same color. Now it was clear that a part—perhaps a major part of this gentleman’s problem was a twisted thing about race.

I tried again, “If you will just tell me what it is you would like to do, I’ll certainly try to help.”

At those words my client seemed to puff up slightly more than he had before. “Just take me to your supervisor. I want to report you. Maybe then I can get some action in this place.”

I reached for the telephone on my desk. “Never mind calling.” My client stretched out his hand as though to take the phone from me. I returned it promptly to its place on the far side of the desk.

“Just take me to him. Where is he?” I pointed to the other end of the room where the walls went all the way to the ceiling, as opposed to our only partially private cubicles. “But I know he’s not in his office now. I was trying to call someone who might know where he is.”

At this the gentleman got to his feet and glared down at me as he said, “You don’t need to do that. We’ll find him.”

I recognized that as an order, not an invitation. I rose and started toward the front door of the large interviewing room with Mr. Rollins not four steps behind me. We walked in this formation down a hall almost a

block long until we came to the place where I thought my supervisor, Lou, might be. He was not there and as I started back to my own office, my client followed as closely as he had done on the outward trip. By then I was beginning to fear that even in this public place, he might take it into his head to clobber me and there would be nothing at all I could do, except yell. If I yelled before he acted, it would probably be fatal. All along the way back to where we had started from, I prayed for him to walk beside, rather than behind me.

We completed our circuit, came once again past my desk and on to Lou's office. The day was finally beginning to look better. Lou was sitting there at his desk and glanced up to see me accompanied by a stranger and obviously scared out of my wits.

Lou, whose background included years of private therapy, said only, "Yes, Frances. How can I help?"

"This gentleman, Mr. Rollins, does not believe that I can help him. He asked to see my supervisor."

Lou said, "Fine. Have a seat, Mr. Rollins. We'll see what we can work out."

Mr. Rollins stared at me. Lou, of course, picked up his signal, "Would you rather we talked alone, Mr. Rollins?"

I turned and went back to my office. In what seemed barely seconds, the formerly emerged gentleman emerged from Lou's office, stalked past my desk without a glance and went into the hall. I gave him time to take the elevator to the first floor then called the receptionist nearest the life to see if he had left the building. By that time Lou was standing beside my desk.

"It's about time for lunch, isn't it?" he said. "I'll take you to one of my favorite places." This would not be our first lunch together, but it was certainly one of the most welcome.

Over lunch, Lou expanded on the lesson he had begun to teach earlier by demonstration, about handling a client as sick as that one had been. He did an excellent job because when the same gentleman returned several months later I felt confident in seeing him and agreeing to everything he said. He did not ask for anything. He had only come, it seemed, to get some things off his mind.

It was apparent from the start that he had no memory of having seen me before. He had come near the end of the workday and I was able to persuade him to bring his speech to an end by telling him that all the staff was about to leave the building and we had to know that our visitors were out before we were free to go.

Another client contact worked out excellently from the beginning—for the veteran. He tried to thank me with a gesture of utmost generosity. I behaved like a babe in the woods in my response to his gift and thereby, made a peculiar kind of history among my friends.

My veteran this time was evidently first on line, in the downstairs reception of new clients. He was, at any rate, first at my desk on a Monday morning. He was a young man, but evidently old enough to have been working as an off-loader for fishing boats in the harbor for quite some time.

He confessed with an air of almost shame. “I don’t have any boots. I can’t work without boots and I don’t have money to buy new ones.” He leaned toward me as he talked and there was no reason at all to disbelieve what he was telling me. His boots were old, had developed holes and last week’s earnings had not been enough, after he had met his household expenses, to buy another pair.

Our Center maintained an emergency fund for just such problems. I asked the price of new boots and was able to give the required amount to the needy worker.

“Thank you, thank you.” he said as he held the money in his hand, looking at it almost as though he could not believe it was there. “I’ll see that you get it back at the end of the day.”

“But that’s not necessary.” I told him. The sun he had requested had been surprisingly small.

He did not rise to leave, but continued looking at me as though he felt obliged to repay the small amount to the Center for quite some time. Finally, he asked, “You like lobsters?”

“Why—yes—“ I answered.

“Good. I’ll bring you some.”

“That’s really not necessary.” I said. “You owe me nothing. The Center provided the money.”

“But you arranged it. I’ll be back.” With those last words he was already on his feet and facing the exit.

I said, “All right, thank you.” There was nothing else to say in order to move on to the next client waiting.

It was just after I had returned from lunch, about four hours later when my formerly bootless worker appeared in the office bearing a basket of lobsters, packed in ice. I was almost too shocked to say a proper “thank you.”

Finally I did say, “Thank you so much. But I have no way of keeping them until closing time. I work until 5 o’clock.” Then—I could even finish the thought. I had visions of water all over the office from warm, rapidly decaying crustaceans in a basket.

My client was puzzled for only a moment. “I’ll find a way. I’ll be back.”  
With that he left, bearing his beautiful gifts in the basket.

As he had promised, he was back in what seemed no time at all, in the interim, I had interviewed another person and tried to help with a new problem. I had just said, “Good-bye” to that client when my dock worker reappeared.

When I nodded toward the chair beside my desk, he sat and then told me exactly where he had left my basket of lobsters. There was a seafood store in 59<sup>th</sup> Street, which I knew well. It was between Park Avenue where our building was and Lexington, the next avenue to the east. The owner had agreed to store the basket in his freezer for me until 5 o’clock.

“Thank you so much,” I said. “It was lucky you could find someone willing to keep them.”

As soon as I had a free moment, I telephoned a friend with whom I was sharing a class in Russian at New York University who lived around the corner from my house.

“Bill,” I asked, “Could you pick me up at 5:15 tonight—please?” I suggested that there was something large I had to move.

After a small pause, he answered, “Yes, of course. What’s up?”

I told him the story about the boots and the basket of lobsters now stored in a nearby fish store.

“I see,” he said. I had a feeling that he didn’t really “see.” But he was nothing if not devoted. “Of course, I’ll be there.”

During the rest of the day, whenever I had a moment, I would call a friend to join Bill and me in a lobster feast sometime around 7 p.m. By that hour, I speculated, we would have had time to retrieve the treasures, get them to my house and ready to cook when the guests arrived.

At quitting time I hurried to the seafood store to pick up my treasures.

The person who I took to be the owner of the store looked unbelieving as he listened to my story. “You say someone left a basket of lobsters here for you this morning?”

“Yes, about 1 o’clock—not really this morning.” I explained then that I worked half a block away and so forth.

The man I was addressing continued to regard me as though I had wandered into his store from Mars. Finally, he said flatly, “Nobody left anything here.”

“Are you sure? Is there anybody else who might have put them away?”

He continued to look at me as though I had come from another county and spoke a foreign language. “Not without my knowing. No, ma’am. No lobsters.”

I finally said, “Thank you.” Having said it, I wondered why, but left anyway to find a phone booth.

Bill did not answer. He was already en route to meet me, of course.

As I stood beside the telephone, lobster-less, thinking that first off, I would have to call all those friends I had invited to come to a lobster “pig-out” in a hour, my spirits descended all the way down to my shoes. Obviously the store owner had accepted the lobsters as a bonus—a golden goodie which had come to him out of the sky on this lucky day. And I had been an idiot to ask my client to find a place to store his thank-you gift.

By the time I had walked back to the Center, Bill was there. He was more sanguine than I when he heard my story. He smiled and suggested that he knew a place in the neighborhood where we could have dinner as soon as I had called all those other people to tell them that the party was off.

As we walked to his car I was still trying to believe what had happened, that I could have been so dumb.

Bill tried to be consoling. “I guess you should have arranged to keep the lobsters in your office and left early.”

I turned to look at him. “How could I have left early?”

He smiled a wry smile. “Or you might have asked me to come right away—for your lobsters. If not for you.”

## WINNIE

It was Wenonah Williams Ross (Winnie) who had persuaded me to leave the Brooklyn Bureau of Social Service and go to work for the Bureau of Child Guidance.

Winnie and I had met when I worked for the Wiltwyck School office. She had been assigned, as a second year student, to that agency for her field work. Her inability to take herself as seriously as many students did, along with her bubbly attractiveness—she was small and brown with naturally curly dark hair and an easy smile—made her an instant hit with both professional and secretarial staff.

Winnie asked me, after we had become friendly and near the middle of her year's placement, if I would type her thesis. At first, I explained and apologized for each change I made in the text. Winnie was not fazed, accepted each with humor and would tell friends later that she did the research "but Frances wrote the thing."

By the end of her internship at Wiltwyck, Winnie and I had become close friends. Winnie's father was an undertaker. His business was on the first floor of the brownstone where he and Winnie lived upstairs. Winnie's mother had been dead for several years when Winnie and I met.

Winnie delighted to show friends interesting corpses which had benefited from her father's skill. I once visited her two days after an explosion aboard a boat in the New York harbor. One of the crew members who had been in the water for more than a day was the beneficiary of Mr. Williams' skill.

When Winnie greeted me at the front door she was bubbling with excitement about her father's work on the recovered body. She ushered me into what she called "the showroom."

As we walked through the large, front reception area into the back, she chattered.

"He was really awful looking." For the rest of our short walk she gave me a more detailed description than I needed of the damage Mr. Williams had had to repair.

When we reached the viewing room, it was as Winnie had intimated. The drowned seaman—young, chubby, light tan color appeared to be sleeping. All the damage from the immersion had been concealed.

Winnie stood beside me, beaming, as I stared into the coffin.

“Daddy’s really good. You would never guess how bad that man looked when he came in here.” She tossed me a glance which could only be called “arch.”

“But I never saw him before. How can I appreciate what your father has done?”

Winnie continued to look down at the corpse as though viewing a work of art. She finally looked up at me again. “I saw him when he came in.”

After a few more seconds, I asked, “Can we go upstairs now? You did say something about coffee when we planned this visit?”

In the ten years after our meeting at Wiltwyck, we discovered that we belonged to the same sorority, shared many other interests, both had been married and divorced. By 1952 Winnie married again and although I had not, she, eternal optimist that she was, assumed that I would. Her telephone call to me after several years with no contact at all was to recommend that I take the upcoming examination for social worker in the Bureau of Child Guidance. She had then been on staff there for several years.

Her enthusiasm for her job crackled through the telephone wires. “You don’t have emergencies. You’re off all summer and maternity leave is generous.” There was laughter in her voice, as usual. She seemed always to have more happy-making thoughts than the rest of us.

But she must have sense my doubts even over the wires. “I’m serious, you know, You’ll be getting married again and you’ll want that maternity leave.”

Her argument convinced me. I sat for the examination.

When I came into the Bureau of Child Guidance many years later, Wenonah, small and scrappy, seemed not to be close to Rose Goldman, then Director of the Bureau, than any of the other African-American staff, possibly because she was among the first of those who put color into the Bureau. Wenonah was also feisty, able to defend her views against all opposition.

The latter quality stood out one day when, after a large staff meeting Miss Goldman, still standing at the front of the auditorium, acknowledged Wenonah’s greeting, then commented, “Why do you and the other

colored (as they called us then) workers always sit together? You have been fighting so long against segregation, then why do you segregate yourselves?”

Winnie’s eyes sparkled and she smiled happily as she repeated the story of the question asked and her reply. “Oh, come on Rose, it’s not that we “segregate” ourselves. We sit with our friends because we may not see them between meetings. Anyway, we’re all right up there towards the front—mostly.”

It was true. If they had not been sitting only a few rows from the speakers, Miss Goldman would not have been so aware that there were several “colored” together.

Winnie and Miss Goldman discussed the question of who sat where for a few seconds longer, then Winnie, turning serious, begged Miss Goldman at the next meeting to look all around the auditorium. “You’ll see lots of us sitting in the middle, even a few alone in the back.” She paused, smiling. “Those are the ones you should worry about. They probably didn’t want to come to your meeting at all.” Winnie’s expression grew even more serious, “Those are the people you should ask supervisors about.”

## KATY FERGUSON

Early in 1948 my tour of duty at the Veterans' Service Center ended when I was invited to become the Director of the Katy Ferguson Home for Unmarried Mothers.

Katy Ferguson, located in a brownstone on West 139<sup>th</sup> Street between Seventh and Lenox Avenues in Harlem, was less than fifteen minutes by cab from my mother's apartment where I was still living. Although taxis were not my customary mode of transport, the location was a happy one for those times when there were emergencies or on mornings when public transportation failed.

Being Director of an institution which sheltered sixteen young women, nearly all under twenty and eight babies (usually) presented the greatest job challenge I had yet had.

There were several changes which the Board planned to make (I was told during my first interview) including removals of some staff members who had, in effect, grown up with the agency. I was the first professional social worker who had ever been hired. The State Department of Social Welfare, largely responsible for funding, was demanding that a professional be put in charge.

When I began at Katy Ferguson, the housekeeper, a woman with ample good will but limited talent, was also called the "Director" which meant that until my hiring she had been responsible not only for decisions concerning the physical plant but also for those which might seriously affect the well-being of the residents.

The physician responsible for maintenance of the health of both mothers and babies, most of the latter waiting for adoption, was someone respected in the community. She had, in fact, been one of the first African-American women to be licensed as a physician the Board must have considered it a real coup to have obtained her service.

I learned soon after my arrival in the agency, however, that while visiting Katy Ferguson rarely for the purpose of following the health of mothers and babies, this distinguished lady was arranging for private

adoptions of those babies she considered suitable for her patients. Final arrangements would be made directly with the young mother, of course, and concluded only after mother and baby had left the institution.

Within a few weeks after my arrival and after ongoing discussions with the Board President, Mrs. Cushing, I hired a social worker (a first for the home) and a new physician. The new doctor, John L. Holloman, was young and enthusiastic (later was appointed Commissioner of Hospitals in NYC). He immediately established a schedule by which he would see the mothers-to-be and the babies on a regular weekly schedule. Nor did he neglect the young mothers who were awaiting discharge. These procedures required a considerable amount of his time—recompense was modest—and were firsts for the home.

One of the younger and newer Board members, Mrs. Hyde, whose hobby was decorating, visited one day shortly after I had come and looked over the living room where, she decided, her ministrations should be. In that room the young the young residents received not only family visitors but also social workers. Its colors were brown, brown and brown for everything—furniture, wall paper, carpets and accessories, relieved only occasionally by a spot of beige.

Mrs. Hyde's choice of basically pink wallpaper in a delicate floral print and purchase of new furniture, both comfortable and attractive (that which was already there appeared to have been handed down—possibly from assorted board members).

When she was satisfied with the living room, Mrs. Hyde then went on, even chirpy and optimistic, unsparing of time or funds, to redo the nursery and dormitories.

Early in my stay, one evening long after I had left the premises, I received a call at home from the housekeeper.

“Yes, Mrs. Hopkins?” I waited to hear the problem when I recognized her voice, strained and tense, as usual.

She said, “The toilet in your office is backing up.” It was not difficult, considering the strain to which our relationship had already been put during my short time at the agency, to recognize that she was trying me to see just how far I could be stretched.

“Do you have a plumber who comes in for emergencies?”

Her “Yes” was low and disappointed.

“Then I would suggest that you call him as soon as we’ve finished talking. He can send us a bill.” I had added that last anticipating that her new question would be about how she would pay the plumber.

Only after we had ended the brief conversation did I begin to wonder how it had happened that the backup in that toilet had been discovered long after the office should have been in use.

Soon after that incident, I was able to find a new housekeeper or “housemother” which was what we really needed. Mrs. Parsons’ manner was alert but not tense. She seemed relaxed and happy even when she was not smiling. Her physical person, too, was more reassuring than that of her predecessor. She was comfortably padded, not fat but in stark contrast to the unusually lean Mrs. Hopkins.

Anticipation of firing the cook occasioned more tension than I had ever experienced on any job. The incumbent had shown in so many ways that, skilled as she may have been in the kitchen, she did not really like the people for whom she was obliged to cook. As described by the new housekeeper who necessarily worked closely with her, she liked hardly anyone and had special disdain for the young women for whose welfare the institution existed.

Planning for the day on which I would notify Mrs. Brown that her services were no longer needed, I talked with the new young doctor to be certain that he could be on the premises, as close as possible. In fact, to my office, during my interview with her, I had never witnessed an outburst from the cook but had heard from other staff, as well as residents, of her tendency to fly into a rage at the slightest imagined offense. My news would certainly be seen as a major assault.

Mrs. Brown and I, before the day of her firing, had had only one negative encounter. It concerned, of all things, my attempt to change her grocery order (on which I was required to sign off) to buy “real” vanilla instead of the substitute she liked. The latter came in a considerably larger bottle and I was unable to convince her that, penny for penny, one got better value from the smaller, genuine article.

When the day came that we finally sat down facing each other, anti-climactic would have been the most accurate description of that meeting for which I had prepared so carefully.

At the hour scheduled Mrs. Brown came into my office, wearing her usual bland expression. I had never seen her smile. She was tall, stout and dark, always neatly attired but with an unyielding manner. She sat in the chair beside my desk when I indicated that she should.

How did one begin to fire an employee who was famous for never having admitted that she was wrong?

I began, “You know, of course, Mrs. Brown, that our main concern here is that our young residents be happy.”

Meeting my gaze quite directly, she nodded, unsmiling.

“I understand from Mrs. Carter that occasionally some of the girls go into the refrigerator at night and that the next morning you are quite stern in reprimanding them.” (The housekeeper had actually said that the cook screamed invectives at whichever of the young women was first to cross her path in the morning.)

“It’s true. I don’t like them going in my icebox.” She had not raised her voice. I was surprised at the calm with which she had taken my criticism.

I cited some of the other problems which the housekeeper had named. In effect, the new housekeeper managed to work with Mrs. Brown, she had said, only by staying away for as long as was possible from the street floor level where Mrs. Brown operated.

Mrs. Brown’s expression was bland and her response calm when I ended by saying that we would plan to pay her for two weeks after she left but were asking her to leave as soon as possible.

Her whole demeanor was so unemotional that I thought for an instant she might have wished to change her job but had not known how to proceed with giving notice. She said, in fact, “Thank you,” and smiled as she arose to leave.

There were many pleasurable aspects to the job at Katy Ferguson, demanding as it was. Conferences with the Board Chairman, Mrs. Corning, were always enjoyable. I had the impression that she visited more often than most Board Chairmen who might be responsible for a similar sized agency. Katy Ferguson seemed to be her principal hobby.

Mrs. Corning was the archetypal patrician who had led a sheltered life. One of my fondest memories of her was of one morning when I was taking a trip with her and two other Board members on agency business to another institution upstate. Mrs. Hyde was driving. The third Board member was sitting in the back, as was I. Mrs. Hyde, always the chirpiest at any gathering, happened to begin a story with “When I was a math major—“

Mrs. Corning’s voice rose in admiration and astonishment as she asked, “You were mathematics major?” In Mrs. Corning’s youth, most young ladies in her social class had gone to finishing school and that was the finish of education, too.

Mr. and Mrs. Corning had three sons. The first two had been adopted, Mrs. Corning told me on one of her visits to the agency. Then, to her joy and amazement, she had become pregnant and carried the baby to term.

As she sat beside my desk that day, she discussed at length her worry about the fact that her youngest son, their own flesh and blood, did not seem to want to work. “He just hangs out with rich boys on the island.” Oyster Bay was the island to which she referred, where the Cornings had a summer home.

Both the older Corning boys, the adoptees, were doing volunteer work, even though still in college. The one who planned to study medicine worked in a hospital and the other, studying law, was working in a law office.

I understood perfectly that when Mrs. Corning referred to “rich boys” she meant young men from families who were “nouveau riche.” She and Mr. Corning occupied a duplex on East 68<sup>th</sup> Street which I knew

only because she had asked me to come to her home one day on agency business. It was my first time to visit anyone who had a private elevator in an apartment building. The Cornings also had three cars, all of which they kept in the country. This last I learned only when I was invited to visit and stay overnight with them in Oyster Bay. On the day when we left from the office for the country, the Cornings came for me by car. I learned, from casual conversation early in the trip, that they had driven into the city to be able to take me back with them. They found it more practical to travel by cab while in the city.

The next morning I was driven to the railroad station by the youngest son, Jim, at maximum allowable speed all the way. Mr. Corning, not yet retired, had told me that he would be going in later, by train. I understood that I was being chauffeured to an early train in order that I might be at my office before ten, but during young Corning's show-off ride to the station. I wondered whether I would arrive in New York on this day at all.

Knowing the Cornings educated me, in record time, with some of the differences in how the rich and the rest of us live. On one occasion Mrs. Corning and I had agency business in mid-Manhattan and she suggested lunch in a modest restaurant. The food was good but when we boarded the bus to go uptown, Mrs. Corning to her home and I to the agency, I paid the ten cents fare for each of us because Mrs. Corning had no change. I saw illustrated then what I had always heard: that "they" don't carry money.

