The apartment building at 409 Edgecombe Avenue was one of the few in Manhattan that dared to have a thirteenth floor; nearly all the others went from 12 to 14, skipping the bad luck in between. By the end of the thirties, Walter White was living in an apartment on 13, giving the lie to racist caricatures of the Negro, paralyzed by superstition and scared to death of haunts. Walter gave unforgettable parties in that apartment. At one of them, a great buffalo of a white fellow was talking passionately with a knot of guests. He had a wild tussle of hair and a suit that looked as if a train on the Sixth Avenue El had ridden over it. He was also holding a tall tumbler of water-clear liquid in his hand. The tumbler was full of gin, and the impassioned speaker was Heywood Broun.

Not long afterward, Broun helped organize the city's newspapermen into the New York Newspaper Guild. At the time I was writing for both the Cal. and The Amsterdam News, and when Broun invited me to join I accepted quickly. One of the first things we did was to set up a picket line at The Amsterdam News, and Broun became a faithful picketer at our demonstrations. The News was the largest weekly in Harlem, and it refused to recognize the guild. It amused me later when the publisher of the News asked Dr. Louis Wright, the first Negro to become chairman of the board of directors of the N.A.A.C.P., and me if we would arbitrate in a subsequent tiff between him and the staff of the News. The publisher had been a little careless in his choice—we found for the employees.

Louis Wright was one of the most impressive, most feisty doctors I have ever met. On Sunday afternoons before board meetings, he'd come to Walter's apartment at the Edgecombe, and we would thrash out ideas and strategy for the next day. Louis came from Atlanta. Like Walter, he had been through the Atlanta race riot of 1906, and like Walter, he had watched through the darkened windows of his home, gun in hand.
There the similarity between the two men ended. Louis had gone to Harvard Medical School, and when the school authorities tried to prevent him from studying obstetrics with the rest of his class at Boston Lying-in Hospital, he told them he had paid his tuition and meant to get precisely what Harvard had offered in its catalogue: obstetrics at Boston Lying-in. He won his point. During World War I he served as a medical officer. He used to tell a story about the white colonel who sent him up to the front lines hoping a German bullet would get rid of him. The Germans didn’t shoot straight enough, and when Louis got back, the colonel looked at him and said, “Well, I sent you up there thinking you might be killed, but since you are here, you can take charge of the hospital; you’re the best surgeon in the outfit.” Louis didn’t say thanks. He just walked out and took over the hospital. Later he became police surgeon for New York City and an expert on skull fractures.

I’m sure there were plenty of times during the thirties when he would have liked to have inflicted a few. The three of us used to sit at Walter’s thrashing out Roosevelt’s policies, the doings of the alphabet agencies—the N.R.A., W.P.A., A.A.A., C.W.A., P.W.A., and all the others—the antilynching bills in Washington, and Thurgood Marshall’s legal wars. I remember the time we received an appeal for help from a white lawyer in Mississippi who was representing Ed Brown, Yank Ellington, and Henry Shields, three cotton-field workers who had been sentenced to death for the ax murder of a white farmer named Raymond Stewart.

There wasn’t a shred of evidence linking the three suspects to the crime. Bloodbath had turned up a scent or any clues, so the law had been forced to become more imaginative. Someone remembered that Shields had had a fight with Stewart some months before, and that was all it took. The sheriff arrested him and charged him with the murder, claiming that a bloody ax and some bloodstained clothing had been found in Shields’ house.

The prosecution wasn’t able to produce that evidence in court, but it did produce a “confession.” To obtain it, interrogators had beaten Shields within an inch of his life, and under the grilling, he had implicated Brown and Ellington. After some similar third-degree work they, too, confessed. Shields was so badly beaten that on the day of the trial he couldn’t sit up in court. Ellington had been hung; his neck was cracked, his eyes were hollow, and it looked as if he might not live. It took one day to indict the three men, one day to try them and condemn them to death.

Luckily, the court made the mistake of assigning John A. Clark to their defense. Clark was one of those brave white Mississippans willing to stand up against local prejudice for the sake of the law. He knew a frame when he saw one, and he took the case to the Mississippi supreme court. A majority on the court upheld the convictions, but Judge W. A. Anderson, an honest jurist, wrote a dissent that encouraged Clark to push ahead with the case. “In some quarters,” the judge observed, “there appears to be very little regard for that provision of the Bill of Rights guaranteeing persons charged with crimes from being forced to give evidence against themselves. The pincers, the rack, the hose, the third degree, or their equivalent are still in use.”

Clark finally wrote us saying that it was becoming dangerous for him to continue the appeal. “I believe these men have been tortured to make them confess that confession is the only evidence against them, but I cannot carry this case any further. It’s so bad that I think it would be well if your organization would come in and help them.”

When we asked Louis what he thought about the case, he said, “Any time a white lawyer in Mississippi says things are bad and he needs help, then we have to help.”

We went in and got a stay thirty-six hours before the three men were to be executed. Thurgood and his people then took the case to the Supreme Court of the United States, and to the immense anger of Mississippi, we won a reversal of the convictions. Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes wrote for the Court’s opinion, saying, “It would be difficult to conceive of methods more revolting to the sense of justice than those taken to procure the confessions. The rack and the torture chamber may not be substituted for the witness stand.”

I thought we had won the day—but I was wrong. Mississippi decided to retry Ellington, Shields, and Brown. They were kept in jail; the chief justice of Mississippi’s supreme court superseded a habeas corpus writ for their release while state prosecutors busily set about turning up “new evidence” against them. Fearing that a second trial would indeed railroad them where the first had failed, the three men agreed to plead guilty in return for reduced sentences. Ellington was sentenced to six months, Shields received two and a half years, Brown accepted a seven-and-a-half-year term. As far as Mississippi was concerned, liberal justice had been meted out. The three field hands were innocent, of course, but then, they hadn’t been lynched or electrocuted, had they? To the Magnolia State, jail terms seemed a small price to exact in return for upholding the honor of Mississippi courts against a meddling Supreme Court in Washington. That was the way things were done down South.
In those days you never quite knew where or in what form Jim Crow would turn up next. In the spring of 1939, those honorable ladies, the Daughters of the American Revolution, refused to let Marian Anderson rent Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., for an Easter concert. She was told that the hall was already taken for that afternoon. When her impresario, Sol Hurok, sought an evening booking, the D.A.R. told him that it was against their policy to rent the hall twice during the same day. Finally, dropping the saber fruge, the group conceded that it was also not D.A.R. policy to rent the hall to Negroes. Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, an old friend of the N.A.A.C.P., stepped forward and offered Miss Anderson the Lincoln Memorial for the concert. I still remember how black people from all over descended on Washington to hear her sing. For twenty-four hours before the concert they came, arriving by car, bus, train—just about everything but a mule. Every hotel room open to Negroes was filled; the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A. had to turn people away. On the afternoon Miss Anderson was to sing, more than 100,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial, spilling down the marble steps and spreading along the sides of the reflecting pool. Cameramen from Fox Movietone News, Pathé, and News of the Day jostled with reporters to get the best view. A little before 5 p.m., Miss Anderson came out before the crowd dressed in a black velvet skirt and a Russian blouse of orange velvet, with an orchid pinned to her coat. Secretary Ickes stepped forward to meet her. He said, "In this great auditorium, under the sky, all of us are free."

