

John Howard Griffin

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Foreword by Studs Terkel

Afterword by Authorized Biographer Robert Bonazzi

Photographs by Don Rutledge • Now Indexed

A BOOK FOR OUR TIME

Studs Terkel tells us in his Foreword to the definitive Griffin Estate Edition of *Black Like Me*: “This is a contemporary book, you bet.” Indeed. *Black Like Me* is required reading at thousands of high schools and colleges for this very reason. Regardless of how much progress has been made in eliminating outright racism from American life, *Black Like Me* endures as a great human - and humanitarian - document. In our era, when “international” terrorism is most often defined in terms of a single ethnic designation and a single religion, we need to be reminded that America has been blinded by fear and racial intolerance before. As John Lennon wrote, “Living is easy with eyes closed.” *Black Like Me* is the story of a man who opened his eyes, and helped an entire nation to do likewise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Known primarily as the author of the modern classic. *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin (1920-1980) was a true Renaissance man. He fought in the French Resistance and served in the Army-Air Force in the South Pacific during World War II. Griffin became an acclaimed novelist and essayist, a remarkable portrait photographer and a musicologist recognized as an expert on Gregorian Chant.

On October 28, 1959, John Howard Griffin dyed himself black and began an odyssey of discovery through the segregated Deep South. The result was *Black Like Me*, arguably the single most important documentation of 20th century American racism ever written.

Because of *Black Like Me*, Griffin was personally vilified, hanged in effigy in his hometown, threatened with death, and – as late as 1975 – severely beaten by the KKK. Griffin's courageous act and the book it generated earned him international respect as a human rights activist. Griffin worked with Martin Luther King, Dick Gregory, Saul Alinsky, and NAACP Director Roy Wilkins throughout the Civil Rights era. He taught at the University of Peace with Nobel Peace Laureate Father Dominique Pire, and delivered more than a thousand lectures in Europe, Canada and the US.

Earlier, during a decade of blindness (1947-1957), Griffin wrote novels. His 1952 bestseller, *The Devil Rides Outside*, was a test case in a controversial trial before the US Supreme Court that resulted in a landmark decision against censorship. Two of his most important books have been published posthumously as part of a growing revival of interest in Griffin's work: *Street of the Seven Angels*, a satiric anti-censorship novel, and *Scattered Shadow: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision*.

Works by John Howard Griffin

The Devil Rides Outside (1952, Ebook 2010)

Nuni (1956, Ebook 2010)

Land of the High Sky (1959)

Black Like Me (1961)

The Definitive Griffin Estate Edition (2004)

The Definitive Griffin Estate Edition, Revised with Index (2006)

Ebook edition (2010)

50th Anniversary Edition (2011)

The John Howard Griffin Reader (1968)

The Church and the Black Man (1969)

A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton (1970)

Twelve Photographic Portraits (1973)

Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures (1974)

A Time to Be Human (1977)

The Hermitage Journals (1981)

Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton's Hermitage Years (1983, 1993, Ebook 2010)

Pilgrimage (1985)

Encounters with the Other (1997)

Street of the Seven Angels (2003, Ebook 2010)

Available Light: Exile in Mexico (2008, Ebook 2010)

Scattered Shadows: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision (2004, Ebook 2010)



“I wet my sponge, poured dye on it, and touched up the corners of my mouth and lips, which were always difficult spots.”

- *Black Like Me*, page 119

This photograph of Griffin applying the “dye” to his face is here published for the first time. This and other historic photographs included in this edition of *Black Like Me* were taken by Don Rutledge in 1959 in New Orleans.

Black Like Me

John Howard Griffin



Foreword by Studs Terkel

The Definitive
Griffin Estate Edition,
corrected from the original manuscripts,
with historic photographs by Don Rutledge
and an Afterword by Robert Bonazzi

WingsPress
San Antonio, Texas

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In Memory of

John Howard Griffin (1920-1980)

and

Elizabeth Griffin-Bonazzi (1935-2000)

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Critical Praise for *Black Like Me*

Foreword

Reading *Black Like Me* 45 years after it originally appeared is much like walking with a ghost. It is a journey through a haunted land with no cicerone to show you the way. Much has changed during those tumultuous years, especially in the South, and yet much has remained the prickly same. The black-white matter is still the Great American Obsession.

