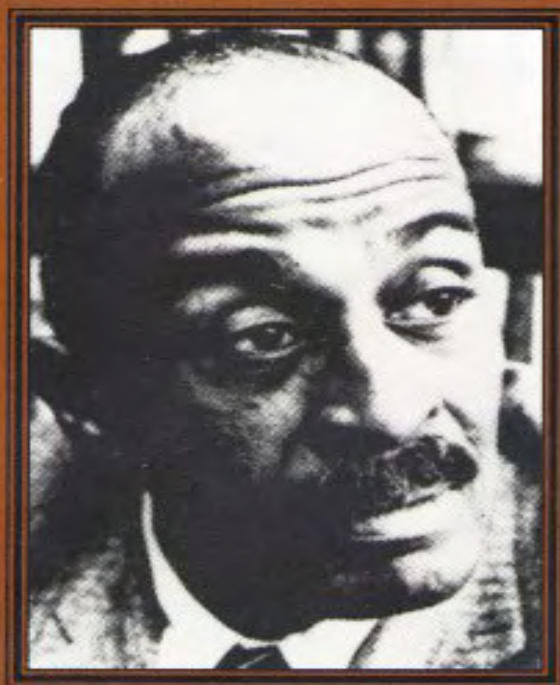


**TROUBLED IN MIND:
J. SAUNDERS REDDING'S
EARLY YEARS IN
WILMINGTON, DELAWARE**



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Delaware Heritage Press
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by J. Saunders Redding

This book is a cooperative effort of the Delaware Heritage Commission
and the Afro-American Historical Society of Delaware.

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Dedication

To Esther Elizabeth James Redding



Age 19, Teacher at Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania

Introduction

The Biblical passage "... a prophet is without honor in his own country" is an apt description of J. Saunders Redding in his hometown. Despite his international reputation as an author, scholar and teacher and the numerous prestigious awards and honorary degrees he received during his distinguished career in Wilmington, Delaware (where he was born and graduated from high school), J. Saunders Redding remains obscure.

Only a few of his books and none of his articles are in the inventories of the public libraries. Most students even at his alma mater have never heard of him. His high school classmates remember him more as a good basketball player than as an accomplished academic. And while his age, residence in other states, and propensity toward shyness may partially account for this paradox, one cannot help but wonder if Redding's virtual anonymity in Wilmington is yet another example of the neglect by the general population of African American contributors and contributions.

So, when the director of the Delaware Heritage Commission approached me with the idea of publishing the first chapter from his Mayflower prize winning book, *No Day of Triumph*, I endorsed the project with great enthusiasm. The project was also unanimously endorsed by the Board of Directors of the Afro-American Historical Society of Delaware because of the members' long standing feeling that J. Saunders Redding is one of Delaware's greatest unsung heroes.

We saw this as an opportunity to introduce Mr. Redding, and his writings to a new generation of students who might otherwise never know him and his family...students unfamiliar with a period in the history of this community and country when skin color was the most pervasive and compelling factor influencing the lives of African Americans. Finally, it is our hope that, as students understand past inequities, like those Redding spent a lifetime addressing in his writings and teachings, they will be moved to disavow race, ethnicity and other forms of prejudice as impediments to individual success and happiness.

Harmon R. Carey

Founder and Executive Director

Afro-American Historical Society of Delaware

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*Chapter headings written by editors, Delaware Heritage Commission

Preface

It has long been my conviction that the next quarter of a century will disclose a tremendous struggle *among* the Negro for self-expression, self-possession, self-consciousness, individuality, new values, new loyalties, and, above all, for a new leadership. My reading of Redding's *No Day of Triumph* has confirmed and strengthened this conviction, for his book contains honesty, integrity, courage, grownup thinking and feeling, all rendered in terms of vivid prose. *No Day of Triumph* is another hallmark in the coming-of-age of the modern Negro; it is yet another signal in the turn of the tide from sloppy faith and cheap cynicism to fruitful seeking and passionate questioning.

Redding is the first middle-class Negro to break with the ideology of the "Talented Tenth" in a complete and final manner. Some may feel that he tears down more than he builds, but that is beside the point. Redding's main task is to expose, exhibit, declare, and he does this job in a dramatic and unforgettable manner, offering his own life as evidence. His narrative moves on a high, sensitive plane, and he depicts how one man, surrounded with falsehood and confusion, groped toward truth and dignity and understanding.

For a long time this book cried out to be written. I predict that it will rock the Negro middle class back on its heels; I forecast that it will set the "Talented Tenth" on fire with its anger; I prophesy that it will be as acid poured in the veins of the smug Negro teachers in Negro colleges. *No Day of Triumph* is a manifesto to the Negro and a challenge to America.

Richard Wright Author of *Native Son*



J. Saunders Redding at Brown University

Part 1

Consciousness of my environment began with the sound of talk. It was not hysterical talk, not bravado, though it might well have been, for my father had bought in a neighborhood formerly forbidden, and we lived, I realize now, under an armistice. But in the early years, when we were a young family, there was always talk at our house; a great deal of it mere talk, a kind of boundless and robustious overflow of family feeling. Our shouts roared through the house with the exuberant gush of flood waters through an open sluice, for talk, generated by any trifle, was the power that turned the wheels of our inner family life. It was the strength and that very quality of our living that made impregnable, it seemed, even to time itself, the walls of our home. But it was in the beginning of the second decade of the century, when the family was an institution still as inviolate as the swing of the earth.

There was talk of school, of food, of religion, of people. There were the shouted recitations of poems and Biblical passages and orations from Bryan, Phillips, and John Brown. My mother liked rolling apostrophes. We children were all trained at home in the declining art of oratory and were regular contestants for prizes at school.

My father could quote with appropriate gestures bits from Beveridge, whom he had never heard, and from Teddy Roosevelt and Fred Douglass, whom he had. There was talk of the "race problem," reasonable and unembittered unless Grandma Redding was there, and then it became a kind of spiritual poison, its virulence destructive of its own immediate effects, almost its own catharsis. Some of the poison we absorbed.

I remember Grandma Redding coming on one of her visits and finding us playing in the back yard. My brother and sister were there and we were playing with Myrtle Lott and Elwood Carter, white children who were neighbors. Grandma came in the back way through the alley, as she always did, and when we heard the gate scrape against the bricks we stopped. She stepped into the yard and looked fixedly at us. Holding her ancient, sagging canvas bag under one arm, she slowly untied the ribbons of her black bonnet. The gate fell shut behind her. Her eyes were like lashes on our faces. Reaching out her long arm, she held open the gate. Then she said, "Git. You

white trash, git!" Our companions, pale with fright, ducked and scampered past her. When they had gone, Grandma nodded curtly to us. "Chillen," she said, and went into the house.

Grandma Redding's visits were always unannounced. She came the fifty-odd miles up from Still Pond, Maryland, as casually as if she had come from around the nearest corner. A sudden cold silence would fall, and there would be Grandma. I do not know how she managed to give the impression of shining with a kind of deadly hard glare, for she was always clothed entirely in black and her black, even features were as hard and lightless as stone. I never saw a change of expression on her features. She never smiled. In anger her face turned slowly, dully gray, but her thin nostrils never flared, her long mouth never tightened. She was tall and fibrous and one of her ankles had been broken when she was a girl and never properly set, so that she walked with a defiant limp.

She hated white people. In 1858, as a girl of ten, she had escaped from slavery on the eastern shore of Maryland with a young woman of eighteen. They made their way to Camden, New Jersey, but there was no work and little refuge there. Across the river, bustling Philadelphia swarmed with slave hunters. By subterfuge or by violence even free people were sometimes kidnaped and sent south. Near Bridgeton, New Jersey, the runaways heard, there was a free Negro settlement, but one night they were stopped on the docks by a constable who asked them for papers. They had none. Within two weeks after their escape they were slaves again. When my grandmother tried to run away from the flogging that was her punishment, Caleb Wrightson, her master, flung a chunk of wood at her and broke her ankle.

It was not until we were quite large children that Grandma Redding told us this story. She did not tell it for our pleasure, as one tells harrowing tales to children. It was without the dramatic effects that Grandma Conway delighted in. What *she* would have done with such a tale! No. Grandma Redding's telling was as bare and imageless as a lesson recited from the head and as coldly furious as the whine of a shot.

"An' ol' man Calub flan a hick'ry chunk an' brist my anklebone."

I can see her now as she sits stooped in the wooden rocker by the kitchen stove, her sharp elbows on her sharp knees and her long black fingers with

their immense purple nails clawing upward at the air. Her undimmed eyes whipped at ours, and especially at mine, it seemed to me; her thin lips scarcely parted. She had just come in or was going out, for she wore her bonnet and it sat on the very top of her harsh, dull hair. Hatred shook her as a strong wind shakes a boughless tree.

"An' ol' man Calub stank lik'a pe'-house from the rottin' of his stomick 'fore he died an' went t'hell, an' his boys died in the wo' an' went to hell."

But her implacable hatred needed no historical recall, and so far as I remember, she never told the tale to us again.

But generally Grandma Redding's taciturnity was a hidden rock in the sea of our talk. The more swift the tide, the more the rock showed, bleak and unavoidable. At other times the talk flowed smoothly around her: the burst of oratory and poetry, the chatter of people and events, the talk of schooling and sometimes of money and often of God. Even the talk of God did not arouse her. I think she was not especially religious; and in this, too, she was unlike Grandma Conway.