There was a tremendous roar of applause. Then Miss Anderson began to sing. She started with two verses of "America," and she finished thirty minutes later with "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." As her haunting contralto floated down from the Lincoln Memorial, across the reflecting pool and on to the Washington Monument, I remember asking myself, "Can any country bear that voice and stay as ugly as before?"

The answer, of course, was yes. When summer came that year, Minnie and I decided to drive to California. It seemed like a good time to take in San Francisco's version of the World's Fair and to see what the rest of the country had to offer. We had a new Pontiac, and the trip presented a chance to spend it out on something more adventure-some than Riverside Drive. The course I laid out took us from Manhattan to Detroit, Chicago, and Omaha, on to Cheyenne, Salt Lake City, and Reno, through San Francisco and Los Angeles to Denver and Kansas City, on to St. Louis and Pittsburgh, and back home. I could see those miles of open road unfolding in front of the Pontiac: quiet, peaceful places away from the buzz of 69 Fifth Avenue. At the last minute, Sarah Dunstan, a social worker and friend of Minnie's, asked if she might come along with us. Sarah was an older woman with few opportunities to break away from the city; she would provide someone for Minnie to talk to while I concentrated on the driving, so I agreed to take her. In early September we tossed our suitcases in the trunk, crossed the Hudson, made our way through the industrial wastelands of New Jersey, turned right at the Pennsylvania Turnpike—and headed west.

The war in Europe followed us every mile. At first I was encouraged by the early, optimistic—and totally unreliable—reports that the French Army had cracked the German lines in a dozen places and would be able to protect France adequately. As we drove into Detroit, I reflected that if France and Britain could defend themselves, America should not enter the war. But this dalliance with isolationism, common enough at the time, didn't last very long. The blitzkrieg put an end to all such wishful thinking, and I knew we were sure to be drawn in sooner or later. As I studied the newspapers in Detroit, the first question in my mind was whether Negroes in the armed services were to be put through the same hell they had suffered during World War I. It had been only twenty years since black men were hounded into the army, filling the few colored units, relegated to being laborers, deprived of the glory due them. The Negroes who reached France had to fight slander and servitude as cooks to get into the trenches. When they succeeded, they won glory more often than not fighting side by side with Frenchmen rather than their own countrymen. That had been a war to save the world for democracy, but of what little was saved, less went to the Negro. My own feeling was that if the armed services wanted to play the same game all over again, the white folks could fight their own war, clean up their own latrines, and fete their own baggage to the front.

As we left Detroit, I tried to put these cankered worries out of my mind. We drove through cities and factory towns, spent a night in Chicago, then left industrial America behind us, entering long, peaceful expanses of farmland and prairie. It was 102 degrees as we drove through Iowa, the farms slipping past through shimmering waves of heat. When we reached Omaha it was 103 degrees at dusk. The city had 220,000 sweaters and its black people were almost the last we were to see until we reached the West Coast. From Omaha we crossed the Nebraska plains and entered Wyoming, following the path of the Union Pacific Railroad. The threat of war, the ways of the South, and my responsibilities at the N.A.A.C.P. all seemed to fall far behind us—until we reached Cheyenne.

Cheyenne was a quiet little place with no streetcars to dodge, no
crowds elbowing in on every side. The few local blacks got by somehow, doing the usual jobs open to them in small towns. At the railroad station a porter told me he had gone through New York City once on his way home from France and had never gone back. After trying Chicago, Kansas City, and Denver, he had settled on Cheyenne. "It's a good place," he said, "if your hell-raising days are behind you."

From my bundle of tour materials I dredged up the name of a tourist home run by a colored woman. After some poking around we located the place. To my disgust, it looked like a corner of Tobacco Road. The wallpaper was peeling off in the bathroom; dirt had taken over in the bedroom. For staying in this squalor, the bill was $2.50 a night. Minnie took one look and said she would rather sleep in the car than spend a minute in a dump like that.

We got back in the Pontiac and drove to the finest tourist camp in town. When I went into the office to ask for rooms for the night, I found myself face to face with a Wyoming Snopels, a sour little white clerk who stared a moment before saying anything.

"How many in your party?" he finally asked me.


"We're all full up," he snapped—and looked away.

He was obviously lying. As I left the office I noticed that the parking lot was nowhere near full. I climbed back into the Pontiac steaming mad. He had clearly taken me for a chauffeur. The only reason he hadn't slammed the door on me the moment I walked in was that he had wanted to find out whether there was a white boss and family waiting outside of me. "Wife and friend"—those innocent words had been enough to clear the picture up for him, and he threw us out. Here we were more than two thousand miles out in the free-and-easy West and we might as well have been seeking a room in Montgomery, Alabama.

It was dark by then, and for a while it looked as if we might indeed have to sleep in the Pontiac. Finally, I found a small tourist camp on the edge of town. It, too, had a white clerk, but to my relief, he welcomed me like a brother. He showed us a tidy, steam-heated cabin with hardwood floors, a tiled bathroom, two bedrooms, a breakfast nook and kitchen, and a locked garage. For all this luxury, the bill was four dollars a night. Minnie and Sarah brightened. We took the accommodations and spent a very comforting evening. The next day, as I paid up, the owner told me he had just opened for business. He thanked me for stopping, gave me a few directions, and told me to send all my friends his way when I got back home. I drove off for Salt Lake City feeling much better about the common decency and good business sense of at least a few white people.

We were all looking forward to seeing Salt Lake City. For years Minnie and I had listened to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir on the radio. As we drove through the arid hills of southern Wyoming and down into the City of the Saints, a garden spot created in a desert valley where sagebrush and salt flats had once been the dominant landscape, I was innocent of the racial theories the Mormons had also cultivated in that valley—but I found out about them soon enough.

We stayed overnight in the home of some friends. Before sunrise the next morning we rose and set off, intent on getting across the Bonneville Salt Flats and into Nevada before the main heat of the day. Blinking the sleep from our eyes, we climbed into the Pontiac and drove downtown in search of a cup of coffee and some breakfast before braving the desert. I drove down South Temple, a broad boulevard running westward, past the statue of Brigham Young that commemorates the intersection with Main Street, and pulled up in front of an all-night coffee shop within a stone's throw of the granite spires of the Mormon Temple. As Minnie, Sarah, and I got out of the car and entered the coffee shop, we were greeted by a manager who looked at us with all the good fellowship of a Grand Klegle in Talalatchie.