What is it like to be the *Other*? A few, very few, thoughtful heroic whites, through the four centuries since the arrival of the first slave ship at Charleston Harbor, have at one time or another considered the idea. It was one man who actually followed through. John Howard Griffin, a white Texan, thought the unthinkable and did the undoable: he became a black man.

Griffin, a student of theology and disciple of Jacques Maritain, a musicologist, photographer and a novelist, decided to become a Negro. (The phrase African-American has not yet enriched our vocabulary).

With the help of a dermatologist, he ingested pigment-changing medicines and subjected himself to intense ultra-violet rays. Though he, in the process, suffered considerable discomfort, he finally “passed.” To add the final touch, he shaved his head clean bald and had, indeed, become an approaching-middle-aged black man of some dignity. He was all set to wander across the Deep South, especially Mississippi. His book is in the form of a diary. The first entry: October 28, 1959. That was the day he became possessed by the challenge. The final one: December 15. That was the day he returned home to his family in Mansfield, Texas as a white husband and father.

What follows is an epilogue; a recounting of the firestorm that ensued with the publication of *Black Like Me*. He was celebrated, of course, in national journals as well as on TV and radio. The vilification came along with it. It was a matter of course. What mattered most, and still matters most, is the difficulty white Americans have in feeling what it is to be the *Other*.

A black woman I know speaks of “the feeling tone.” John Howard Griffin, in his perilous, humiliating, and at times hilarious, yet, strangely enough, hopeful adventure, captured “the feeling tone” as no white man I’ve ever known.

This is a contemporary book, you bet.

- Studs Terkel
Chicago, 2000

Preface

This may not be all of it. It may not cover all the questions, but it is what it is like to be Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down.

Some whites will say this is not really it. They will say this is the white man's experience as a Negro in the South, not the Negro's.

But this is picayunish, and we no longer have time for that. We no longer have time to atomize principles and beg the question. We fill too many gutters while we argue unimportant points and confuse issues.

The Negro. The South. These are the details. The real story is the universal one of men who destroy the souls and bodies of other men (and in the process destroy themselves) for reasons neither really understands. It is the story of the persecuted, the defrauded, the feared and the detested. I could have been a Jew in Germany, a Mexican in a number of states, or a member of any "inferior" group. Only the details would have differed. The story would be the same.

This began as a scientific research study of the Negro in the South, with careful compilation of data for analysis. But I filed the data, and here publish the journal of my own experience living as a Negro. I offer it in all its crudity and rawness. It traces the changes that occur to heart and body and intelligence when the so-called first-class citizen is cast on the junk heap of second-class citizenship.

—John Howard Griffin, 1960

Rest at pale evening ...
A tall slim tree ...
Night coming tenderly
Black like me.

—Langston Hughes
from “Dream Variation”

Deep South Journey

1959

For years the idea had haunted me, and that night it returned more insistently than ever. If a white man became a Negro in the Deep South, what adjustments would he have to make? What is it like to experience discrimination based on skin color, something over which one has no control?

This speculation was sparked again by a report that lay on my desk in the old barn that served as my office. The report mentioned the rise in suicide tendency among Southern Negroes. This did not mean that they killed themselves, but rather that they had reached a stage where they simply no longer cared whether they lived or died.

It was that bad, then, despite the white Southern legislators who insisted that they had a “wonderfully harmonious relationship” with Negroes. I lingered on in my office at my parents’ Mansfield, Texas, farm. My wife and children slept in our home five miles away. I sat there, surrounded by the smells of autumn coming through my open window, unable to leave, unable to sleep.