My grandmothers met at our house but once. They did not like each other.

Part 2

Grandma Conway said "Good morning" as if she were pronouncing the will of God. A woman as squat and solid as a tree stump, she had a queer knurl of religious thought and character that no ax of eclecticism could cleave. She had great bouts of religious argument with whoever would argue with her. Even though her adversary sat but two feet away, she would shout out her disputes in a cracking voice and half-rise threateningly, her gray serge breast lifting and falling as if she had been running uphill. She often frightened our young friends in this manner, awed them into speechlessness; and when she had done this, her green-yellow eyes would blink very fast and her fat, yellow little fists would fly to her chest and beat gently there in laughter.

Grandma Conway was honest about God and often very moving. When she visited us, the family prayers on Sunday belonged to her. Her prayers seemed to bring Him into our dining room, transforming the flesh and blood reality of Grandma Conway into a greater reality of mystical communion. It was as if a sleep and dream of God descended upon us all, replacing our earthly consciousness with another too penetrating to be born in wakefulness and too sublime to bear the weight of our gross senses. I would keep my gaze fastened upon Grandma for visual evidence against that awful Presence; or I looked around feeling my elbows pressed deep into the fabric of the chair seat, at my brother, my sisters, the quiet stillness of my mother's bent back, the upright, almost transfixed solidity of my father's shoulders. I would hear and smell the sausage frying, and the baked beans, and the hot rolls, and the coffee. But insensibly my eyes would close against the physical reality, which somehow even sight and sound and smell could not confirm, and I would be washed up onto a plane of awareness that terrified me.

"Come on feet of thunder, Holy One, but tread amongst us softly, and let us hear the rustling of your garments. It's like the sound the wind makes at night in the sycamore trees in front of my house on Columbus Street. I feel Your spirit hands uplifting me and Your Holy Presence cloaking me, Oh, Giver of all things good and perfect."

But often she talked to Him of the intimate trifles that enlivened her day, of

her children and her children's children.

"Dear Father, the boy, Saunders, had a croup last night and his hacking and coughing kept me from my sleep."

So intimately and yet so reverently.

It was on one of these Sundays that my grandmothers met. Grandma Conway had been with us a month. Grandma Redding came as unceremoniously as she usually came, looking as if she had walked every step of the fifty miles from her home. When my mother went to the kitchen that morning, Grandma Redding was sitting on the back steps. Though it was August and hot, she wore a heavy black dress and the black woolen jacket which seemed to be her only garments. When she discovered that Grandma Conway was visiting us, she did not remove her bonnet, and, as I remember, there was some difficulty in inducing her to stay for prayers and breakfast.

The presence of the two old women filled us children with strange, jerky excitement. Even our mother was infected by it. I think we recognized more than the surface differences between our grandmothers. Separating their thoughts and characters was a deep gulf that could not be accounted for alone by the wide divergence of their experiences. It was something even more fundamental. It was what they were and would have been, even, I believe, had they lived through similar experiences. No bridge of time or thought or feeling could join them. They were of different earth. On the surface it looked as simple as this: one was yellow, the other black.

There was a pause of embarrassment just before we knelt for prayers. Grandma Conway, with the gracious magnanimity with which one sometimes yields to a rival, said to my father, "Maybe your ma would like to lead us in prayer this morning." My father looked embarrassed, drawing his hand over his bald head from crown to forehead and shooting an oblique glance at my mother. Mother said nothing. Then Grandma Redding said;

"No. Thank'ee. Lewis wist I ain't no comp'ny- prayin' one. Let her pray."

We knelt at chairs around the square table. The odor of the breakfast was heavy in the room—coffee, fresh bread, and the Sunday smell of sliced bananas all mingled. The sun made a heavy shaft of light through each of the two windows and flecks of it escaping through the multitudinous small holes

in the green shades danced upon the wall. More than the Sunday excitement of dressing for church filled us. Beyond the hard, straight shoulders of Grandma Redding I could see my older sister silently dancing on her knees. Behind me I could hear my mother's stepped-up breathing and the sound her dress made when she moved against the chair. The others knelt on the other side of the table. Lowering my face in my spread fingers, I waited for prayers to begin. Grandma Conway sighed heavily. I set myself against the coming of that awful Presence.

"God, our Holy Father, Chastiser of sin and evil, great Maker of all things pure and good and of the creatures that here on earth do dwell, be with us in our prayers this morning. There are many who cannot rise from their beds of pain this morning—dear Lord, be with them. There are many who went last night in health to bed and this morning lie cold in death. Be with them. And be with us. Thou can be everywhere. Thou art in the sun that. . ."

It was obvious to us who knew her prayers that the spirit had not descended upon her. Her prayer was not coming with that mellifluous and intimate spontaneity with which she generally spoke to God. She was remembering perhaps too much of the Book of Common Prayer which she had studied as a child. My tension eased a little.

". . . Holy Father, these my children now, and my children's children. Mary here, and the man who made her a woman. You know all this, Father, but I'm getting old and my mind wanders. Make these children as Your Son. Keep not the cross from them, nor the crown of thorns, nor the cup of sorrow. Deny them not the chastening rod of truth if their young lives would be as lamps on the footpaths of eternity. And Redding's ma, Lord. She's with us this morning. She has her affliction, Holy One, and we can hardly notice it, but it's an affliction on her. Bless her. Teach her that affliction chasteneth a righteous heart and only the wicked are bowed down. Bless her, dear God, and bless us all. We ask it in the name. . ."

Before my father could say "Amen," as was his custom, and we could rise from our knees, Grandma Redding's hard, grainy voice whanged out beside me. I felt the room's shocked stillness. Surprised and irritated a little at this fresh delay to breakfast, I peeped at her through my fingers. She was kneeling with her long back in a hard curve and her forearms spread along the chair

seat. Her black hands grasped the uprights of the chair, so that her large knuckles stood out purple. Her eyes were not closed and her face was as hard as rock.

"Lis'en, Jesus. You wist I ain't got the words fer comp'ny prayers. This is all I want t'say. I been climbin' hills an' goin'down valleys be't sixty some years, an' the hills ain't no littler an' the valleys ain't no lesser. I ain't downright complainin', Jesus. I'm jes' tellin' You the way things is, be't You ain't been here in my lifetime. You ain't been here in be't than a thousan' years. Sence You been here, Gawd's done made a new Ian' an' put a whole lot o' diff'unt things an' people on it all together, an' we're all steered up ever' which way. We had slav'ry sence You been here. That's mean business. Now we got something else, an' that's mean business too. Devilment an' hate an' wo' an' some being one thing an' some another, that's all bad, mean business. We'se all skiverin' an' steered up. It ain't t'beginnin' an' it ain't the close. You understan' what's on my mind, Jesus.

"Now, bless these young'uns. Bless 'em on earth. It don't matter 'bout us al' ones. We'se skitterin' down the rocky hill anyhow. Bless us in the everlastin'. But these young'uns, they's climbin' up. All I ast be You keep 'em from the knowin' an' the manbirthed sins o' blackness. We'se bent on knees to Your will, Lord Jesus. Amen."

This prayer probably had no lasting effect upon the others who heard it, but, young as I was, its impression upon me was profound. In time to come it was to be as a light thrown upon Grandma Redding's character, and, by reflection, upon Grandma Conway's. It was only later, of course, that I had any intellectual comprehension of the basis of the contrast between them. For many years I continued to think of Grandma Redding as a strange, bitterly choleric old woman and that her irascibility was somehow a part of her blackness. I could not help this absurdity then, for ours was an upper-class Negro family, the unwitting victim of our own culture complexes; deeply sensitive to the tradition of ridicule and inferiority attaching to color; hating the tradition and yet inevitably absorbing it.



Louis and Gwendolyn (Saunder's older brother and sister)

Grandma Redding knew and admitted the debilitating force of that tradition, and out of her knowledge had come her prayer. There were dark ones among us, but none so black as Grandma Redding. I was dark. But here again we were the victims of evasive and defensive thinking. To members of our immediate family the stigma of blackness did not apply. But Grandma Redding, whom, somehow, we never seemed to know very well, and her children—my father's brothers—were not of the family circle. And it applied to them. It was a crazy, irrational, paradoxical pattern, not made less so by those occasional upheaving disturbances in the general social order that rolled in on us in great breakers from the fathomless sea of the white world. We were a garrisoned island in that sea.

On the other hand, I thought of Grandma Conway and her kin—they were all mulattoes—as escaping the tradition. But, indeed, Grandma Conway was nearer the absurdity than I. I have always remembered with what garrulous delight she used to repeat:

"So this white gentleman, who lived in the next block, met us on the street one day. I had a big hat on Cora, you see, and you couldn't see her face without raising her head or taking off her hat. So he met us and says, bowing just as nice, 'Miss Cora'—that was to me. Your poor, dead Aunt Cora was named for me. 'Miss Cora,' he says, 'let me see this prize package under the big hat,' and he lifted her hat up. Cora was just as pretty! She was too pretty to live, dear Lord. He lifted her hat up, and when he saw her, he says, as if he'd been kicked in the stomach, 'Why, she's nearly white!' Yes, indeed,' I said, 'and I intend to keep her that way.' "

And then her eyes behind her tiny oval glasses would screw up and her fat yellow hands would fly to her breast and beat there gently in laughter. Her laughter was not an exact comment, but it was only later that I realized this, for when we were young it seemed merely an amusing story.