"We don't serve colored," he sneered.

The three of us were so taken aback that we retreated without putting up a fight. A few blocks farther on I found a second coffee shop, this one run by a Chinese family, some third-generation yeoh. He hadn't an American accent. He took us for a brother up from the railroad-building days. Here, I thought, we would surely get breakfast in peace. But when we walked in, the Chinese short-order cook looked even more stricken than his white colleague up the street.

"No serve colored, no serve colored," he babbled frantically.

That was too much for me. There we were in a small Christian theocracy, a town soaked in religion, a place that had Brigham Young's statue on Main Street and his grave not far away, the temple and that tabernacle from which the celestial voices of four hundred well-tuned Mormons rolled out across the airways every week—and we couldn't get a cup of coffee because we were black.

"What kind of goddamn town is this?" I exploded.

The Chinese cook said, "Mo'mon town, Mo'mon town," he said in pidgin, a pleading look in his eyes.

If his accent hadn't been so comical, I might have opened a tong war right on the spot. Instead, I ushered the ladies back into the car and roared out of town, hurtling across the desert at top speed for the Nevada line. Just at sunrise, we reached Wendover, a railroad, gambling, and sporting town perched on the state line. Once again we got out of the car and walked into a coffee shop. This one was full of gam-
blers and ladies of the night preparing to go off shift. They nodded pleasantly as we came in, and without a second glance the counterman served breakfast. For years afterward, I would have taken the lowest-life Nevada gambler over a Mormon bishop any day. Minnie and I stopped listening to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

The nearer we drew to California, the more decent people seemed to become. A friendly woman who put us up for a night told Minnie that if she ever wanted to “take the cure” (get rid of me), she would always have a place to wait out a Reno divorce. In improved spirits, we made our way up the winding road over the Donner Pass and down the far side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains to San Francisco. After a few days with friends in Berkeley and a visit to the World’s Fair, we drove down Highway 1 to Los Angeles. It was an unforgettable trip, the blue Pacific shimmering on our right and the Coast Range Mountains looming up on the left.

Los Angeles still had separate hotels for black people, many of which were excellent. We stayed at the old Dunbar Hotel, a stopping place that topped anything I had seen elsewhere. We arrived well after midnight on a Saturday, but the night clerk was all smiles, the bellboy was bright and alert, and we soon had a plateful of sandwiches from the grill downstairs. An all-night valet took our wrinkled clothes and returned neatly pressed pants, coats, and dresses next morning, along with a Sunday paper. The bathroom was immaculately clean, the curtains spotless.

Los Angeles was very hot—104 degrees—but we enjoyed ourselves. Clarence Muse, a Negro star who had made his way to the edge of Hollywood’s film industry, took us out to a lot to watch Bobby Breen make a movie. We also went on a tour of Max Factor’s Beauty Salon on Hollywood Boulevard, where they gave Minnie a free “glamourization” in their celebrated Brunette Room. Tom Griffin, the president of the Los Angeles N.A.A.C.P. chapter, held a splendid garden party in our honor, and Charles Matthews, a young assistant district attorney, took us on a full day of sightseeing.

We stayed in Los Angeles several days, then rose at 2:20 one morning and slipped across the desert by 9 A.M. to Las Vegas and Boulder Dam, missing the heat. Harold Ikeks knew of our trip and had wired ahead, ordering a tour of the dam for the young men whom Mr. Jackson sized up as a maker of marks. He allowed the two young people to go out and about, but on a very tight tether—they went canoeing and on picnics. Mrs. Jackson policed the fruit punch during parties at home, keeping a lookout for those foolhardy enough to try to spike the punch bowl from their pocket flasks.

By the time Earl went to work for the Call, he was obsessed with marrying Helen. While Mr. and Mrs. Jackson worried about Earl’s finances, Earl worried about something more disturbing. He remembered all too clearly the way Armida and our mother had died of tuberculosis. He lived in dread that the disease might strike him after he and Helen were married. He told Helen nothing of his fears, but years later, after they were married and Helen was pregnant with their first child, her doctor said to her, “I hope you appreciate what a fine young man you’ve married.” “I think, which had been a controversial project among Negroes because of the lily-white employment policies that had gone into it along with all that steel, cement, and imagination. The same evening we drove to the Grand Canyon, arriving shortly after seven o’clock. We listened to the Louis–Pastor fight on the radio as we ate dinner in the Bright Angel Lodge on the rim of the canyon.

The next day the superintendent of the park met us and conducted us on a tour of the canyon, much to the disbelief of a crowd of tourists from South Carolina, Georgia, and Texas. We drove on to Albuquerque, where a fine-colored lady put us up in her tourist home. Then we made our way up Pikes Peak in Colorado and to the Garden of the Gods, stopped in Denver, and pushed on to Kansas City for a visit with my brother, Earl, and his wife.

By 1939, Earl and Helen had been married nearly ten years, and I’ve never seen two people more in love. Helen had known Earl since she was twelve years old. She was a shy and bright-eyed child, a fierce reader and a natural student. The term before she showed up on the University of Minnesota campus, Earl had bumped into a group of friends on a street corner in Minneapolis talking excitedly about Helen’s impending arrival. “That need be of no concern to any of you,” Earl told the boys. That was that. Earl was Helen’s beau all through college.

Courting her took plenty of finesse. Helen’s father was terribly strict. He didn’t allow his daughters to go out dating until they were eighteen years old, and he gave all their young callers a ferocious going-over. “I wouldn’t encourage that young man,” he told Helen when a lad failed to match his high standards. If the boy looked more promising, he would say, “That young man will make his mark.” Earl was one of the young men whom Mr. Jackson sized up as a maker of marks. He allowed the two young people to go out and about, but on a very tight tether—they went canoeing and on picnics. Mrs. Jackson policed the fruit punch during parties at home, keeping a lookout for those foolhardy enough to try to spike the punch bowl from their pocket flasks.

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gloriously ahead for them. Then Earl developed a bad cold, and he went quickly to the family doctor to check an ominous cough. Laughing, the doctor said to him, "Earl, you just keep scaring yourself because of your mother and sister."

"No, I want a sputum analysis," Earl told him.

They took the test—and this time the results were positive. Earl spent the next three years in the Missouri State Sanitarium. Helen's father had died by then, so her mother came down from Minneapolis to help take care of Roger while Helen went to work for the Y.W.C.A. After two years the doctors collapsed one of Earl's lungs; the other took hold—and he improved.