Finally there came a day when Mrs. Corning came into the office and sat in her usual spot beside my desk. What was unusual was that she was in a visible state of excitement. Before I could inquire, she burst out, as soon as she was seated, with her good news.

"Jim has a job." Her face was glowing as she leaned toward me waiting for my response.

I said, "That's wonderful. What's he doing?"

Mrs. Corning's glow did not fade. "Oh, he's just working in a filling station but he puts in a full day—every day." Unsaid was the most important truth—that Jim was no longer on the beach with "those rich boys."

Katy Ferguson's board had only two African-American members, but each contributed in a way which was unique and altogether different from what the Caucasian members did. One, the wife of a distinguished physician who had been on the staff of Harlem Hospital for many years, but who herself was not a professional, came into the Home regularly, twice each month, to play familiar songs for the young residents who would gather around the piano and sing. All of the young residents looked forward to those days.

The other African-American Board member, one of only two males on the Board, worked for the Internal Revenue Department, stationed in its central office. Although he was never able to attend Board meetings because they were always held in the afternoon, he was, by judicious guidance of some of the taxpayers who requested his help, able to direct many substantial contributions to the agency.

Early on, it became apparent that I would not be able to function without a secretary. My first try was with an older woman who was efficient enough in taking shorthand and typing an acceptable letter. Within a day or two after she had settled in, however, she began to suggest changes in the wording of the letters I would dictate, some radical enough to obscure the meaning. I listened attentively the first few times until it became clear that she was not really a grammarian but only intent on exercising an odd kind of control by her suggestions.

Initially, I tried to be patient because I thought Mrs. Graves might never before have worked for someone younger than herself, and was, therefore, uncomfortable and this was her way of taking control. Later, I observed that she made no attempt to change the letters of the young white social worker I had hired.

I tried hard to understand what was happening between us. Since the social worker was also younger than she, I finally decided that she had never before had to take directions from someone of her own race and questioned why I should be her "boss." After repeated futile attempts to persuade her to type my letters as I dictated them, I had to tell her that we were evidently not suited to work together.

On my second try, I found a younger woman, good-natured and with a sense of humor but who was also not a clock watcher. Unfortunately, she seemed not to watch the clock any more closely in the morning than she

did at quitting time. Initially, I worked at persuading her to come promptly at nine, but finally conceded that if she chose to work from 9:30 to 5:45 or later, it did not matter, both because of the quality of her work and the fact that she seemed to bring so much sunshine with her when she walked into the Office.

One morning the Board Treasurer, a woman who was as highly organized and sophisticated as the President was not, called at 9:15. I answered the phone.

Before she had even told me the business of her call, Mrs. Gilmore asked, “Where’s Mrs. Booth? Why are you answering the phone?”

“She’s not in yet, Mrs. Gilmore,” I answered. It had not even occurred to me to dissemble, to say, “She went on an errand” or “She’s elsewhere in the building.” I had become so accepting of the fact that Mrs. Booth gave full time for her salary, even if her hours were not traditional.

Mrs. Gilmore asked, with a tight voice, “But shouldn’t she be there? Isn’t she supposed to work from 9 to 5?”

“Yes and no.” I was emboldened to answer. “She sometimes gets in a little after 9, but even more often she leaves long after 5.” If Mrs. Gilmore had questions about my explanation she gave no indication but went on with the business about which she had called.

Only a few days later when she came into the office to talk at length with me, Mrs. Gilmore was full of praise for the quality of Mrs. Booth’s work. In the interim they had exchanged several telephone conversations about handling some of the agency’s finances. From what I had overheard from time to time I knew that Mrs. Gilmore now realized that few secretary-bookkeepers would be equally as efficient in handling both money and people as Mrs. Booth had revealed herself to be.

Shortly after I left Katy Ferguson in 1949 the agency was merged with a foster care agency. Both the institution and the name disappeared. There is, of course, less rationale for the existence of “homes for unmarried mothers” in these times than there once was. Women in the public eye, actresses, stars in other fields and ordinary citizens all become unwed mothers as a matter of course. There is no longer need to secrete oneself

in a shelter. Some of us question whether this is good for the children who are born as a result of unions without benefit of clergy. But no amount of criticism, from no matter who would seem to matter in the present day atmosphere.

One of the young mothers I remember best and most fondly among the population at Katy Ferguson was a charming girl who, with the complicity of her older brother, told their father that the brother was the one who had impregnated her. Her father was sufficiently angry to bring charges against his son. As a consequence, the young man served time in prison—after a cruelly revealing trial.

Several years later the young mother, whose baby had been in foster care for several years, revealed to her social worker that she and her brother had made up the story about his being the father of her child because they both thought that the father would be less severe with the girl. Finally, mother and child were reunited when she married someone who extraordinarily understood. She had maintained a close relationship with the child all during the time she was in foster care.

## 127<sup>TH</sup> STREET

In 1948 Langston Hughes bought the brownstone on West 127<sup>th</sup> Street which would be home for him and the Harpers for nearly twenty years—until the end of his life and Toy's.

Toy and Emerson used the first floor back for their bedroom and rented out the large front room on that level.

Langston had the whole top floor, with his study in the back and bedroom in the front.

The ground floor was truly the heart of the house. In the spacious front room only a step from the entrance, Toy had her piano and the living room pieces from 634 St. Nicholas Avenue, all of which seemed to occupy hardly any space at all in this new house.

Between the front room and the kitchen was a small room which Toy used for dining when she had a large dinner party. At extra special times, such as Christmas and Thanksgiving, she would set up tables in both living room and small room.

During the long stretches between festive occasions that same space would be used as a cutting room. It was ideal for the purpose because if one went through the doorway on the way to the kitchen, one would find Toy's machine, close at hand to the right against the small section of wall between the cutting room and the hallway.

Toy's kitchen at 127<sup>th</sup> Street, as in all brownstones, was spacious—in its center she had put a large round dining table, acquired, obviously, for this house. (At 634 St. Nicholas if there were more than Toy and Emerson to dine, a table was set in the foyer.) All of her beautiful tableware was accommodated in the generous built-in cabinets on the far side of the kitchen, alongside sink and work counter. On the wall opposite the cabinet, far across the wide room, was a lavatory at right angles to the back door. Between that and the door leading to the basement was a large expanse of wall.

My first visit to 127<sup>th</sup> Street was almost like going into a new country since I had been inside few private houses in New York. I learned only many years later, when Charlie and I owned one in Brooklyn that the design was standard for brownstones all over the city. The only differences would be in the size of the kitchen, depending upon whether it was located on the street level or on the first floor. Street level kitchens are always enormous. Those were the ones, no doubt, in which a whole platoon of servants functioned at meal time in the days when the houses were first constructed and always occupied by the rich.

In Toy and Langston's house it was the long hall leading to the back of the ground floor which was splendid in its historical and revelatory nature. The walls on each side of that hall were lined with photographs—of Langston, as well as those of many old show business friends of Toy and Emerson's.

The most treasured by Toy and the most intriguing for visitors were the pictures just inside the entrance, opposite the door into the living room.

There one found shots of Emerson in the various bands of which he had been a member and snaps of Toy with countless friends from the entertainment world, as well as many of Langston with friends from all over the rest of the world and all walks of life.

## GAMES

One afternoon while Langston was still living at 634 St. Nicholas Avenue with the Harpers, I had gone by to help him. We had worked, as we often did, until dinner time and Toy set the usual place for me.

After dinner one of the Harper's friends from the neighborhood came by and suddenly a poker game was organized.

"But I don't know poker," I pleaded, as the game spirit was rising all around me.

Toy said, "It's not that hard. I'll teach you." And she did try, with the determination she applied to everything she did.

Langston laughed uproariously each time I made a dumb play.

That night's lesson cost almost a week's salary from my new job at Wiltwyck. I wasted no time in regrets, however. I had had fun, despite my sitting duck status.

It was several months later when I played my second game of poker at Toy's with the same players, except of the addition of my friend, Blanche Pierce. I had planned that visit to the Harpers only to say "Hello" to Toy whom I had not seen for several weeks. It was just after the dinner hour and Langston was still there. Everybody welcomed Blanche with the natural warmth always abroad in that group and then, suddenly, we were into poker.

Blanche, almost as tiny as Toy, sat across the table from Langston and me, between Toy and Emerson. Bert, the neighborhood friend, was there also. Everybody welcomed Blanche with the natural warmth always abroad in that group and then we were playing.

Langston, as was his custom, kept a cigarette dangling from his lips all through the game and laughed heartily time and time again without ever taking it out. At one point, as he broke up over a play, with ashes threatening to fall on the table at any moment, Blanche said to him, smiling, "You're simple."

That comment amused Langston so much that he took the cigarette from between his lips, threw back his head and enjoyed a real belly laugh. He continued laughing until Aunt Toy reminded him sharply that he was holding up the game.

I always believed, because Langston seemed to have taken such delight in being dubbed, “Simple” that it was from this incident that he had derived the title for his column ‘SIMPLE SAYS’ which began to appear soon afterwards in the Pittsburgh Courier, the oldest and most prestigious newspaper owned by African-Americans.

It has been said that Langston claimed that the character who spoke in the column was based on a neighborhood bartender whose name was “Semple.” Could be, but each time I come across the book which was later published as a compilation of those weekly columns, I recall that poker game and am convinced anew that Blanche gave the column its title.

My skill at poker eventually increased but not during the sessions with the Harpers and Langston, I never even shared with them the bizarre ending of that night’s game.

Blanche and I left so late that, under normal circumstances, we would certainly have hailed a cab. But nothing about that night was in any way “normal.” It might even have been said that we were strapped—so we boarded a bus on the Northwest corner of St. Nicholas Avenue, almost across the street from the Harpers—to ride to our homes on Manhattan Avenue and 113<sup>th</sup> Street. (Blanche lived with her married sister on Manhattan Avenue and I around the corner in the apartment house at Manhattan and 113<sup>th</sup> Street). The distance was little more than a mile and a half but we had ridden less than two blocks when the skies opened and a healthy summer rain began. The downpour was of such vigor that we decided, after minimal discussion, to ride past our stop, hoping for a let-up.

Twenty minutes later we had gone to the end of the line and were again approaching our corner on the return trip. The storm had lost none of its force. After a brief conference, we agreed that this time we would have to get off the bus. After all, we both had a work day coming up in a few hours.

“But I hate to get my shoes soaked.” I wailed.

“I know.” Blanche agreed. “What we have to do is—“

She did it as she talked and I followed her example. When the bus stopped one block from our corner, we both stepped down with shoes under our arms and sloshed in stocking feet to our respective homes.

Langston moved soon after that second poker session to a three room apartment at 66 St. Nicholas Place. The daytime doorman at that house was accustomed to extending greetings to tenants each time one passed in or out, no matter how often they happened by during his hour of duty. I think he was proud that he knew all their names.

This habit drew from Langston one day some testiness, quite unlike any I had ever seen before. “I just wish he wouldn’t keep saying ‘Good afternoon, Mr. Hughes’ every time I pass. It gets tiresome, especially when you have to answer as though you hadn’t seen him half a dozen times before.” He smiled as he spoke, but that was one of the rare times when I heard him criticize anybody. He did not harbor small grievances. For the large ones, he literally took to his bed.

At 66 St. Nicholas we worked across from each other at a table long and wide enough to have accommodated a small diner party. There was no other furniture in that room besides the chairs we sat on.

One of the most memorable days for me in the new setting was the one when the mail brought the news from Cleveland that Rowena Jelliffe, the director of the Gilpin Players, despaired of ever receiving from Langston the last act of his play which was already in rehearsal, with an opening date announced. So—the company had devised its own opening.

Langston was sitting across from me, as usual, at the table as he read. Before he had reached the end of the letter he had doubled up with laughter. “Imagine that.” He was barely able to find breath to squeeze out those words. “They wrote their own ending.” He laughed again. “That was pretty smart.”

He continued to chuckle, as he held the director’s letter in hand. I his artist’s ego was bruised, he did not reveal the hurt.

He had tried to meet the deadline. Only a day or two before he had noted that we had so much to do he would like me to come “early.” I had discovered by then that “early” was close to 10:30.

It is doubtful that it would have mattered to Langston’s productivity if he had been able to begin work earlier than he customarily did. He enjoyed so much his own digressions from the task at hand. One evening shortly before the surprise announcement from the Gilpin Players, he was hungry and began to fantasy about a sandwich. Not just any sandwich but a “large, drippy, droopy type,” impossible to hold but unbelievably good if it could ever be conquered. He enjoyed these fantasies, I think, as much as though they were income producing.

Shortly after Langston had moved into his own apartment he said one day while we were working “I don’t know why you can’t be my lecture agent. You might as well have the ten percent.”

While I mulled over this, never having considered such a career in my wildest dreams, Langston continued, “You could do Arna (Bontemps) too. And that lady I know who does a one-woman show—plays in which she takes all the parts.”

I became an agent with remarkable speed. It was, Langston, of course who designed and had printed a four page leaflet with pictures and bios of himself, Arna and the dramatic artist. I sent them to all the places to which he had been accustomed to go.

Our return mail showed no excitement about the one woman show but all the schools were eager to book Langston as usual. Several also wanted to book Arna into spots to precede or follow Langston.

There was neither risk nor ingenuity about this enterprise, since the contacts had already been well established. It was rather like magic. One sent out the folders and got back the times when schools would be pleased to have Langston or Arna.

My pride and delight with the agent business lasted only a short time. When I wrote to apprise Arna Bontemps of the dates I had booked for him along the same route which Langston had made familiar, he wrote, by return mail, that he regretted he would be unable to do lectures this season because he had been in ill health.

It was only then that I realized that Langston had not alerted Arna that I was to be his agent, too, and that arrangements were being made, in effect, for engagements to happen almost right away.

Canceling programs arranged with several schools was one of the most difficult tasks I had ever faced. My career as an agent ended almost as soon as it had begun. It was only years later, however, when I discarded the large supply of glossy paper pamphlets which Langston had had printed.

It was more than three years after my ill-fated brush with the agent business and I had already been in and out of the Navy that Langston observed one morning after we had been to the theatre the previous evening, “It might not be so bad being married if you could get away on lecture tours from time to time.”

I said, “Maybe not—if you could find someone who would not mind being alone a lot.”

He looked away as he said softly, “I guess you’re right.”

We never discussed that subject again.

Although Langston complained frequently in the little notes he used to send me about having to be on the lecture circuit, we both knew that not only did the lecture fees fill the spaces left in a poet’s earnings, but that he reveled in meeting new people and took not unkindly to be lionized.

I had once told him that my uncle Rienzi, in his youth a heavy drinker, spoke French whenever he had imbibed too generously. He and his two sisters, both of whom had lived in the West all my life, had been born in Haiti and had come to the United States only when they were teen-agers.

Langston had never met my Uncle Rienzi, but during a visit to Salt Lake City in April 1944, he was entertained after a lecture by my aunts, Rose Offutt and Eugenie Monplaisir (who I always knew only as “Aunt Jenny”). He wrote a note during that evening on which he had both my aunts add their own greetings. He had mentioned a good brandy in his part of the message and the evening sounded quite celebratory for an after-lecture session.

At the end of a note from another lecture tour in the same area, Langston said that he had now met Aunt Jenny's husband. I could picture him laughing as he wrote "You Uncle Charles Monplaisir also speaks French when he's looped."

Not long after that, one afternoon between tours, visiting me at home. Langston played with my mother's little black and white terrier and said wistfully that he would "like to have a little dog."

"You don't really mean that." I said. He was sitting on the piano bench and tapping out a non-melody with his right hand while with the left he patted Skippy.

He laughed and admitted, "I would if you didn't have to take it out."

He had come that day to invite me to go with him to see "One Touch of Venus," a musical which had opened a short time before to rave notices. I think he was interested to see that show (although he did not say so) largely because he was about to begin working on a musical version of "Street Scene" with Elmer Rice. In whatever chats we had had about the theatre, he had never before shown any interest to see a musical.

Not long after we had been to "One Touch of Venus" we met in the same line at a box-office on Broadway, both trying for tickets for a hit show. We were fortunate to obtain them for not too far in the future. As we chatted in line Langston professed to find it remarkable that people would buy tickets for as much as six months ahead. He said, laughing, "How do you know if you'll still be alive then?"

When we had our tickets, he suggested that we go across the street to have a drink. Conversation over Manhattans and oysters on the half shell centered, for awhile, around Langston's discussion, between hearty laughs, on the subject of possible food poisoning from the combination of liquor and raw seafood. According to the "old folks" he said, it was a deadly combination. While we talked we both munched and sipped unconstrained, all the while laughing between bites about that legend and other old wives tales we had heard in relation to combinations one should avoid.

We never went to a ballet together. I invited Langston to be my guest once when the friend with whom I should have gone was ill.

He said a gracious, “No, thank you. Ballet makes me itchy.”

This was a complaint I had never heard from anyone before. I said, “You mean you don’t enjoy it?”

“I guess I don’t,” he said, laughing. “I just get so itchy I have to get up and leave.”

At almost every ballet performance I have attended since, I have to experience at least a few seconds of itchiness.

## MARRIAGE

On an afternoon in August 1953, Langston gave a party at his house on 127<sup>th</sup> Street to honor a young African-American woman writer who had had a short story in one of the women's magazines. Her story had later bought for a motion picture. Except for the guest of honor, Langston and the Harpers, I remember no one else at that party because shortly after I arrived Charlie Thorpe appeared and offered me a cigarette.

I should have said, "No, thank you." Only three days earlier I had been told by an ophthalmologist that smoking was deadly for the eyes, affecting the capillaries. I should have heeded the doctor's advice, if for no other reason than that I had traveled all the way to New Jersey from Harlem just to consult him. Helen Strauss, my old Navy friend, had told me that her husband Fritz, himself a doctor, recommended that ophthalmologist without reservation.

In those years there were not yet campaigns to discourage people from smoking for fear of cancer. Pregnant women had been cautioned that smoking was not good for them, but doctors were not saying a flat out, "No." The doctor in New Jersey had explained, in simple language that smoking was not compatible with good vision. So, when Charlie Thorpe invited me to have a cigarette, I should have shared my newly acquired wisdom or, at least, sought out a non-smoker with whom to make small talk.

Instead, I accepted the cigarette from this young man with the wide smile and the party took on new life.

We were married on November 26<sup>th</sup> which happened, that year, to be Thanksgiving Day. Thus, we created lasting confusion for all our friends who tried later to remember the date.

When I told Toy of our plans, she was immediately full of ideas about the wedding gown. We shopped together for the damask-type patterned aqua fabric but Toy chose the design and went from there. I was not permitted to sew one stitch on that dress.

We had a small wedding at Grace Congregational Church. That place was chosen only after my Uncle Henry refused to perform the ceremony because I was a divorcee. Charlie had worked as a clerk at Grace and thought highly of the minister, William King.

Aunt Leah came from Wilmington, despite her husband's attitude. Uncle Rienzi and Blanche were there also. Charlie's brother, Monte, was best man because Johnie Wright, Charlie's closest friend, was ill. My friend, Blanche Pierce, was maid of honor.

I made the wedding cake but did not decorate it with the fancy device Charlie and I had bought at a home show we attended only a few days before the wedding. That device was never used, in fact. We abandoned it when we left 113<sup>th</sup> Street for our own apartment. It must have suffered a second abandonment when mama moved in with us at Park Place because we never saw it again.

We went off on a four day honeymoon to Paradise Farms, a popular summer resort at the confluence of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania; an ideal location for newlyweds in November. Accommodations for nearly a hundred guests were occupied by Charlie and me and only one other couple. We considered it an omen of great good luck that their names were Charlie and Frances, which we learned when they introduced themselves across several empty tables at breakfast on our first morning.

The third character with whom we became closely involved (unlike the other Charles and Frances, whom we saw only at mealtimes) was the resident German shepherd. We dubbed him "the keeper" because he had the habit of finding us wherever we were on the grounds. Initially we attributed this to simple friendliness but by the end of the second day we realize that he joined our walks only at mealtime. His folks, we recognized, must have used him as a retriever of errant diners.

We came back from the weekend to live in my mother's apartment, the same from which I had left for the Navy nine years earlier and to which I had returned upon discharge. I learned soon after we were back in the apartment that Charlie, when he had made his formal declaration to my mother, had let her persuade him that we would set up housekeeping right there with her.

"Why did you do that without even asking me?" I complained when he told me of their agreement. Like any bride I had looked forward to having my own place. I had assumed that Charlie wanted that, too. When we met he had been sharing a room with his brother in a brownstone on 136<sup>th</sup> Street and Edgecombe Avenue, in a

house owned and occupied by a friend of his late father. To me, it had seemed like living still under the parental roof.