How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth? Though we lived side by side throughout the South, communication between the two races had simply ceased to exist. Neither really knew what went on with those of the other race. The Southern Negro will not tell the white man the truth. He long ago learned that if he speaks the truth unpleasing to the white, the white will make life miserable for him.

The only way I could see to bridge the gap between us was to become a Negro. I decided I would do this.

I prepared to walk into a life that appeared suddenly mysterious and frightening. With my decision to become a Negro I realized that I, a specialist in race issues, really knew nothing of the Negro’s real problem.

I drove into Fort Worth in the afternoon to discuss the project with my old friend George Levitan. He is the owner of *Sepia*, an internationally distributed Negro magazine with a format similar to that of *Look*. A large, middle-aged man, he long ago won my admiration by offering equal job opportunities to members of any race, choosing according to their qualifications and future potentialities. With an on-the-job training program, he has made *Sepia* a model, edited, printed and distributed from the million-dollar Fort Worth plant.

It was a beautiful autumn day. I drove to his house, arriving there in mid-afternoon. His door was always open, so I walked in and called him.

An affectionate man, he embraced me, offered me coffee and had me take a seat. Through the glass doors of his den I looked out to see a few dead leaves floating on the water of his swimming pool.

He listened, his cheek buried in his fist as I explained the project.

"It's a crazy idea," he said. "You'll get yourself killed fooling around down there." But he could not hide his enthusiasm.

I told him the South's racial situation was a blot on the whole country, and especially reflected against us overseas; and that the best way to find out if we had second-class citizens and what their plight would be to become one of them.

"But it'll be terrible," he said. "You'll be making yourself the target of the most ignorant rabble in the country. If they ever caught you, they'd be sure to make an example of you." He gazed out the window, his face puffed with concentration.

"But you know - it is a great idea. I can see right now you're going through with it, so what can I do to help?"

"Pay the tab and I'll give *Sepia* some articles - or let you use some chapters from the book I'll write."

He agreed, but suggested that before I made final plans I discuss it with Mrs. Adelle Jackson, *Sepia's* editorial director. Both of us have a high regard for this extraordinary woman's opinions. She rose from a secretarial position to become one of the country's distinguished editors.

After leaving Mr. Levitan, I called on her. At first she thought the idea was impossible. "You don't know what you'd be getting into, John," she said. She felt that when my book was published, I would be the butt of resentment from all the hate groups, that they would stop nothing to discredit me, and that many decent whites would be afraid to show me courtesy when others might be watching. And, too, there are the deeper currents among even well-intentioned Southerners, currents that make the idea of a white man's assuming nonwhite identity a somewhat repulsive step down. And other currents that say, "Don't stir up anything. Let's try to keep things peaceful."

And then I went home and told my wife. After she recovered from her astonishment, she unhesitatingly agreed that if I felt I must do this thing then I must. She offered, as her part of

the project, her willingness to lead, with our three children, the unsatisfactory family life of
household deprived of husband and father.

I returned at night to my barn office. Outside my open window, frogs and crickets made
the silence more profound. A chill breeze rustled dead leaves in the woods. It carried an odor
of fresh-turned dirt, drawing my attention to the fields where the tractor had only a few
hours ago stopped plowing the earth. I sensed the radiance of it in the stillness, sensed the
earthworms that burrowed back into the depths of the furrows, sensed the animals that
wandered in the woods in search of nocturnal rut or food. I felt the beginning loneliness, the
terrible dread of what I had decided to do.

Lunched with Mrs. Jackson, Mr. Levitan, and three FBI men from the Dallas office. Though I knew my project was outside their jurisdiction and that they could not support it in any way, I wanted them to know about it in advance. We discussed it in considerable detail. I decided not to change my name or identity. I would merely change my pigmentation and allow people to draw their own conclusions. If asked who I was or what I was doing, I would answer truthfully.

“Do you suppose they’ll treat me as John Howard Griffin, regardless of my color - or will they treat me as some nameless Negro, even though I am still the same man?” I asked.