My grandmothers did not meet again after that Sunday breakfast. It was as strained a meal as any I have ever sat through. Grandma Redding kept her bonnet on all through it. She drank only sweetened hot water and ate only the sliced bananas. As always, Grandma Conway, though silent, ate and drank heavily of black coffee sweetened almost to syrup, of the kidney stew and baked beans, and the crunchy rolls as large as buns. Even under ordinary

circumstances, her appetite was amazing. My father quarreled with us a good deal that morning. My mother was silent. Eventually we all fell silent, hearing only the sucking sound that Grandma Redding's lips made on the edge of her cup and explosive grunts of pleasure with which Grandma Conway munched into her roll.

They never saw each other again, though each lived several years longer. In 1923 Grandma Redding, her face stone-set in pain, limped defiantly to her death, and three years later death caught up with Grandma Conway while she slept.

Part 3

Our street was caught in the embrace of the slow decline which possessed it in mellow decadence for almost twenty years. A block above us on the west stood a row of massive houses facing the Court House square. They were the clubs of the rich. Among the shining carriages and the high, big-wheeled cars, I used often to see the low, queer-shaped, foreign-made cars of the Du Pont who was "crazy about automobiles," and the square glass and metal electrically driven boxes called hansoms, which also were associated in my mind with great wealth. These hansoms were always driven by elegant women in elegant hats. Whenever I saw one, I used to think how grand my mother would look in one of them. The thought was the measure of naivete. I thought that if my father just kept on working very hard and living according to certain moral principles, he would certainly become rich—rich enough to buy an electric hansom for my mother and a huge, high-wheeled car for us all. That is what we were taught in school and Sunday school. We're not the Du Ponts fine, Christian people, attending and supporting the church? My father was a fine Christian too. Was not John D. Rockefeller, whose little, wrinkle-lidded eyes peered out from a page of my civics book, the richest man in the world? And had he not been a Sunday school worker all his life? My father was superintendent of Sunday school. He is now. He has been for thirty-odd years; but he has never become rich. In those days I had not heard of Tarbell or Steffens.

He lived in a sort of neutral ground between the last orderly outposts of the well-to-do—their businesses, their clubs, their churches, their graveyard—and the teeming camp of the hard-faced poor. Our street was quiet and shaded with elms that in summer formed an archway over the cobbled street. There were porches and hedge-bordered patches of front yards, and deep back yards with grape arbors and flowers. But below us on the east the streets became gradually more naked and sly, until flinging off the last rag of pride, they prowled with brutal defensiveness past the huddled houses, the big-windowed corner saloons, the dark, dirty grocery stores, and the obscene, blank-walled factories to the river. On wet, still days the stink from the morocco shops and the jute mills lay over the streets—and over ours—like the breath of putrefaction. It was a strange, compelling, lair like

neighborhood, immobilized in stilly desperation.

How my parents maintained their neutrality! What a fine balance they drew! Belonging neither to the outpost above nor to the camp below, they were yet a part of both. Their manifest standards were conservative. My father voted the Democratic ticket once, but only after agonies of soul-searching. They went to church regularly. They believed in individual initiative and in its fruits. The conservative instinct of acquisition did not grow stagnant even under the burden of debt and mortgage and taxes. They believed that one was rewarded according to his worth and that no factor—save only occasional strokes of mischance—upset the balance between honor and truth and industry on the one hand and respect, credit, and success on the other. Yet I have known my father to sit on the back steps and my mother to sit just within the screen door and listen for hours in sympathetic respect to the strange talk of Weeping Joe.

Weeping Joe was a character frequently spewed up from the gurgling entrails of the east side. A short, pallid man of Polish stock, he went barefooted and bareheaded winter and summer. School children mocked him pitilessly, though he paid them no mind. Three or four times a year, surrounded by crude homemade emblems and placards, he stood on the low wall surrounding the Court House square and railed against the "symbols of politics." He wept and railed. Always promptly arrested for disturbing the peace, his release was always the occasion for a one-man parade of protest, during which he was sometimes spat upon and subjected to other indignities. He was called an idiot. But Weeping Joe was not an idiot. He talked of the return of power to the masses from whom it was derived. He talked sane heresies—of equitably distributing wealth, of a people's government, of wiping out racial prejudices, of linking the spirits of men together in the indissoluble bond of Christ. He talked these things, too, on our back steps, and my parents, sitting in the silence of the warm evening, listened.

"That is it," Joe would say.

"Yes, I know," my father would say. "But is one's own ambition and initiative to amount to nothing?"

"To one's own self and family, enough to feed them, put them in a good house, clothe them. To everybody else, everything."

"My sweat to feed others, to satisfy others? I wouldn't like it," my father said quickly, stroking his bald head.

"Ah! Of what I talk, that thing is better for the colored peoples than for me. That thing would make you equal, make everybody the same in equalness. Don't you see? It would be Christ come again. Is that not better? And do you think there are no equal men to you who are poorer than you? I know, my friend." He tapped his eyes. "I see."

He was not the weeping heretic, the burning rabble-rouser of the Court House wall. He laughed a little, a strange sound like the call of some strange bird. He stroked his coarse, straw-colored beard against his naked throat and looked up sideways at the dark face of my father.

"What has working for yourself got you?"

"Well," my father said tentatively. In the doorway, behind the screen, my mother was bent forward listening. It had grown too dark to mend and she was leaning over a small basket of stockings in her lap.

"Answer, my friend." He made that laugh again and let go of his beard, screwing himself sideways on the step so that he faced my father.

"Well," said my father again.

"It has got you a house, which maybe you will own the next fifteen, twenty years—maybe. . . ."

"Twelve years," said my father triumphantly. "The second mortgage is paid, and it took me only eight years."

"That's twenty years, my friend. Think. Think!" His voice rose a little. "Twenty years to pay for a house that somebody built in a few weeks, a house that was paid for once already, maybe two times already. Twenty years! It is a crazy thing, a thinkless thing. And who gets paid, my friend? The peoples who put up the house? No. The peoples who cut the boards? No. The peoples who made the bricks? No. Who gets paid for twenty years of your work and sweatings is the peoples who have never seen the house and don't know you are living."

My mother stirred.

"But *we* have the house, Mr. Smoleki," she said quietly. She had been very

careful to ask him his last name, and now she called him by it.

"Yes, my friend, you peoples have the house. But only because you are buying for those other peoples mansions. Are they better than you that you should have lesser? Are they aristocratics, like in the old country? Are they from the womb unborn? Are they of the immaculate conception?"

My mother did not answer. Father said, "I don't mind work. It's what a man has to do to live."

"In decency," my mother said pointedly.

Weeping Joe laughed and shook his massive head. That head was like a weedy pumpkin on a pole. He threw one leg across the other and swung his bare suspended foot.

"In decency," he gently mocked.

"Yes," my mother answered.

"Ah, my friend's lady, there is only one decency for peoples, and that is here." He touched his fingers to his heart and looked past my father to the dark-soft shape of Mother sitting in the doorway. "Is it not so?" My mother straightened up and sighed. "I suppose so." Still with his cupped fingers lightly touching his heart, Weeping Joe went on. "If every peoples had equalness of decency here, it would be the day of Christ."



MaMA (Mary Ann) with younger sister Jeanette
(from left to right)

"But even then," my father said dejectedly. "Even then."

"Hush, Fellow," my mother said. She always called my father that.

"That day won't ever come, Joe."

"Ah, my friend. It is a bad thing for peoples who have no hope."

So they talked, my father always strangely aroused, always, it seemed to me on the verge of something, of establishing some absolute value by which to judge the meaning of his living. And always ending in dejection. What did his living mean? What purpose had it? Perhaps he never framed the questions to himself, but heaving up from almost any circumstance he faced were these and other imponderables. There was my mother, too, mostly silent, thinking I do not know what, but in her way aroused no less than he, responding to his dejection with murmurs of gentle protest, and by a slow exercise of almost organic will blunting the cool edge of excitement which Joe's words set oscillating within her.

But my father was not usually hopeless. A man without hope does not struggle, does not work. And my father worked. He had come up from that same east side whence Weeping Joe now and then emerged. Indeed, he had come from deeper down in some spiritual east side, where his mother and all her kin had dwelt as far back as ancestral memory goes; for slavery was an east side, too, for some—a kind of spiritual ghetto of the damned. My father's emergence was more than physical, but it was not complete. It was as if a man struggling from beneath a smothering weight frees his head to breathe, but finds the rest of him pressed down and his cramped lungs unable to use the air his gasping mouth sucks in.

His hopes were high when he had gone to Howard University and worked his way through in all kinds of service. There he had met the long-legged mulatto girl who was to be my mother. They were graduated from the Normal Department, and she went home to Alexandria, and he went out to make a living. In the winter he taught a country school in Maryland for fifteen dollars a month. From spring until late fall he waited table in the old United States Hotel in Boston. But in 1898 my father's older brother persuaded him to move to Wilmington, Delaware. Here, after their marriage in 1900, my parents settled down, and here we began to be born.

For a time my father ran a grocery store deep in the east side where they lived. (I was not yet born.) His trade was mostly a credit trade among the Negroes, and after a little more than a year, when his own credit was exhausted and his books full of bad debts, he had to give it up. He went into the postal service.

