

The Yale Review

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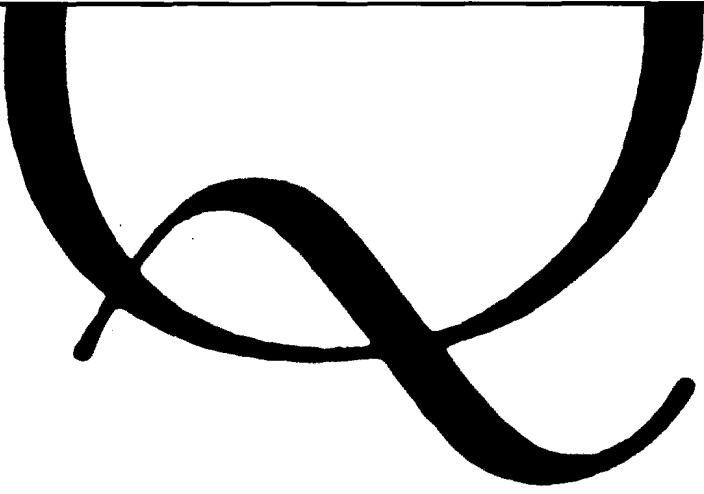
The Yale Review

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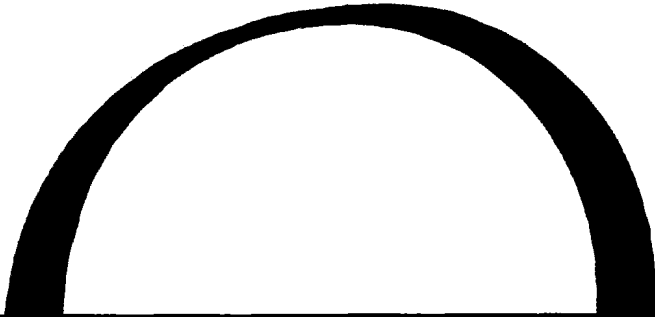
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Mazel Tov!

from THE QUARTERLY
to THE YALE REVIEW



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—Dallas Wiebe, "Night Flight to Stockholm," Issue 73

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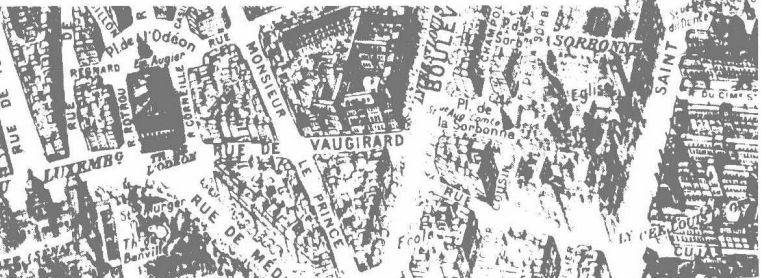
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This Is Your Wife

How the telephone helps her to be five busy people

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The Yale Review

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GAYLE PEMBERTON

None of the Above

The Hottest Water in Chicago

My father died sometime during the wee morning hours of November 12, 1977. He had retired just a few months before and had been ill for longer than that, although none of us really admitted it. He was a “race man”—that is, for almost all his adult life he worked for an organization that promotes racial equality. Because of the nature of his life, and because he was my father, I had always wanted him to write his memoirs. The whole family thought it a good idea and an exciting project for his retirement. It was agreed upon, just between my father and me, that I would help him write them.

In the early evening of November 12, 1977, I found three sheets of yellow legal paper on top of the television, sandwiched between a couple of *Good Housekeeping* and *Ebony* magazines. In my father’s patented scrawl were the beginnings of his story. It went something like this:

When I was ten years old I had a job cleaning shit off the boots of black stockyard workers in Clarinda, Iowa. There were three kinds of shit on them: sheep shit, horse shit and chicken shit. Sheep shit is the worst of all and was nearly impossible to get off.

I haven’t researched it myself, but I believe my father, and since reading those pages I have avoided sheep shit like the plague.

He hadn’t had a chance to retire. He went from work to the throes of death. He hadn’t had a chance to write more than those three pages. I will always wonder whether my reading of his work is correct: that for him, at least, talking about real shit was an appropriate beginning to the story of a life that was steeped in all kinds of it, both real and figurative, and a lot messier than

the sheep variety. I will always wonder, too, because I never heard him say the word *shit*.