When we arrived, Earl was a semi-invalid, but he still managed to run his family honorably and well. Helen never thought of him as weak or dependent, because his mind remained so keen and full of energy. Roger still remembers the day Earl took him down to the railroad station in Kansas City to see a new streamlined locomotive come in. Looking at the gleaming streamliner, Roger blurted out that he would like to drive such a machine when he grew up. Earl believed in telling the truth. He looked sadly at Roger and warned him that such jobs were only for white boys. "But that's unfair!" Roger said. He had received his first lesson in race.

After we left, Earl's health weakened, and he spent more and more time in the upstairs bedroom of the family's neat little house on Merri­ington Avenue. His frail health depressed me, and after Minnie and I got back to New York, I tried to bury myself in work.

There was always more than enough to do. Thurgood Marshall was so successful with his legal campaigns that he set up a new wing of the organization. He did a little poking around with the Internal Revenue Service, studying the tax advantages of incorporating a separate, nonpartisan, educational and legal defense fund for the N.A.A.C.P. The result was the I.N.C. Fund, a wonderfully successful pool that offered tax breaks to N.A.A.C.P. contributors. It also offered Thurgood a bailiwick of his own, and from then on he handled the N.A.A.C.P.'s legal work, leaving the lobbying and politicking to Walter and me.

The work was often as frustrating as it was exhausting. One of my keenest disappointments was the steadfast refusal of Congress to pass a federal antilynching law. The more we lobbied, the more we publicized the hangings, shootings, burnings, and mutilations that took place in the South, the less respectable the Lynch spirit became in Dixie. We had a giant banner inscribed with the words "A man was lynched today," and on the days we learned of lynchings we put the flag up outside the window of the office alongside the American flags that flew so cheerfully up and down Fifth Avenue. The owner of our building became so alarmed over the banner that he threatened to cancel our lease. We had to stop flying it, but we had made our point. The body count finally began to drop. While a federal antilynching law would have been of direct benefit to fewer and fewer victims each year, the broader effect of the legislation would have been to lift 13 million Negroes to the rank of free-and-equal Americans, fully protected in life and limb under the Constitution. But that particular improvement seemed to be more than the Southern bloc in the Senate could accept. In 1937 the House passed the Gvagan antilynching bill, but the Senate balked. In the 1938 filibuster, Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi argued that to pass it would lead to granting Negroes in the Deep South the right to vote. There was the real rub of the matter. The full guarantee of citizenship, the promises of the Constitution, the basic rights of democracy—all these things the gallant South could not tolerate.

Every time you flicked on the radio or opened the newspaper that last year of the thirties, you heard about defending democracy. For black Americans, there was an unmistakable irony behind the headlines: a country that denied democracy to millions of its citizens in the South was suddenly rousing itself to defend democracy thousands of miles away across the Atlantic. We were a country that placidly countenanced lynch ropes and laggots for Negroes was suddenly expressing horror over the persecution of minorities in Europe; a country that abomin­ated Nazis still winked at the Ku Klux Klan and the white master race ideology of Southern Democrats. Obviously Hitler had to be dealt with—black Americans felt the need to fight him as passionately as whites—but anyone with eyes, ears, and a sense of justice knew that segregation at home was also an evil that had to be wiped out. Yet the country seemed oblivious to this obvious truth. We all know about the "good Germans" who were unaware of what was going on in their country during the Hitler years; unpleasant as it is to say, the United States was also full of good Americans who didn't see our own racial problems much more clearly.

The truth was that a black person could not escape the stain of race anywhere in America. I was bleakly amused when a German theorist named Hans Habe drew up his plan of how life would be for American Negroes under a global Third Reich. According to Habe, people of color were an inferior race, a nuisance that the white master race would have to keep in check. Germany would control their jobs and all forms of association that might lead to assimilation. Internar-
riage would be *serbosen* and sexual intercourse between races subject to the death penalty. Only whites would be able to vote; Negroes would be barred from roads, streets, cars, motion pictures, and all public accommodations. They would never be allowed to become Nazis or to serve in the army, except in labor battalions.

This little scenario sounded very familiar to me. It could have been a page from Cole Blease, not *Mein Kampf*. At the time, Negroes were being kept in their "place" from one end of the United States to the other. Federal, state, and local governments and the American Federation of Labor effectively curbed assimilation by restricting upwardly mobile jobs to white workers, creating generation on generation of unskilled black labor and domestics. Twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia banned intermarriage. White primary laws kept Negroes out of the political system in the Deep South; Jim Crow laws governed everything from railroad berths to drinking fountains. And with World War II coming on fast, the U.S. Army had restricted Negro fighting men to two regiments of infantry and two of cavalry. Negroes were not being sent to any concentration camps, of course, but what a thing that was to have to be thankful for.

Despite the anger I felt over these realities, as political conditions deteriorated in Europe I knew that Negro Americans could not and would not refuse to serve their country when hostilities finally broke out. In September 1940, after Roosevelt signed the Selective Service Act, Mayor La Guardia named a number of black citizens to local draft boards and asked me to serve. I was thirty-nine, and by the army's standards a little long in the tooth for boot camp, so I accepted the invitation gladly.

I've never had a harder job. The draft board was located up in Washington Heights, a Jewish neighborhood on the outskirts of Harlem. A Jewish dentist was chairman of the board, and he was a very tough man. When Jewish kids applied for deferments on the basis of health or as supporters of their mother, he would look at them stonily and pronounce them fit as fiddles. "Every Jew in New York City has a mother," he would say—and send them off to war. The black kids went, too. Only wealthy and well-placed whites had success in finagling deferments. I remember one case when I served on an appeals board. The son of a prominent newspaper publisher in New York City was working as a correspondent in the Soviet Union and claimed a deferment on the ground that he was supplementing American intelligence. After a local board drafted him, we on the appeals board upheld his 1-A classification. Then someone pulled strings with General Louis Hershey, head of the Selective Service, and we were all over-

turned. It was a fine little lesson in the way rich folks can be just a little more equal—and a lot safer—than everyone else in our country.

At about this time I received word from Kansas City that Earl was sick again. He had come down with pleurisy, and no longer had strength left to fight back. In January 1941 he died.

The funeral was held at his home. I hurried out to help with the arrangements. Roger still remembers hearing me order the grownups to compose themselves as he came downstairs on the day of the funeral. A single tear trickled down his cheek. I think he was braver than all the rest of us.

When the funeral was over, we had to bury my brother in a segregated cemetery. First Grandfather Ashberry, then my mother in the red dirt of Mississippi, and now Earl in the clay of Missouri. From across the Atlantic and Pacific, World War II was blowing closer and closer, but white America was not yet ready to accept a Wilkins or any other Negro as an equal—not even in death.
On the morning of December 7, 1941, Minnie and I got up early and packed for a short trip to Washington. The War Department had invited us to attend a conference of black editors and journalists on how Negro manpower could be best put to use if war came. The War Department’s own preferences ran toward drafting Negroes as dray horses, not soldiers, so I was eager to offer a few more positive ideas. Minnie ordinarily didn’t like to go to Washington—she hated its Southern exposure—but I wanted some company, and she agreed to come along. Her plan was to visit a few friends and do some sightseeing.

