

Chicago: Southside Summers

1.

For some time now--I think since I was a child--I have been possessed of the desire to put down the stuff of my life. That is a commonplace impulse, apparently, among persons of massive self-interest; sooner or later we all do it. And, I am quite certain, there is only one internal quarrel: how much of the truth to tell? How much, how much, how much! It is brutal in sober uncompromising moments, to reflect on the comedy of concern we all enact when it comes to our precious images!

Even so, when such vanity as propels the writing of such memoirs is examined, certainly one would wish at least to have some boast of social serviceability on one's side. I shall set down in these pages what shall seem to me to be the truth of my life and essences . . . which are to be found, first of all, on the South side of Chicago, where I was born. . . .

2.

All travelers to my city should ride the elevated trains that race along the back ways of Chicago. The lives you can look into!

I think you could find the tempo of my people on their back porches. The honesty of their living is there in the shabbiness. Scrubbed porches that sag and look their danger. Dirty gray wood steps. And always a line of white and pink clothes scrubbed so well, waving in the dirty wind of the city.

My people are poor. And they are tired. And they are determined to live.

Our South side is a place apart: each piece of our living is a protest.

3.

I was born May 19, 1930, the last of four children.

Of love and my parents there is little to be written: their relationship to their children was utilitarian. We were fed and housed and dressed and outfitted with more cash than our associates and that was all. We were also vaguely taught certain vague absolutes: that we were better than no one but infinitely superior to everyone; that we were the products of the proudest and most mistreated of the races of man; that there was nothing enormously difficult about life; that one succeeded as a matter of course.

Life was not a struggle--it was something that one did. One won an argument because, if facts gave out, one invented them-- with color! The only sinful people in the world were dull people. And, above all, there were two things which were never to be betrayed: the family and the race. But of love, there was nothing ever said.

If we were sick, we were sternly, impersonally, and carefully nursed and doctored back to health. Fevers, headaches, and toothaches were attended to with urgency and importance;

one always felt important in my family. Mother came with a tray to your room with the soup and Vick's salve or gave the enemas in a steaming bathroom. But we were not fondled, any of us -- head held to breast, fingers about that head - until we were grown, all of us, and my father died.

At his funeral I at last, in my memory, saw my mother hold her sons that way, and for the first time in her life my sister held me in her arms I think. We were not a loving people: we were passionate in our hostilities and affinities, but the caress embarrassed us.

We have changed little. . . .

4.

Seven years separated the nearest of my brothers and sisters and myself; I wear, I am sure, the earmarks of that familial station to this day. Little has been written or thought, to my knowledge, about children who occupy that place: the last born separated by an uncommon length of time from the next youngest. I suspect we are probably a race apart. The last born is an object toy which comes in years when brothers and sisters who are seven, ten, twelve years older are old enough to appreciate it rather than poke out its eyes. They do not mind diapering you the first two years, but by the time you are five you are a pest that has to be attended to in the washroom, taken to the movies and "sat with" at night. You are not a person--you are a nuisance who is not particular fun anymore. Consequently, you swiftly learn to play alone. . . .

5.

My childhood South side summers were the ordinary city kind, full of the street games which other remembers have turned into fine ballets these days, and rhymes that anticipated what some people insist on calling modern poetry:

Oh, Ms. Mary Mack, Mack, Mack
with the silver buttons, buttons, buttons
All down her back, back, back
She asked her mother, mother, mother
For fifteen cents, cents, cents
To see the elephant, elephant, elephant
Jump the fence, fence, fence
Well, he jumped so high, high, high
Til he touched the sky, sky, sky
And he didn't come back, back, back
Til the Forth of Ju-ly, ly, ly!

I remember skinny little South side bodies by the fives and tens of us panting the delicious hours away:

"May I?"

And the voice of authority: "yes, you may--you may take one giant step."

One drew in all one's breath and tightened one's fist and pulled the small body against the heavens, stretching, straining all the muscles in the legs to make--one giant step.

It is a long time. One forgets the reason for the game. (For children's games are always explicit in their reasons for being. To play is to win something. Or not to be "it." Or to be high pointer, or outdoer or, sometimes--just the winner. But after a time one forgets.)

Why was it important to take a small step, a teeny step, or the most desired of all-- one GIANT step?

A giant step to where?

6.

Evenings were spent mainly on the back porches where screen doors slammed in the darkness with those really very special summertime sounds and, sometimes, when Chicago nights got too steamy, the whole family got into the car and went to the park and slept out in the open on blankets. Those were, of course, the best times of all because the grownups were invariably reminded of having been children in the South and told the best stories then. And it was also cool and sweet to be on the grass and there was usually the scent of freshly cut lemons or melons in the air. Daddy would lie on his back, as fathers must, and explain about how men thought the stars above us came to be and how far away they were.

I never did learn to believe that anything could be as far away as that. Especially the stars. . . .

Response to “To be Young, Gifted, and Black”

Name: _____

Please record all answers on a separate sheet of paper!!!

1. What do you feel are the three most important things the writer said?
2. What were the things that surprised you? What did you find surprising about them?
3. Describe Hansberry’s childhood:
4. Based on the text, describe the type of people living in the Southside.
5. How was her family life like or unlike that of the Youngers?
6. What was the purpose in including the nursery rhyme?
7. If you could ask her one questions left unanswered by the text, what would it be and why?
8. What did you learn about America during Hansberry’s life from this passage?