“You’re not serious,” one of them said. “They’re not going to ask you any questions. As soon as they see you, you’ll be a Negro and that’s all they’ll ever want to know about you.”

Arrived by plane as night set in. I checked my bags at the Hotel Monteleone in the French Quarter and began walking.

Strange experience. When I was blind I came here and learned cane-walking in the French Quarter. Now, the most intense excitement filled me as I saw the places I visited while blind. I walked miles, trying to locate everything by sight that I once knew only by smell and sound. The streets were full of sightseers. I wandered among them, entranced by the narrow streets, the iron-grill balconies, the green plants and vines glimpsed in lighted flagstone courtyards. Every view was magical, whether it was a deserted, lamplit street corner or the neon hubbub of Royal Street.

I walked past garish bars where hawkers urged me in to see the “gorgeous girls” do their hip-shaking; and they left the doors open sufficiently to show dim, smoke-blue interiors crossed by long rays of pink spotlights that turned the seminude girls’ flesh rose. I strolled on. Jazz blared from the bars. Odors of old stone and Creole cooking and coffee filled the street.

At Broussard’s, I had supper in a superb courtyard under the stars - *huîtres variées*, green salad, white wine and coffee; the same meal I had there in past years. I saw everything - the lanterns, the trees, the candlelit tables, the little fountain, as though I were looking through a fine camera lens. Surrounded by elegant waiters, elegant people and elegant food, I thought of the other parts of town where I would live in the days to come. Was there a place in New Orleans where a Negro could buy *huîtres variées*?

At ten I finished dinner and went to telephone an old friend who lives in New Orleans. He insisted I stay at his house, and I was relieved, for I foresaw all sorts of difficulties staying at a hotel while I turned into a Negro.

In the morning I called the medical information service and asked for the names of some prominent dermatologists. They gave me three names. The first one I called gave me an appointment immediately, so I took the streetcar to his office and explained my needs. He had had no experience with such a request, but was willing enough to aid me in my project. After taking my case history, he asked me to wait while he consulted with some of his colleagues by phone as to the best method of darkening my skin.

After some time he stepped back into the room and said they had all agreed we would attempt it with a medication taken orally, followed by exposure to ultraviolet rays. He explained they used it on victims of vitiligo, a disease that causes white spots to appear on the face and body. Until this medication was discovered, the victims of this disease had had to wear pancake make-up when they went outside in public. It could be dangerous to us, however. It usually took from six weeks to three months to darken the skin pigmentation. I told him I could not spare that much time and we decided to try accelerated treatments, with constant blood tests to see how my system tolerated the medication.

I got the prescription filled, returned to the house and took the tablets. Two hours later I exposed my entire body to ultraviolet rays from a sunlamp.

My host remained away from the house most of the time. I told him I was on an assignment that I could not discuss and that he should not be surprised if I simply disappeared without saying good-bye. I knew that he had no prejudices, but I nevertheless did not want to involve him in any way, since reprisals might be taken against him by bigots or by his associates, who might resent his role as my host once my story became known. He gave me a key to his house and we agreed to maintain our different schedules without worrying about the usual host-guest relationship.

After supper I took the trolley into town and walked through some of the Negro sections of the South Rampart-Dryades Street sections. They are mostly poor sections with cafés, bars and businesses of all sorts alongside cluttered residences. I searched for an opening, a way to enter the world of the Negro, some contact perhaps. As yet, it was a blank to me. My greatest preoccupation was that moment of transition when I would "pass over." Where and how would I do it? To get from the white world into the Negro world is a complex matter. I looked for the chink in the wall through which I might pass unobserved.

For the past four days, I had spent my time at the doctor's or closed up in my room with cotton pads over my eyes and the sun lamp turned on me. They had made blood tests twice and found no indication of damage to the liver. But the medication produced lassitude and I felt constantly on the verge of nausea.