When we reached Pennsylvania Station we found the platforms jammed with soldiers in fresh uniforms, gear at their feet. The men were laughing and joking with relatives who had come to see them on their way. We didn’t pay much attention as we settled into our seats. In Trenton we looked out the window and saw more sunny scenes of parting like those we had witnessed in New York: apple-cheeked soldiers hugging mothers, gripping the hands of beaming fathers, stealing a few kisses from proud sweethearts—a sight for the cover of The Saturday Evening Post.

When the train pulled into Wilmington, Delaware, the sunshine suddenly disappeared. Grim young men stood next to weeping families; tearful young women clutched their young men. As the train creaked into motion, I stopped one of the soldiers hurrying down the aisle.

“What’s going on?” I asked him.


I sank back into my seat. Minnie looked at me, but there wasn’t much to say. The train chugged through Baltimore and on to Washington, picking up more soldiers along the way. I could feel an anger hard as the steel we were riding on settling over the train.

When we reached Washington, the capital was still in shock from the sneak attack. The next day I went to the manpower conference, while Minnie went to the House of Representatives. Congressman Joe Gavagan had wangled a seat for her, and she was there when the President took the rostrum and told a joint session of Congress: “Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy . . .” Roosevelt spoke for a little over six minutes, just long enough to call for a declaration of war. “We will gain the inevitable triumph, so help us God,” he said, and Minnie listened as the Congress roared its approval. The vote for war was 82-0 in the Senate and 388-1 in the House. Jeannette Rankin of Montana, a woman of pacifist views and unswerving conscience who had been the only nay vote in 1917, voted once again against the declaration of war. As the joint session broke up, Minnie passed Miss Rankin in the corridor: she was weeping.

Across town at the War Department’s conference, I was having problems maintaining my own composure. Sitting around the table were twenty of the country’s leading black editors, flanked by a small army of military brass and public relations experts. The War Department wanted us to buy the idea that a little cheerleading was all it would take to keep black men in fighting trim. Changing the military was the last thing the War Department wanted to think about. There were no plans to take Jim Crow out of uniform.

The markers the War Department offered put all of us on the spot; no one wanted to spoil morale or undermine the war effort. The more timid editors in attendance that day argued that segregation was a factor that worked against the effective use of black soldiers. “Fine,” the War Department men said. “But it’s only one factor, a factor that cannot be changed. The army has always been segregated; it will always be segregated; there is nothing that can be done about that particular problem.” Faced with the stonewall, most of the editors fell silent. Three of us—the editor of the Chicago Whip, Claude Barnett of the Negro Associated Press, and I—didn’t back down. We argued that so long as segregation existed in the armed forces the military would never be able to put black fighting men to good use; morale would always be rotten. Segregation wasn’t just a factor; it was as deadly as nerve gas. Jim Crow had to go. That’s where we stood after breakfast that morning—and we were still there after dinner.

I didn’t intend to compromise with those brass hats. For over two years I had been watching the country moving toward war, and just about everything that had been done in the way of national defense indicated that Negroes would be subjected to the same shabby treat-
ment they had received during World War I. The only exception had come after A. Philip Randolph organized his March on Washington movement to keep American factories that were turning out military hardware for U.S. allies abroad from turning black workers away from their gates. Randolph’s idea was to have 10,000 people march down Pennsylvania Avenue for defense jobs and dignity. Where all the marchers were to come from was a puzzle. Randolph’s union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, had about 10,000 members, but they were scattered far and wide across the country. The N.A.A.C.P. thought the march was a good idea, so we decided to give the Brotherhood a hand. Randolph supplied the impetus and organization backbone for the march; we tried to provide the manpower. In many places, the movement’s branches had overlapped those of the N.A.A.C.P., and for a time I worried that competition might work to our disadvantage. But Randolph had insisted all along that a march was just what the word meant—something temporary—and that a permanent organization wasn’t what he had in mind. If I remember correctly, the Jersey City branch of the N.A.A.C.P. used to adjourn, reconstitute itself as the local March on Washington movement, and get back to business. So it had gone. F.D.R. had talked Eleanor Roosevelt and Fiorello La Guardia into calling Walter White to get Walter to dissuade Randolph from the march. The President’s argument was that violence might erupt in Washington, that the marchers would simply defeat their own purposes.

Walter couldn’t have talked Randolph out of that march even if he had wanted to—which he didn’t—but he was too defer a politician himself to let the President and the First Lady know that. Instead, he angled for a meeting at the White House, and the President agreed, summoning Randolph and Walter to the Oval Office. Randolph held his ground, and F.D.R. surrendered. On June 25, 1941, the President issued Executive Order 8802 barring discrimination by race, color, creed, or national origin in any defense plant receiving contracts from the government for war production or for training workers for war industries. Only then did Randolph call off the march. To this day I don’t know if he would have been able to turn out enough marchers to make his point stick. Walter always suspected that he was bluffing, but what a bluff it was. A tall, courting black man with Shakespearean diction and the stare of an eagle had looked the patrician Roosevelt in the eye—and made him back down.

The War Department was not ready to make similar compromises. The U.S. Army wanted as few black soldiers as possible—and it intended to use them as hostlers, not fighting men. The army’s new air corps didn’t want them at all, and the navy was only in the market for mess attendants. As time went by, the Red Cross would even try to segregate the black and white blood in its blood banks. And at one point, someone seriously suggested that Washington ought to build Jim Crow bomb shelters against the threat of enemy air raids. I had to laugh at that proposal. So far as I was concerned, if the time ever came, any white folks who thought they were too good to jump into a shelter alongside their black neighbors deserved to be blown to hell.

No matter what the generals and War Department argued, the truth was that segregation was the evil behind all the race problems in the military. Segregation meant inferiority, pure and simple, there was no way to duck it. No matter what the army pretended, there had never been segregation with equality in the United States. Here we were about to fight a war against racial bigotry and barbarism, to depend heavily on nations of color elsewhere, yet the War Department proposed to shame our own black soldiers. Once drafted, they were to wait months for induction, ostensibly because the government had not had enough time to build Jim Crow facilities for them. At training camps they would find themselves set apart from their white comrades-in-arms. There would be separate busses for them, separate counters for cigarettes and candy, separate movie theaters on base, and a Jim Crow roost in the theaters in town.

