

Journal Of A Trip South

(Continued from Page 1)

very presence — the white man's presence in the Negro's home — cause trouble. What trouble? Certainly no trouble in the Negro community. We feel that if they sink to reprisals, then let them. That sounds dramatic — it is the reality of this place and this time.

In here, Mozart and coffee and lamplight. Out there the night. Out there the threat of violence hangs like a stench over everything — violence from racists who claim that Christ would bless them for any act they might commit against us in order to perpetuate this system.

Is our host at supper this evening with his shotgun beside his bed? As we left his house, we reassured ourselves in whisper: "I don't think anyone saw us enter or leave this house."

"No—I'm sure no one saw . . ." "It doesn't matter," the host's wife said. "We don't care if they

did see — what can possibly be wrong with this?"

But we knew and we did care.

MONDAY

"It's six-ten, John." Father's voice aroused me from sleep.

"Thank you, Father," I groaned, my eyes closed, struggling to come to wakefulness.

Mass at 6:30. I walked through a soft cool light of dawn next door to the Church. The air was still, clear — no cars yet in the streets.

Mass in the low-ceilinged church with only Father, two altar boys, a matron and myself. I fought the drowsiness that insulated me from everything except the animal need to sleep.

Communion. A clumsy moment. If I got up and approached the altar rail first, the lady might hold back. (How quickly, when I was a Negro, I learned that hideous etiquette: you wait until the last White has received and returned to his seat before you approach

the communion table. It offends him to receive next to a Negro. Sacramental lie.) But this matron surely knew who I was — such thoughts, such hesitations probably were not in her mind. Nevertheless, I waited until she knelt at the altar rail, and then I walked up and knelt beside her.

Resentment that concentration on the Sacrament had to be spoiled by such considerations for her and for me. It quieted to deep silence at the moment of reception. Then I was aware of a movement beside me. The lady rose, genuflected and moved away. Floor boards announced each careful step she took in her effort to walk quietly back to her pew. There in the silence, I felt again the jolt of scandal, the true horror of some Catholic White who can feel and express protest when Catholic Negroes receive next to them. At such a moment of all moments — the moment of union with the Host — how could any soul recoil against the presence of another soul merely because it is encased in a darker flesh? I heard the lady kneel behind me and outside somewhere in the neighborhood the cheerful cackling of chickens.

I returned here to the house after Mass to fix myself a glass of strong instant coffee and for a later breakfast.

In this part of the world, many of us — white Catholics — are leaving Mass, going to breakfast, to the routine of our lives. We will go out from Mass and contribute our part to prevesting Negroes from growing as men, from fulfilling their human potential. We may not do this actively, though many of us do; but we condone the system with our silence — we go along with it.

Seven a.m. Two groups of citizens, two groups of men made in God's image, prepare to go about the business of living and bread-winning — both groups victims of this system that allows the one group to suppress the other in a pious fraud of staggering completeness. I am talking specifically about Catholics. We do this and never lose the illusion that we are in a state of grace, that God smiles on us. I think of the story I heard here recently. A well-dressed Negro Catholic from out of the area went to Mass in a nearby town in an "all-white" Catholic Church. An elderly white woman remarked loudly to her daughter: "Did you see that nigger push his way up to the altar rail. I could have spit in his face." It was not so. He waited to go last. But the woman, I am sure, found her righteous anger in no way inconsistent with her state of grace.

I found myself remembering the words of that Negro tenant farmer whom Lillian Smith mentions. He was thrown off of his farm in midwinter, with no money and no place to take his family. He fell on his knees in the snow and prayed: "Oh God, break their hearts, give them tears." I heard myself muttering those words for those of us who are white Southerners. "Oh God, break our hearts; give us tears." Somehow, it is our only hope, our only health now. But who among us will feel it, see it? To most such a prayer makes no sense at all.

LATER

A brief walk outside. Father prays in his office alone in the little cracker-box church. Hunger begins to trouble me. I return as Father's housekeeper arrives. The smiles, the welcome — "It's good to have you here, Mr. Griffin." But her eyes look searchingly at cars that pass, white men's cars some of them; and I can see that she wishes me inside. All around us in the morning sun, the unpainted wooden houses, the trees, the dusty streets.