I have no remembrance of our east-side house. Grandmother Conway would not visit there because she could not bear "the stinking morocco, the jammed-up houses, and the ugly mudflats." My brother, the oldest of us, was frequently ill there too, and when the second child was born, my mother went home to Alexandria where her children could grow in health. There was no breach in my parents' relationship. My mother's going was simply the best thing to do and she did it. They saw each other frequently, and on one of her visits to Wilmington I was born prematurely. I was born in the house on the east side.

Grandma Conway used to say of us who were born down there that we were marked for life. All through my childhood the east side had strong and unpleasant associations in my mind. It seemed that everything anti-social happened there. There lived the whores and the pimps, there happened the shootings and the stabbings, and there in the night one could smell the hot breath of violence. Frequently the papers carried editorials on the "east side element," the Negroes and the foreign-born poor, who, it seems, were most undesirable. When I was a schoolboy, the hurled epithet "dirty eastsider" cut to the soul, and even now has an edge to make me wince.

In its purely physical aspects my father could and did cope with the east side. He moved. Moving was not so simple, for it was not a matter merely of having the money to buy or to rent the house of one's choice. It was made very dark and complicated by the fact that we were a Negro family. I have never got the details straight, but moving was almost like stealing.

It has always seemed to me that I have some recollection of that moving. I was not then four years old, and it is likely that part of my memory is ancestral. I remember the hushed quality of that night, the subdued and yet excited air of conspiracy. I remember the two-seated, rubber-tired carriage which my father had hired skipping over the cobbled road, past the dark factories and the houses huddled in the night. I remember the feel of my

mother's arms as she held me in her lap, and my sister's bubbling excitement. "Shush, hone. Shush," my mother said. Baggage was piled all around us. My brother sat on the front seat with my father. Out of the narrow streets into a broad street with a carbon light on every corner and a gas lamp in every block. Wonderful lamps! The light from them flecking the leaves of the trees and making dancing patterns on the road. Out of the east side, the horses trotting smoothly now and fast, with the carriage lights shining on their flanks and leather and wood creaking and the night air streaming into our faces. Then a turn to the right, up a cobbled, slanting street that somehow looked free and clean even in the dark. In the very middle of the hill, dim under the tree that spread to its roof, stood the house. It, too, was free. There were no houses joined to it on either side. It seemed alive with the light from the gas lamp playing on its four front windows and the glass-fronted door.

I remember how my father's jaw stood out like a hard fist in the light of the match he struck to find the keyhole in the back door. He went in first, and we could hear him picking his way among the litter of furniture that had been sent in broad daylight—for furniture has no race. My mother stood trembling, waiting for the lamp to be lit. Then she stepped in, and we all stepped in, and there was my father holding the lamp above his head.

"This is home, Girl," he said.



Mason Redding, Saunders youngest sister, died while a student at Bennett College.

And my mother sat down on a packing box and lifted her veil and removed her hat. Her hair was already whitening, though she had just turned thirty. "Thank God!" she said, and broke into uncontrollable weeping.

That night trembles down the crowded corridor of my memory as a light seen at the end of a long tunnel.

My father was right. It was home. Here life laid siege to us, and we built our walls of family-feeling, of love and talk, inviolate, we thought, against the flux of time and the change of circumstance. Here the other four children were born, and two of them died in infancy.

Part 4

But what a struggle it was!

As far back as I can remember, it was necessary for my father to eke out his small government salary by doing all sorts of odd jobs after his regular hours and in his vacations. He belonged to a waiters' association, and frequently he served at dinners, banquets, and parties from early evening until dawn. On these occasions he wore the swallow-tailed coat in which he had been married and the black broadcloth trousers which he had picked up at a secondhand shop. This outfit always amused us, for the trousers did not cover his ankles and his big feet spread beneath them in a truly monumental fashion. The coat had a greenish tinge and fitted across his thick shoulders like a harness. My mother had to sew up the shoulder seams after every use. My father cared little about the appearance of his clothes. "So long as they're clean, children," he used to say, when for reasons of pride we used to fidget with his tie, fold down his collars, and see to it that he was wearing a proper belt in his trousers. Our attentions amused him, and he would wink at our mother and say, "Girl, they've all got your side's pride."

Sometimes he would bring from these parties a satchel bulging with steaks, chicken, butter, rolls, and ice cream; and then we feasted—not because we ever went hungry, but because all this was extra and had to be eaten before it spoiled.

My father always took his annual vacation in the late summer or early fall, for then he could find employment among the farmers a few miles outside the city. He would contract to cut corn or harvest potatoes. Sometimes he stayed in the country, but when he did not, he was always back long after we were in bed and gone again before dawn. Often my brother and I, in the room next the bathroom, would wake up in the night and hear my father thrashing about in the tub and murmuring wearily to my mother, who always waited for him late in the night.

As I look back upon it now, I know that my father was driven by more than the necessity to provide a living for his family. Surrounded by whites both at home and at work, he was driven by an intangible something, a merciless, argus-eyed spiritual enemy that stalked his every movement and lurked in

every corner. It goaded him every waking hour, but he could not get at it, though he felt it to be embodied in almost every white man he met. Because of this, he moved with defensive caution, calculating the effect of every action and every utterance upon his unseen enemy. Every day he won defensive victories, but every day the final victory seemed more impossible. He was up at dawn, painting the trim, repairing the roof, putting out ashes, shoveling snow from the sidewalk. In fifteen years he was never late for his work, and only once did he allow an illness to keep him home. His endurance was a thing of the spirit.

But the other necessity was there too, the physical need to provide for a family that soon increased to seven. We were a problem. We helled through our clothes, and especially our shoes. My father mended our shoes with thick leather patches that balled clumsily on the soles. He trimmed our hair. When it seemed safe, he avoided doctor's bills by purging us with castor oil, plastering us with goose grease, and swathing us in flannel. I myself was often sick with ruinous colds that threatened a serious illness. I was almost constantly under the care of Dr. Elbert, who spent his time thumping my chest and giving me nauseating medicines. But no saving was too trifling, no economy too stringent for my father to make. Sometimes it was a joking matter. Our garbage pail seldom contained anything but vegetable parings and bones, for my mother, too, knew the value of a penny. Indeed, her thrift was generally more effective and yet less severe than my father's. She had a reasonableness in the matter which he lacked. Sometimes she raised objections—futilely, for instance, to my father's spending his vacation harvesting potatoes or cutting corn. She argued the point of his health, but my father's answer was always the same: "Work wouldn't hurt a man."



Dr. Samuel Elbert, Sr. Delaware's first black physician.
Photo courtesy of Afro-American Historical Society of Delaware.

When I was fourteen or fifteen, I spent a Saturday on one of these corn-cutting expeditions with him. It was the last week end of his two-weeks vacation, and he had been working on a farm eight miles out of the city. We left home before daylight and reached the farm just at dawn. It was a large farm, and only a part of it was under cultivation. Before we set to work, the farmer joined us. He was a bucktoothed post of a man, with skin raw and peeled-looking by the sun. The corn field lay some distance from the house and the land sloped away gently to a flat, rocky strip beyond which the corn field rose abruptly. The brown corn stood in marching rows on the side of the hill. The field had not been cared for. High weeds tangled the rows.

"Well, you overstretched yourself, looks like," the farmer said, looking at the uncut corn on the hill.

My father took off his coat and drew his corn knife from the ground where he had left it the evening before. I saw his jaw tighten like a fist.

"I'll need a knife for my boy here," he said. "We'll get it done. The weeds will hamper us some, but we'll get it done."

"Maybe you will at that," the farmer said, kicking in a mat of weeds. "Didn' have no time to do nothin' with this crop out here myself. Had another colored feller workin' for me, but he ups an' quits 'bout the time I needed him most. Wasn' much of a loss to me, I don't reckon. He sure was a lazy one. This your boy, hunh?"

"Yes," my father said. He looked past the man. "We'll get it done all right."

"I'm from Missouri," the farmer said.

When he came back with the long-bladed corn knife, he stood for a while and watched us work. I had never cut corn before, but it was simply a matter of bending one's back and swinging one's blade as close to the roots as one could. When an armful of stalks was cut, we bound them together and stood them up to finish drying for fodder. The weeds were already giving us trouble. They were wet and tough with dew and they tied themselves around our ankles. But for a while the work did not seem hard to me. My father worked easily, making of bending, swinging, grasping one flowing, rhythmic action.

"The other colored feller sure was a lazy one," the farmer said after a

while.

My father did not look up, but I watched the farmer spraddle down the hill and across the rocky gully.

"Damn him" my father said. "Damn him!" It was the only time I ever heard him curse. "Sure. That other colored fellow was lazy. Come on, son. Do you want him to think we're lazy too?"

It began to be hard work cutting uphill, and pretty soon the sun was at us. The weeds grabbed at our blades and we had to hack through them to get at the corn. My father cut very fast and determinedly, paying no attention to me. By nine o'clock my legs were rubbery with fatigue. I could hear my father working the dry, screeching corn somewhere ahead and to the left of me. He made an aspirant sound every time he swung his blade, and this came to me quite distinctly. "Hac. Hac. Hac." I seemed to be floating. My head felt enormously swollen. Bending to the corn, I could feel myself falling, but I had no strength to prevent it. I fell face down in the weeds, struggled up. Then suddenly the earth exploded in my face with blackening, sickening force.