I didn’t convert the War Department. All I could do was keep from throwing in with them, go home mad, and start fighting. The most flagrant example of discrimination came not long afterward in the army air force. From New York, we sent a wire to Washington asking if Negroes were to be trained as pilots. We received a one-sentence reply saying the War Department didn’t think so. Then an intrepid, twenty-four-year-old engineering student from Howard University sought our help in breaking this color line in the sky. His name was Yancey Williams, he had a private pilot’s license, and when the army turned him down he sued. Thurgood Marshall did what he could to help in the case, and under pressure, the army made a small concession. It agreed to train thirty-three black pilots for a pursuit squadron of twenty-sever planes, the crack 99th Pursuit Squadron, an outfit that subsequently attracted some of the most promising young leaders of the race. The scale of that breakthrough could be measured by a small hit of arithmetic. At the time the army begrudgingly agreed to form the black squadron, which trained in a Jim Crow base at Tuskegee, it was calling for 30,000 pilots a year. Though blacks comprised one-tenth of the population at that time, they would only be one one-thousandth of its air force.
Even in the face of such humiliation, the will of Negroes to fight did not die. One day I was on a train from Denver to Chicago when a young porter stopped by my seat for a talk. He was a good-looking kid, twenty-three years old, with clear eyes and a quick smile. He was making his last run on the railroad before joining the 100th Pursuit Squadron, the group which was formed after the 99th surprised the military with its competency. He put a beer down in front of me, shifted anxiously, and said, “Do you think there will be any chance of us flying bombers? That’s what I would like to do—but they are sending me to Tuskegee.”

I told him that the army seemed intent on segregating not only its airfields but the kind of flying it taught.

“But I have had some experience with flying big ships,” he said. “In Minnesota I used to fly with a man who had a four-engine Stimson. He let me at the controls sometimes when we were up together. I’d sure like to fly an army bomber.”

A bell rang somewhere in the car, and he headed off to find another passenger a cold bottle of beer. “Maybe by the time I go in, they’ll have a place for us,” he said as he left.

Had the army seen his straight shoulders, heard his firm voice? Here was a brown-eyed young man who wanted to fight as surely as any blue-eyed kid. The army should have been ashamed of itself. I knew it would not take long for the racial strains created by the draft and by segregation in the armed forces to spill over into civilian life. Before the war was well under way, black folks at home had heard horror story after horror story about the treatment of their boys in uniform. Nerves tautened, poisons spread. The result was inevitable—in 1943 an ugly series of riots scarred Los Angeles, Mobile, Beaumont, Detroit, and Harlem.

In June 1943 there was a wildcat strike at the Packard plant in Detroit, which made engines for bombers and P.T. boats. After bigots at the plant went on strike to protest the promotion of three Negro workers, Walter went to see what was going on. He reported that he had heard one of the strikers say, “I’d rather see Hitler and Hirohito win the war than work beside a nigger on the assembly line.”

I thought that cracker was fighting for Hirohito and Hitler already. His remark and the strike revolted me. 25,000 good American people were willing to threaten the nation’s defense because three of their countrymen had won promotions. The strike stoked racial tempers around Detroit to the kindling point. Toward the end of June, the riot that had been smoldering flared into life at Belle Isle, a park owned by the city. The incident that triggered the violence was minor. On the bridge linking Belle Isle to the rest of Detroit, a white driver collided with a black driver, and there was a scuffle that ended as quickly as it had started. But terrible rumors quickly began rippling through the city. In the white neighborhoods, folks said that a black man had raped a white woman out at Belle Isle; in the black part of town, folks said the whites had thrown a black lady and her baby into the lake. There was rioting for thirty hours, and when it was over, thirty-four people were dead: twenty-five were Negroes—seventeen killed by policemen. Not one of those killed by the police was white. The police said they had simply shot looters, but Thurgood went out to Detroit, did some investigating, and found that there had been plenty of random shooting.

Only a month after the Detroit riot, Harlem erupted. This time the trouble began at a hotel uptown when a policeman shot a soldier in the shoulder while clumsily trying to calm a drunken fracas. Once again the rumor mills began churning. Before they had finished, the cop had shot a black soldier to death in cold blood at the hotel. It wasn’t long before the bricks started flying along 125th Street and Lenox Avenue.

The evening the riot broke out, Minnie and I were coming home from downtown on the bus. At 116th Street and Seventh Avenue a brick came hurtling through the window. “Get down on the floor,” I yelled at Minnie, who was too curious to leave the window.

In the barrage a woman was badly cut. The bus driver stepped on the gas and took off for Sydenham Hospital. He dropped the casualty at the emergency room, then drove uptown as if nothing had happened. When we got home we were shaken; but we didn’t know at all what was going on.

A short while later, the telephone rang. It was Walter. He told me that Harlem was up in arms and that Mayor La Guardia had just telephoned from City Hall asking for help. He was headed for the police precinct on West 123rd Street.

I grabbed my hat and coat and headed for the lobby to intercept him. Walter was as white as La Guardia; how long either of them could last on the streets of Harlem was anyone’s guess. I caught Walter in the lobby, we took a cab and made it safely through all the bricks and bottles to the police station. We took La Guardia out for a tour of the battle zone. He had his Italian up. He rushed on bands of rioters, ordering them to cease and desist, and most were too startled by the sight of the red-faced mayor to do anything but obey. It was a miracle nothing happened to him. Walter finally suggested a small tactical retreat. He persuaded the perspiring mayor to send for sound
trucks. We divided, climbed into the relative security of the trucks, and began cruising the streets, urging everyone to cool off.

Shortly after we set off, the phone rang back at 409 Edgecombe. Minnie picked it up. The caller was a lady who helped her around the house and who lived in central Harlem on Seventh Avenue.

"Mrs. Wilkins," she said anxiously, "it's awful! I recognize Mr. Wilkins's voice in a truck. He's begging everyone to go home—but they won't."

Minnie told her to calm down and take another look. A few minutes later she came back from the window with a more reassuring report. The sound truck had disappeared up the avenue. Out on the curb an old man had plunked down his loot: a gallon can of vanilla ice cream, which he was polishing off as I rode on my rounds.

The riots in Harlem and Detroit inevitably led white folks to clutch their tongues, shake their heads, and ask in patently bewilderment what the black folks thought they were up to. The answer was obvious, though it didn't seem to register with those who disapproved.

America was so accustomed to setting the Negro outside any moral and ethical consideration that the country had been going about its business as if no conflict existed between its high pronouncements and its practices. Our leading statesmen, our radio stations, our newspapers were denouncing dictators, racial and religious bigotry, and brutality; they were extolling democracy, humanitarianism, equality of peoples; they were wringing their hands and tearing their hair over the Austrians, the Czechs, the Danes, the Norwegians, and the rest. Black America listened to the radio, read the newspaper. But if it was cause for international distress that Jews were beaten in Berlin and scoured in a loathsome ghetto in Warsaw, what about a tear for black ghettos in America? If aggressors in Central Europe and Asia could be quarantined, what about aggressors on the racial front here?