I cannot help him tell his story. I cannot tell it on my own, either. But I can ghost a tiny part of it now, even though I know of it in only the barest of ways. This story meant a lot to him, and I think my father would okay my version of it, for we had planned to name the entire book after this episode from his working days. It's called "The Hottest Water in Chicago," and, naturally, it is for my father.

The setting is Chicago, of course, in the very early 1950s. Bigger Thomas has been dead for more than ten years; we listen to "Helen Trent" on the radio; we watch "Gangbusters" and "Boston Blackie" on our twelve-inch television — and the fights on Friday night, when my father lifts his portly frame out of his armchair, drops to his knees, and shadowboxes with the flickering images on the screen. We live in a housing project on the South Side, a very nice one as projects go. And when I saw it last, only a few years ago, I thought it had aged well, weathering generations of youngish black people clinging to the edge of the middle class, the bricks and glass and sidewalks still in place. We lived in Chicago only until I left the first grade. My sister, who later taught in its schools for a number of years, always said it was a good idea we left when we did; otherwise neither of us would have been able to read much now and I certainly would not be able to write this.

I remember being at home with my mother, watching her iron one oxford-cloth shirt after another. She would pull each one out of the refrigerator, already sprinkled and damp, from a large plastic bag that had the hint of an odor of mildew. It took about twenty minutes per shirt, and her work was impeccable. Then she would fold them, professional laundry style, and pile them on the dining room table, atop a sheet of newspaper. My father always needed two shirts per day: one for the day's work and a fresh one to wear at night to the interminable community meetings that kept him, throughout his career, away more often than home.

I would do my best to help, which sometimes meant concentrating on a drawing while I sat at a little table in the corner. At other times it meant playing laundry messenger by dropping the shirts onto the kitchen floor. One day—Mother ironing, of course—we were watching “The Bickersons” on TV, with Frances Langford and Don Ameche. At the commercial break, the show went off the air, never to return. Both my mother and I, separately, through the years, have sought corroboration for this major event, and we both have failed.

All in all, I don’t recall much about my home life then, probably because things went smoothly. We ate regularly; I got Easter clothes and usually what I’d asked for from Santa. My sister, who is five years older than I am, terrorized me with stories of the earth blowing up whenever sirens went off. And she tried her best to lose me whenever my mother said to her, “Take your sister with you.” No, nothing really remarkable. It took several years for me to learn that often my father had no more than a nickel in his pocket, that his checks were regularly late, and that my mother all too often had to fend off offensive phone calls from nasty, ill-mannered credit managers.

Most of my recollections of Chicago in those days are images from outside my home, and they are always painted gray. It’s a scientific fact, you know, that Chicago is the grayest city on earth. It makes the gray of New York, or San Francisco, or Pittsburgh, or London, or Paris, or Moscow seem positively blue. Another reason I think of gray and Chicago probably has to do with the fact that I was much smaller then, closer to the pavement and the high curbs that seemed like mountains as I approached them. My father, taking my hand, would say, “Jump up!” and I still have a few tiny scars on my knees from those moments when my timing was bad.

The grayness had a sound track, too: of sirens, for it seemed as if the whole city was in a perpetual state of burning, a habit formed in 1879. Of the El: we drove across Sixty-third Street on gray Sundays after church, turning onto it from South Parkway, now Martin Luther King, Jr., Drive; there the El was a noisy,

black, frightening umbrella, resembling a Mondrian painting gone out of control. Of streetcars: on State Street, they were ready, I was sure, to jump the track as they careened through intersections, on either the left or right set of wheels, with their bells not sonorous but muffled, doing a frenzied *dink-dink-dink-dink-dink-dink-dink-dink-dink-dink-dink-dink-dink*.

There was no Dan Ryan Expressway cutting a tornadic swath through the city. The Loop was a full hour's ride away by streetcar and bus—Mother didn't like the El either—and I remember going there only when someone was coming to town or leaving. My mother, sister, and I would go to California in the summer to visit my grandparents. We'd leave from Dearborn Station if we were riding the Santa Fe, or Union Station if we were taking the Southern Pacific or the Union Pacific. We'd pick up Grandma, my father's mother, from the Illinois Central Station because she came in on the New York Central or the Pennsylvania line from Ohio. I even remember going to the Rock Island Station for friends and relatives from Minnesota who came through Chicago, always on their way to somewhere else. The only other times I went to the Loop were when I was ill, which was often enough. Then we had to take the El.