“Your mother told me she had been so lonely when you were away in school and then in the Navy.”

“But that’s been over ten years. And she never told me.”

“I guess she didn’t want to upset you. But not you know.” Charlie looked pleased as punch with the plan he and mama had worked out. “And we’ll be helping with the rent.”

That last argument must have aroused all the guilt which had lain dormant from the time I had gone away to graduate school, I offered no further objections.

In preparation for our return from Paradise Farms, mama had transformed her apartment. The piano had been moved from the living room and that had become our bedroom. Her large bedroom was the new living room and she was sleeping in the larger of the two hall rooms which had been mine.

Atop the dresser in what was now our room was two pieces of mail. The one I opened right away was from the Loewensons, my friends in France. James wrote that they would arrive in New York on the *Mauritania* on November 29<sup>th</sup> –this day—to live permanently in the United States. This was the first I had heard of their plans to emigrate. They were to be met by HIAS (Hebrew Immigration Aid Society) and would go to Wisconsin where James an aunt. She was their sponsor. Ship arrival time would be between nine and ten p.m. of the evening on which I was reading the letter.

The second missive was a notice from the Board of Education ordering me to report for work four days from the date of the notice. There had been no earlier notice that I had even passed the examination for social worker for which I had sat nine months earlier.

I threw that notice back on the dresser but we were hardly able to do justice to the “Welcome Home” dinner mama had prepared. I was so anxious to be certain that we were at the pier on time to greet the Loewensons.

It was near midnight when we finally saw James, Ruth and little Danny on the customs line. By then there were only the smallest number of friends and relatives still waiting in that huge pier. People coming to this country for the first time were obviously those whose luggage was examined last. James and Ruth, both ingressive, were at the end of the now short line of new arrivals. Danny, five years old, was the only one of the three who looked as if he had enough energy to go on for several hours more.

Charlie and I saw them before they saw us, but could only wave until they reached the customs agent. They were the very last passengers left on the pier. By then we were standing quite near, as the agent addressed James.

“You don’t have anything to declare, do you?” he said. As he waited for a “No,” I could see him well on his way home which was probably miles from this pier in mid-Manhattan.

“Well, yes— James began—“Just”-- Honesty glowed from the earnest face he turned towards the agent.

The agent tried again. “You don’t have anything—“

Charlie and I both, now standing behind the agent but in full view of James, were shaking our heads violently from side to side in the most dramatic “Noes” we could demonstrate.

Finally, while the agent watched their faces with his own wreathed in hope, James could no longer miss the signal. He said sheepishly, like anyone would who never lied, “No.”

Relief showed in the very motion of the agent’s arm as he said “Good” and waved them through the space he created by removing the rope which stood between incoming arrivals and the great outside.

When hugs, kisses and introductions were over, we realized that we were the only people left in that huge pier. There were, at least, no bodies that looked official, as though they were HIAS staff.

It did not seem worthwhile even to discuss what might have been the problem. Charlie and James started toward the outside with the trunk, Ruth took one bag and I another while Danny brought up the rear, tugging at the smallest case.

Mama, who had not waited up for us, soon in the hall, containing her surprise, even, in fact, seemed to enjoy the sudden change of program, as she greeted the Loewensons.

The next morning I asked James, the first of the family who I met in the hallway, "How did you sleep?"

His brow furrowed as he answered, "It was hot."

I apologized. I should have remembered to turn off the radiator to try to approximate, at least, the cooler house temperatures with which everybody in France lived.

At breakfast, mama was enchanted with Danny's animated conversation now conducted in all three of the languages to which he had been exposed. He had picked up a considerable number of English words and phrases in the five days the family had spent on the ship. Just as he had spoken when I first met him, using French and German, whichever came most easily to mind, he now threw in sprinklings of English words.

James read and wrote English well, but did not speak fluently, in contrast, Ruth, born and raised in Switzerland, was entirely at home with English.

That night, after Danny was asleep, the four of us played SCRABBLE in French and English, James and Charlie against Ruth and me. That game was, without question, one of the most exciting in which I ever participated. Even the challenges were in two languages.

On his second morning in New York, James was up and out early to explore the neighborhood, he told me later. He ventured so far as to get a haircut at the local barber shop, located on the next avenue and about three blocks downtown from our street.

Charlie and I were impressed to the point of being open-mouthed. The barber was African-American and James had never before seen such a shop, even from the outside, let alone had the opportunity to patronize one.

"Weren't you the least bit afraid that you might get a bad job?"

Looking me straight in the eye and smiling, he said, "No, not at all. A barber is a barber, yes?" Then he gave me a look which might have been called "arch. Anyway, I needed a haircut."

What neither Charlie nor I thought of at the moment was that the barber, perforce, would have had experience in cutting many different types of hair. Barbers James might have patronized at home, in the French suburbs, might not have had the opportunity to cut hair which was not straight. On the other hand, customers of our local barber shop, would have hair which varied as much as their skin colors.

That night we ventured to introduce the Loewensohns to a smorgasbord restaurant, one of our favorites in midtown Manhattan.

We had to wait on line for several minutes during which we chatted in French and English, as had become normal in the days just passed. Finally the maitre d' came to tell us that we would be seated in only a few minutes. I turned to Charlie and said, "He says we'll have a table soon."

Charlie nodded and only half smiled at me. "I know. I understood him perfectly."

I took a silent vow to cease translating thereafter. Only two days of thinking alternately in French and English had completely addled my brain.

After we had seen the Loewensons off to Minnesota the next day the apartment seemed too quiet for a long time.

It was only a few months later when we heard from James that Maxie had now come into their lives. He was a source of great joy, James wrote on and on, in his most poetic, about Maxie.

Charlie was delighted to have the news and I went shopping promptly, acquiring a simple pajama set, "up to six months" in size.

James' letter of thanks, but no thanks, made clear in even more poetic phrases than he had used in the first letter that Maxie preferred to sleep in the nude. After a page or so more about Maxie's habits, including that of scratching at the bedroom door in the early morning, it was clear that Maxie was a dog, not a baby.

A few years later, when Peter was born, James wrote a proper notice which left no doubt at all.

## BCG 1953

My first mission, as soon as we had put the Loewensons on the train to the Midwest, was to visit the Board of Education, located then, as now, at 110 Livingston Street in Brooklyn.

I explained to the tall, attractive young woman to whom I was directed that I would not be able to report to work by the first week in December because I was employed and would need to give notice on my present job.

From behind the counter which separated us the civil service employee listened impassively to my plea for time. Her well made-up face was expressionless as she stared at me, a miserable soul begging for time.

“Young lady, either you want this mob or you don’t If you can’t come now, that’s it.” With that pronouncement she turned and walked back to her desk.

As I waited for the elevator to leave the building, I was ready to say “I don’t.” The Board of Education did not sound like a happy place in which to work.

In light of the many good years I later experienced at the Bureau, both in terms of associates and of having been able to help children and their parents, I was always glad that I had not thrown in the towel because of that one clerk. Instead I telephoned Rose Goldman, then head of the social work department in the Bureau, to tell her of the turn-off I had received.

“You mustn’t pay attention to them,” she said. “They talk that way to teachers because they always have more applicants than they have jobs. They have no idea of how much difficulty we have finding social workers.”

Little more than a month later I began working at the Bureau as a psychiatric social worker in the Bronx office on East 149<sup>th</sup> Street, not far from Alexander’s, a popular priced department store.

Despite the distance between my home and my office, travel to and from the Bronx was not onerous because the crowds were always going in the opposite direction, from up to downtown.

The BCG offices at 149<sup>th</sup> Street were in process of being converted from classrooms in an old school building which was shared with the Bureau of Attendance. That Bureau which was fully installed on the first floor. Some BCG offices were already being used but many needed still to be installed on the second and third floors. I was one of the three new staff members assigned on the same day to the Bronx. All of us shared a classroom for several weeks while renovations proceeded. Children's desks and all other usual furnishings had been removed so that each of us operated in one corner of the huge room from behind a conventional office desk with a telephone. There was a chair for a client beside each of our desks and nothing else at all in those huge classrooms.

My roommates were Lois Fairley and Frank Holloway. Frank, of average height and weight, brown skin with a neat mustache, not unhandsome, became an "odd man" for us from the day we all arrived in the office. He brought with him that first day a load of filled manila folders and a stout briefcase, the whole so burdensome that he needed a shopping cart in which to stow and transport it all from his car to his office.

Neither Lois nor I was ever able to divine what needs would force one to report to a new job thus encumbered. But on one occasion, years later, when both Frank and I had moved to our own offices and I had to interview a parent who could not climb stairs, Frank graciously arranged for me to use his first floor office. Every corner was filled almost to the ceiling with an assortment of folders, papers to be filed and other miscellany.

No one of the several other offices of the Bureau to which I would be assigned during my twenty-six years in the school system would equal the physical challenge posed by that first placement in the Bronx. On the day after we three, the newly hired, had settled, each in his or her assigned corner to begin the business for which we had been hired, the workmen arrived. Our classroom spaces were divided with appropriate banging by the erection of barrier walls, reaching only half way to the ceiling but providing a small measure of privacy.

Jack Strauss was Administrator of the Bronx Center. Jack, tall and slim, had been trained as a social worker but looked and bore himself like the talented management person we soon came to know. When the

workmen had finally finished banging all through our workdays and the new cubicles were ready for occupancy, Jack scheduled a staff meeting. This was held in an untouched classroom, furnished with only one teacher's desk but a large spot for staff meetings.

Jack, leaning against the teacher's desk, in its usual place in the front of the room, opened the meeting with an announcement.

"Tomorrow— in a dramatic pause after the opening word, his brown eyes moved all around the fifty or so faces before he continued "every male in this room will come in work clothes. We will all meet here for work assignments—furniture moving, that is."

Male social workers (only two), psychologists and our one psychiatrist all exchanged glances. Surely Jack was joking, standing in front of this assemblage, looking over the whole room, checking the effect of his words.

One psychologist, David Monroe, already famous among his co-workers as a smart dresser, was bold enough to speak for the group. "How about just bringing a change of clothes?"

Jack, from his six feet one inches, stared down into the assembled group and said, "No good. We start moving at the beginning of our working day—nine o'clock. No time for changing."

By the end of that ultimatum discontented groans were beginning to sound from different corners of the room.

Jack continued. "We have two choices. One is to put furniture where we need it now that all the dividers are in place. The other is to continue working in a state of disorder—you might even say 'bedlam' until the Board of Education sends its movers."

He inserted a dramatic pause here, "As of yesterday at four forty-five, nobody—nobody—at 110 Livingston Street could give me even a probable date when moving men might be available."

“If there is any man here who is physically unable to move furniture I suggest he come to my office later—at the end of this meeting.” With those words, Jack, continuing to lean slightly against the desk, let his gaze travel slowly all around the room. There were some smiles, but no challenges.

On the following day the women moved paper, telephones and books while the men, from the psychiatrist to the office clerk moved furniture.

Jack’s managerial ability, although exercised quietly most of the time, extended into all areas of our lives during the working day.

One afternoon, near four o’clock, long after we had all been settled into our places and the business which we should have been about seemed to be moving with silky smoothness, Jack happened upon a psychologist in the hallway all coated up, briefcase in hand, proceeding toward the staircase.

She barely nodded as she saw Jack.

“What’s up, Donna?” he asked.

Donna’s answer came without hesitation. “I’m leaving. I didn’t have any lunch hour, so I’m going now.” With that she took another step towards the stairwell.

Jack’s voice interrupted her after only that one step. His tone was stern.

“In this office the working day is from nine to five. You know that, Donna.” He paused. “I’m sorry you missed your lunch, but try to imagine what it would be like if several staff members decided to pass up lunch for an early quitting time.” His attitude, as Donna reported later, was non-threatening but also not to be challenged. He leaned back against the wall, almost relaxed as he talked. But his message was unequivocal.

Donna said, “Well, all right. If that’s the way you feel.”

Jack pulled away from the wall and took toward his own office before he turned to face her and say, “That’s the way I feel.”

As effective an administrator as Jack was, the women in the office who outnumbered the men by eight to one, were unsuccessful in getting him to intervene in the matter of an age old problem not peculiar to our office.

There were two lavatories on each floor. Those on the top floor were for staff—one for women and the other for men. The two on the lower (second) floor were for clients. Staff had the nation-wide, ages old problem. Men never had to wait while women, even as small as our office was, frequently found themselves on a line.

Some of us agreed, one day, that we had put up with that silly situation long enough and that we would use the men's room as well as the one designated "WOMEN," putting one woman outside to stand guard when necessary.

All went well for three days. On the third day the psychiatrist, of all people, came to the door labeled "MEN" and found one of his female colleagues barring entry.

"What's going on?" he is reported to have asked.

The staff member on guard thought it a silly question coming from someone of his education and experience but answered, "We get crowded in the "Ladies Room" sometimes so we're borrowing space in yours."

Dr. K. blew up, almost literally. He was young, handsome and well liked by all of us, but what we had done he took as an affront beyond belief.

"Well, that's the damndest thing I ever heard—it's outrageous."

Our women's rights defender could only say, "You really think so?"

Almost before she could finish the short question, Dr. K had taken off, whether back to his office or downstairs to use the public facilities no one ever knew.

Whatever his original intent, he had finally gone to see Jack, disappointing all of us who, up until then, had considered him sensible, as well as skilled in his profession. Jack disappointed us, too.

The women staff members were forced, thereafter, to form lines—as in all public facilities—outside the door labeled "WOMEN" while watching the men come and go with never a wait.

Despite this one minor problem which some of us had been certain Jack would solve, working at the Bronx office had many satisfactions, in the molding of friendships and the extra (not advertised, of course, in the work description) of being able to shop in the neighborhood at lunch time or after work.

It was at the meat counter of Alexander's. In fact, where, at the end of one workday I had a never-to-be forgotten encounter.

As I stood before the display cases, waiting my turn to be served, a short, brunette woman beside me asked, without turning from the meat in front of her:

“What's that?”

Since we were the only two persons in the immediate area I presumed she was speaking to me.

I followed her gaze and answered “Calf's liver.” I turned back them, trying to get the butcher's attention.

“I don't believe a word of it,” she said, still staring into the meat case.

At that I turned all the way towards her, wondering what she could possibly want from me.

She was not looking my way. She was still staring into the meat case as she continued talking. “They tell me he needs treatment, that he's not right. I don't believe it.”

Only then did I notice that on the side away from me she held the hand of a boy who might have been seven years old. Looking still more closely, I remembered having seen her and the child earlier, leaving the psychiatrist's office in the Bureau.

I wanted to tell her that the people she had talked with were reliable professionals that the doctor had examined many children in that office and that complaints were almost non-existent. Instead I turned back to my marketing, knowing that, disturbed as she seemed, she would not have believed me any more than she had believed the doctor.

In April 1955, Charlie and I moved into the garden apartment of the house in Brooklyn which our friends, Ruthann and Arthur Bates had just bought. I transferred then as early as possible from the Bronx to the Schermerhorn Street office in Brooklyn.

At Schermerhorn Street I met so many people who were to become the Intake Department. All of us in Intake had offices on the right side of the entrance hall, close to the front door.

Inez, Vi Gordon and I fell into the habit of lunching together almost every day. Sometimes we went to the corner luncheonette directly across from the back entrance to our offices. At coffee break time, especially, the luncheonette booths were always filled with people from BCG. Greetings flew back and forth, Inez, quiet and reserved, commented one day, as she and I sat on the same side of a booth with Vi opposite us, "She knows everybody."

Vi only smiled and said, "Not everybody."

Inez persisted. "It's as though they all see you first, as soon as they walk in. And that you are the one person they had wanted to see all day."

Again Vi smiled. "I don't know why that is." She seemed almost embarrassed.

What neither Inez nor I could put into words or had thought through was that Vi radiated warmth to which even the most rigid of our co-workers responded.

Lunches at the restaurant on the other block were almost formal by contrast with the diner, usually happening when one of us had had an extra difficult morning or, by contrast, had something to celebrate.

Tables were far enough apart to provide a sense of privacy, even though one might be close enough to observe fellow diners without seeming to stare.

On one occasion we noticed, not far away, a table of three ladies, all grey-haired who seemed to be enjoying each other's company without restraint.

Vi looked at them and said, smiling, "There we are, forty years from now."

## WILMINGTON

Charlie had met my grandmother, Aunt Leah and Uncle Henry at our wedding but he had no idea at all of what surprises awaited him in Wilmington, Delaware where we went, along with my mother to spend Christmas of 1953.

My grandparents had lived the Henrys ever since grand-pop's retirement, except for one semester when he had taught at a college in the South. From his letters it sounded as though in that position he had been as happy as a young man just beginning a career. His young students seemed to have adopted him as a kind of group father and he, having had no prior extended experience with young people, took to them with equal enthusiasm.

Grand-pop had made the mistake of criticizing the meals served on the campus. He had not been used to so much fat and the monotony of oft repeated menus. My Aunt Nin, concerned that he was not eating well, had persuaded him to give up his work, come home and eat more healthfully. He had heeded her advice, and returned to Wilmington. He never complained about being without a regular work schedule, but many times his thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. Grand-pop and Grand-mom lived on the top floor of the Henrys. They joined Aunt Leah and Uncle Henry for the main meal of the day; however, Grand-mom's cooking had always been marginal, at best. Aunt Leah achieved peace of mind by having her parents as dinner guests, rather than worrying about what was happening around the stove two floors away.

Aunt Leah's own kitchen was a kingdom of disbelief. Usually there was dishwater in the sink, even without dishes. The water was soapy and Aunt Leah wasted nothing. This notion presented striking curious contrast to the saver who in her person was not only beautiful, but always well groomed and fresh looking. Mornings, in fact, unlike some housewives, Aunt Leah never left her bedroom until she had combed her hair and put on her make-up. She was not only beautiful but had to be fresh looking. On at least one occasion the

laundry man had had to reschedule his pick-up because when he rang the first time Aunt Leah was not ready to make a public appearance.

Two days after Christmas, we all had enjoyed a dinner which Aunt Leah had prepared without turkey or any of the Christmas leftovers. She asked if anyone would like some cake for dessert.

Charlie, original cake-lover, especially if it were chocolate, glowed. "Thank you. I'll have some."

I said, "Why not?"

Aunt Leah was smiling happily as she rose from her seat near the kitchen to go for the cake. "I'm so glad you're going to have a taste," she said on her way out. "It was my birthday cake."

Charlie did not remember, if he knew, the date of Aunt Leah's birthday but when she mentioned the occasion, my heart flip-flopped. I knew the birthday had been August 14<sup>th</sup> and here we were, about to eat the celebratory cake for Christmas.

I looked at Charlie as Aunt Leah went into the kitchen and at all the rest of the family sitting innocently around the table as though nothing unusual were happening.

Charlie said, only seconds later, as though he were reading my mind.

"When was your birthday, Aunt Leah?"

Aunt Leah threw back over her shoulder, casually, "August 14<sup>th</sup>. You didn't remember?"

Charlie threw me a sideways glance, filled with disbelief. How did he say to my relative he had met only once before, at our wedding, "Thank you, no. I'll pass on the birthday cake."

Aunt Leah, from the kitchen, must have read his mind. "It's been in the freezer all the time. I'm sure it's alright."

There was nothing to say, nothing to do either, but wait for the ancient delight to appear.

We made unimportant conversation while waiting for Aunt Leah to come back with the goody. Finally she came, bearing the prize, smiling but not a happy smile. "I guess I kept it too long," she said. "I don't think you would enjoy it." She went back into the kitchen, cake plate still in hand.

Not one of us would comment on the obvious, but Charlie did sigh with genuine relief. The conversation turned quickly to other matters, like whose birthday was coming up next. We were unable to find one until Charlie's—in April. End of cake discussion, at least.

Uncle Henry, through all of this, while the women made fill-in conversation and Charlie tried to be a part of that exercise, made no effort at all to look involved. He sat in his wheelchair, one arm with elbow on the handle and chin in his hand.

I always thought that it was not at all difficult for Uncle Henry to look uninvolved. He had probably been practicing that expression for years, without even being aware of doing so.

Uncle Henry was genuinely black, his blackness emphasized by the fact that his hairline had receded considerably, adding to the illusion of an unusually high brow. (And he was a “highbrow” in every sense of the word). Whether his eyes were as piercing as I always thought or whether, as a child, I found him frightening: therefore imagined the piercing eyes. I could not remember when I was old enough to think about physiognomy in an adult way. Whatever the reason, his expression as the women and children's (one child, me, in those years) conversation sullied the air in his space was always one of complete detachment.