Black people wanted nothing new or startling. They were asking nothing they had not asked for before Hitler came to power, nothing inconsistent with the declared war aims of the United States, nothing inconsistent with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. They were asking quite simply for complete equality: equality before the law, equality in security of person, equality in human dignity, etc. Negroes did not need us at the N.A.A.C.P. to tell them that it sounded pretty foolish to be against park benches marked JUDE in Berlin, but to be for park benches marked COLORED in Tallahassee, Florida. It was grim, not foolish, to have a young black man in uniform get an orientation in the morning on wiping out Nazi bigotry and that same evening be told he could buy a soft drink only in the "colored" post exchange. We pointed these things out, and we continued to attack Jim Crow in the military. Negro servicemen responded with overwhelming support, and the N.A.A.C.P. grew during the war as it had never done before.

During these years the N.A.A.C.P. and the Urban League engaged in a friendly but rather stiff competition stimulated by the strong egos of Walter White and Lester Granger, the Urban League's director. This situation made me uncomfortable because both organizations, though different in structure, program, and constituencies, were working for black equality. I felt their operations should have been complementary. I became the subject of much teasing around the office one year when Granger invited me to be one of the speakers at the Urban League's annual dinner. At the time, our fight against segregation in the armed forces was at a high pitch, and a few days before the dinner Granger called and asked if I planned to talk about segregation in the armed forces. I said that I could not discuss the position of the Negro in America during the war without talking about Jim Crow. Lester told me that Colonel Ned Gourdin, a handsome, Harvard-trained Negro who commanded black soldiers guarding strategic points in and around New York City, would be a guest of honor and such a discussion would embarrass him. I said there would be no hard feeling if the Urban League wished to withdraw its invitation, but Lester declined.

At the dinner I decided to speak off the cuff on segregation in the armed forces and its effect on black people and the image of the United States abroad. The members of the audience were mostly white—and mostly secure in social and financial position. They felt a moral obligation to do something about the problems of black people—but not too much. To my great surprise I received a standing ovation at the end of my remarks, followed by Colonel Gourdin's congratulations and thanks. The injustice of Jim Crow in the service was beginning to penetrate the conscience of the nation far more deeply than I had expected. It was a good sign for the future.

I have to confess that a few of the people around the Urban League could have given me some lessons in making money. One day in the early forties, a bright and elderly man named John Johnson came to the office to talk to me about an idea he had for starting a new magazine, a pocket-sized publication that would summarize newspaper and magazine articles about Negro life. I knew the almost continuous financial difficulties The Crisis had had, and I told him that in my opinion the time was not right to venture into the field. Fortu-
nately, Johnson ignored me and began publishing Negro Digest in November 1943. He followed that with Ebony. Between 1945 and 1972 he produced Tar Confessions, Proper Romance, Jet, Hue, Beauty Salon, and Jet Jr., giving Negroes an uplifting view of their progress in the United States.

As the Second World War dragged on, the N.A.A.C.P. grew stronger and stronger. The financial drought of the Depression years began to ease, our membership rose, and our influence began to expand. Dr. Du Bois rejoined us for a second spirited tenure. When the war came to a close, he, Walter, and I were invited to attend the United Nations charter conference in San Francisco as observers. Walter and Dr. Du Bois took the train out to the Coast for the opening of the meeting. Walter said that traveling with Dr. Du Bois was always quite a trip.

When Walter had to return to New York, I served in his place. I spent a great deal of time with Mary McLeod Bethune, the articulate and dedicated president of the National Council of Negro Women and an advisor to President Roosevelt. She had come to San Francisco as a consultant to the United Nations, but her organization had not been able to give her enough money to cover transportation and living expenses. She solved part of the problem by staying in the home of a friend across the Bay, but when I arrived she was desperately in need of money to get back home. She told me she had presented her problem to Walter and asked the help of the N.A.A.C.P. and she felt that Walter had studiously avoided her after that. My immediate reaction was that the N.A.A.C.P. should not hesitate to assist its twenty-first Spingarn Medalist in an emergency, and I told Walter so over the phone. He agreed, and I passed the needed funds on to Mrs. Bethune. After that she always said I had rescued her from a time of peril. She never forgot that small incident.

After the jubilation of V-E Day and V-J Day had passed, I began to brace myself for the harder days I knew lay just ahead. Black soldiers had returned home after World War I to find—particularly in the South—that the whites were scared to death of them. They had learned how to use guns—and they would no longer stay in their “place.” Black soldiers still in uniform had been lynched back then, and it looked to me as if the same thing would happen again. We might have lacked the master race in Europe, but our own master race pretenders down South had not begun to fight.

Toward the end of February 1946, my worst fears proved founded when Mrs. Gladys Stephenson and her son James walked into the Castner-Knott Electric Company in Columbia, Tennessee. James Stephenson was nineteen years old. He had spent nearly three years in the navy during the war, and he had accompanied his mother that day to help her register a complaint about the stiff price of repairs on a radio that didn’t work when she got it home. When Mrs. Stephenson complained about the slipshod work, the white repairman hit her.

James Stephenson had not gone to war for three years to watch a white man slap his mother. He stepped forward and sluggeds the repairman, sending him crashing through a plate-glass window. The sound of the fracas quickly drew a crowd. In the usual course of Southern justice, a policeman set about arresting the Stephensons. When Mrs. Stephenson protested, the policeman hit her above the eye and trundled both her and her son off to jail. Fortunately, the sheriff in Columbia had enough presence of mind to get the Stephensons out of town fast. Unaware of this development, seventy-five white men kicked the jailhouse door, demanding that the Stephensons be handed over to them. The sheriff threw open the door, leveled a Tommy gun at them, and ordered them to disperse, telling them that their prey was gone. The mob withdrew, casting about for a new plan of action.

Columbia had a black ghetto that the local white folks called Mink Slide. It consisted of a small business district and a residential neighborhood. As night fell, the blacks in the ghetto retreated to their darkened homes expecting a mob. When four white policemen wandered into the neighborhood that night, the local blacks mistook the police for the advance guard of the mob. Someone shouted, “Here they come,” and there was a volley of shots. No one was quite sure who had fired first, but the four policemen were wounded. They retreated on the run.

I could hardly believe what happened next. With military efficiency, the local police, State Highway Patrol, and State Guard cordoned off the business district. Shortly before dawn, a small army of launmen, backed by furious white residents toting rifles and shotguns, moved in and shot up the ghetto, vandalizing whatever their bullets missed. They scattered the instruments of the local black doctor, tore up the files at the insurance office, shot out the mirrors and cut up the four chairs in the barbershop, broke the tables and threw away the balls in the pool parlor. The mob signed the carnage by painting the letters KKK on a coffin at the Morton Funeral Home.