The doctor, well-disposed, gave me many warnings about the dangers of this project insofar as my contact with Negroes was concerned. Now that he had had time to think, he was beginning to doubt the wisdom of this course, or perhaps he felt strongly his responsibility. In any event, he warned me that I must have some contact in each major city so my family could check on my safety from time to time.

"I believe in the brotherhood of man," he said. "I respect the race. But I can never forget when I was an intern and had to go down on South Rampart Street to patch them up. Three or four would be sitting in a bar or at a friend's house. They were apparently friends one minute and then something would come up and one would get slashed up with a knife. We're willing enough to go all the way for them, but we've got this problem - how can you render the duties of justice to men when you're afraid they'll be so unaware of justice that they may destroy you? - especially since their attitude toward their own race is a destructive one." He said this with real sadness. I told him my contacts indicated that Negroes themselves were aware of this dilemma and they were making strong efforts to unify the race, to condemn among themselves any tactic or any violence or injustice that would reflect against their race as a whole.

"I'm glad to hear that," he said, obviously unconvinced.

He also told me things that Negroes had told him - that the lighter the skin the more trustworthy the Negro. I was astonished to see an intelligent man fall for this cliché, and equally astonished that Negroes would advance it, for in effect it placed the dark Negro in an inferior position and fed the racist idea of judging a man by his color.

When not lying under the lamp, I walked the streets of New Orleans to orient myself. Each day I stopped at a sidewalk shoe-shine stand near the French Market. The shine boy was an elderly man, large, keenly intelligent and a good talker. He had lost a leg during World War I. He showed none of the obsequiousness of the Southern Negro, but was polite and easy to know. (Not that I had any illusions that I knew him, for he was too astute to allow any white man that privilege.) I told him I was a writer, touring the Deep South to study living conditions, civil rights, etc., but I did not tell him I would do this as a Negro. Finally, we exchanged names. He was called Sterling Williams. I decided he might be the contact for my entry into the Negro community.

I had my last visit with the doctor in the morning. The treatment had not worked as rapidly or completely as we had hoped, but I had a dark undercoating of pigment which I could touch up perfectly with stain. We decided I must shave my head, since I had no curl. The dosage was established and the darkness would increase as time passed. From there, I was on my own.

The doctor showed much doubt and perhaps regret that he had ever cooperated with me in this transformation. Again he gave me many firm warnings and told me to get in touch with him any time of the day or night if I got into trouble. As I left his office, he shook my hand and said gravely, "Now you go into oblivion."

A cold spell had hit New Orleans, so that lying under the lamp that day was a comfortable experience. I decided to shave my head that evening and begin my journey.

In the afternoon, my host looked at me with friendly alarm. "I don't know what you're up to," he said, "but I'm worried."

I told him not to be and suggested I would probably leave sometime that night. He said he had a meeting, but would cancel it. I asked him not to. "I don't want you here when I go," he said.

"What are you going to do - be a Puerto Rican or something?" he asked.

"Something like that," I said. "There may be ramifications. I'd rather you didn't know anything about it. I don't want you involved."

He left around five. I fixed myself a bite of supper and drank many cups of coffee, putting off the moment when I would shave my head, grind in the stain and walk out into the New Orleans night as a Negro.

I telephoned home, but no one answered. My nerves simmered with dread. Finally I began to cut my hair and shave my head. It took hours and many razor blades before my pate felt smooth to my hand. The house settled into silence around me. Occasionally, I heard the trolley car rattle past as the night grew late. I applied coat after coat of stain, wiping each coat off. Then I showered to wash off all the excess. I did not look into the mirror until I had finished dressing and had packed my duffel bags.

Turning off all the lights, I went into the bathroom and closed the door. I stood in the darkness before the mirror, my hand on the light switch. I forced myself to flick it on.

In the flood of light against white tile, the face and shoulders of a stranger - a fierce, bald, very dark Negro - glared at me from the glass. He in no way resembled me.