I walk into the house, wonder-

PRESIDENT KENNEDY

President Kennedy,
What is the remedy
For anxiety and hate?
Quickly! Nimble! Hopefully!
(But not in haste)
Is your death but just a bitter taste?

All fingers and thumbs,
Our numb hearts rifle through
Your words for comfort;
Quiet souls, at this late date,
Because the sound of your own voice
Is shot silent.

Here, now, is the morrow we feared.
All things strange to your new season
Have reared up irrelevantly,
And thrown the whole wide unreasoning world
In sorrow.

This Age of Space is spent
On follies it did not prevent
But more than blood its brow is bent
Because the Age is of Consent.

Slowly, grumbling, and with a groan,
This old and oiling mass
Grasps for a cushion
To its grief
In what you said.

Can we believe the lilt—
Now you are dead—
With which you'd tilt the windmills?
Take we relief that Youth
At least began his deeds?

Those seeds
Have not sprung weeds,
As yet,
Lest we forget.

Eiku. (c) 12-3-63.

East Side

(Continued from Page 1)

"when he stepped out of a group of people waiting for the bus. Then I saw why he stepped out. A crippled Negro girl was having trouble with the rubber tip on one crutch couldn't get it to stay on.

"And this man stooped down and helped replace the rubber tip for the girl. She thanked him prettily. But I noticed that he kept watching her as she struggled on up the street. And yes, the rubber tip on her crutch came off again.

"The man strode out and caught up with her. Then he sat down on the curb, took a bit of paper or something out of his briefcase, wrapped it on the tip of the crutch, wrestled the rubber cap back on, wiggled it to see if it was tight, then handed it back to the crippled girl with a smile. But in the meantime he had missed his bus."

If that were you, the scanty identification given by the lady was all we know about you—except for one thing: A small deed, a little, nameless kindness such as that paints a much more luminous picture of you than reams of detail on physical description.

And we'll bet you're a pretty nice fellow.

Well, dear friends and gentle people, those are my Christmas damned good examples of what Christianity should mean. Agree?

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ing what it is that makes all rectories feel and smell the same. Across the entrance hall, I can see into my room, the bed still unmade—a room in a rectory, simple, fragrant with cedar.

In the kitchen, I prepare another glass of instant coffee with faucet water while the housekeeper watches. I carry it to the front room office.

Now the house promises breakfast. I hear the sizzle of eggs; the odor of bacon enlivens the atmosphere.

Father has entered the kitchen through the side door. I hear the housekeeper tell him: "Well, I saw coffee made a new way this morning — with just tap water."

Then some laughter and more talk.

"Yes, he drinks coffee all day and all night," Father says.

Breakfast in the kitchen. The sunlight poured in over my shoulder onto the table. It cast a magnificent light on the starched, flowered tablecloth and dazzled the glasses of orange juice, the plate of eggs, bacon, biscuits, butter and honey.

LATER NOON

The heat rises. The sun bakes the land, but despite the brilliance, a softness remains in the atmosphere. The air is still. Katydid rasps loudly in trees.

I drove to town for a haircut. The barbershop was filled with "sitters." They talked in quiet, concerned voices about the "niggers" and the "half-communist Federal government." I heard all of the tired cliches, all of the old southern cultural myths. Middle-aged and elderly men, their weatherworn faces seamed with

worry, talked about "winning," talked about fighting for "our rights" all in condemning Negroes for seeking their rights. Apparently they are incapable of seeing such a contradiction. It would destroy them to see this truth that nevertheless stands before us and shouts to be seen.

They talked with an almost tearful sincerity. "We can still win yet, if we'll just stick together." This said in a melancholy tone that implied he knew the old way was lost. "If we'd all stood behind Faubus at Little Rock, we wouldn't be having this Birmingham mess. No, we haven't stuck together — so now each State has to stand up and fight all over again."

A young man stood up and said: "We'll win, old man, don't you worry. They's plenty of us and we're strong. We're going to see the niggers don't get the vote."

The old men, consoled, looked sadly at their hands.

"God damn, we better wake up, that's all I can say," one of them mumbled. He looked up toward

(Continued on Page 3)

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