Chicago stank. The stockyards sent their bloody odors wafting through the summer evening air. The city dump blew the same smell at least once a week, I swear, as that of an open can of tomato juice that has been sitting in a refrigerator for five days. And there was another smell, one that persists today, after the dump and the stockyards have gone: of burnt potatoes. I have yet to discover its source.

I have other memories of Chicago, too: of being out at 1:00 A.M. with my sister the night Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated and Chicago was burning, riding around in Scotty, her green VW, and seeing National Guard troops riding in jeeps with real live guns mounted on them; and of driving to Midway Airport, on the wrong street, as it were, and passing a building with a huge, white swastika painted on its side; of seeing Sixty-third Street as it looks today, with the street, the buildings, and

the El in tatters. It would look better if it were Dresden in 1945.

But those more recent memories are not important for this story. I mention them only to suggest that time passes very slowly and there is much in Chicago that never, ever changes. It is still gray; it still stinks; and it is still largely racially segregated.

But one morning in 1954, the owner of a hotel on Michigan Avenue, just south of the Loop, decided he would make a change. The following is my scenario and, at this stage of the story, probably as likely as my father's, since he never discovered any intentionality behind the act.

The Supreme Court has just ruled in favor of *Brown*, and this gets our hotel owner — let's call him Sam — to thinking: "Ya know, if they're gonna integrate the schools, I think I'll integrate my hotel. I've been turnin' away these boys, some of them in uniform from Korea, but it don't seem right to keep doin' it. I think I'll integrate this hotel."

It's Tuesday. My sister has chased me down the stairs once again. Mother is yelling at us to stop and to hurry because we're all running late. Daddy is up, drinking his seventh cup of coffee. He hasn't put on his tie yet, and he has the paper napkin folded around the collar of his oxford-cloth, button-down shirt to keep the egg yolk from ruining one of Mother's masterpieces. I sit down and start consuming milk in large quantities. No one says anything memorable.

Soon Daddy says, "Gotta go."

I say, "Can I come?"

He says, "No. Gotta see a man about a dog." Which is what he always said to my entreaty. And since I never could go, I at least wanted the dog—but we couldn't get one of them either.

He slips away from the table, grabs his tie, puts it on, puts on his suit jacket, pats my mother on her rear, which causes her to jump and extend his name to eight syllables. He gets into the blue-painted-over-maroon Mercury four-door and goes to his office, some forty blocks north.

My mother starts a day of ironing.

My sister goes to school.

I plan to help Mother until kindergarten begins; I am on the afternoon shift.

It is a clear, gray day, a little chillier than usual for May 18. A steady breeze is blowing from the east, off the lake, as my father makes his way up Michigan Avenue. He swears at a few drivers, thinks about having to paint the interior walls now that I've been broken of my short-lived wall-drawing habit. He wonders if he'll get paid Friday.

There isn't much on his schedule today. Until eleven he's interviewing job applicants. One of the things my father's organization does is act as a broker for firms willing to hire blacks. Applicants saw my father, filled out forms, usually got some comments from him about the importance of shined shoes and pressed pants, and then the white firm was contacted. This aspect of the business, I suspect, was not land office, but it kept my father fairly busy.

At 2:00 P.M. his superior, the director, summons him because a call has just come in from a man named Sam Somebody who owns a hotel on Michigan Avenue and who says he wants someone from my father's office to come down and spend the night. It seems the man wants to integrate his hotel. My father is delegated.

Small-town Iowa in the teens and early twenties, as I understood it from my father, was a little different from other places. "It was broader in its thinking," he would say. Which meant that, as a young boy, my father met with very little discrimination. He went to grade school and junior high school with all the rest of the children in town. He visited their homes, played baseball, fought, cursed, and learned to spit with them. He shined shoes and became an expert on what could be found on their undersoles. He graduated from high school in Sioux City and then moved to Minnesota to work and to attend the state university.

Minnesota, in the twenties and thirties, was a little different from other places, too. And although the black community there — as everywhere — was kept and did keep to itself, the larger

community was "broader in its thinking," he would say, so attending the university was not primarily a matter of breaking down barriers. And employment could be found in some of the farm-support industries in the Twin Cities.

There were, doubtless, many things my father chose not to discuss with his children, or perhaps with anyone. I asked him why we moved so often — four times before I was ten years old — but I never thought to ask him why he hated funerals or what kinds of discrimination he'd faced. He was never in the military; his first visit below the Mason-Dixon line was in 1972. I suspect there are a fair number of black people from my father's generation who will say that Minnesota was devoid of much unpleasantness. But whatever my father faced in Iowa, Minnesota, or anywhere else, I'll never know. I do know that his grandmother, Carrie Roberts, kept a scrapbook with all the newspaper clippings she could find that had any reference to "colored." Most of them detailed lynchings.