Uncle Henry had been far less removed from the trivial doings around him before he had suffered the removal of his right leg as the result of diabetes. In addition to being more communicative, he had, in fact been the concerned landlord of the several properties he had acquired after some time in his pastorate. He was certain to respond immediately to any requests his tenants might make. When he became physically limited, he seemed to give up even answering the telephone, but he was frequently nearby when Aunt Leah received a request for attention to a tenant's problem. His patience, as he listened, with chin in hand, elbow resting on the arm of his chair would give out early. Once I remembered him interrupting Aunt Leah, talking with a tenant who needed a plumber.

“Tell him, ‘Yes,’ Leah,” he interjected. “Tell him you'll send the plumber today, as soon as you reach him.”

Aunt Leah would nod, relay Uncle Henry's message exactly as instructed and Uncle Henry would continue his lesson after she had hung up.

"There is no need for a long conversation when a tenant tells you he has a leak. Meanwhile, his affairs are getting wet and my house is being ruined." He would shake his head slowly from side to side as though to indicate the hopelessness of trying to teach his wife to be a landlord. "When something needs fixing, the landlord has to fix it."

Aunt Leah would only smile. She never had any intention of denying the tenant access to the plumber and the help requested. But she had never even talked to this man before and he had a pleasant voice. Aunt Leah was always the soul of graciousness, loved everybody until they gave her reason to change. It was not easy for her to have a brief conversation.

Finally she would say, "You told me they had a new baby. I wanted to ask how the baby is."

Uncle Henry would look heavenward. "When the man tells you there is a leak, it doesn't matter how the baby is. All he wants from you is to know that the plumber is on his way."

Nevertheless, despite the acidity in his tone now, he had not changed in his attention and thoughtfulness toward Aunt Leah. On anniversaries, birthdays and Christmas—Christmas, especially, he would arrange to be taken out by his godchild long ahead of the holiday to seek a suitable gift for Aunt Leah. His taste in jewelry was impeccable, but that was not all. He continued to have a sharp eye for antiques—with which he had furnished his whole house after he had begun teaching at Lincoln University (in addition to his pastoring while in West Chester). Even while he was a student he had begun to collect furniture, china and silver.

We never knew where and how he had learned the value of the pieces he sought and acquired, but long after he was gone knowledgeable visitors would comment on the quality of certain pieces. How had a poor student who must have devoted more than the usual time to his studies, judging by his achievements, found space and energy to inform himself about antiques? The answer to that question died with Uncle Henry.

He did relish telling the story, however, of the time when he had taken one of his favorite finds, a loveseat, to an upholsterer to be recovered. He had not called for the couch immediately upon its completion and the upholsterer had put it on display in his window. In hours after its placement there, someone had called to ask whether this was an article for sale. The upholsterer had said “No” that it belonged to the Reverend Henry. Then the inquirer had indicated that he represented one of the Duponts who was willing to offer—and the agent named a figure in four digits to possess the piece.

With his usual direct approach to things material, Uncle Henry replied, when he went in to pick up his couch and was told of the interest shown by the agent of the Duponts, “If it’s worth that much to a Dupont, you must understand, it’s much more valuable to me.”

Uncle Henry’s sermons, like those of my grandfather’s friend, Dr. Costin, thrilled me with the sound of his words long before I was able to fully understand their meaning. Father Shelton Hale Bishop at St. Philips Episcopal Church in Harlem which I joined in my early teens had the same effect. But tall and handsome as he was it was probable that he reached my girlish psyche long before he touched on my religious intelligence.

Aunt Leah, if she had not married Uncle Henry, would undoubtedly have found from the time she was old enough to understand what was required, singing in the choir, leading rallies, baking cakes. She was ideally suited to be a minister’s wife, not only because of her talent for necessary church activities but also because of her natural graciousness, an air about her of loving everybody. That last quality was probably the one which created an ongoing tension between Aunt Leah and Uncle Henry in the later years of their marriage. Aunt Leah could not bear to miss the Saturday market, not so much because she needed to provision her larder—here was one Frigidaire where was always more food than could possibly be consumed in a reasonable time even by a far larger family—Aunt Leah’s mission at the market was to “meet and greet.”

Uncle Henry, proud pastor and teacher (for many years he continued, even after he and Aunt Leah had moved to Wilmington, to commute regularly to Lincoln to carry on the teaching which he truly loved) would say

to Aunt Leah almost weekly, “Why do you have to go to market on Saturday? I don’t get paid on Friday. You know that’s why they have markets on Saturday, don’t you? For the wives whose husbands are paid on Friday.”

Aunt Leah would smile as glowing a smile as though she were being praised instead of censured and answer, “But I like to go on Saturday. That’s when I see people I might not see at church and we have a chance to chat?”

“Well, yes, that’s one reason.” As he had stated it, it did sound strange, odd enough to give Aunt Leah pause. After a few seconds, she added defensively, “And the vegetables are fresher.”

Uncle Henry just continued to look at her. He said nothing more. He knew when he had lost.

## HAITI

In 1958, as part of a three week vacation, Charlie and I visited Haiti at the invitation of my Aunt Nin who had gone there earlier in the year as a dietitian at the Hopital St. Marc in the north of the island. This institution had been built and staffed solely by the efforts of Dr. William Mellon, of the Pittsburgh steel family. Dr. Mellon had been so inspired by reading about the life of Albert Schweitzer and what he had done in Africa that at the age of forty he had begun his medical training.

Nin, reading about this pioneering son of a family whose other members had made their fortune in business had herself been sufficiently moved to arrange to be one of those interviewed by Dr. Mellon when he was in New York seeking staff for his hospital. Although she had never discussed her motivation, it seemed highly probable that being of service in her ancestral home had drawn her as much as her admiration for Dr. Mellon's commitment. She had been the resident dietitian for several months when she asked us to visit.

Initially, we had scheduled a tour which included Puerto Rico, Haiti and Cuba. But early on, while still in Haiti, we cancelled our visit to Cuba.

As we prepared for the trip, a fishing rod, riding breeches and boots—all Charlie's were included in our luggage. Nin had written that fishing was possible and that Mrs. Mellon had horses which she was gracious enough to allow guests to ride.

"We have to go, if for no other reason" I had said to Charlie "than to allow you to wear those boots." I was only half joking. From Christmas, two years earlier, the boots had remained in the guest room closet, pristine and unexposed to real life as on the day when I had bought them for a Christmas gift. Charlie had told me that year that riding boots were what he wanted more than anything else.

"It's kind of ridiculous to take them that far to be broken in, don't you think?" was his response to my desire to take them to make certain that they were worn sometime.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said. “But Nin says, bring riding boots.’ You’ve got them so you may as well take them.”

As early as when our plane put down at the Dominican Republic we began to wonder whether this was a journey we should be making.

From the cathedral height ceiling of the terminal hung unshaded bulbs which appeared to be no stronger than thirty watts. Young soldiers, armed with rifles almost as tall as themselves, patrolled the dimness of the area. An eight-foot high chain link unwelcoming building. On our side of the fence it was possible to purchase souvenirs, but it was difficult to believe that any traveler would want to carry home a memento from this airport.

Port-au-Prince’s airport, reached in no time at all after the Dominican Republic was better lighted and not as chilly in its reception of newcomers but we noted that there was less than a joyous “welcome home” extended even to returning citizens. While our luggage was being inspected we discovered that somewhere between Haiti and New York we had lost the fishing rod. Charlie, now more concerned with adjusting to our new environment, was only momentarily saddened.

It would be another day, we learned, before we would have transportation from Port-au-Prince to Saint-Marc. To pass the time we tried first to reach a friend of Nin’s who, she had told us, had recently been appointed “Cultural Attaché.” Telephone information went dead in response to my request for his number. Later in our Haitian visit we would learn that he had fallen out of favor with the government. Nin could tell us nothing more.

After dinner we tried to call Celeste who had been a classmate of mine at Guerre-Lavigne in Paris. She had telephoned me in New York early in 1953 when she was on her way back to Haiti. When I called her hotel the same day I was told that she and her husband had checked out and left no forwarding address. Having no way of reaching her, I had wondered all these years what had occasioned their sudden departure.

Now I dialed the number listed under her family name several times, but there was never a ring at the other end. Finally I was able to summon an operator. She listened to my statement of the problem, said nothing at all and then I had a dead line.

Charlie had stood beside me all the time I was going through these futile telephone exercises.

He tried to offer some comfort. “You have her address, yes? First thing tomorrow morning we’ll set out to locate the house.”

Our room was attractive and comfortable but as we passed the desk after having had breakfast in the hotel dining room, we were greeted in English and asked if we would “pay” (for our night’s rent). Standing on our side of the counter listening to this man who, by his manner, was apparently owner of the establishment, it was hard to believe that we were hearing correctly. We had made the reservations through the American Automobile Association. We had never before been asked for payment after only hours in an establishment.

“Pay?” Charlie repeated, as though the word itself were foreign. “We usually pay when we’re ready to leave.”

At this juncture, the lady of the house, as it were, who earlier had stood behind her husband, observing and hearing the discussion, emerged to instruct him in French how to deal with us. It was apparent, then, that she was French and determined to put these bumptious Americans in their places.

“Let me talk to her.” I suggested to Charlie. Although my French had not been aired in conversation for several years, I must have been inspired by her effrontery. When I had delivered my sentiments, she not only understood but was obviously startled to meet an American who could exchange barb for barb with her. She had apparently been accustomed to badgering guests at will.

“We made our reservations through the Automobile Association—see.” Here I showed the receipts which Charlie had been holding. “You have proof that we do not intend to leave without paying. You will give us a bill tomorrow and you will be paid.”

Thus instructed, the over ambitious lady smiled, said a soft “Bien” and retreated to the other end of her counter.

We set out then to find the address listed in the telephone directory for my friend. With the help of several natives encountered along the route, we did locate her residence, a large house set in the center of an enclave occupying one square block. The whole area was enclosed by a high chain link fence.

After a prolonged search we located a bell which evidently sounded within the house even when pulled from half a block away. Charlie pulled and we waited. After a time, he pulled again. Then, from a tiny house a few yards from the castle-like building which we assumed to be the family residence, a door opened and a woman, evidently a servant, peered out. She yelled “Oui?” and I yelled back, asking if Madame were at home.

There was no answer. Our contact simply disappeared and closed the door behind her. Nothing happened for what seemed an eternity but was probably only a few minutes. Then the Iron Gate in front of us suddenly swung open and the same woman we had seen earlier appeared in the doorway of the big house, beckoning us to approach.

Once inside, we were directed upstairs. Celeste was on the landing and after she and I had embraced, led us into a large living room. She looked as I had remembered her from Paris, except thinner. She was as gracious as ever, pleased to meet Charlie. After one long pause in the conversation, she called the servant back and exchanged a few words with her.

Much later, after we three had exchanged bits of halting conversation (I interpreting between Celeste and Charlie) the now familiar maid appeared and served us all an aperitif. It was apparent that she had been sent outside to buy the beverage. Celeste was either too depressed to bother stocking her wine closet or had had no visitors; therefore no need to do so.

Our conversation was full of long pauses. I learned only weeks later when we were back in New York that Celeste’s husband was still practicing in a hospital in Brooklyn. All three of his brothers, also doctors, who had operated a “clinique” in the huge compound where the house was located, had been murdered because they opposed “Papa Doc” Duvalier. Celeste was under house arrest and would probably continue so until her husband came back to Port-au-Prince.

Back in our hotel room, even though we did not yet know the full horror of the story, we were unable to talk about anything else. We had surmised that Celeste was under house arrest. There must also have been a third person, an agent of the government, on the grounds that had made the decision that we might be admitted. We wondered how close he had been to the room in which we had conversed with Celeste.

On the next day our ride north to Saint-Marc, in a car provided by Dr. Mellon, was shared with a doctor from India and his wife. The doctor was one of the many who came from all over the world to serve as volunteers at Dr. Mellon's hospital. Vegetarians, this couple was enchanted during the whole ride by the quality and variety of mangos offered by vendors along the way. The doctor twice asked the driver to stop so he could make purchases.

Being on the grounds of the hospital was like coming into another world in contrast to Port-au-Prince. Not only were the grounds carefully laid out and well-cultivated but there was also a sense of urgency even in the ordinary movement of the many specialist volunteers, who, like our car companion from India, stayed usually for about two weeks. In residence, they all practiced as if entered in a contest for productivity.

Our Indian friend, we learned, was an ophthalmologist and performed cataract surgery the day following our arrival. His patient's joy at the result of the operation was described over and over by all who visited her ward or had an opportunity to talk with the doctor.

It was apparent that all the doctors carried far heavier schedules than they might have at home, trying to accomplish the maximum in their brief stays. Our companion rider literally ran whenever he went from building to building.

On our second afternoon we enlisted for clerical work, of which there was a considerable backlog. Even though we contributed less than full working days, we both had, at the end of the week, the sense of making some difference. It would have been impossible and embarrassing, in the midst of so much concentrated effort, to have remained simply visitors.

It was only our third night on the grounds when the country was invaded by a group which had been organized in and set out from Dade County in Florida (we learned after the uprising had been defeated). Six persons were involved. Three were Haitians. Their plan was to break into the Presidential palace and remove “Papa Doc.”

The attempted coup was unsuccessful but the perpetrators, except for the one thought to be the leader, were captured, tied to the rear of automobiles and driven through the city. For the one who was assumed to have planned the incursion a slower, less showy punishment was devised. He was said to have been imprisoned in a dungeon which was too low to allow its occupant to stand and just wide enough to accommodate a normal body.

Nin and everyone we met on the grounds of the hospital tried to make our visit seem as normal as possible during the tension which resulted from the invasion but even as far from the capital as we were, everyone at the hospital was forced to observe the curfew which had been imposed on the whole island because of the invasion.

After we had been at St. Marc for awhile, Nin took a day off to accompany us on the obligatory climb on horseback up the mountain to Cap-Haitian to steep ourselves in the actual deeds of Toussaint l-Ouverture, the founder of Haiti, responsible for that tiny country’s achieving independence from France.

For the task of leading eager, trusting visitors to the fortress at the utmost height of the peak, small boys are employed. My escort, who looked not more than nine, could not have cared less, had he known, that this was my introduction to the back of a horse. There was not other means of ascent. Because the center of the steep trail was deeply rutted, my little guide tended, naturally, to keep the horse to the inside. As we wound our way up I tried to concentrate on how different the ascent might be if I were not being hit in the head all along the route by overhanging branches.

Equally as awe-inspiring as the battlements, including the prison constructed atop the mountain, was the legend told by a lecturer on the grounds, i.e., that Toussaint kept down rebellion among his troops by ordering those who presented problems to leap from the tip of the mountain to the void below.

On the trip back down, my little leader traveled with remarkable speed and guided the horse to the outer edge of the trail. Whenever I forgot to keep looking straight ahead I could see the absolute bottom of the mountain as my boy hurried the steed mercilessly. In his mind's eye he was certainly seeing his next customer waiting at the foot of the mountain.

As I glanced at Charlie from time to time for reassurance, he looked surprisingly comfortable. He had, of course, familiarity with the back of a horse. Nin's expression revealed neither apprehension nor wonder. It was probable, I thought, that what she had seen and heard at the top of the mountain had been so impressive that it had driven out any fear she might have had of the ride to and from the site.

Charlie did not wear his boots the following day when we met and rode Mrs. Mellon's horses. (Nor did he ever wear them.)

This would be only my second time to mount a horse and the person, who cared for the animals, heeding Charlie's directions, chose for me one who was allegedly mild-mannered. All went smoothly until we were about a quarter of a mile from the compound. We were then in the vicinity of a farm. My horse, it soon became evident, had never in his whole life seen corn with so much appeal. Charlie, secure on his mount which evidently did not care for corn, kept calling out to me, as my steed lowered his head to snack, "Pull his head back."

Despite all my pulling, the horse and I dueled over the corn for what seemed ages. I was fully prepared for the farmer whose crop was being decimated to emerge at any moment from his farmhouse and do violence to both me and my steed. Finally, after what seemed a time without end, my corn lover had had his fill and for a brief interval we had an easy, loping ride.

Normality was short-lived. I was just beginning to enjoy the contrast between this relaxed means of traveling and my experience going up the mountain to Cap-Haitian when suddenly, out of nowhere in front of us, appeared a filly who was of uncommon attraction to my colt. Before I had had time even to consider what might happen, it had happened and my fellow was in position to go at the girl he fancied.

Charlie, secure on his steed only a few feet away, attempted once again to direct me to sensible action. “Get off” was his order, but I was too nervous to dare. I continued to remain atop the horse, sliding rapidly backward. It had not been that easy for me to mount. Why did Charlie think I could reverse the process on command?

Finally, a few seconds later which felt like hours, gravity had its way and I slid all the way to ground level right over the horse’s rear even while he was having his way with the lady.

In the lover’s good time I was able to remount and we wound our way back to the Mellon compound just as though the ride had been perfectly normal.

Mrs. Mellon, a lady of uncommon charm, as well as beauty, was truly fond of her horses, I learned not long after my riding adventure. On that evening my aunt was invited to bring Charlie and me to have dinner at the Mellon home.

The living room, where we sat for a time before dinner, was cool and spacious, with high ceilings and red stone floors. Furnishings appeared to have been kept to the bare minimum, adding to a sense of peace and restfulness. Air and light poured in from the open French doors which I noted were unusually high. When I commented on that distinctive note, Mrs. Mellon answered, smiling, as though anybody should have been able to understand the reason for the large doors, “That’s so the horses can come in and out.”

Despite having been told earlier and with emphasis that our hostess was a horse person I was impressed to learn that she treated them in the same manner as some of us treated our cats and dogs.

Charlie and I were housed while we were at the hospital in the nurses quarters, a dormitory equipped with a washroom having multiple basins, showers and johns. Our room was for only two persons but it was eerie to use the huge bathroom facilities where we encountered various kinds of wildlife. Salamanders clung to the outside walls, exposing their bellies to us all the time. Once there was a toad in a toilet.

We were privileged to enjoy this luxury of space because the nurses who worked at the hospital seemed all to come from towns near enough that they could go home when their duty tours were ended.

Patients, by contrast, came from great distances, usually by donkey or horse. There was, in fact, an area on the grounds for the animals to be sheltered while their masters were receiving treatment. There was another outside area which could accommodate relatives.

Despite the miles between the hospital compound and the capital, there was still tension abroad during the remainder of our week's visit. This was heightened after dark. Dr. Mellon restricted all staff to quarters during evening hours, even as they would have been if in the city.

On the day of our return to Port-au-Prince for the flight back to New York, Dr. Mellon was concerned and kind enough to ask his daughter to accompany us on the ride into the capital. Anne appeared to be in her early twenties, was dark-haired and slim. She spoke and moved quickly, though, one sensed, never unnecessarily. Her presence with us in the car was reassuring. We had been told that she, like her father, was well known and loved all over the island. Our trip from Saint Marc to the capital would be without incident, Dr. Mellon promised, if Anne were present as sponsor, so to speak.

As we packed for leaving Saint-Marc, I had what I thought a remarkably ingenious idea. Instead of putting our soiled articles of clothing in one corner of a bag, I stuffed them all into the riding boots which had not yet served any useful purpose. Not only would be effectively separated from soiled, I thought, but space would be available for whatever trophies we might acquire before we boarded the plane.

When I demonstrated to Charlie how my plan would work he showed real admiration. "That must be the best idea you've had for the last week." I sensed that, even though he did not mention the incident directly, he was referring to my ill-fated riding expedition.

But as Fate would have it, that plan was as ill-conceived as any could have been. Coming from the peaceful atmosphere of the hospital grounds, we had not anticipated the degree of tension still pervading the whole country. Despite being accompanied by the daughter of a benefactor to the nation who was well known and revered far from his scene of action, our car was stopped three times during the trip to Port-au-Prince. We

were ordered out and asked to open our bags. Soldiers then stood over us brandishing their rifles while we emptied the contents of our cases onto the country road.

The soldiers at each stop were so young as to be scary. Their boyish features and young voices accompanying authoritative demands presented startling contradiction.

Even in the broiling sun, I was a slow learner. Only after the second stop and search did I realize that it would be smart to cram all the soiled socks, shorts and so on back into the suitcases wherever they would fit. Although there was no less tension created by the young soldiers each time they offered us to “halt,” the minutes spent kneeling in the dusty road in the merciless sun were reduced considerably.

## HOUSE WITH HISTORY

We moved into the house on Park Place in January 1961. And for each of us—mama, Charlie and I—it was the place where we stayed longer than in any other home in our lives.

