

Turning Point for the White Boy

The Bethlehem Gadfly Arts, the, George Floyd killing June 8, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the Arts in Bethlehem* 

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There are “Sundown Towns,” towns in which it is not safe for a black after dark. I lived in a “Sun-drenched Town,” a town in which you’d hardly see a black at any time.

There was an “other side of the tracks” in my town. The Paoli Local split the town, not in half, but let’s say 90-10. The blacks stayed on their side of the tracks. This was the 1950s.

The school playground, however, was democratic terrain. There the many bloods of the American stream met.

It was on the playground that I met him.

I can’t remember his name. It was Homer or Horatio. It was Johnson or Brown or Washington.

Homer or Horatio was good-natured and gregarious. He faced life with what I would much later recognize as a plantation smile. He was also a natural athlete, a “superb physical specimen,” as they say when coldly dehumanizing a person, the kind of guy who never wore a shirt in warm weather and you didn’t mind.

Homer or Horatio and I played a lot of ball together in my high school years.

We were friends on the playground.

After graduation, I had a summer job delivering furniture and appliances, helping to meet college expenses.

Homer or Horatio wasn’t going to college. He needed a job to subsist. But he confided to me with inherited stoicism that everywhere he applied

in our sun-drenched town he met polite but curt refusal. Remember, this was the 1950s.

Homer or Horatio was my friend.

He needed a recommendation.

So I made the well meaning offer to put in a good word for him with my boss, pretending I was a man of influence, of privilege, of power. Though I knew he was better equipped for this kind of work than me, who was a definite liability on the ass-end of a sofa going up two flights of stairs.

I offered to help Homer or Horatio. He was my friend.

But I never followed through.

My big boss was a big bigot – Mr. Sundrenched himself. His assistant – I remember *her* name precisely – was the snooty Mrs. DuBois – pronounced Du-bwa, mind you, not Du-boise – who barely tolerated my lower middle classness.

It was no good. I would be no help. I had not the courage to recommend my black friend.

Moreover, from some dark cellar of racial anxiety, I made the selfish calculation that even recommending my friend might endanger *my* job. That he might trump me.

I never followed through on the offer to help my friend.

I did nothing.

I thought the rash offer forgotten.

But this unpardonable sin was not to go unpunished.

Late one drowsily hot Saturday summer afternoon as the work week wound down, while killing time by fiddling with the front store window display, I saw Homer or Horatio confidently approaching in his Sunday best.

It hadn't occurred to me that he would do this.

It felt like something never before done in our sun-drenched town.

I couldn't breathe.

I lept from the window and blocked him at the door, stupidly, selfishly, and transparently lying that I had done my best but that the boss expressed sincere regret that at the moment there were no jobs available.

Homer or Horatio lowered eyes that had seen cowardice, neatly folded his smile for use another day with a better friend, joined the palms of his hands prayerfully on his chest, and, bowing subserviently ever so slightly from the waist, turned and disappeared.

I never saw Homer or Horatio Johnson or Brown or Washington again.

Except on the rack of conscience.

Except on the ever rising tide of resolve to do better by people of color that persists to this day.

Edward J. Gallagher

Gadfly is fostering local art and encourages followers to contribute creative work and personal responses to the George Floyd killing.