The transformation was total and shocking. I had expected to see myself disguised, but this was something else. I was imprisoned in the flesh of an utter stranger, an unsympathetic one with whom I felt no kinship. All traces of the John Griffin I had been were wiped from existence. Even the senses underwent a change so profound it filled me with distress. I looked into the mirror and saw nothing of the white John Griffin's past. No, the reflections led back to Africa, back to the shanty and the ghetto, back to the fruitless struggles against the mark

blackness. Suddenly, almost with no mental preparation, no advance hint, it became clear and permeated my whole being. My inclination was to fight against it. I had gone too far. I knew now that there is no such thing as a disguised white man, when the black won't rub off. The black man is wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been. I was a newly created Negro who must go out that door and live in a world unfamiliar to me.

The completeness of this transformation appalled me. It was unlike anything I had imagined. I became two men, the observing one and the one who panicked, who felt Negro even into the depths of his entrails. I felt the beginnings of great loneliness, not because I was a Negro but because the man I had been, the self I knew, was hidden in the flesh of another. If I returned home to my wife and children they would not know me. They would open the door and stare blankly at me. My children would want to know who is this large, bald Negro. If I walked up to friends, I knew I would see no flicker of recognition in their eyes.

I had tampered with the mystery of existence and I had lost the sense of my own being. This is what devastated me. The Griffin that was had become invisible.

The worst of it was that I could feel no companionship with this new person. I did not like the way he looked. Perhaps, I thought, this was only the shock of a first reaction. But the thing was done and there was no possibility of turning back. For a few weeks I must be the aging, bald Negro; I must walk through a land hostile to my color, hostile to my skin.

How did one start? The night lay out there waiting. A thousand questions presented themselves. The strangeness of my situation struck me anew - I was a man born old at midnight into a new life. How does such a man act? Where does he go to find food, water, bed?

The phone rang and I felt my nerves convulse. I answered and told the caller my host was out for the evening. Again the strangeness, the secret awareness that the person on the other end did not know he talked with a Negro. Downstairs, I heard the soft chiming of the old clock. I knew it was midnight though I did not count. It was time to go.

With enormous self-consciousness I stepped from the house into the darkness. No one was in sight. I walked to the corner and stood under a streetlamp, waiting for the trolley.

I heard footsteps. From the shadows, the figure of a white man emerged. He came and stood beside me. It was all new. Should I nod and say "Good evening," or simply ignore him? He stared intently at me. I stood like a statue, wondering if he would speak, would question me.

Though the night was cold, sweat dampened my body. This also was new. It was the first time this adult Negro had ever perspired. I thought it vaguely illuminating that the Negro Griffin's sweat felt exactly the same to his body as the white Griffin's. As I had suspected they would be, my discoveries were naïve ones, like those of a child.

The streetcar, with pale light pouring from its windows, rumbled to a stop. I remembered to let the white man on first. He paid his fare and walked to an empty seat, ignoring me. I felt my first triumph. He had not questioned me. The ticket-taker on the streetcar nodded affably when I paid my fare. Though streetcars are not segregated in New Orleans, I took a seat near the back. Negroes there glanced at me without the slightest suspicion or interest.

began to feel more confident. I asked one of them where I could find a good hotel. He said the Butler on Rampart was as good as any, and told me what bus to take from downtown.

I got off and began walking along Canal Street in the heart of town, carrying one small duffel bag in each hand. I passed the same taverns and amusement places where the hawkers had solicited me on previous evenings. They were busy, urging white men to come in and see the girls. The same smells of smoke and liquor and dampness poured out through half-open doors. Tonight they did not solicit me. Tonight they looked at me but did not see me.

I went into a drugstore that I had patronized every day since my arrival. I walked to the cigarette counter, where the same girl I had talked with every day waited on me.

“Package of Picayunes, please,” I said in response to her blank look.

She handed them to me, took my bill and gave me change with no sign of recognition, none of the banter of previous days.

Again my reaction was that of a child. I was aware that the street smells, and the drugstore odors of perfume and arnica, were exactly the same to the Negro as they had been to the white. Only this time I could not go to the soda fountain and order a limeade or ask for a glass of water.