Could that have been, I have often asked myself, because our friend, Inez Charles, knew more than Charlie and I did when she found the house for us from her sickbed? On one of the many evenings we spent with her after she was too ill to do more than lie in bed, she said suddenly, “I’ve found a house for you.” She smiled then and reached for the newspaper on the table alongside the bed.

Charlie took it from her and read aloud the description of the three story brownstone, located only a few blocks from where we were at that very moment, on Sterling Place.

Before we had even seen inside the house ourselves, Inez, knowing from our response that evening that we were interested, had asked her sister, Enid, to drive her to the site just so she could have a glimpse of the outside. Later that evening when we visited with her she had pronounced her satisfied that 1046 should be our house.

“I just have this feeling” she said, smiling as she leaned toward us, half-raised on her elbow, “that it’s as right inside as it looks inside.”

This, one of Inez’ last decisions, could not have been more accurate and was to be most precious for us. She died only a few weeks later.

Only once after we had met at Langston’s party did Charlie and I see him again. That was at the dinner party we gave soon after we had moved into our new house in spring of 1961.

We had had frequent postcards, books and other greetings from Langston while he was on the road, but not face to face contact. A “new house party” seemed a good reason for coming together again. Langston always loved parties, as long as he was not expected to “do” anything.

In my job at the Bureau I had just worked closely with one of the psychiatrists to effect results I thought little short of miraculous in the case of a high school junior with pronounced homosexual behaviors.

My client, the mother, had kept her first appointment in our office dressed all in black, including a black kerchief over her head. She was desolated, she said, over her son's behavior. Her manner of dress could not have been more descriptive of her state of mind.

She had told me with her head bowed down "When we go out together—like to the market—so he can carry the heavy bags home—I walk behind him."

"That must be awkward." I had commented.

"It's better," she said, looking down at her hands folded in her lap. "He makes his pants so tight and uses make-up on his eyes."

Mrs. B. was beautiful but on her early visits to our office she looked as though she were in mourning. She was Hispanic, as were many of her neighbors. "Like me," she said, "but their children are all right."

Gil Campbell's intervention, seeing Carlos regularly while I worked with his mother, had resulted in more than Carlos' letting out the seams in his pants and forsaking eye shadow. In direct response to her son's moderated behavior, Mrs. C. took off her black kerchief, resumed using make-up and wearing bright colors.

By the end of the school year I was almost rhapsodic about the changes which had occurred in our mother and son, not only in how each looked, but also in the boy's adjustment in school. Inevitably, as Carlos had given up advertising his effeminacy, he had found more acceptances among classmates and teachers. Best of all, Gil had effected a school transfer away from an atmosphere where the principal himself had over-reacted to the boy's sexual orientation.

Gil and I were congratulating ourselves one more time on our success with Carlos and his mother when I happened to mention that Charlie and I had recently bought a house.

After I had described it, Gil said, “Why don’t you invite Jerry to see it?” His housemate, Jerry, was a decorator. “I’m sure he can give you some ideas.”

I lost no time in taking up this intriguing offer. “How about next Friday?” I invited. We were fortunate that Langston was in town and seemed happy to be invited to join us with Gil and Jerry.

I chose to serve boeuf bourguignon to which I had become addicted in Paris and which seemed to be enjoyed by everyone on whom I had tested it. While the dish was simmering I ventured to make martinis, Charlie’s favorite cocktail and one which I knew, from having watched Gil lunching at a restaurant near our office was also his. A considerable amount of tasting went on between the stew and the drink and only much later, just before dessert, did I discover that red wine and even a smidgeon of Martini do not mix well.

We dined in the center room which was largest one on the first floor, accessible only by going through the front hall and the reception room (as the English identify that space between the front hall and the rest of the first floor and from which the staircase always proceeds to the upper floors).

While we were eating, Jerry suggested that we should change the dining room from where we sat to the front room, an area half as large and separated from the entrance hall only by columns.

“This room,” he said, looking all around the area where we sat, “would be much better as a living room.”

I said I thought I would have problems, taking food all the way to the front. “This is so close to the kitchen. It would require a lot of hauling to serve a meal in that room.” As we sat in the middle room looking toward the front, it seemed miles away.

Jerry was patient, as with a small, backward child. “All you have to do is to get a service cart. They’re fashionable and practical, too. You could probably pick up a used one which would be fairly reasonable.”

Gil was looking pleased, as though he wanted to say, “I told you Jerry could help.” Langston and Charlie were both giving only casual attention to the decorating conversation, much more to the food on their plates.

By the time we had reached the dessert and made considerable progress in deliberations on rearranging rooms, I was feeling less than tip-top and excused myself, went upstairs to lie down for what I thought would be a moment.

When I returned the transformation was almost complete. Charlie, Gil and Jerry were still moving furniture. It looked as though the only piece which had not been touched was my mother's piano, still in the center room between the two others in which all the activity had been happening.

Langston sat, laughing, on the one upholstered chair which had already made its way to the former dining room. He looked as though he had not had so much fun in years.

I asked, "What were you doing before they brought this chair in from the front?"

He stopped laughing long enough to say 'Watching. I've never been to a moving party before.' Later Charlie told me that Langston had sat smiling in that same chair for most of the time the furniture was being rearranged. Not too long after that adventurous night we were able to find a serving table and for all the remaining twenty-seven years we lived in that house, we kept to Jerry's plan about what should be where.

Mama agreed with us that the piano she had brought from Manhattan when she came to Brooklyn never seemed at home in the center room. But she had not wanted it on the third floor in her living room. She had had to do rather a lot of compressing as it was, moving five rooms of furniture from her apartment to four in our house.

Mrs. Wilson and Mama were old friends from their earlier memberships in Bethel A.M.E. Church on West 132<sup>nd</sup> Street in Harlem. Mama had left, with a small group of dissenters, some years earlier, as a result of a disagreement with the minister. Their friendship had continued, nevertheless.

Although ten years older than Mama, Mrs. Wilson gave no quarter for age. Tall, brown and with even features, she could easily have been taken for twenty years younger than she was. She had lived on Staten Island for many years and one day made that long trip by bus from her house to the ferry—which went to downtown Manhattan, then subway to Brooklyn—all the time carrying flowers and vegetables grown in her garden. She

had not called beforehand and found no one at home. She deposited her gifts on our front steps and went back to Staten Island, having made a journey about which many people half her age would have thought a long time.

Mama and Mrs. Wilson had frequently exchanged overnight visits through the years. So, not surprisingly, Mama invited Emma Wilson to visit with her at our new dwelling not long after Gil's friend had inspired the radical furniture re-arrangement.

Early the next morning I was in the kitchen, getting breakfast for all of us when Mrs. Wilson came down, greeted me and continued her walk downstairs to our basement.

When she came up in a short time she announced, "You have plenty of room there for a grand piano."

It took me a few seconds to recover. I knew that she was planning to move from her house to a smaller one but had no idea until this moment that she was looking for a home for her piano.

I turned from the sink to face her. "If you should give us a piano we wouldn't put it in the basement, for heavens' sake. There's plenty of space in the middle room."

Mrs. Wilson looked thoughtful then as she walked towards the front of the house. She came back in no time at all, saying, "I didn't know whether you would want it." She smiled then. "But, of course, if you do—and we finished together, "that's a much better place."

We were able to find a community center which was happy to have the upright before the arrival of Mrs. Wilson's piano.

Only a short time later Mrs. Wilson telephoned one evening to ask if Charlie could arrange to transport her to Kennedy airport on a day not too far from the time she was calling.

Charlie was, of course, more than eager to do such a small thing for this beautiful lady who always invited us to her house for New Year's Eve Day and was such a delight to be with at any time. On the appointed day he drove out to Staten Island at the time agreed upon, not yet knowing in which direction his passenger was going from Kennedy.

He could hardly wait to get in the house upon his return.

As he put his coat in the closet, he said, “Where do you think Mrs. Wilson’s going?”

“I wouldn’t have any idea.”

“Would you believe Israel?”

His announcement had the desired effect. For a moment I could not answer. I asked, when recovered from shock, “By her?”

“Well, not really by her—with a group. But just the same, how many people--?”

I finished for him. “How many people do I know in their eighties who would pick up and go that far from home?”

“That’s what I mean,” he said, as he closed the closet door. “She said she always wanted to go and she thought she better do it now. She didn’t know how much more time she had. Besides, she earned that time on her job for being punctual.”

Now I was even more amazed than I had been with the idea that she was going because she had always wanted to see Israel.

I just looked at Charlie. “Tell me more about that part.”

“It’s just simple as she explains it. On her job each employee gets credit for the time they arrive before nine o’clock or whatever time they are due. And when they have enough time, they can take it in vacation.”

We had known that Mrs. Wilson had been working for awhile with a company of shipbuilders, located on Wall Street. Her job was as a matron and she came to it every day from Staten Island, arriving, obviously, before most of the employees who lived in Manhattan. She had, in fact, chastised the president of the company one day (she had told us) for complaining about disabilities of age.

“I’m a lot older than you,” she had told him. “You just better get yourself together. Take some exercise and loosen up.” According to Mrs. Wilson’s account of that meeting, the president had listened and shortly afterwards told her he had begun working out in an exercise program. That was the beginning of a chatty relationship which continued for as long as she stayed.

Mrs. Wilson kept her job until she was ninety. That year the president called her into his office and explained, gently as possible, she said as she told the story, that the company was going to have to let some employees go. Since she was among the oldest and was eligible for both social security and unemployment insurance. It was logical that she should be among the first released.

As Mrs. Wilson related the story, it was obvious that she had been saddened, but she was not defeated. When she began to look around for work she had found a gentleman about her own age whose daughter thought he needed a careperson. She had enjoyed bringing cheer into the old gentleman's days and felt she had lost a friend when he died. A short time later, however, she had become a volunteer in an institution for children which were near her home.

On one of her visits to our house, the same one in which she stayed overnight, in fact, and announced the next day her gift of a piano—we had invited my Aunt Nin—many years younger than Mrs. Wilson—to dinner. The conversation turned, somehow, to gardening (perhaps because my aunt had not long before joined the New York Horticultural Society).

“I love to go out in the early morning and work a little, look a little. That's the time when everything is at its best in the garden.” Mrs. Wilson said, smiling as though her garden were in sight at that very moment.

“That is a good time,” my aunt said. “But I don't go out then because the ground is so damp. I'm not ready to get dressed for the street and I prefer not to dress twice.”

Mrs. Wilson looked up, directly across from my aunt. “Get dressed? In the early morning? To go in the garden?” She was a lady not easily upset, but her voice had gone up and up. “I never get dressed. There's nobody to see me and I love to feel the dew on my feet.”

Nin looked truly shocked at that. “Oh, no, I would never go in that damp grass with nothing on my feet.”

Mrs. Wilson broke out into a hearty laugh. “Why, for heavens' sake? It feels so good.”

Nin looked across the table at her as though she had dropped in from another world. “Because I would be afraid of getting a cold.”

Mrs. Wilson chuckled. “I’ve been doing it for years. Never got a cold yet. In fact, I don’t seem to get them at all.”

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## STRIKE – 1967

In spring 1967, Charlie read an article in the *New York Times Magazine* section in which our senator, Daniel “Pat” Moynihan, discussed family breakdown in general and in particular among African-Americans. He commented pointedly on the absence of male role models in the classroom, especially in the lower grades.

Charlie mulled over the senator’s message for not more than a day before he applied for the “instant teacher” training, as some derisively called the special program then in effect to increase the number of male teachers in the system.

Vast numbers of young men were joining the teaching corps or resuming educational programs they had earlier abandoned solely in order to avoid going to fight in Vietnam. Men of draft age were so prominent among those applying for the concentrated training that Charlie delighted for years after he had entered the system to relate his experience when he went for his oral examination.

There he sat waiting in a large room filled with young men, most under the age of twenty-six, the cut-off age for the draft. He had taken time off from his job at Psychological Corporation when notified by the Board to appear on this day for the oral.

While he tried, in the midst of this gathering of young men, to battle his boredom, an earnest middle-aged lady interviewer, eye glasses in hand, appeared at the front of the room. She called out, imperiously, “Charles Thorpe,” and waited. Charlie stood and called again, impatiently now. “Where is Charles Thorpe?” By then he had made his way from the back, closer to where she stood.

“I’m Charles Thorpe,” he said, coming immediately before her.

All she said, as she looked at the only middle-aged man in the room was, “Oh.” Then, pulling herself together, “Follow me.”

There was no vacation that summer for the new teacher-to-be. In addition to training his successor at Psychological Corps, he tried to prepare himself as thoroughly as possible, beyond the basic training offered by the Board's quickie course.

We drove together out to Sag Harbor, presumably for the summer vacation, but after a week Mrs. Dixon and I drove Charlie to the L.I.R.R. station at Yaphank and he went back to work at Psychological Corps. He was trying to make up for leaving.

September 11<sup>th</sup> was the first day of school. There must have been hundreds of teachers, good union members, who participated in the "Mass Resignations" as that day's action was called by the Union, who were unhappy, torn between loyalty to the organization and discomfort at leaving their classes uncovered. Many were sensitive to the fact that for a number of their charges school was a refuge from a home where, even with a non-working mother there might be little stimulation. Other children, with working parents, would necessarily be alone for much longer than the school day.

Charlie, the brand new teacher, had no conflict.

"Anybody who thinks I gave up a good job to walk a picket line has to be crazy" was the way he put it. He had been sought by three principals, recommended to them by friends of ours who were already in the system. His choice P.S. 138, only two blocks from our house, not for its nearness but because of the recommendations of more than one person we knew on the staff.

For the duration of the strike Charlie was custodian of the keys to open the school doors in the morning and later, to a slew of other doors within the building. The school custodian, white, had indicated his position by refusing to open the school doors to those teachers who were ready to cross the picket lines and proceed with the normal school day. His assistant, Afro-American, contrived to gain access to a duplicate set which he entrusted to Charlie. He chose Charlie, no doubt, not only because he was brand new: therefore could not be too dangerous, but also because he was the only black male teacher in the school.

My closest associate in Jr. H.S. 65 in lower Manhattan, Sally Bloch and I held almost nightly discussions by telephone while she continued to work. She told me about one of the vice-principals in the school whose sincerity we had both wondered about many times.

“He walks the picket line before classes begin, then goes inside and acts like an assistant principal, even teaching if necessary. And it’s necessary about every day.”

“That must make him beloved of everybody.”

“That’s his idea.” Sally’s disgust crackled over the wires. “But it’s working to do just the opposite.”

I laughed. “You mean everybody hates him?”

“Just about.” Sally said.

Although the strike was initially a contest between the Board of Education and the teaching staff, as represented by the Union, early on it became a bitter contest between black and white (largely Jewish) teachers. Many of the latter identified the elements of disagreement as matters concerning mainly the children in the poorer schools. And this was not entirely inaccurate.

Adding to this impression, no doubt, was the fact that during the opening days of the strike prominent African-American leaders, such as Stokely Carmichael, Bayard Rustin and even Martin Luther King, Jr. (in a telegram to the Union) supported the strike. During the course of the bitter struggle, “community control” became a by-word. Community control came to be defined as African-American parents exerting more power in their schools, presumably for the better education of their children.

I. F. Stone, in his weekly which was published from Washington, D.C., even put out a “special” issues on New York’s school crisis. On page 3 he cited the Civil Liberties position in regard to the strike. Presumably, the struggle was for community control which the African-American community believed would result in more effective education of its children.

As the duration of the strike lengthened, anger grew to such a degree that some of our Jewish friends who were teachers reported that they had received taunting, derisive telephone calls from persons they

recognized as being from their own group. One, a member of a small number of us having dinner together at the home of a co-worker who was among the strikers, told of being awakened in the middle of the night by crank calls.

In the midst of the turmoil and tension all around me, I was in a position which I found increasingly embarrassing. I was on sabbatical. At the time I had requested the leave there had, of course, been no indication at all that the system would be in the critical state which resulted from the strike.

Although embarrassed about being out of school during this difficult time, I did not have a truly easy road during those days. I was teaching a course at New York University School of Social Work (ignorant as a new-born about the fact that one was not supposed to work—even for a tiny salary—while on sabbatical) and taking a course in Supervision at the New York School of Social Work, then located at 92<sup>nd</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue.

No matter how I stressed, when I parked in a garage near NYU that I would need to get out in a hurry when I was leaving, my car always managed to get itself in a position where I had to wait for it to be retrieved.

Then, at 92<sup>nd</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue there was, of course, no place anywhere near the school available for parking. Each of those days when I had to visit the two schools of higher learning were trying in the extreme.

On Friday, the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, end of the second week of the strike; I was negotiating a fruit and vegetable deal with Moe, the huckster who came to our block every Friday about 10 o'clock. I should not have been there. In normal times, if a school holiday happened to fall on Friday, I would have been delighted at my good fortune to be able to behave like a full-time housewife, to join the scramble at Moe's truck, picking over the goodies, fresher and far better priced than any one ever saw in our "changing" neighborhood, already sufficiently changed so that the produce is wearier and higher as it always is in the "black" communities.

The week before I had bought over \$5 worth of lovely stuff (a lot of money by Moe's prices) in three trips, but today I am distracted, torn to bits about the strike and where it is all going to end, so the best I've been able to do is four items on two trips.

Moe says, with no inflection in his voice, “So you’re out today.” I had never told him I worked for the schools but he must have had time to think about a lot of things while he stood there totaling the housewife’s baskets and reprimanding those who sample freely as they go and toss the unwanted items back in the crate—“They’re not baseballs, ladies.”

I muttered something in response to his comment about my being “out” and asked as all of us asked anybody who would listen in those days, “When do you think it will end?”

“Right after the holidays,” Moe said, grinning mischievously. The holidays he referred to were “Rosh Hashanah,” of course. It was Mrs. Adams, a sturdy African-American who reprimanded him. “That’s an anti-Semitic remark.” Moe laughed aloud then and some of the Jewish housewives around the wagon smiled with him. “But that’s when the strike will end,” he repeated.

Moe was round all over, broad faced and usually smiling. This day he called me back when I had already started towards my door, finished with the customer in front of him and bent to say confidentially, “Listen, I’m sixty-six years old and I went to school all my life in New York. Everybody learned and they didn’t have all this trouble. If they’d just go back to teaching them—“

I started toward my house again, making only a half-hearted attempt to bring out that the problem seemed to be that “they” seemed not to want to teach “them.” A young Jewish woman near us pocketed her change and said, “Have a happy Jahr” as she trundled her cart down the street. She is the same one who was competing with me for peaches, apples and onions. I never really saw her face, only remember that I became more and more annoyed at her arm and the top of her turbaned head (covered because she is Orthodox) always coming in front of my arm and head for the same produce.

She had said, “Have a happy Jahr,” I mused as I put the key in my door.

When I had put away the fruit and vegetables and sat down to read the paper, I could not concentrate because I continued to think about that woman whose face I would not know now if I saw her in the next moment. Part of me all the time was thinking, “They’re so aggressive.” But then another part was recalling that

all summer long when I had been at Moe's wagon every week and had lots of energy to compete, the women who played the pushy roles were African-American women. They got to Moe earlier and with longer lists. The women from Jamaica were first to reach the truck and were the fiercest in their determination to cull the best of whatever fruit or vegetable they coveted. And aren't we all motivated by the same desire, to get the most we can for our money and our families?

Another day, years earlier when Moe's customers on our block were still largely Jewish. I had found myself in the midst of a discussion about making pickles. I had never made a pickle in my life but that day Moe had fresh dill. It was so green and fragile. Most of the Jewish housewives were snapping it up eagerly. Three of them got into a discussion about the amount of salt to put into the brining mixture. When they couldn't agree one turned to me for my opinion. Without hesitating I said "yes." I thought a cup of salt was about right.

I left the group then and when I was inside my house, asked myself why I had answered the salt question and wondered if I would ruin the woman's pickles. When I had concurred with her estimate of salt, she had nodded and seemed perfectly satisfied.

I kept wondering "Why?" Why had I answered that question when I had never made pickles in my life? Finally it came to me—the explanation of my freely proffered answer. I was so flattered to be accepted, not as an African-American among whites or a Christian among Jews, but as a housewife who made pickles.

## VISITING CHURCHES

In the second week of the strike, Charlie read in the Village Voice that on Sunday morning, September 24<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Elliot Shapiro, recently appointed Assistant Superintendent of Schools in District 6 would be guest speaker at Spencer Memorial Church in Brooklyn Heights. I resolved instantly to attend that service but it was not until ten o'clock Sunday morning that I knew Charlie did not plan to accompany me. He was not without ideas, however. While I prepared breakfast he called our friend, Violet Gordon, who worked in the Headquarters Office of the Bureau and inveigled her into going with me to Spencer Memorial. All of us were consumed with curiosity about what Dr. Shapiro might say because his appointment to the superintendency had been accompanied by considerable controversy. He was famous for being "not an establishment man." His announced topic was "Is the Teacher a Citizen?"