When I came around again, my father was kneeling beside me. His face was gray and hard and his eyes and mouth were like Grandma Redding's. My nose was still bleeding a little and blood was on my shirt and smeared on the damp rag with which my father was stroking my face. He had stuck a twig under my upper lip.

"What's the matter, son?" my father asked. "Feel all right now?"

I spit out the twig. "I can't keep up."

"That's all right. I shouldn't have brought you." He was still stroking my face with the wet, blood-smeared rag. It was unpleasant. I smelled and tasted the blood. He looked across the gully toward the house that stood naked and ugly in the broad stroke of the sun. "I'll give that farmer a piece of my mind yet," he said.

"When he said, 'I'm from Missouri,' that's slang," I said. "People say I'm from Missouri when they don't believe you can do something. They say, 'Show me.' "

"I'll show him," my father said.

After lunch I felt strong enough to work again, but my father made me lie under the lip of the hill out of the sun, and all afternoon I listened to the sound of his working moving farther and farther away from me. He finished the field just before dark.



Pa-PA, patriarch of the Redding family

Part 5

My mother was tall, with a smooth, rutilant skin and a handsome figure. Her hair began to whiten in her late twenties and whitened very rapidly. I especially liked to be on the street with her, for I enjoyed the compliment of staring which was paid to her. I think she was not aware of these stares. There was pride in her, a kind of glowing consciousness that showed in her carriage in exactly the same way that good blood shows in a horse. But she had no vanity. Her pride gave to everything she did a certain ritualistic elan.

It is surprising to me now how little I learned about my mother in the sixteen years she lived after my birth. It was not that I lacked opportunity, but insight. She was never withdrawn or restrained, purposefully shading out her personality from us. And her speech and actions seemed to have the simple directness and the sharp impact of thrown stones. But she was a woman of many humors, as if, knowing her time to be short, she would live many lives in one. Gaiety and soberness, anger and benignity, joy and woe possessed her with equal force. In all her moods there was an intensity as in a spinning top.

I vividly recall the day when in rage and tears she stormed because another Negro family moved into our neighborhood. When her rage had passed and she had dropped into that stilly tautness that sometimes kept her strained for days, she said to my father:

"That's all it takes, Fellow. Today our house is worth one-third of what it was last night. When those people . . ." She shrugged her wide shoulders and stared at my father.

"Oh, Girl! Girl!" my father said gently. "You mustn't be so hard on them. They may be respectable people."

"Hard! Hard! And respectable people!" She laughed brittlely. "What has respectability got to do with it?"

Then she tried to find the words for what she felt and thought, for we children were present and she did not wish to appear unreasonable before us. The subject of race was for her a narrow bridge over a chasmal sea, and the walking of it was not a part of her daily living. Only when she felt she must save herself from the abyss did she venture to walk. At other times she

ignored it, not only in word, but I think in thought as well. She knew the speeches of John Brown and Wendell Phillips, the poetry of Whittier and Whitman, but not as my father knew them; not as battering stones hurled against the strong walls of a prison. She was *not imprisoned*. Stones, perhaps, but dropped into a dark sea whose tides licked only at the farthest shores of her life. She took this for reasonableness.

I remember she laughed a brittle laugh and said, "The first thing they moved in was one of those pianola things. Oh, we shall have music," she said bitterly, "morning, noon, and midnight. And they're not buying. They're renting. Why can't they stay where they belong!"

"Belong?" my father said.

"Yes. Over the bridge."

"They are our people, Girl," my father said.

My mother looked at him, tears of vexation dewing her eyes. She blinked back the tears and looked fixedly at my father's dark face shining dully under the chandelier, his bald head jutting back from his forehead like a brown rock. As if the words were a bad taste to be rid of, she said;

"Yours maybe. But not mine."

"Oh, Girl. Girl!"

But Mother had already swept from the dining room.



House on Tenth Street as it stands in 1990
Photo courtesy of Harmon R. Carey

It is strange how little my deep affection for my mother (and hers for all of us) taught me about her while she lived. I have learned much more about her since her death. It is as if the significance of remembered speech and action unfolded to me gradually a long time after. My mother was the most complex personality I have ever known.

But no will of my mother's could abate the heave of the social tide just then beginning to swell. Our new neighbors were the first that we saw of that leaderless mass of blacks that poured up from the South during and after the war years. It was a trickle first, and then a dark flood that soon inundated the east side and burbled restively at our street. Within five months of the time my mother had raged, the whites were gone. But rents and prices in our street were too high for the laborers in morocco and jute mills, shipyards and foundries, the ditch-diggers, coal-heavers, and the parasites. They crowded sometimes as many as eight to a room in the houses below us, and I knew of at least one house of six small rooms in which fifty-one people lived.

Our street and the diagonal street above it were more exclusive preserve. A few middle-class Jews, a clannish community of Irish lived there. But they were nudged out. The Germans first, for they became the victims of mass hatred during the war, and the last German home was stoned just before the day of the Armistice. Landlords and realtors inflated prices to profit by Negro buyers who clamored for houses as if for heaven. Into our street moved the prosperous class of mulattoes, a physician and a dentist, a minister, an insurance agent, a customs clerk, a well-paid domestic, and several school teachers. Nearly all of these were buying at prices three times normal.

The atmosphere of our street became purely defensive. No neighborhood in the city was so conscious of its position and none, trapped in a raw materialistic struggle between the well-being of the west side and the grinding poverty of the east, fought harder to maintain itself. This struggle was the satanic bond, the blood-pact that held our street together.

But there was also the spiritual side to this struggle. It remained for me for a long time undefined but real. It was not clear and cold in the brain as religion was and taxes and food to eat and paint to buy. It was in the throat like a warm clot of phlegm or blood that no expectorant could dislodge. It was in the bowels and bone. It was memory and history, the pound of the

heart, the pump of the lungs. It was Weeping Joe making bursting flares of words on the Court House wall and murmuring like a priest in funeral mass on our back steps of summer evenings. It was east side, west side, the white and the black, the word nigger, the cry of exultation, of shame, of fear when black Lemuel Price shot and killed a white policeman. It was Paul Dunbar, whose great brooding eyes spirit-flowed from his drawn face in a photograph over our mantle. It was sleeping and waking. It was Wilson and Hughes in 1917 Harding and Cox in 1921. It was a science teacher saying sarcastically, "Yes. I know. They won't hire you because you're colored," and, "Moreover, the dog licked Lazarus' wounds," and getting very drunk occasionally and reeling about, his yellow face gone purple, blubbering, "A good chemist, God damn it. A Goddamn good chemist! And here I am teaching a school full of niggers. Oh, damn my unwhite skin! And God damn it!" It was the music of pianolas played from dusk to dawn. And it was books read and recited and hated and loved: fairy tales, *Up from Slavery*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Scaramouche*, *Othello*, *The Yoke*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Heroic Story of the Negro in the Spanish-American War*, *The Leopard's Spots*, *Door of the Night*, *Sentimental Tommy*, *The Negro*, *Man or Beast?*, and the rolling apostrophes of the *World's Best Orations*.

And on this plane allegiances were confused, divided. There was absolute cleavage between those spiritual values represented by Grandma Conway, who thought and lived according to ideas and ideals inherited from a *long line of free ancestors and intimates* (her father had been white, her mother part Irish, Indian, Negro. Her first husband was a mulatto carriage maker with a tradition of freedom three generations old) and those ill-defined, uncertain values represented by Grandma Redding and which, somehow, seemed to be close to whatever values our neighbors on the east held. What these were I never knew, nor, I suspect, did Grandma Redding. Certainly she would have cast equal scorn on the east side's black Lizzie Gunnar, who ran a whore house and who two days before every Christmas gathered up all the Negro children she could find and led them to the Court House for the city's party to the poor, because, "Niggahs is jus' about de poores' folks dere is," and white and foreign-born Weeping Joe, who spoke of linking the spirits of men together in the solvent bond of Christ. Her closeness to them was more a sympathetic prepossession than an alliance. They were her people, whether

their values were the same as hers or not. Blood was stronger than ideal, and the thing that was between them sprang from emotion rather than mind. It was unreasoning, and as ineluctable as the flight of time. Grandma Redding was the outright inheritor of a historical situation.

But not so Grandma Conway. She had assumed—not to say usurped—both the privileges and the penalties of a tradition that was hers only disingenuously, and therefore all the more fiercely held. The privileges gave her power; the penalties strength. She was certain of her values and she held them to be inviolate. She believed in a personal God and that He was in His heaven and all was right with the world. She believed in a rigid code of morality, but in a double standard, because she believed that there was something in the male animal that made him naturally incontinent, and that some women, always of a class she scornfully pitied, had no other purpose in life than to save good women from men's incontinence. In her notion, such women were not loose any more than rutting bitches were loose. A loose woman was a woman of her own class who had wilfully assumed the privileges and shunned the penalties of her birth. Such women she hated with face-purpling hatred. She believed in banks and schools and prisons. She believed that the world was so ordered that in the end his just desserts came to every man. This latter belief was very comprehensive, for she thought in terms of reciprocal responsibility of man and his class—that man did not live for himself alone and that he could not escape the general defections (she called it "sin") of the group into which he was born.