I caught the bus to South Rampart Street. Except for the taverns, the street was deserted when I arrived at the Butler Hotel. A man behind the counter was making a barbecue sandwich for a woman customer. He said he'd find me a room as soon as he finished. I took a seat at one of the tables and waited.

A large, pleasant-faced Negro walked in and sat at the counter. He grinned at me and said, “Man, you really got your top shaved, didn't you?”

“Yeah, doesn't it look all right?”

“Man, it's slick. Makes you look real good.” He said he understood the gals were really going for bald-headed men. “They say that's a sure sign of being high-sexed.” I let him think I'd shaved my head for that reason. We talked easily. I asked him if this was the best hotel in the area. He said the Sunset Hotel down the street might be a little better.

I picked up my bags and walked toward the door.

“See you around, Slick,” he called after me.

An orange neon sign guided me to the Sunset Hotel, which is located next to a bar. The drab little lobby was empty. I waited a moment at the desk and then rang a call bell. A man obviously awakened from sleep, came down the hall in his undershirt, buttoning his trousers. He said I would have to pay in advance and that he didn't allow men to take girls up to the rooms. I paid the \$2.85 and he led me up narrow, creaking stairs to the second floor. I stood behind him as he opened the door to my room and saw over his shoulder the desolate windowless cubicle. I almost backed out, but realized I could probably find nothing better.

We entered and I saw that the room was clean.

“The bathroom's down the hall,” he said. I locked the door after him and sat down on the bed to the loud twang of springs. A deep gloom spread through me, heightened by noise of talk, laughter and jukebox jazz from the bar downstairs. My room was scarcely larger than a double bed. An open transom above the door into the hall provided the only ventilation. The

air, mingled with that of other rooms, was not fresh. In addition to the bed, I had a tiny gas stove and a broken-down bed stand. On it were two thin hand towels, a half bar of Ivory soap.

It was past one now. The light was so feeble I could hardly see to write. With no windows I felt boxed in, suffocating.

I turned off my light and tried to sleep, but the noise was too much. Light through the open transom fell on the ceiling fan, casting distorted shadows of the four motionless blades against the opposite wall.

A dog barked nearby and his bark grew louder as another tune from the jukebox blasted up through my linoleum floor. I could not shake the almost desperate sadness all this evoked and I marveled that sounds could so degrade the spirit.

I slipped into my pants and walked barefoot down the narrow, dim-lit hall to the door with a crudely lettered sign reading MEN. When I stepped in, the hollow roar of water beating against the wall of a metal shower filled the room, along with an odor of cold sweat and soap. One man was in the shower. Another, a large, black-skinned man, sat naked on the floor awaiting his turn at the shower. He leaned back against the wall with his legs stretched out in front of him. Despite his state of undress, he had an air of dignity. Our eyes met and he nodded his polite greeting.

"It's getting cold, isn't it?" he said.

"It sure is."

"You talking to me?" the man in the shower called out above the thrumming.

"No - there's another gentleman here."

"I won't be much longer."

"Take your time - he don't want to shower."

I noted the bathroom was clean, though the fixtures were antique and rust-stained.

"Have you got a stove in your room?" the man on the floor asked. We looked at one another and there was kindness in his search for conversation.

"Yes, but I haven't turned it on."

"You *didn't* want to take a shower, did you?" he asked.

"No - it's too cold. You must be freezing on that bare floor, with no clothes on."

His brown eyes lost some of their gravity. "It's been so hot here recently. It feels kind of good to be cold."

I stepped over to the corner washbasin to rinse my hands.

"You can't use that," he said quickly. "That water'll run out on the floor." I looked beneath as he indicated, and saw it had no drainpipe.

He reached beside him and flicked back the wet canvas shower curtain. "Hey, how about stepping back and letting this gentleman wash his hands?"

"That's all right. I can wait," I said.

"Go ahead," he nodded.

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