When I telephoned Vi about going to hear Dr. Shapiro that Sunday, we agreed that it seemed an excellent opportunity to "enrich" ourselves (as they say in the trade) and to meet again.

That expedition began a program of church visiting which lasted until the end of the strike and, more importantly, nourished the development of a friendship like no other of my adult life. Dr. Shapiro was the only educator to whom we were audience, but in the course of our regular Sunday morning excursions we were privileged to hear many excellent speakers.

On Sunday, October 15<sup>th</sup> we did not go to church. My friend, Marion Palfi, had come to New York from Los Angeles a few days before and was staying at our house. Her plan was to spend as much time as possible with Toy Harper who she always called "Little Mama."

I had met Marion, a "social photographer" through Langston while I was in the Navy. She had invited me to her apartment on the lower East Side to sit for a photograph. We had soon become good friends.

Marion's title of "social photographer" had been bestowed by Karl Menninger of the Menninger Clinic in the foreword which he had written for a collection of her photographs documenting the lives of aged persons

in nursing home type residences. Her focus, from the start of her career in photography, had always been on those persons and situations she felt should be in the spotlight of public attention and had been neglected. She had been in the South at the height of the civil rights battles and at considerable risk to her person had photographed many confrontations between those seeking freedom from unnatural restrictions and those who would perpetuate the mistreatment of African-Americans by any means possible,

Earlier Marion had lived on Indian reservations from where she had made striking photographic records of Native Americans.

Langston had not told me when he arranged for Marion and me to meet how much she was into social studies. I was met by a slim, dark-haired woman with a warm smile who might have been in her mid-thirties. She was of average height and even in repose, projected a store of energy. I was not surprised to learn, after we had become good friends, that in Europe she had been an actress. She had gone to work for a photographer soon after arriving in New York and although some of the stories she related about growing into her new career seemed to suggest she had been exploited, she had used the experience well enough to become a skilled practitioner on her own.

On this Sunday all of us, Marion, Charlie and I went to 127<sup>th</sup> Street together and gathered around the large dining room table in Toy's kitchen.

Emerson was visibly happy. He said that today was like a holiday because Toy, only weeks before, unable to negotiate a walk from where we sat to the front door, had come downstairs the night before to dinner. His friend "Doc" Weir, a buddy from the time they were both traveling with a jazz band, now a retired dentist, had taken cooking as his third career. For this day, he had produced one of his famous gourmet-type meals. We were, all seven, including Adele Glasgow, Toy's longtime friend, full and happy.

Earlier, upstairs in Toy's bedroom when she and Adele had been reminiscing about life in Kansas (Toy's home) in the late nineteenth century, I wondered how Adele knew so much current history since she had declared more than once that she could not bear to read the papers these days or listen to news on the radio

because the world was in such a state. Now, downstairs, we reached the point, inevitably when we began to discuss the topics she did not want to read about—the war in Vietnam, the people who were misfits in the whole puzzle and those who had simply become drop-outs.

In short order we came to the color problem. Charlie who takes wicked delight in inserting confusion factors in a normal conversation threw in the discussion the fact that Vi and I had been “co-mingling” in selected churches—all, of course, with predominantly white parishioners.

When the laughter had subsided, Adele said, ‘Co-mingling,’ it’s an odd term. It doesn’t really make sense. ‘Co’ means together and so does ‘mingle.’”

Charlie explained that the phrase was not his. “That’s the term the minister used in the first church Vi and Frances visited. And the next Sunday another minister put it in his sermon. ‘Everybody’ he said, should have a ‘colored friend and see him often, call him two or three times a week.’”

“Even Elmo Roper,” I added. “In the most recent Saturday Review had an article whose conclusion stated that it’s up to the intellectuals to start cultivating the ‘out’ people—on their level, of course.”

On the next Sunday Vi and I resumed our church visiting and continued the practice for the duration of the strike. From the Reverend Robert A. Edgar, pastor of Central Presbyterian at 64<sup>th</sup> Street and Park Avenue we received a warm note. That may have been because we were conspicuous in the coffee hour after the service. Except for the African-American soloist in the choir we were the only people of color in the church that Sunday.

After one service at that church we were welcomed by a mink-clad, middle-aged woman who sat in the pew just behind us and finished her warm welcoming with “Tell me, just who is your leader?” She was serious and obviously puzzled.

Vi and I exchanged glances while trying to maintain contact with our friendly parishioner and keep straight faces.

Our questioner continued, obviously puzzled. “There’s Dr. King, of course.”

We were both concentrating, with all force on how to tell this kind lady that we, no more than she, would have only one person in the whole country to which we looked for leadership.

Vi, as usual, came through fast with a sensible answer and in no way did it seem to have come out in a hurry.

“I suppose that now with the strike in effect,” she said, gently, “all of us in the school system look to the union head as our leader.” We were both looking directly at our friend by then. She nodded, but still looked troubled as she smiled and left us.

## GOOD-BYE

During those last months when Toy was so ill I was fortunately on sabbatical. She looked forward, I knew, to the whole day of each week which I would spend with her. There were, of course, shorter, drop-in calls but they were not the same in quality or content.

Toy was a devoted listener to one radio game show where participants would telephone in answers. She enjoyed matching her skill against that of the prize seeking participants. More often than not she would have the correct answer even before the radio guest.

Emerson was being kept together, as it was, by his old friend and performing buddy, “Doc” Harrelson.

They had been on the road together for many years, performing in the same bands. After that Doc had become a dentist, had married and established his home in the South. He and Emerson had drifted apart. But by 1966 Doc was a widower, retired and had come to live with the Harpers on 127<sup>th</sup> Street.

Doc’s hobby and principal occupation was preparing food which was out of the ordinary. When I met him in 1967 he was in his Chinese food phase. On the way to Toy’s room on the second floor I would stop in the kitchen to say “Hello” and there would be Doc in the midst of innumerable small dishes of chopped ingredients for his next recipe. In those difficult months I never once saw him sitting down, reading or relaxing—except when it was time to eat. He was always concocting something mysterious and wonderful.

Doc was as solidly built as Emerson was slight. He was dark brown while Emerson was light enough to have been mistaken for Caucasian. Emerson played several wind instruments but could not (literally) boil an egg. While doc was working away at his menu for the day, they would reminisce about their experiences years before, on the road.

Toy one day asked if I would help her to take a shower. She was so tired of having only bed baths which the visiting nurse would give. We made it in and out of the shower but she had a terrible stomach upset

afterwards. I felt so guilty for having gone along with her plan but once she had pulled herself together again, she declared that she was glad we had done it. She felt clean, for a change.

When we were not going over the news she liked to think back on our early years together and how ignorant I was about sewing. She talked a lot, too, about the things she could not eat. She had been restricted by her doctor to artificial salt.

“As long as I can still eat,” she said one day, “I’d rather have real salt. That stuff does nothing at all for food.” Doc and Emerson never went along with her on the idea of her adding salt to the dishes which she was served, but she did eat what Doc cooked and, as far as anybody knew, he always used the real seasoning.

Charlie and I went together to the hospital when Emerson told us that Toy had something she wanted to tell me.

We all knew that she had little time left but when we came into her room she neither looked nor sounded like one who would die within hours. What weight she had lost did not show in her face.

From her hospital bed she was disposing of all her most valued possessions and wanted to tell me what she wanted me to take from the house.

In a few days we would repeat the journey we had taken only a few months before with Langston—to the funeral parlor on St. Nicholas Avenue and then the long ride to the crematorium.

## GOES ROUND AND ROUND

Our friend, Arthur Bates, has often commented that “the black middle class world is very small.” The first time we heard him say that was when he learned that friends he had not known were acquainted turned out to be as close to each other as he was to one of them.

It was a long time ago that we first heard Arthur express those sentiments. In the years which have passed since. I have had more than one occasion to note that is the “World”—not any one sector—which is a surprisingly small place and growing more so every day.

It was the day after the retirement celebration for our friend, Helene Cave, who had left her position with the Veterans’ Administration after fifty years of service. The party had been held at the Terrace on the Park, a favorite location for galas. It had been a true “gala”—as sparkling as it should have been for Helene and the years she had devoted in service to the community.

It was the next day and I had brought the program of the evening’s festivities along with me on my way to an appointment in midtown. Riding on the subway for half an hour from Brooklyn would give me the opportunity to catch up on all of what had happened the night before. There had been no reading time during the celebration.

As I removed the document from the small shopping bag into which I had tucked it, a golden page (literally) of special contributors to the event escaped its cover and fell to the train floor. A gentleman sitting next to me leaned over, retrieved and handed the piece to me. As he brought it up from the floor, he commented, surprised, “I know him.” “Him,” his pointing finger indicated, was the first name at the top of the page, a gentleman who had taken an “ad” of several inches to express his admiration and good wishes for Helene. I read the ad as I thanked my neighbor for retrieving the paper. He was a board member of a large, prestigious corporation.

“I went to his birthday party last week,” my seatmate said, as I accepted the recovered sheet from his hand.

I only smiled and said, “Thank you,” because I didn’t know what else to say. Helene is an African-American. My helpful seatmate was Caucasian, as was the gentleman board member to whose birthday party he had gone the week before. How small a world it truly is.

Later, still marveling at how close we are on such a large globe, I remembered an incident from several years earlier. In Sag Harbor we had a friend, Arthur Grieg, who lived only a short way down the road from us and would drop in frequently just to pass the time of day.

One day, after we had known each other for more than two years, Arthur, having stopped by for his usual few minutes, suddenly stared at me as though we had not been seeing each other for several years, then said—

“My friend, Muriel, has a head—a piece of sculpture that looks so much like you. “Just like you,” he repeated.

Muriel Petioni, older sister of my college mate, Marguerite, had been in medical school with Arthur. They were still close and met frequently.

Arthur smiled and reared back on the couch. “Yes, I’ve been thinking for some time how much that head reminded me of somebody I knew. You should see it.”

I said, “I’d like to.”

Nothing further was said about the head then but the next time Muriel came to Sag, Arthur brought her to our house and we learned how she acquired the head. She had purchased it many years before when she had just begun practicing. She had seen it in a shop near her home and had made arrangements to pay so much per week until she had completed the asking price—only \$100—but a lot for a new doctor to pay in lump sum.

Muriel told us, “The artists were moving out of town, emptying his studio. The bust was only one of several works the store owner had bought from him. His name is ‘Artis.’ That’s remarkable, isn’t it?”

What was remarkable was that I was able to say calmly, “It looks like me because it is me.” I was too excited to be grammatical. “I sat for it while I was in college.”

Arthur and Muriel were both looking at me with amazement, even though both were essentially “cool” characters. Why would I not have had the piece in my possession all these years was the question on both their faces.

Finally Arthur asked, “Didn’t the artist offer it to give it to you?”

“Of course he did.”

“Then why--?”

“Because I was simple—just simple.” I answered truthfully. William had asked me to sit for that bust when he was just beginning as an artist and I had done it because he was my friend. When he told me it was finished and I could take it home, I had said I wouldn’t know where to put it.” As I talked I could see on their faces exactly what my listeners were thinking.

“It was not only stupid. It was so inconsiderate of his feelings. But I had sat just so he could have a model he didn’t have to pay.”

They all three looked at me with different expressions, but I knew what they were thinking.

Charlie arranged to go and see the piece (without my knowledge) and to borrow it from Muriel in order to have it duplicated so that he could make me a gift of the copy for my birthday several months later. Borrowing the head was not easy, he told me, once the deed was done and the copy was in our possession.

Everyone who sees the head is impressed but not everyone recognizes the sitter immediately. After all, it was done more than a half century ago.

I am probably the only one who is depressed when I look at that head in its prominent place in our living room—not because it shows such a young person in contrast to my present appearance, not even because I failed to realize that my head was being molded by a young man who would soon be known as a great artist—but

because I am reminded of how unfeeling a young person I must have been, not even to take home the work into which William had put so much effort.

And so often when I catch a glimpse of the head I remember the song, “It Must Have Been Moonlight” because that was the tune I remember our dancing to shortly after William had told me that the head was completed and I could get it whenever I liked.

Many, many years later I learned how much William had achieved because I saw his work on the walls of the Brooklyn Museum of Art. That was long before Arthur Grieg had “discovered” me at Muriel’s house. When we came back to New York after that summer of recognition I went to the public library to find out more about my friend. I learned that he had moved to Minnesota where he had been teaching at the University. That was when he had emptied his studio in Harlem and the woman with the “arts” shop had acquired the head which later became Muriel’s.

William had died several years before the time of my research.

## PROTESTS

During the years which I spent in the Schermerhorn Street Office of the Bureau of Child Guidance, history was being made which would change some of our lives profoundly.

Passage of the Civil Rights Bill of 1957 was one piece of legislation in which many of us previously associated only at work became more than casually involved and developed friendships which would endure past the struggle.

Lestina Grant, an unusually talented psychologist, based at the Schermerhorn Street office during the period of some of the most intense struggles concerned with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, initiated the plan of Bureau staff, as individual citizens, carrying on a letter campaign to our representatives in Washington.

For almost a month during lunch hours, after five o'clock and on weekends a small committee organized by Lestina exhorted our co-workers to exert as large an effort as possible to make our legislators hear. Although a few of us took responsibility for the mailing of duplicated letters, we were proudest of our success in eliciting handwritten pleas.

At the same time as civil rights struggles were being waged all over the country, some of us at the Bureau inevitable became involved in the fight in our own backyard.

Protests were being held at the site of the erection of Downstate Hospital, for instance, a building slated to be, as part of the complex which included Kings County Hospital, a state of the art institution.

In the midst of a community whose citizens were of diverse backgrounds, not one person of African-American or Hispanic origin had been hired to be engaged in construction. Activists were demonstrating against this flagrant neglect and insult by lying in the streets to prevent the passage of the trucks transporting work materials.

My friend, Vi Gordon, and my former supervisor, Kitty Donnell, arranged to meet me at the scene on a morning in July 1957. Our plan was to join the protestors who were marching around the construction site. But

we were soon moved, literally, to join those who were putting themselves in the paths of the trucks. Once the decision was made, we had barely found positions in the prone state before we were hauled away by the police and driven in a police van to the block long jail on Raymond Street.

We were held in cells for only a few hours, but Kitty, we learned only after our release, had been subjected by the female guard to a strip search. We knew that the penalty for involving oneself in a civil rights battle might be more severe if one were Caucasian but this indignity committed by one woman against another seemed to have arisen solely out of hate, not out of legal necessity.

When I returned to Sag Harbor the next morning (I had only gone into the city to join the picketers) I saw that Charlie had planted half a block of small hemlocks on the border of Mrs. Dixon's property. When I marveled at the amount of effort which must have gone into the planting, he said, "I had to do something while I wondered how long you would be in jail."

"How did you know?" We had had no communication from the time I had left him two days before.

"If you and Kitty and Vi were there and people were throwing themselves in front of trucks, I knew that you three were not just watching." He bent over his trees again as he finished the thought.

"But none of us is the impulsive type to do a thing like that." I protested, recalling that I had even surprised myself.

He smiled a broad Charlie smile. "Who said anything about being impulsive?"

## HELPERS FOR MAMA

Mama's great pride and joy was in her church membership. She never missed Sunday morning service and sang in the choir for thirty-four years. It was a sad day for me, almost as sad as I knew it must have been for her when she told me that the choirmaster had given her notice that, because she was unable to follow the words of the hymn, even with book in hand, she could no longer be a member of the choir.

Despite that cruel rejection, Mama had, nevertheless, told me that she wanted to be buried in her choir robe which she had put away with great care. Over time, however, she must have become less forgiving of her choir director because she announced only a year or so later, that she had changed her mind.

Mama's doctor had, early on, diagnosed her as having Parkinson's. Later, I was certain that he had missed the early symptoms of Alzheimer's. There were so many simple mistakes she made. One time, having attended a church only five blocks from our house, she did not know how to come back. When I became anxious and went to find her, she was about a half a block from the church in the midst of a circle of several kind men who were trying to help her but were having difficulty because she could not even recall the name of her street.

Another time while we were home together, Mama answered the telephone and the call was for me. A long time later I found the telephone in the kitchen off the hook. Between receiving the message and coming to look for me, Mama had evidently forgotten that there was a call.

One day I had just returned from work—we were then living on Park Place, Brooklyn in a three story limestone where Mama had the third floor—I found her fully dressed in her Eastern Star outfit, ready to leave for the meeting which I knew was to be held in Manhattan at eight o'clock.

“But it's too early,” I told her. “You'll have a long wait. Meeting time is almost three hours away.”

Mama insisted I was wrong: she would not be too early. When I finally realized that she was determined to go no matter what I said, I went on inside the house.

She was back home long before eight o'clock.

“What happened?” I asked.

She said, “They wouldn't let me in.” Her hurt was palpable.

“But, Mama,” I tried to console her and suggest another reason. “You're a member in good standing. Why wouldn't they let you in?” After a long time I was able to persuade her, I thought, that she had made a mistake in the hour.

A few weeks after that, Mama said at dinner one evening, smiling as though she were recalling a truly funny story. “The doctor's giving me up. He refuses to be my doctor anymore.”

At that time she was still being seen at her union medical offices. She had been almost as proud of her membership in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union as she had been of her church membership.

I had accompanied her on one visit to the clinic. At that time she seemed not only to be able to fend for herself in the whole routine of registering, waiting and being seen by the doctor, but while waiting, had enjoyed a mild flirtation with another patient. Although it was the gentleman who had initiated the encounter, they both had appeared to be having a good time. It did not seem necessary for me to accompany her again. It might, in fact, I thought, be a hindrance.

“Why did the doctor say he wouldn't take care of you anymore?” I asked. I could not believe that the doctor had said just that. From the start of this discussion, Charlie had listened, looking from one to the other of us, saying nothing.

Mama smiled as though enjoying a great joke, then revealed that she had not been taking her medication for diabetes for sometime. That fact the doctor had determined by her tests.

It was after she had told us this story, still as though it were all a joke that I knew I had to have someone to care for her while I was at work.

And thus began a series of adventures which finally came to a happy ending but, meanwhile, included episodes over several months which I would not have believed had I read of them happening to someone else.

Unacquainted with any private employment agency and knowing the urgency of getting someone in the house as early as possible, I called the New York State Employment Agency—Household Division.

It took only one day for a candidate to appear in response to my call.

Celeste was unusually attractive, slender, light brown skinned, with a wide open smile. She was such a pleasant person that I did not question her experience or background in this type work. The agency had accepted her qualifications. I trusted them.

Bells did not even ring when I learned that she had not even brought a uniform or a change of clothing in which to work. Obviously, the stylish street dress she was wearing was inappropriate. We were about the same size so I loaned her one of my housedresses.

My suspicions were not even aroused when, only the next day, a retired gentleman neighbor who often did errands for us, suggested that I must have the “prettiest” housekeeper he had ever seen.

Earlier in the day, in the few moments I had with Celeste when I came home from work, I had responded to something she had said about her “husband” by asking what kind of work he did.

“He sharpens knives,” she answered, smiling.

That took me off guard. I pictured the men who used to travel, with pushcart or sometimes even in a small car, offering to sharpen knives and scissors. I had not long to dwell on that idea, however, Celeste added—

“He has a store and he’s a medical student.”

I could not help but stare at her. By all appearances she was absolutely serious, expecting me to accept for real this strange combination of trade and vocation.

“How on earth does he combine the two? Medical students usually have all they can do just to keep up with school studies?”

She laughed a little trill, accompanied by a toss of her pretty head. “He works very hard.”

With no idea whatsoever of how to pursue this conversation sensibly, I desisted.

All the pieces came together that night when I had gone to bed early with a book. My bedside telephone rang and when I answered a male voice asked for “Celeste.” He was undemanding, simply stated his desire to talk with her and then waited.

“But she’s not here now.” I answered. She leaves at 5:30 when I come home.”

There was a long absence of sound on the other end. Then, “You mean she doesn’t sleep there?”

“No. She doesn’t sleep here.” This person seemed too involve. “To whom am I speaking?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I should have told you right away. This is her husband.”

When I had recovered sufficiently to be able to understand I learned that Celeste had told her husband, the hardware store owner, that she had a housekeeping job where she was expected to sleep in and where she was also able to have their two small girls with her. Mr. Brown now understood that his wife must be living with the medical student she had told him about, who, in fact, she had thrown in his face in the midst of an argument.

As I listened, the pieces began to come together and gradually I realized that my caller, as he talked about his wife, was describing a bona fide sick person. It was evident, nevertheless, that he cared for her and wanted to do whatever he could to make sense of this odd marriage.