Once the havoc in the business district was complete, the forces of white law and order invaded every Negro home in the ghetto, ostensibly in search of weapons. The marauding police, State Guard, and State Highway Patrol shot into houses and herded the residents into
the open with hands aloft—a scene right out of the newsreels from Germany. In all, the police arrested 106 black Columbians that day, slapping them in jail without bail or formal charges. To justify this miscarriage of justice, the law asserted that there was an insurrection afoot in Maury County, a plot by blacks to topple the powers that were. The man they charged with leading the dark cabal turned out to be the chairman of the local Red Cross and War Loan drives.

We got word of the Columbia disaster and entered the case immediately. Maurice Weaver, a white lawyer from Chattanooga, Z. Alexander Looby, a lawyer of West Indian descent who worked in Nashville and who was a member of the National Legal Committee of the N.A.A.C.P., and Thurgood Marshall went to Columbia to put things back together. They succeeded in getting a change of venue for the trials to Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, about fifty miles away, a little backwater with a sign posted at its city limits saying NIGGER, READ AND RUN. DON'T LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON YOU HERE. IF YOU CAN'T READ, RUN ANYWAY. It was not safe for Marshall, Weaver, and Looby to spend the night in Lawrenceburg or Columbia. They had to drive more than 200 miles round trip from Nashville every day. As the trial went on, local crackers threatened to take all three to the nearby Duck River for a little lesson in Southern manners, a sure invitation to a lynching.

The judge and prosecuting attorney in the case lost no chance to humiliate the defendants; but the jury's sense of fair play was outraged and the jurors acquitted all but two of the defendants. Later in the year, Marshall, Looby, and Weaver went back and won freedom for the last two Columbians on appeal.

The evening after the verdict, the three lawyers set off for Nashville. No sooner had they crossed the bridge leading out of Columbia than they found their way blocked by a gray automobile parked in the middle of the highway. Thurgood was driving. He blew the horn, but the car stayed put. When he pulled off on the shoulder and passed the car, a highway patrol car parked nearby drove up, siren wailing, and stopped him. The law announced that it had warrants to search for whiskey. Finding none—Thurgood kept a close eye out to make sure none was planted—the police let the three lawyers go. But a few miles down the road the cop car wheeled up behind them and stopped them again. This time Marshall was charged with being drunk, and was invited into the other car. The white lawmen then told Looby and Weaver they could go on their way to Nashville.

Looby and Weaver watched as the car carrying Marshall set off down a side road toward the Duck River, but instead of going on to Nashville, they took off in hot pursuit of Thurgood's escort. The chase discouraged the crackers, who returned to Columbia, hauling Thurgood before the local magistrate, a man named Pough. He smelled Thurgood's breath.

"This man isn't drunk, he hasn't even had a drink," Pough announced after the nose test, and he let Thurgood go. Marshall, Looby, and Weaver borrowed another car and slipped unnoticed out of Columbia. This time they reached Nashville safely. If Looby and Weaver had not had the presence of mind and plain courage to tail those crackers down the road, Marshall might have wound up in the Duck River—and the Supreme Court would have lost a champion of civil rights.

Life in the northern reaches of Manhattan was a good deal safer. After the war, the main problem we had at the N.A.A.C.P. was coping with success and booming growth. As time passed, Walter spent more and more of his energies on visible lobbying, leaving me to run the store. We outgrew our quarters at 69 Fifth Avenue and moved into a larger office in Freedom House, a building at 20 West Forty-ninth Street overlooking Bryant Park and the Fifth Avenue Public Library.

Those were busy years. I'm afraid I became something of a martinet around the office, but the people who worked for the N.A.A.C.P. were wonderful and I loved all of them. One of my favorites was Bobby Branch, a young woman who worked as the office manager and who provided everything from small conversations on civil rights to a needle and thread when I lost a button.

The war was a great watershed for the N.A.A.C.P. We had become far more powerful, and now the challenge was to keep our momentum. Everyone knew the N.A.A.C.P. stood against discrimination and segregation, but what was our postwar program to be? Beyond opposing discrimination and segregation, where would we stand on veterans, housing, labor relations, strikes, the Fair Employment Practices Commission, organizations at state levels, education? What would we do to advance the fight for the vote in the South? We were badly in need of a program, something fresher than our traditional lobbying and public-relations campaigns. I used to wince when old friends walked up to me, jabbed me in the ribs, and said, "What letter of protest did you write today?" We had a big membership—500,000 members and 1,200 branches—and a large income, but we didn't know how to use them.

What made this state of affairs all the more troubling was the continuing activity of the Communists, who had reverted to their prewar tactics and program. For a while they tried to turn the Columbia trial
out to be malignant. Dr. Allen steered me to Dr. Russell, a well-known gastrointestinal surgeon who told me as gently as he could that I would have to have a colostomy.

The news shocked and frightened me. For the first time in my life I felt helpless and hopeless, and I couldn’t help wondering if I wouldn’t be better off dead. I had never heard of this particular operation, and the details seemed horrible. I was forty-five at the time, I had been married seventeen years, and I wondered what Minnie would think about having a freak for a husband. I postponed telling her for as long as I could—only to find that she knew much more about the operation than I did. As a social worker she had had considerable experience with medical problems, and among her cases there had been a client who had had a similar operation. She knew what to expect, and as usual, she was optimistic and encouraging. Without her, I would have been lost.

In the middle of June 1946, I entered Post Graduate Hospital in New York City. I was badly frightened. The operation took place on the afternoon of June 20, 1946, and that morning I called Walter. He wasn’t in, so I left him a message.

I guess you know that the Dodgers are badly in need of a catcher and that the Billy Herman deal raised hell in Flatbush. I don’t suppose you noticed it in the papers a day or two ago. We heard the reporters were after the Brooklyn management on the Billy Herman deal, somebody told them that Branch Rickey was still the old master and that he probably would have a statement to make when he came back from Nashua.

I don’t suppose you remember that Nashua is a farm team of the Dodgers and that Roy Campanella is catching for Nashua and is rated as a better than fair hitter and has been so hitting. Wouldn’t it be something if Rickey came back with Campanella as a catcher for the Dodgers? Last year when there was so much talk of Negro players getting a try-out for the majors, it was said, by those who knew, that Campanella was the best all-around Negro player. However, Rickey picked Jackie Robinson because he is good and because he was a four-letter athlete, a college man, and a lieutenant in the army, all of which could help the publicity.

Just as I am getting ready to go downstairs, this little thought came to me because you are such a baseball fan, and I wanted to pass on the thought in case you had not seen that Rickey was in Nashua.

I suppose it’s only human for people to prepare to meet their maker on such days. I would like history to record that what I thought about was the Brooklyn Dodgers.