These beliefs must have been conspicuous to Grandma Conway's most casual acquaintance, but to me—and I have no doubt, to the rest of us long familiar with them—they were past both realizing and remarking, like the skin of one's body.

But realization of her most occult belief must have come quite early. Perhaps it came to me in 1917, when, on one of her visits, she first found the lower boundary of our neighborhood roiling with strange black folk and brazen with conspicuous life. It may have come to me imperceptibly, along with the consciousness of the stigma attaching to blackness of skin. But this stigma was a blemish, not a taint. A black skin was uncomely, but not inferior. My father was less beautiful than my mother, but he was not inferior to her. There were soot-black boys whom I knew in school who could outrun,

outplay, and outthink me, but they were less personable than I. And certainly we did not think in any conscious way that Grandma Redding was a lesser person than Grandma Conway. The very core of awareness was this distinction.

But gradually, subtly, depressingly and without shock there entered into my consciousness the knowledge that Grandma Conway believed that a black skin was more than a blemish. In her notion it was a taint of flesh and bone and blood, varying in degree with the color of the skin, overcome sometimes by certain material distinctions and the grace of God, but otherwise fixed in the blood.

To Grandma Conway, as to my mother, our new neighbors on the east were a threat.



Old Howard High School

In our house a compromise was struck. No one ever talked about it. In the careless flow of our talk, it was the one subject avoided with meticulous concern. My parents were stern disciplinarians, and this subject was so fraught with punishable possibilities and yet so conscious a part of our living that by the time the three older ones of us were in grammar and high school our care for the avoidance of it took on at times an almost hysterical intensity. Many a time, as we heard schoolmates do and as we often did ourselves outside, one or the other of us wished to hurl the epithet "black" or "nigger," or a combination, and dared only sputter, "You, you . . . monkey!" For being called a monkey was not considered half so grave an insult as being called the other; and it was at least as grave a sin to avoid as using the Lord's name in vain. My parents, of course, never used either black or nigger, and avoided mentioning color in describing a person. One was either dark or light, never black or yellow—and between these two was the indeterminate group of browns of which our family was largely composed. We grew up in the very center of a complex.

I think my older brother and sister escaped most of the adolescent emotional conflict and vague melancholy (it came later to them, and especially to my brother, and in decidedly greater force) which were the winds of my course through teenhood. For me it was a matter of choices, secret choices really. For them there was no choice. And yet I had less freedom than they. They went off to a New England college in 1919. Up to then their associates had been first the white and then the mulatto children on our street. Even the children whom they met in high school were largely of the mulatto group, for the dark tide of migration had not then swept the schools. Going to school was distinctly an upper-class pursuit, and the public school was almost as exclusive as the summer playground which Miss Grinnage conducted along stubbornly select lines for "children of the best blood" (it was her favorite phrase), almost as exclusive as the Ethical Culture lectures we attended once each month, or the basement chapel of St. Andrews Episcopal church, where Father Tatnall held segregated services for us twice a month. For my older brother and sister, the road through childhood was straight, without sideroads or crossings.

But by the time I reached high school in the fall of 1919, life was undergoing a tumultuous change. It was as if a placid river had suddenly

broken its banks and in blind and senseless rage was destroying old landmarks, leveling the face of the country farther and farther beyond the shore line.

The migrants not only discovered our neighborhood, they discovered the church where we went to Sunday school and where my father was superintendent. They discovered the vast, beautiful reaches of the Brandywine where we used to walk on fair Sundays. They discovered the school. I remember the sickening thrill with which I heard a long-headed black boy arraign the mulatto teachers for always giving the choice parts in plays, the choice chores, the cleanest books to mulatto children. He called the teachers "color-struck," a phrase that was new to me, and "sons-of-bitches," a phrase that was not. He was put out of school. Many black children were put out of school, or not encouraged to continue. Two incidents stand out in my mind.

In my first oratorical competition, I knew—as everyone else knew—that the contestant to beat was a gangling dark fellow named Tom Cephus. He had a fervor that I did not have and for which I was taught to substitute craft. His voice, already changed, boomed with a vibrant quality that was impressive to hear. Moreover, he was controlled, self-possessed, and I was not. For days before the competition I was unable to rest, and when I did finally face the audience, I uttered a sentence or two and from sheer fright and nervous exhaustion burst into uncontrollable tears. Somehow, bawling like a baby, I got through. I was certain that I had lost.

Cephus in his turn was superb. The greater part of the audience was with him. Beyond the first rows of benches, which were friendly to me, stretched row after increasingly dark row of black faces and beaming eyes. It was more than an oratorical contest to them. It was a class and caste struggle as intense as any they would ever know, for it was immediate and possible of compromise and assuagement, if not of victory. Mouths open, strained forward, they vibrated against that booming voice, transfixed in ecstasy. The applause was deafening and vindictive. In the back of the crowded hall someone led three cheers for Cephus (a wholly unheard-of thing) and while the teacher-judges were conferring, cheer after cheer swelled from the audience like the approaching, humming, booming bursting of ocean waves.



Clement Hollis, believed to be Tom Cephus, who went on to become
Delaware's first black chiropractor
Photo courtesy of his daughter, Miss Elaine Hollis

A pulsing hush fell on them when the judges returned. They watched the announcer as leashed and hungry dogs watch the approach of food. But the judge was shrewd. She wanted that excitement to simmer down. Flicking a smile at the first rows, she calmly announced the singing of a lullaby and waited, a set smile on her face, until three verses had been sung. Then icily, in sprung-steel Bostonian accents, she announced to an audience whose soft-skinned faces gradually froze in spastic bewilderment, "Third place, Edith Miller. Second place, Thomas Cephus. First place!" My name was lost in a void of silence. "Assembly dismissed!"

Stunned beyond expression and feeling, the back rows filed out. The front rows cheered. Cephus's lips worked and he looked at me. I could not look at him. I wanted to fall on my knees.

I was truant from school for a week. When my parents discovered it, I took my punishment without a word. A little later that year, Cephus dropped out of school.

But I was stubborn in my resistance to these lessons. My stubbornness was not a rational thing arrived at through intellection. It was not as simple and as hard as that. I was not a conscious rebel. I liked people, and, for all the straitening effects of environment, I was only lightly color-struck. A dark skin was perhaps not as comely as a brown or yellow, but it was sometimes attractive. In matters of class morality and custom and thought I was perhaps too young to make distinctions. I liked people. When I was sixteen and a senior in high school, I liked a doe-soft black girl named Viny. After school hours, Viny was a servant girl to kindly, dumpy, near-white Miss Kruse, the school principal, who lived across the street from us. I saw a good bit of Viny, for I ran Miss Kruse's confidential errands and did innumerable small things for her. There was nothing clandestine about my relations with her servant girl. We talked and joked in the kitchen. We sometimes walked together from school. We were frequently alone in the house.

But one day Miss Kruse called me to the front porch, where in fine, warm weather she ensconced herself in a rocker especially braced to support her flabby weight. She sat with her back turned squarely to the street. She was very fair, and because she ate heavily of rich heavy foods, at forty-five she was heavy-jowled, with a broad, pleasant, doughy face. A sack of flesh

swelled beneath her chin and seemed to hold her mouth open in a tiny O. She was reading.

"Sit down," she said.

I sat in the chair next to hers, but facing the street, so that we could look directly at each other. Both sides of the street were still lined with trees at that time, and it was June. Hedges were green. Miss Kruse read for a while longer, then she crumpled the paper against herself and folded her fingers over it.

"You like Viny, don't you?" she asked, looking at me with a heavy frown.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Well, you be careful. She'll get you in trouble," she said.

"Trouble?"

"How would you like to marry her?"

I did not answer, for I did not know what to say. "How?"

"I don't know'm. This provoked her. She threw the newspaper on the floor. The network of fine pink veins on the lobes of her nose turned purple.

"Well, let her alone! Or she'll trap you to marry her. And what would you look like married to a girl like that?" she said bitingly. "No friends, no future. You might as well be dead! How would you like to spend the rest of your life delivering ice or cleaning outdoor privies? Don't you know girls like her haven't any shame, haven't any decency? She'll get you in trouble."

I stared stupidly at her. I do not know what my reaction was. I remember being confused and hotly embarrassed, and after that a kind of soggy lethargy settled in my stomach, like indigestible food. I distinctly remember that I felt no resentment and no shock, and that my confusion was due less to this first frank indictment of blackness than to the blunt reference to sex. Boys talked about sex in giggly whispers among themselves, but between male and female talk of sex was taboo. In the midst of my embarrassment, I heard Miss Kruse's voice again, calm and gentle now, persuasive, admonitory.

"You're going to college. You're going to get a fine education. You're going to be somebody. You'll be ashamed you ever knew Viny. There'll be fine girls for you to know, to marry."

She sighed, making a round sound of it through her O-shaped mouth, and rubbing her hands hard together as if they were cold.

"Viny. Well, Viny won't ever be anything but what she is already."