At one point in our conversation, Mr. Brown said, matter-of-factly, “She’s an awful liar. I’ve known it for a long time, but—his wife, Mr. Brown hoped to save or resuscitate the marriage. I suggested; therefore, that he go to the Brooklyn Bureau of Social Service (the agency I had been with before I went into the school system).

He thanked me but sounded doubtful that there was any cure for their problem “I’ll go though. I don’t know what else to do.”

When he thanked me and said, “Good night,” I was relieved, finally, not to be doing casework in the middle of the night.

I did not have time to talk with Celeste the next morning before I left the house. She had contrived, almost from the third day, to arrive close to the time when she knew I had to leave.

At five-thirty that evening I confronted her with my telephone conversation of the previous evening. Her eyes opened wide and it looked for just a second as though she were actually contrite. She did admit, just in passing, that her husband the knife sharpener (who actually had a hardware store) and the medical student were two different people.

“Who takes care of your little girls while you’re here?”

They were not left alone but it was difficult to understand what arrangements were made. I said, finally, “You know, Celeste, before I started with the schools, I used to be with an agency which worked for the welfare of families with children. Frankly, I’m worried about your children at this moment.”

“Oh, they’re not alone, I wouldn’t leave them alone. They’re too little.” Her voice and facial expression wondered how I could think such an awful thing.

For my own piece of mind, I telephoned my Aunt Maybelle in Chester, Pennsylvania. I knew that she was no longer working. When I had laid out my problem in all its seamy details, I asked whether she could arrange to come and stay with us, to be an overseer, as it were, until the end of the school term which was then only three weeks away. When I was at home all day I would do what I could to hire someone who had all her marbles.

Aunt Maybelle, always cheerful and gracious, was willing and came within the week. She was charmed by Celeste, despite having been told that she had some serious problems.

On the second day after Aunt Maybelle’s arrival, Celeste stopped at our front door only long enough to deliver a birthday card which she had promised to pick up for my aunt. Aunt Maybelle had been surprised, to put it mildly, when Celeste said, after handing her the card. “I can’t stay today.” She had not lingered long enough to say why.

Aunt Maybelle admitted that she was so taken aback that she had not been able to ask for further details about this day off. She simply stood at the door and watched as Celeste crossed the street and took her place alongside the driver of a car which Aunt Maybelle thought might have been a Cadillac.

It was some time after Celeste had left for good and I had already telephoned the agency to discuss with them her problems that I came upon the scraps of material she had carefully placed in a picnic basket in the basement. She had taken fabric she had found in my dresser drawer, evidently cut a garment for herself and left me the scraps—in a place where they would not be discovered too soon.

It was several weeks later when I found that my lavalier with the diamond, given my by my Aunt Leah, was also no longer among my possessions. I felt truly betrayed by that loss because of its sentimental value.

Celeste was, by any definition, the most dramatic of any of the women who helped take care of my mother during the years until I was finally advised by her doctor to place her in a nursing home. The woman who followed Celeste (by then Aunt Maybelle had gone home) was gently, thoughtful and came to work prepared to do what was required. She left only when she learned that her three year old was playing in the street unsupervised while the person she had hired to care for her while she worked was not in sight. I agreed without reservation that she needed to make other arrangements.

The young mother was followed by Mrs. Landry, a Jamaican, who despite her skill and thoroughness in the performance of her duties brought with her several kinky characteristics. For instance, Charlie liked to lie on the floor while watching television and would often fall asleep there. Neither of us would notice but Mrs. Landry, pointing out to me where she had placed a quarter or two dimes, made it clear that she knew I let money fall in odd places to test her.

Despite this and other behavior quirks she showed from time to time, Mrs. Landry and I managed well enough until the first school holiday which occurred after she had come into our lives. On that day she did not come to work at all. She had assumed, I learned when I called her home, that if I were on holiday, she would have a holiday.

Mrs. Whittaker, who followed Mrs. Carter, was not only the epitome of efficiency but was also one of the healthiest, most well balanced persons with whom I had ever been acquainted. And withal, she had a ready sense of humor.

It became apparent early on that Mrs. Whittaker, in contrast to her recent predecessor, was someone who lacked nothing in self-confidence; was therefore, able to deal with others in a reasonable fashion even while performing her own job expertly. She also had a lively imagination.

Coming in from my work one day, my attention was caught immediately when I went to hang up my coat. Taped on the mirror in the closet was a message, "The bread is in the freezer." Mama was limited to one slice of bread per meal. But she loved all starchy foods, especially breadstuffs and cakes, so Mrs. Whittaker had stored the bread in a place unlikely to be discovered for the eventuality that she and my mother might be on different floors.

Another time when I had stripped the guest room bed after a friend had stayed over, she commented: "Those new fitted sheets are a bit tight for the bed."

"I know," I said. "They make them very skimpy these days."

She stood by the kitchen sink, drinking water as we talked, "You should complain," she suggested.

I agreed and did but to no avail. It occurred to me that manufacturers must be realizing a considerable profit by cheating on both hems of flat sheets and width of fitted.

Charlie and I planned a summer vacation that year to visit the Loewensons in Minnesota and other friends on the way back. This would take us away for several weeks, but I was fully confident that Mrs. Whittaker could and would take good care of Mama and the house.

She spoke with me one afternoon about a friend who she thought would be a good person to come in and help her while we were away. I knew, of course, that she would need someone in the house not only for company but also to enable her to have a regular day off.

“She has only one arm, but she’s able to do almost anything even with her handicap.” She paused. “I wouldn’t even call her handicapped, in fact. And she has a sunny disposition. She’ll be good for your mother.”

I trusted Mrs. Whittaker sufficiently by then to agree that she should ask her friend to come in on the day Charlie and I were scheduled to leave.

We called from Wisconsin and learned from Mrs. Whittaker that all was going well.

The one-armed helper was released the day before we were scheduled to come back, so I never met her at all. When we had been in the house for awhile, however, I took time to ask Mrs. Whittaker how it had gone with her friend helping her.

She sighed and raised her eyes heavenward. “You wouldn’t believe, Mrs. Thorpe. I couldn’t believe it myself and I’ve known her for so long.”

“What happened” When we called everything seemed to be O.K.”

She laughed. “It was nothing really bad. Just weird.” She leaned back against the cupboard where she was standing and began to laugh again. “She insisted on going downstairs to wash out the cat dishes.” (We had two cats.) She stopped again, obviously reliving the difficult times.

“Maybe it just seemed like four or five times a day she was going down or coming up. Every day, maybe twice a day—I’d say ‘You don’t have to do that.’” But it didn’t make any difference. After the first three days I was exhausted, just watching her. And I did tell her at least once or twice that she could use the pantry sink, that we never put people dishes in there. No use.” She paused and looked tired. “She never gave it up.”

“But she got along all right with my mother?”

Mrs. Whittaker was serious again. “Oh, they were fine together. Your mother never knew about her running up and down the stairs to wash out the cat dishes in the washtub.”

## CLOSING

In my twenty-third year with the Bureau and after having worked at four different offices, the last at 34<sup>th</sup> Street and Third Avenue in Brooklyn. I decided that the time had come to say “Good-bye” to public school.

I might easily have stayed on until the mandatory retirement age if the city had not decided that year to flood all the offices with time-motion specialists. I was not self-conscious about my own production, but among other activities, these efficiency experts were counting the number of pages each typist produced in a given time, and apparently weighing by the same scale the number of interviews each case worker had within the month.

There had been so many good days with the Bureau and even with the Board; including the one on the day of the mini-strike when we all marched in front of the board Headquarters at Livingston Street and I, as head of the social workers action committee, spoke before a filled auditorium. Later, in a speech before a formal meeting of the Board, I had petitioned for social workers to be paid salaries equal to those of psychologists. There was, of course, pressure being applied to the Board from other directions at the same time but I was proud to see part of my appeal quoted in *The New York Times*. The Board capitulated, from a combination of forces, no doubt, only a few days later.

But now, after so many good years, I found myself saying each day as I made ready to go to work, “Why do I put up with this nonsense?”

My decision became firm when I noted that the time-motion specialists were comparing the monthly reports of one male social worker under my supervision with that of the other five (women) none of whom had had as many “interviews” per child.

I knew, as any functioning supervisor would have, that in the first instance, the gentleman counted as an interview even the “Hello” which he said in passing to any child whose name he carried on his monthly report.

By contrast, it was evident that the interview figures of the other social workers and psychologists in my unit represented fully professional efforts at helping a child or his parent.

Early in 1978 I completed all the formalities necessary for retirement. In the next month, however, I was asked to assume responsibility for conducting therapeutic groups with mothers of “exceptional children.”

“Exceptional” in this instance was a polite term for children with varied learning problems. It was believed that the mothers whose children had been identified might respond more positively in a group situation than they had to individual therapy.

In order to set up the groups I was positioned at 110 Livingston Street (Board Headquarters) with input from various schools, identifying the children and speaking with parents about our plans to offer help.

It was in the effort of trying to obtain the cooperation of a particular school’s custodian to keep the building open after 3 o’clock that I became aware of the absolute authority of school custodians and their independence even from the principals in whose schools they worked.

One principal in a Brooklyn school was so excited by the idea which the Bureau was proposing to help these difficult to reach children that he volunteered, even before I asked, to discuss with his custodian the idea of the evening openings.

Two days later, the principal called me. His voice was low and sad.

“Mrs. Thorpe” he said, “I don’t know how to tell you this. But I guess the best way is just to put it bluntly, the way it is. My custodian said, ‘No way’ will he ask someone to stay in the evening to keep the school open for a group meeting.”

After a second or two, I asked, “And, of course, he will not think not.”

My principal’s voice was truly low and sad as he answered, “I think not.”

We were forced then to resort to scheduling meetings in the district offices.

## NATIONAL NEGRO OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

In the summer of 1987 I was an honored (as it were) guest at two more Navy reunions.

The National Naval Officers Association brings together all African-American officers of the sea services. This, of course, includes Marines and Coast Guard, as well as Navy.

I was scheduled to be in attendance only from the evening of July 8, in time for the President's Cocktail Party until after the opening luncheon the following day. Duration of the conference for members was from July 6 to July 11.

As in the previous year, my transportation and housing had been arranged by Lt. Crayton, courtesy of the Navy.

Along with Lt. Crayton to meet me at the airport was one Ensign Barnes, a young male nurse who, according to Lt. Crayton was impressed with the fact that he would be driving the first black woman officer in the Navy.

During the ride to the Hilton Hotel I learned that Captain Wilomot had been transferred to Washington to the Office of the Secretary of the Navy. Lt. Crayton would himself be transferred to Norfolk in two weeks for sea duty. He was looking forward to this move because it would put him on the road toward promotion. By this time he would have moved up had he been in the work for which he would have to be at sea for a minimum of six months. His new bride was "in a state" about that aspect of the new assignment.

We talked about the current scandal in Washington involving Colonel Oliver North, headlined again in today's paper. Mark said that the Assistant Secretary of the Navy had been scheduled to be a platform guest at today's conference, but had begged off, probably unable to leave Washington because of the Iran-Contra hearings.

When I came down from my room fifteen minutes after I had checked in, I was met in the corridor by one of the bright young officers in attendance at the conference. They were all wearing more gold braid on

sleeves and shoulders than I had ever seen in one place. I was taken directly into the ballroom where the cocktail party was in session.

One beautiful young lady was presented immediately as “the first black woman officer in the Marines.” Her father, I learned, at the same time, was a Marine General. Then I met the first black woman Coast Guard officer. There had been four black women in her class but she had been the only one to finish.

After a spate of introduction and several mini-conversations I took the seat which had been proffered several times before. My answer to whether I was tired was still “no” but the advantage of being seated was that one no longer felt like an exhibit.

Only forty minutes from its start, the cocktail party was well under way. There were no hors d’oeuvres left, one solicitous officer returned from the refreshment table to tell me. Food was not important to me at that point but drink was. My caretaker returned the second time to tell me that the bar offered only coke at this time. Even the ginger ale had run dry. A well known fast food company had hung a large banner in a prominent space above the revelers, proclaiming themselves as the providers of refreshment. Would they at least be embarrassed, I wondered?

In seconds, even sitting began to have its bad side. The music was loud, fast and non-stop.

I met General Powell who, evidently as curious as I was, asked a senior lady officer why most of the women were wearing black hosiery. Her reply was that by regulation they were supposed to wear flesh-covered hose. (This had not changed, evidently, from my time in service). But since there were so many African-American women now in the service and since skin colors among these ladies was as varied as it would have been in any group of the same background, it appeared that they had just not taken the pains to match their legs. Whether by group agreement or just spontaneously, they had decided that the simplest course was to wear black.

As dozens of black-clad legs whirled by, I reprimanded myself for worrying about this phenomenon. Why should I be such a stick-in-the-mud? At the same time I could not help but think of the ballet. There, with a

wide range of subtly different complexions, the ballerinas always looked bare-legged. What the African-American women in the sea services needed was a costume manager, I decided.

After a spate of introductions and several mini-conversations I took the seat which had been proffered several times before. My answer to whether I was tired was still “no” but the advantage of being seated was that I no longer felt like an exhibition.

Only forty minutes from its start, the cocktail party was well under way. There were no more hors d’oeuvres left, one solicitous officer returned to tell me. Food was not important to me at that point, but drink was—probably because I was getting overheated from watching all the frenzied activity on the dance floor.

In seconds, even sitting began to have its bad side. The music was loud, fast and non-stop. The disc jockey was out-performing himself.

As I continued to watch all those beautiful young women twirling and twisting in happy abandon, I wondered if, by chance, the black hosiery might be a statement about blackness. It would then not be “by chance,” of course. But would so many young women with legs as pretty as they all were choose to downplay a good feature to make a political statement? I watched the dancing legs for a long time, more and more puzzled. Finally I spotted one light-skinned young woman whose hosiery matched her face. A rebel? Or a conformist? It was too much to try to decipher in this gathering.

After a few moments one of the bright young ladies with multiple gold stripes stood before me asking if there was anything I would like. Without too much thought I said, “Yes. I would love to dance.”

Only seconds after I had said it, I realized that the request had been close to unreasonable. Which of those bright young men would volunteer to approach the dance floor leading an institution? Or did the officer in charge of protocol simply tap one and say “Your turn—dance with the old dame.”

But it seemed that the young lady who had posed the question was nothing if not resourceful. She must have known that it was Lt. Crayton who had met me at the airport. It was he who appeared in seconds after I had

said I'd like to dance. He had said earlier that his wife would "not like it" if he danced. It was for that there would be no problem, he must have reasoned, if he danced with the oldest woman at the party.

After Mark, came two others. The third said he would not ask my age but he did wonder when I had enlisted. I gave him the date. My reward was "You're quite a dancer." I interpreted this to indicate amazement that I was still mobile.

Soon after that happy session I said "Good-night" to the young lady whose charge I had been and went in search of a newspaper and something to eat.

The next morning, soon after I had had breakfast, a young ensign came to my room, sent by Captain Wise, the President of the National Negro Officers Association, to get biographical notes for his introduction of me at the luncheon. We had just completed answering the questions she posed when Ensign Barnes came to take me to the pre-luncheon reception.

Downstairs the assembled guests were in an anteroom near the dining room having pre-luncheon tea or coffee. One of the first people I met was the General of the Marines. Jerome (nicknamed Gary) Cooper, father of the pretty Marine Lt., both of whom I had been introduced to at the cocktail party the evening before. There was also Capt. Liefbrahn who had replaced Capt. Wilmot at Great Lakes in recruiting. He was among the few white officers in attendance.

There were the usual symbols during the opening ceremonies—presentation of the colors, the group oath of allegiance and the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner" (with more feeling than one hears from most groups). Near front and center, sitting together were several of the original "Thirteen" I had met at the reunion of the "Black Naval Veterans of World War II."

Brigadier General Cooper substituted for the Assistant Secretary of the Navy as the main speaker at the luncheon. As Mark Crayton had indicated earlier the Secretary who was to have been guest speaker had been unable to leave Washington because of a political emergency.

The “you remind me of someone I know” phenomenon occurred again when Capt. Liefbrahn, beside whom I sat on the platform, whispered that I looked and sounded exactly like his mother-in-law, even to my hair and accent. I was charmed, probably because, for just a minute, I felt proud to be promoted to being a mother-in-law when I had never even been a mother. I was so beguiled that it did not occur to me until hours later to wonder if he had married an African-American woman.

## SECOND NAVY REUNION

In August 1987 I was invited once again to Chicago to a Navy convocation. This time it was the “bi-annual conference” of the WAVES. I would learn gradually under how many different banners it was possible to “reunite.”

Having been to Chicago for one conference, I should have been happy if this one had been held elsewhere. But the invitation had been so warm (proffered in a letter signed by one Lt. Fournier—my grandmother’s maiden name which, of course, I found immediately intriguing) that I was unable to say, “No, thank you.”

The flight from McArthur was smooth, although we left forty-five minutes late. As we neared O’Hare, the pilot announced that we would have to make a 360 degree turn because of crowded airspace. Even as an infrequent flier, I knew that O’Hare was the busiest airport in the country. But 360 degree turn?

This time I was met at the terminal by Petty Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> class Blair, a tall, thin, non-stop talker of considerable charm who explained that he had come because Lt. Crayton had had to go on an “errand.” Blair was from Tuscaloosa, Alabama which he explained was just across the border from Vicksburg, Mississippi. P.O. Blair had gone two years to Southern University, had been in the Navy for five years. He was the youngest of seven children. He had a brother who had enlisted at the same time. Their mother had been widowed when the youngest child was an infant. His father had died in an automobile accident.

After the biographical notes, our conversation was all about color in the Navy and the progress which had been made. P.O. Blair registered astonishment when I told him that I had entered the service in 1944. He repeated “1944!” in the same tone of voice he might of used if the date had been 1844.

It was late when I arrived at the hotel. It seemed as I approached the registration desk that the entire Hotel Marriott had been taken over by the women of the Navy. A few feet away a plaintive voice was explaining

with infinite patience to the clerk that she was here for the Navy Women's Convention. Her tone suggested that he must be from another planet if he were unaware of the great event for which all these ladies were gathered.

As I approached the desk, I noticed not far from where I stood an unattractive young woman, smartly dressed in informal summer uniform. She, too, in a voice which was firm and expecting results was telling the clerk that she was there for the convention and that her accommodations were not what she had requested. When I looked in her direction she caught my eye and smiled. Later I learned that she was the Number Two person on the arrangements committee. She was sharing sleeping space with the head lady, Lt. Fournier and had requested a sitting room. There was none. She made it clear that she expected the error to be corrected immediately.

In the elevator to which the bellboy led me there were three women, all wearing convention tags.

As he wheeled my two small bags to the room on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor, the porter gave me an instant lift when he admired my Hartmann weekender which by this time had seen more than thirty years of service. It had been a gift from Charlie when we had first been married. When the porter set it down in the room, he patted it almost fondly, saying "You just don't see this kind any more."

As we had approached the room, the bellboy had confided that the ladies had been having a "great time" on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. He had heard singing and lots of laughter from there. Then again, he thought that the festivities might have ended by now. It was "pretty quiet."

After freshening up, I made a brief foray to the seventh floor only to discover that the porter had been right in his guess that the WAVES party had ended. "Positive Proof Ministries," according to the plaque outside the room was in full swing in the spot previously occupied by the WAVES, according to the information the porter had given me. The "Positive Proof" ladies were serious, not laughing, not singing and certainly not drinking.

A few minutes later I was back in my room, sitting at the dressing table, sipping my soda and wondering what I might do for the rest of this evening. There was no activity listed on the schedule I had been given at

registration. I was spared from descending into an “all alone” depression by a knock on my door. When I opened it there was Mark Crayton, who I had by now come to regard as my only link to the modern Navy. He had come, he explained, with his new wife, Kimberly, who was waiting downstairs, to take me to dinner. (He had telephoned me in Brooklyn with the news of his marriage.)

We chose a restaurant called “Allen’s Eatery” on the first floor because, among the imposing array of choices, this one appeared to be both unpretentious and capable of fast service. Sitting at a table across the aisle, alone, was the young woman with whom I had exchanged greetings at the registration desk when I was checking in. She recognized me and introduced herself. She was Chris Sullivan, employed in real life as a telephone lineswoman (I learned later, properly awed) but not serving in her reserve status as “right hand man” to Lt. Donna Fournier, the coordinator of this conference.

Chris was a fast talker, full of enthusiasm and sounded capable of assisting to coordinate whatever came her way in need of coordination. I asked, after we had all talked for a few minutes across the aisle if the Craytons would mind if Chris joined us. Once she did, we all began to exchange biographical notes, Chris, not pushy, was nevertheless a real melder.