Now, at 3:30 P.M., my father called my mother, making sure there was another shirt ready. He told her he'd need an early dinner and a change of underwear because he was going downtown to integrate a hotel.

My mother said, "What?"

My father said, "I'm going to integrate a hotel."

My mother said, "What?"

My father asked if she was hard of hearing.

My mother said it sounded pretty stupid to her.

At 7:30 P.M. my father drove up to the address on Michigan Avenue. He looked at the façade of the building: five stories high, about 150 feet wide. Hanging from the third-floor level was a large neon sign with the word "Hotel" flashing on and off. The sign was half a chevron, with smaller lighted printing below the horizontal "Hotel." It said, "Rooms To Rent Per Day: No Hourly Rates." A Budweiser beer sign was in the window.

He got out of his car and walked toward the door, shaking his head slightly, biting his lower lip. Once inside, he noticed a dull light shining down from a filthy chandelier, coated with the

remains of hundreds of insects. To his left was a single walnut counter, the baseboard of which was splintered from too many feet scraping its edge over too many years. From behind the counter a man turned to meet my father, quickly turned away, and then walked toward a tiny office in a corner. He said nothing to my father.

My father waited at the counter, leaned against it, pulled out a cigarette, and noticed a faint aroma of Raid. At the sixth puff of his cigarette another man appeared from behind the counter. He walked around it and out to my father, extended his hand, and announced himself as Sam, the owner of the hotel.

"Are you Mr. So-and-So, from Such-and-Such?" he asked my father.

"Yes."

"Well, good. You're going to integrate my hotel. Please follow me."

My father said the man was about five feet six inches tall, of a slight frame. He had short, black, very straight hair that was slicked down with a heavy, perfumy pomade. He wore shiny black shoes whose heels were run over on the outsides. And he was dressed in a blue serge suit that had recently been ironed, perhaps for the fifth or sixth time since its last cleaning. There were several spots along the sleeves and a large stain on the lapel.

"Let me show you the rooms," Sam said to my father.

They walked to a single door that opened onto a gated elevator. Smells of urine and alcohol permeated the small space. My father sighed.

Sam took my father to the third floor. As they got out of the elevator, they were met by a single dull exit sign, pointing to a stairwell on the left. There were three equally spaced bare light-bulbs hanging from the ceiling. On either side of the long corridor were cubicles partitioned with chicken wire, each cubicle with a dirty mattress and a rickety nightstand. On each nightstand were aluminum ashtrays, two Dixie cups, a hand towel, and a hotel-sized bar of soap. Unwrapped.

My father coughed slightly, the smell of insecticide catching the smoky mucus at the base of his throat.

"I see," he said.

"Every new guest is provided a clean, newly sprayed room," Sam explained. There was an uncomfortable pause as a ragged man passed them on his way to the bathroom. The man muttered something inaudible, hawked, prepared to spit, and then suppressed it.

Sam said quickly, "You need anything, you come get me at the desk. Anybody bother you, you let me know. This is a friendly establishment. And, for your information, we have the hottest water in Chicago."

My father said Sam beamed and rose on his toes with that line. End of story.

Because of the nature of his work, and the opportunity for it, I like to think that my father did at least one mitzvah each day. He came home tired the morning after he had integrated the hotel; he stayed in the bathroom an hour, and I could hear him talking to himself, occasionally chuckling. He came down to breakfast and surprised us with a line reserved only for Saturdays: "And how are the sick and the afflicted this morning?"

He worked again on Friday; the paychecks were late. On Saturday we all went to the new shopping center called Evergreen Plaza, where I ate my first soft ice cream cone. And it was now safe, now policy, for a black man in Chicago to register at a particular transient hotel there, and find out whether the water could wash off the flea shit, roach shit, rodent shit, and human shit that was everywhere around him.

Twenty-three years later I wondered what connection my father would have made between sheep shit and the hottest water in Chicago. I'm still working on that.

On Andrew Wyeth, Checked Suits, Broken Hair, Busted Dreams, and Transcendence

I don't know what to do when the temperature is eighty degrees and the calendar tells me it is November. Fall was a failure for me in Los Angeles. I didn't know how to dress for it. On one of these hot, Southern California fall days, when I wasn't working