And what is she? And what and where are the others? One, who wore the flashy clothes and made loud laughter in the halls, is now a man of God, a solemn, earnest pulpiteer. Cephus, the boy who won and lost, is dead. And Pogie Walker's dead. It is remarkable how many of those I came to know in 1919 are dead. Birdie, Sweetie Pie, and Oliver. Viny? After she quit and moved away, she used to write me once a year on cheap, lined paper. "I'm doing alrite." (She never learned to spell.) "I'm living alrite. I gess I'm geting along alrite. How do these few lines fine you?" And Brunson, the smartest of that migrant lot, who outran, outfought, outthought all of us. He was expelled for writing a letter and passing it among the students. Most of the things he said were true—the exclusion of the very black from the first yearbook, the way one teacher had of referring to the black-skinned kids as "You, Cloudy, there," and never remembering their names. Well, Brunson is a week-end drunk. At other times he's very bitter. Not long ago I saw him. I spoke to him. "You don't remember me," I said. "Yeah. I remember you all right. So what?" He lives down on the east side, way down, where in the spring the river comes.



Miss Edwina Kruse, long-time principal of Howard High School
(From a portrait by Clawson Hammitt, courtesy of Howard High Alumni
Association)

Part 6

Miss Kruse was right in this: I did go to college.

My mother was recently dead, and a temporary sentimental weakness settled on my father. He did not wish me to go far from home. He considered me too young in 1923 to go off alone to the college in New England from which my brother had just been graduated. I had first to spend a year at Lincoln University, a Negro college run by a white Presbyterian church board in Pennsylvania, only twenty-odd miles from home. That I should go to college was a matter of course. I was just seventeen, and I felt no compelling drive. There was nothing in particular that I wanted to learn, and I had given no thought to a career. The driven, sharp ambition of some of the chaps (and especially those from the South) I met there surprised and bewildered me. They seemed to me to have a brazen, articulating cunning. They thought of education exclusively in terms of prestige value. They wanted to be doctors and lawyers—doctors mostly—professions to which they referred as "rackets." There was money in them, and they were motivated by the desire to possess, as indeed they put it, yellow money, yellow cars, and yellow women. They studied textbooks to that end. Almost none of them did any reading beyond the requirements of courses. Each had a singleness of purpose that seemed to me even then as ruthless and as uninspired as the flame of an acetylene torch. It was deadly. It was unmixed with either cynicism or idealism. All their instincts, all their forces were channelized to flow in one swift, hard, straight stream, to settle at last in a kind of dull gray lake of fulfillment.

Perhaps this would have been better for me. But I could not see life with such baneful certainty. There stirred sluggishly in me a consciousness of certain incommensurables that could not be measured out in the scales of personal ambition, a certain imponderability that could not be weighed in terms of biology, chemistry, civics, and Greek—or in any other terms of which I knew. I could not spin in a whirring cosmos of my own creation, as the others did. I could not create a cosmos; I haunted others. I could not even spin; I wobbled.

I was lonely a good deal. I studied enough, but with no other purpose than

to put a face on things, to make a pretense of ambition that I did not have, for I was ashamed of my groping uncertainty. I read with indiscriminate avidity. The library was open only two hours a day, but I got special permission and a key and spent greedy hours there. Most of the books were old, and three-fourths of them on theology, but in a tumulus of dust I found Stendhal, Meredith, Thackeray, Trevelyan, Bierce, Miller, William James, Dreiser, Henry George, and a half-dozen paper-bound plays by Sedley, Wycherley, and Congreve, which, I am certain, Professor Labaree did not know were there. On Sunday nights I walked four miles to a mission church and listened to the singing of such starkly primitive and beautiful music as I had never heard. At the end of my first year, I transferred to Brown, in Providence, and no one at Lincoln missed me.

There were two other Negroes at Brown, both seniors at the time, and Clyde Bastrop came in my second year. Bastrop and I could have roomed together at a saving, but we did not, for we took elaborate precautions against even the appearance of clannishness. I had found this peculiar behavior in the two seniors, and apparently it had come down to them from a long, thin line of Negro students. Yet among them there must have been a terrific consciousness of kind, just as there was between Bastrop and me. Our denials of this consciousness sometimes took the most exaggerated forms. We made a great show of not seeking each other's companionship, meeting always apparently by accident, and never in the Union or the Commons or the library, and only in each other's rooms at night with the shades drawn. We never ate together. We recognized no snubs or slights from white associates. We did not even talk of them to each other in the secret of our rooms at night with the shades down. Once in a biology class, the instructor, a man from Tennessee, referred to "niggers" in a humorous, insulting way, but I said nothing. Once a professor committed an act of discrimination so flagrant that even one of his assistants rebelled, but I pretended not to notice. Bastrop and I underwent a kind of purge, but we denied any sense of martyrdom. We were lost in the sacrificial, foreordained, pitilessly wretched way in which the not-quite-saved are lost. But we were not alone. Negro boys in colleges all over New England were also lost; and on occasional very rowdy, very unrestrained parties in Boston we cemented with them a desperate bond of frustration.

These parties were the measure of our tense neurosis, our desperation. I see that now. With an abiding strain of puritanism, I was inclined in those years to put an undue weight of moral significance upon the sins we committed. For days after a week end saved from utter beastliness only by a certain controlling melancholy cynicism, a sort of soul-sickness, I suffered an agony of remorse. I reviled and despised myself. I hated the housemaids, the elevator girls, the hairdressers, and the occasional college girls who shared our unrestraint. But I went again. I always went, as a sick dog returns to his vomit. That shameless bitchery! Those shoddy, temporarily freeing, hysterical bacchanalia!

We thought we had the strained, fine courage of strong men who are doomed and know they are doomed. In reality we carried on a sort of blind quest for disaster, for demotic and moral suicide outside the harbors of sanity.

It was following one of these parties in the late winter of 1926 that Bastrop left. Still red-eyed with sleeplessness, he came to my room in Hope College. He was a round-faced boy, extroverted, I thought, and with a capacity for playing practical jokes of a complicated nature. But this day he was subdued, looking inward upon himself and not liking what he saw.

"I'm leaving," he said, without preliminaries.

"Leaving school, you mean?"

"Yes," he said, and fell silent. He sat on the bed and leaned backward on his elbows. Then he turned over and lay with his chin on his fist, staring at the wall. Around his eyes the skin was almost white, as if he had worn dark glasses in the hot sun for a long time. He raised his head and said, "Yes. I'm leaving." "But why?" I asked. "What's eating you?"

With a sudden twisting movement he was up and sitting on the edge of the bed, hunched over, hard-drawn. I knew he was not joking.

"There must be some place better than this. God damn it, there must be! I can find a place somewhere. This isn't the place for me. I feel like everybody's staring at me, all these white guys, waiting for me to make a bad break. Things I'd do without thinking about them, I do now like they were the most important things in the whole damned world. How the hell do you stand it? We're always talking about being casual. All right. But what do we do?"

He got up nervously, but sat down again almost at once. "I'll tell you good and damn well what we do! We put on the damnedest airs in the world. We're showing off. Casually, casually, by Christ! And yet everything comes so hard you can hear us breathing way over on George Street. I'm sick of being casual! I want to be honest and sincere about something. I want to stop feeling like fall apart if I unclench my teeth. Oh Christ!"

He looked wretched. He sat there on the edge of the bed with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders drawn in a hard curve, as if he were out in the cold without an overcoat. The religious medallion which he wore on a silver chain around his neck had worked through his shirt and he seemed to be staring at it.

"Listen, Bastrop," I said.

He looked up. "Listen, hell! I'm tired of listening," he said angrily.

It was just as well, for I do not know what I would have said. There is no answer to truth. I do not know what I thought or felt other than the need to retreat from the truth against which all my defenses had toppled. Suddenly all my resiliency was gone. I started to make some tea, but even as I made it, I knew that tea-making was another bluff, a flimsy protective device, like our careful speech, our careful avoidance of clannishness, and I knew at the same time that these things were necessary to us in the same way a sheath is necessary to a sword. I did not want to lose my hard, fine edge, as Bastrop was doing, I thought cynically.

"That was a hell of a party in Springfield," I said.

Bastrop looked up with angry eagerness. "Did you see Jerry?" Jerry was a girl we knew from Philadelphia who was a student in Boston.

"Yes. Sure."

"Listen. Do you enjoy those breakdowns? Do you really have fun?"

"Sure. Yes," I said.

"All that hog-wallowing?"

"It's something to do. You got to do something." He looked at me with strange aversion, I thought. But his thoughts were not on me, for he said:

"Jerry enjoyed it. She actually got a kick out of it," he said, as if he could

not believe it. "And when a girl like that enjoys that . . . Well, we were dancing," he said, as if he were wretchedly eager to get something off his mind. "We were dancing and she said she was enjoying it, said she was going to be herself. She wasn't drunk then either. She didn't get drunk until later. You saw how drunk she got. She got pie-eyed."

"Why did you take her in the first place?" I said. "You knew what kind of party it was going to be."

"I don't know," he said miserably.

"Did you...?" He looked at me for a wild, frightened, shamefaced moment and dropped his head. I diverted myself in sham anger.

"So that's the real reason you're leaving. You're afraid," I said.

He stood up. "Afraid? Afraid? Yes, God damn it! I'm afraid. But I'm not afraid of what you think. I'm afraid of getting like the rest of the guys. I'm afraid of not having anything inside, of getting so that if anybody touches me I'll fall apart. I've still got enough left to know that there's something wrong with this, and I'm leaving before that goes too!"

That night Bastrop left on the night boat. I never saw him again, for in the late spring he killed himself in the bathroom of his parents' home in Cleveland. He was the first of five suicides in a half-dozen years from that group I knew in New England. Two of them were girls. By any reckoning, this is a high percentage. Excluding that numerous crowd of fourflushers who took an evening course here and there in the various colleges in Boston, there were not more than fifteen of us who knew each other intimately as fellow collegians.