Mark and Kimberly finally begged off as they had a two and half hour drive home. I had not realized how far they had come and was truly impressed. Before they left, Mark happened to mention that he is a chess enthusiast.

“So is my husband, Charlie,” I said. “You must come to New York and have a game with him.”

Suddenly we were all pushing our favorite games. Chris described a recent family reunion at which poker seemed to be the game of choice. She had finally managed to engage several relatives in Scrabble to which, like me, she seemed addicted.

Before our party dissolved, Chris explained that at 9:30 the following morning the convention would hold a memorial service for the WAVES who had died during the year. She planned to attend and wondered if I should like to go with her.

“Of course,” I said, “that’s an excellent idea, especially since I had no idea at all of what I should do during the early part of the day.”

Chris glowed, which she did easily and we agreed on the hour and the place of meeting before we bade, “Goodnight.”

Next morning, on my way to the desk where I saw Chris, I was stopped momentarily by the bustle of people in front of an elevator, at right angles to the desk and only a few feet away. As I paused, waiting to get by, the door opened and a solidly built lady of Commander rank walked out of the elevator. We nearly collided, but she said, rather than “Excuse me,” “Aren’t you the first, the first—“

A smaller woman, of lesser rank who was with her, a little in the back, finished for her as they exited from the car and the door closed behind them, “Oh, come now—just spit it out, “the first black WAVE?”

“Yes, of course,” said the Commander, still not looking at me directly. “The first?--“

I tried, like her companion, to relieve her of any further struggle to describe me. I answered, “Yes, I was the first black WAVE.”

We were still in close proximity because of the number of women trying to reach the registration desk and passing to and from the elevators. The Commander did not smile, nor did she look at me eye to eye but squeezed out, “You’ll be on the dais for the luncheon.”

I believe I said, “Thank you,” but continued trying to make my way to where I saw Chris. When I was finally within talking distance, it was apparent that she was truly besieged. When I reached her she smiled and was apologetic.

“I’m so sorry but I can’t possibly get away.” She nodded at questioners as she talked to me to reassure them that their queries would be answered shortly. “But it won’t be hard to find. It’s just about two blocks from here, straight down the street we’re on. Turn left when you go out and you’ll have to come to the Fourth Presbyterian Church. The service is at 9 o’clock.” She glanced at her watch. “You’ve got plenty of time.”

The day was bright and the walk satisfying.

Whoever had planned the memorial service had made certain that both men and women were involved and that it was interdenominational. Although women seemed to be in charge, there were also two males in the chancel, a priest and a rabbi. A choir of Navy personnel took me back to Sundays at Northampton.

As I was leaving at the end of the brief service, I saw Jean Stewart in the vestibule. I had met her at my first Navy reunion—the one for black Navy personnel. It was a happy surprise to exchange greetings with someone I knew in this sea of strange women.

Lord and Taylor and a bevy of other quality stores were within two blocks of the church. Since I was unscheduled until lunch time, shopping seemed a good idea. Lord and Taylor had nothing which looked intriguing enough to take back to New York. On the alert for a souvenir for Charlie, I ventured into a men's store near Lord and Taylor. The clerk there showed me a belt for \$200. That item completely dissipated my interest in shopping.

Almost as soon as I returned to my room, a repairman appeared, in response to word I had left at the desk that my TV was not functioning. Although casual about TV at home, it seemed important to know what was happening on the TV in Chicago. Waiting for the worker to leave so that I could dress made me later going downstairs than I had planned. When I reached the second floor where the luncheon was to be held, however, and checked the banquet room, there were only a few scattered groups of women present.

After a brief moment of wondering what to do next I inquired of a young lieutenant standing near an elevator if she knew where all the dais guests were. She stared at me for a second as though I were an apparition, then said, accusingly, "They've been looking for you," and led me forthright to a room which seemed to be half a floor below where we had been talking: Lieutenant Fournier was there and said she was "delighted" to find me. I had not known that I was lost since I had been in my room for at least three-quarters of an hour prior to descending to find out what was happening. I remembered that someone had said that I would

be at the head table but I had assumed, naturally, that if dais guests were to assemble in a designated spot ahead of time someone would have told them (and me) where and when.

All the other dais guests, including one woman who I learned later were a state Senator and several Navy women of exalted rank were already corsaged and finishing drinks. Lt. Fournier (whose name I learned only after we were seated on the dais) was pinning on my corsage as the help removed the refreshments. When she had completed the pinning she handed me a book “Lady in the Navy” by Joy Hancock. (Joy Bright Hancock was a “veteran yeoman of the First World War, a civilian employee in the Bureau of Aeronautics in the Bureau of Aeronautics in the second World War and from 1946 to 1955, Assistant Chief of Naval Personnel for Women.( Introduction to “Lady in the Navy” by Joy Bright Hancock, Naval Institute Press.)

We all mounted half a floor to the great dining room where the Commander who could not even say the words “first black Wave” was at the lectern. As in our earlier encounter, she continued to have difficulty with what I had been doing in the Navy. When she came to me (next to last, beside Lt. Fournier on the dais) she began with “the first black yeoman,” but corrected that immediately.

It was not surprising, however, to learn the next day, in conversation with several of those in attendance at the luncheon that they had no idea at all of who I was. Apparently I had not waved, smiled or acknowledged in any way the introduction which the Commander had such difficulty making. That was not planned. But I was intent on hearing what happened with the other introductions.

They all went off smoothly.

During the first course, between conversational bits with my companion on the right, Lt. Fournier. I expressed regret that I had not given the Commander the 3x5 card on which I had jotted a few lines of identification (including my name and status in service.) The idea of writing all this had come to me just before the meeting opened. Then I had made the mistake of tucking it into my bag.

The assemblage was representative of many distinguished Navy women—WRENS, for instance, who had come from all over the British Empire to attend this meeting.

As had happened at the other reunion, I was asked by several attendees from the floor for autographs, this time before I left the platform.

I continued to wonder, from time to time throughout the afternoon, why it had been so difficult for the Commander lady to say the five or six words of introduction (for me) which she had allowed herself. It obviously had nothing to do with me as a person. She had never seen me before, except briefly the day before in front of the elevator when she had stuttered trying to identify me. Her problem had to do with my blackness. I was present because of my color and the fact that I had been that color when commissioned forty-three years earlier. But for this woman the reason for my being at the “head table,” as she had put it earlier, was eclipsed by the fact that I was black. There was no logic to this. It was, in fact, bizarre.

Although I had left a call for 6 a.m. in anticipation of taking the advertised trip to the Great Lakes on my second day at the conference, I was awake long before the call and having mixed feelings as I dressed. After all, I had visited Great Lakes the summer before. At that time I had attended graduation exercises and, at Captain Wilmot’s invitation, had stood in the receiving line for the graduating seamen. But I had seen nothing at all of the station away from the buildings in which we had all lunched and nearby, where the graduation ceremonies had been held.

There was so much more I wanted to learn about this base which, when I had served at Hunter had been only a name. An awe-inspiring name, true—a name which never failed to conjure up ideas of magic-making as I envisioned thousands of recruits who had gone there nearly newborn to the service and emerged a few weeks later as skilled performers in diverse areas.

As I waited outside the rear of the hotel to board a bus, doubts began to grow again. I had to force myself to join the crowd of women, all apparently waiting for the same bus. When we finally boarded, it turned out that many should have been on a third vehicle. Only two of the three parked at the hotel’s back entrance were headed for Great Lakes.

Luck was with me when I chose a seat on the aisle. My companion, in the window seat, was the widow of a cattle farmer. In addition to selling milk, they had made cheese. Always able to sell to quality distributors, she said they had not had to worry about the vagaries of the market. After her husband's death she had carried on for a time with the help of her three sons. Now it was they who managed the farm and did almost all the work. Nevertheless she had looked forward to this reunion as a break from the routine of farm life.

As my seatmate talked about her family and her business, I found myself so absorbed that I did not want her to stop. It was my first time ever to talk at length with a former WAVE and one who was a farmer, besides.

Only after we had parted did I realize that neither of us had sought or volunteered information about our stations or billets while we were in service.

The tours had been charted with the usual Navy attention to detail. Neither of the two buses which had left the hotel almost simultaneously crossed the path of the other nor did they meet again until lunch time when we arrived together at the mess hall.

Our tour made stops at Aviation, Mechanics, Ship Repair and Gunnery Schools. Each of the chiefs in charge who described his program was an eager presenter who, it was plain, must also be a top-notch teacher for impressionable recruits. The second, in Ship Repair, was an African-American. His discussion of the goals and methods of training in his specialty was focused and enthusiastic.

And why not, I asked myself, as I listened and watched him. I realized then that my thoughts about this young man and his specialty were still out of that long ago time when I had been in the Navy. Despite the fact that thirteen African-American gentlemen had achieved officer status in 1944, the vast majority of enlisted black men were still cooks and mess attendants in those years. (Only long after war's end did I learn that my closest cousin had been an athletic instructor at Great Lakes during the war.)

During my attendance at Great Lakes the previous year I had seen large numbers of young African-American men march among the graduates in all the specialties. But I had not had the opportunity to hear one of

them speak and demonstrate the skills he had acquired from his Navy experience as these young men had done today.

Between the third and the last of our training hall stops, I was attached to by a young woman who claimed to be a journalist, writing for a local newspaper. (She did not think it important, evidently, for me to know either the name of the publication or its home.) She sat next to me on the aisle after I had taken a window seat and bored into me (while she bored me) about any experiences of prejudice I had had in the service. The same question was posed several times in different wordings.

When I continued to maintain that in my year and a half there had been no problems, she finally said, icily, “That’s not what the enlisted women I talked to said.” I held onto my composure tightly to refrain from saying, “Maybe officers lie.” Most of the women she had interviewed, she said, had experienced housing and/or assignment problems on their bases.

I tried to make as clear as possible that I could understand that some African-American women, despite the stated policy from the top command of the WAVES, might have suffered indignities once away from the training station, but that I could not really talk on that subject, having been limited for the duration of my service to two bases, both in New York City. My newspaper friend left then, in a huff, to sit elsewhere. I regretted that she thought I was being deliberately uncooperative.

Presumably this person on the trail of a provocative story had found her African-American informants at the hotel, since I was the sole one of us on the bus. It was only later, when I had begun to recover from the sense of having been badgered, that it occurred to me that I should have asked my questioner to tell me the names of some of the former WAVES to whom she had talked. I should certainly have liked to have had the opportunity of talking with them myself, especially to know what billets each had had in the WAVES.

At the buffet style luncheon, presented with the usual Navy efficiency—two lines from different sides converging in the center of the food presentation—who should suddenly appear beside me in the line but Mark Crayton. He had undoubtedly been urged ahead by some of the women. He was, after all, a three-star celebrity

in this assembly—male, officer and African-American. He had said at dinner the day before that he would not see me again. He had requested transfer from Great Lakes because his job in recruiting was dead-end. He was being sent, in response to his request, to sea duty. He had been unable to get a flight to Norfolk today, hence he had decided to join us at lunch.

Mark's emergence from nowhere, as it were, was a tonic not only for me but for all the women at the table, including several WRENS (women of the royal navy) who were among the assemblage of special guests at this convention. One reservist from New Hampshire took a snapshot of us all—Mark sandwiched between two WRENS and me.

After lunch Mark left us and I took the bus with some of the ladies to attend graduation exercises. The ceremony was held under cover (a boon on this sunny day) in a hall which on less important days was undoubtedly a small aeroplane hangar. I deduced that because the ceiling soared and the dais, as well as chairs, had obviously been brought in for today.

While was waited for the formalities to begin I made the acquaintance of one Lt. Lora Wells, titled by her card, "Campus Liaison Officer," the only other African-American in the audience at lunch. She was stationed at a school in Huntersville, Alabama. Since I never saw her again after the ceremonies, I presumed that she had been on the station for business purposes only.

The exercises were brief, but moving. The invocation was given by an African-American chaplain, the one non-Caucasian on the dais. He addressed himself to God in what he said he would imagine to be the words and emotions of the "long-suffering" graduates. He was so eloquent in an understated way that I found my eyes misting. As I fumbled for a handkerchief, the officer sitting nearest me, somewhat older than the lady from Alabama, whispered, "Now, let's not get carried away." We chatted briefly at the end of the program. I learned that she was in Pharmacy and served on stations all over the world.

Rear Admiral Louise Wilmot, who had been so gracious to me when I had been at Great Lakes for my first Navy reunion the year before was also on the dais.

On the bus for the return to the hotel, one “Pidge” Nelson led lusty WAVES songs for several miles. I guessed that it might have been she who had been the moving spirit at the previous night’s sing which I had missed.

It came to me suddenly and a little sadly that in officer training I had missed all the relaxed times which happened among the enlisted women. I would never know, of course, how much of the fun part Harriet and I had not known simply because we had been sent to Northampton so late. It did not seem logical that only the enlisted women had fun times like “sings.”

Before eight o’clock the next morning I was standing at the registration desk, along with at least a dozen or so other conference participants trying to locate Chris with whom I had made a breakfast date. When I finally saw her, she seemed beleaguered by WAVES demanding all kinds of information or help to which only she, of all the women behind the desk, seemed privy.

I decided to go downstairs where we had dined the previous evening to search out breakfast. Before I found the place we had enjoyed so much, I came to another, on a higher floor, therefore lighter and more inviting. I was seated almost immediately and enjoyed a hearty, almost too hearty, breakfast.

I stood in line, waiting to pay my bill when one of the convention ladies waiting on a parallel line for a seat spotted me. She smiled and said, “You’re from Milwaukee, aren’t you?”

I said, “No. I’ve never been to Milwaukee,” and wondered what that was all about. I could not recall ever having seen her before.

“Oh?” She seemed puzzled. “One of you was from Milwaukee.”

It was nearly twenty-four hours later that, as the scene replayed itself in my head for some reason, the proper response to “One of you, etc.”—“But there is only one of me,” came to mind. I knew the moment she said “one of you” she must have talked with one of the several other African-American women in attendance at the reunion.

Musings on that episode were almost sublime. My focus was on whether my later ride to the airport was still assured and whether I would have time before leaving Chicago to find and explore the art museum Helen Strauss had said I must not miss.

Meanwhile, I joined a throng of women waiting at the back of the hotel to board one of several buses for a trip to Great Lakes Naval Station, among other points of interest.

When I had finally made up my mind to thrash this out with Lt. Fournier who had invited me to this reunion I felt better. In my mind I rehearsed the few words with which I would present the problem and resolved to rise early to meet her before her seminar, scheduled for 9 o'clock the next morning.

Carefully arrived at as they were, my plans did not work. Anger, repressed for a whole day, had evidently built to sleep blocking proportions. When I finally dropped off near dawn, the telephone rang, It was 6:10 in New York and Charlie was right, of course, to have estimated that by this time I would normally have been awake.

It was close to 9 o'clock when I reached Lt. Fournier, only minutes before she was to start her meeting. I went to the front of the auditorium and asked if I might have a word with her later.

"No, not later," she said. "Let's talk right now."

I tried to say that not only did I wish not to hold up the proceedings but that I also wanted to have sufficient time to make my thoughts perfectly clear and to hear her response. This moment did not seem appropriate for bringing up an abrasive subject.

On Lt. Fournier's insistence I did indicate what had disturbed me the previous day.

She said, "I, too, was troubled by that introduction. I wondered what had happened to the Commander, especially since I had given her notes."

Her last comment confirmed my broodings. The problem was as large as I had suspected.

Lt. Fournier offered an apology and embraced me. I left on that note so that she could open her meeting. Although I felt better for having shared my misgivings. I was also sad because I knew that the next time the

Commander was faced with talking to, to say nothing of introducing an African-American servicewoman, she would have the same problem.

To occupy myself in the short time remaining before I would be picked up for my flight home, I inquired about museums within reasonable distance of the hotel. The Museum of Contemporary Art, to which one could walk, was full of surprises but not soul filling. Helen had recommended one but it was too far for a drop-in visit.

When I returned to the hotel I sat in the lounge near the concierge to whose desk I had been told my driver would come. I ordered a drink and became involved in conversation with three other conference attendees. We exchanged biographies and one offered me another drink. They left soon after I had declined and we had indulged in a bit more unsparkling conversation, such as, "Are you related to Jim Thorpe?" On good days I am often tempted to reply that my husband is descended from Indians but from the Shinnecock, not those Indians from Oklahoma. But on this, not the best of days, I answered simply, "No," and smiled.

After I had checked out the gift shop, filled with the usual unbeautiful novelties in which hotel gift shops seem to specialize, I returned to my spot near the concierge's desk, only closer. Seconds later a male Ensign appeared and asked if I needed a ride.

When I followed him to car, the attractive young Commander who was the Ensign's principal rider was already sitting in the front seat. While the driver stowed my gear, she introduced herself and told me the Ensign's name.

From then on, all the way to the airport, the Commander and the Ensign were engaged in a conversation which I found altogether fascinating, even though it might just as well have been in Hindustani for all that I understood. I was able to recognize that the Commander was an aide to the Admiral who was in charge of all fighting ships and planes based at Norfolk. That was intriguing, of course, but nothing more in the conversation, concerned with machine technicalities, made any sense to me. I was impressed once again, however, with the varied and skilled jobs performed by the women of the Navy.

## SECOND POSTSCRIPT

Despite the incident on the dais, with the Commander forgetting everything about me, except that I was non-white, my second reunion with the Navy was the most stimulating.

It was also educational, albeit too late. I met several women who were retired from both the Reserves and from civilian jobs, pensioned by both.

My severance from the Navy, by contrast, had been abrupt and final.

Soon after my arrival in Paris in July, 1949 I received a cablegram from the Third Naval District Office (the very same at which I had taken the oath to become a member of the Navy in November 1944). The message was terse, three lines. Its tone was indignant. It had “been learned” (it said) that I “had left the United States without permission.” I was instructed to “explain” by return cable.

Only then did I become cognizant of the fact that at the time I considered myself “discharged” from the Service, I had merely been moved from active to reserve status and that, as a reservist, my movements were subject to Navy supervision.

After I had recovered from my amazement, I was indignant. The notion of being held on such a short leash without even having been told of it, was repugnant. By return cable, I submitted my resignation from the service. Nobody even bothered to say “Accepted.” It was not until nearly forty years later, with Lt. Crayton’s mail-gram that I heard from the Navy again. It was only at the second reunion that I realized what I had forfeited by not knowing that I was a reservist and maintaining that status for the required period.

As I pursued casual research on the subject of women reservists, it seemed to me that at the time of my discharge, nobody was telling women that they were entitled to become active in the reserve to which they had automatically been consigned and that, furthermore, there were financial advantages to such membership.

In the spring of 1946, I now know, the Navy had probably not thought of how it might employ women reservists, despite the fact that they had become such automatically. Being a member of the Reserves happens automatically but in my discharge experience nobody was delegated to discuss exactly what this meant.

On the other hand, it is entirely possible that the meaning of reserve status was left undiscussed with this African-American officer in the WAVES because it was thought unlikely that there would be a place for her in the Reserves.

In contrast to the Navy's attitude in 1946 toward the women it had trained (and it may have been similarly casual about men discharges in those years) the son of one of my friends failed to become active in the reserves when he was discharged from regular duty sometime in the 80's. His last commanding officer was then in touch with him after what, to the C.O., must have seemed a reasonable time. My friend's son took the summons seriously and affiliated himself with the nearest unit of reservists. He was then required, of course, to make regular appearances for drill. He did not feel the exercise burdensome or else had been so intimidated by the summons directly from the Navy that he continued to attend bi-monthly meetings for many years. He retired only when the C.O. of the local group told him at the end of one session that he had noted by his record that the reservist had been attending meetings for a long, long time. "You don't have to come anymore, you know," the C.O. said. "You're entitled to get your pension."

During those two and a half days in Chicago in July 1987 I talked with women who had had travel experiences in service which would have been unimaginable during my service time.

By the time of my discharge women who had been early enlistees were being allowed to request assignment overseas. (Service aboard ship would come considerably later.) In July 1987 I talked with several women who had served in far-off places.

One woman's service had largely been in Hawaii. She had married and raised her children there and although she and her husband returned to the States, their children had married and continued to live in Hawaii. She spoke of "my Hawaiian grand-children" in even more doting terms than most grand-mothers would use.

Another reunion participant had been in the business of ferrying planes to Europe even before World War II. I had not known until she told me that there were women pilots doing such work at the time. Her descriptions of her crossings, some of the bizarre adventures she had had and the demands made suggested that there might have been a conspiracy to keep this area of women's activity secret from the general public.\*

\*Willers, June A. "America's Forgotten Heroines", Continuum, 1983.

These were the same group of women to serve in World War II and they were not made part of the military until thirty years later. After a long, hard fight they did gain veteran status.