Part 7

In my senior year I met Lebman. For several lonely months I had been the only Negro in the college, and the sense of competitive enmity, which began to develop slowly in me in my second year, was now at its height. It was more than a sense of competition. It was a perverted feeling of fighting alone against the whole white world. I raged with secret hatred and fear. I hated and feared the whites. I hated and feared and was ashamed of Negroes. (The memory of it even now is painful to me.) I shunned contacts with the general run of the latter, confining myself to the tight little college group centered around Boston. But even this group was no longer as satisfying as once it had been, and I gradually withdrew from it, though the bond of frustration was strong. But my own desperation was stronger. I wished to be alone. My room in the University Hall had almost no visitors, but it was peopled by a thousand nameless fears.

Furtively trying to burn out the dark, knotted core of emotion, I wrote acidulous verse and sent bitter essays and stories to various Negro magazines. One editor wrote, "You must be crazy!" Perhaps I was. I was obsessed by nihilistic doctrine. Democracy? It was a failure. Religion? A springe to catch woodcocks. Truth? There was no objective ground of truth, nothing outside myself that made morality a principle. Destroy and destroy, and perhaps, I remember writing cynically, "from the ashes of nothingness will spring a phoenix not altogether devoid of beauty." All my thoughts and feelings were but symptomatic of a withering, grave sickness of doubt.

And then I met Lebman.

He was a Jew. He had lived across the hall from me since the fall, and I had seen him once or twice in only the most casual way. Then late one night he knocked at my door. When I opened it, he was standing there pale and smiling, a lock of damp, dark hair falling across his wide, knotty forehead.

"I saw your light. Do you mind if I ask you something?" he said diffidently.

"Come in," I said automatically; but all my defenses immediately went up.

Still smiling shyly, he came into the room and stood in the center of the

floor. He carried a book in his hand, his longer fingers marking the place. He was wearing pajamas and a robe. I remember I did not close the door nor sit down at first, but stood awkwardly waiting, trying to exorcise my suspicion and fear. He looked around the room with quiet, friendly curiosity.

"I've been reading your stuff in the Quarterly," he said. "It's good."

"Thanks," I said. And I remember thinking, 'Don't try to flatter me, damn you. I don't fall for that stuff.' Then I tried to get a hold of myself, groping at my tangled feelings with clumsy fingers of thought in an action almost physical. "Thanks."

"I think you're after something," he said. It was a cliché, and I did not like talking about my writing. It was always like undressing before strangers. But Leberman was sincere, and now unembarrassed.

"You do?" I said, trying to say it in a tone that would end it.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Oh, it's plain in your writing. You know, I correct papers in philosophy too. Your paper on Unamuno, it was plain there. That paper was all right too."

"I wish I knew what I was after, or that I was after something," I said defensively, cynically. I closed the door. Then in the still, sharp silence that followed, I moved to the desk and turned the chair to face the other chair in the corner. Leberman sat down.

"What I came in to see you about was this," he said, holding the book up. And in another moment, without really asking me anything, he had plunged into a brilliant, brooding discussion of Rudolph Fisher's *Walls of Jericho*, the book he held in his hand, and of men and books. I listened captiously at first. He did not speak in the rhapsodic way of one who merely loves books and life. He spoke as one who understands and both loves and hates. He sat in the chair in the corner, where the light from the reading lamp fell upon his pale face, his narrow, angular shoulders. Through the window at his elbow we could see the mist-shrouded lights outlining the walks of the middle campus. Leberman talked and talked. I listened.

I do not remember all he said between that midnight and dawn, but one thing I do remember.

"I'm a Jew. I tried denying it, but it was no use. I suppose everyone at some time or other tries to deny some part or all of himself. Suicides, some crazy people go all the way. But spiritual schizophrenes aren't so lucky as suicides and the hopelessly insane. I used to think that only certain Jews suffered from this—the Jews who turn Christian and marry Christian and change their names from Lowenstein to Lowe and Goldberg to Goldsborough and still aren't happy. But they're not the only ones. Fisher makes a point of that. I thought so until I read him. You ought to read him, if you haven't."

"I've read him," I said, trying to remember the point.

"Schizophrenia in the mind, that's the curse of God; but in the spirit, it's man's curse upon himself. It took me a long time—all through college, through three years of reading manuscripts for a publisher, through another two years of graduate school—it took me years to realize what a thing it is. I'm a thirty-six-year-old bird, and I've only just found my roost."

"That's what you want, a roost, a home. And not just a place to hang your hat, but someplace where your spirit's free, where you belong. That's what everybody wants. Not a place in space, you understand. Not a marked place, geographically bounded. Not a place at all, in fact. It's hard to tell to others," he said. "But it's a million things and people, a kind of life and thought that your spirit touches, absorbed and absorbing, understood and understanding, and feels completely free and whole and one."

That midnight conversation—though it was scarcely that—recurred to me many times in the years immediately following.

When I came up for graduation in 1928, it still had not occurred to me to think of finding work to do that would turn my education to some account. My brother had been graduated from Harvard Law, and I thought randomly of earning money to follow him there. My credits were transferred. But I earned very little and I could discover in myself no absorbing interest, no recognition of a purpose. The summer blazed along to August. Then, out of the blue, John Hope offered me a job at Morehouse College in Atlanta. I took it. I was twenty-one in October of that fall, a lonely, random-brooding youth, uncertain, purposeless, lost, and yet so tightly wound that every day I lived

big-eyed as death in sharp expectancy of a mortal blow or a vitalizing fulfillment of the unnameable aching emptiness within me.

But Morehouse College and the southern environment disappointed me. The college tottered with spiritual decay. Its students were unimaginative, predatory, pretentious. Theirs was a naked, metal-hard world, stripped of all but its material values, and these glittered like artificial gems in the sun of their ambition. An unwholesome proportion of the faculty was effete, innocuous, and pretentious also, with a flabby softness of intellectual and spiritual fiber and even a lack of personal force. They clustered together like sheared sheep in a storm. They were a sort of mass-man, conscious of no spiritual status even as men, much less as a people. They were a futile, hamstrung group, who took a liberal education (they despised mechanical and technical learning) to be a process of devitalization and to be significant in extrinsics only. They awarded a lot of medallions and watch charms. Try as I might, I could feel no kinship with them. Obviously my home was not among them.

I thought often of Lebman in the pre-dawn quiet of my room, saying, "Not a place in geography, but a million things and people your spirit touches, absorbed and absorbing." I did not want sanctuary, a soft nest protected from the hard, strengthening winds that blew hot and cold through the world's teeming, turbulent valley. I wanted to face the wind. I wanted the strength to face it to come from some inexpressibly deep well of feeling of oneness with the wind, of belonging to something, some soul-force outside myself, bigger than myself, but yet a part of me. Not family merely, or institution, or race; but a people and all their topless strivings; a nation and its million destinies. I did not think in concrete terms at first. Indeed, I had but the shadow of this thought and feeling. But slowly the shadow grew, taking form and outline, until at last I felt and knew that my estrangement from my fellows and theirs from me was but a failure to realize that we were all estranged from something fundamentally ours. We were all withdrawn from the heady, brawling, lusty stream of culture which had nourished us and which was the stream by whose turbid waters all of America fed. We were spiritually homeless, dying and alone, each on his separate hammock of memory and experience.

This was emotional awareness. Intellectual comprehension came slowly,

painfully, as an abscess comes. I laid no blame beyond immediate experience. Through hurt and pride and fear, they of this class (and of what others I did not know) had deliberately cut themselves off not only from their historical past but also from their historical future. Life had become a matter of asylum in some extra time-sphere whose hard limits were the rising and the setting sun. Each day was another and a different unrelated epoch in which they had to learn again the forgetting of ancestral memory, to learn again to bar the senses from the sights and sounds and tastes of a way of life that they denied, to close the mind to the incessant close roar of a world to which they felt unrelated. This vitiated them, wilted them, dwarfed their spirits, and they slunk about their gray astringent world like ghosts from the shores of Lethe.

I tried fumblingly to tell them something of this, for my desire for spiritual wholeness was great. I yearned for some closer association with these men and women, some bond that was not knit of frustration and despair. In impersonal terms I tried to tell them something of this. They snubbed me. They looked upon me as a pariah who would destroy their societal bond, their asylum. They called me fool—and perhaps I was. Certainly I was presumptuous. Their whispers and their sterile laughter mocked me. They were at pains to ridicule me before the students. They called me radical, and it was an expletive the way they used it, said in the same way that one calls another a snake. For three years I held on, and then I was fired.

But my seeking grew in intensity and the need to find became an ache almost physical. For seven, eight years after that I sought with the same frantic insatiability with which one lives through a brutal, lustful dream. It was planless seeking, for I felt then that I would not know the thing I sought until I found it. It was both something within and something without myself. Within, it was like the buried memory of a name that will not come to the tongue for utterance. Without, it was the muffled roll of drums receding through a darkling wood. And so, restricted in ways I had no comprehension of, I sought, and everywhere—because I sought among the things and folk I knew — I went unfinding.



Saunders with Esther in the winter of 1929

BIOGRAPHY OF J. SAUNDERS REDDING

by
Annette Woolard

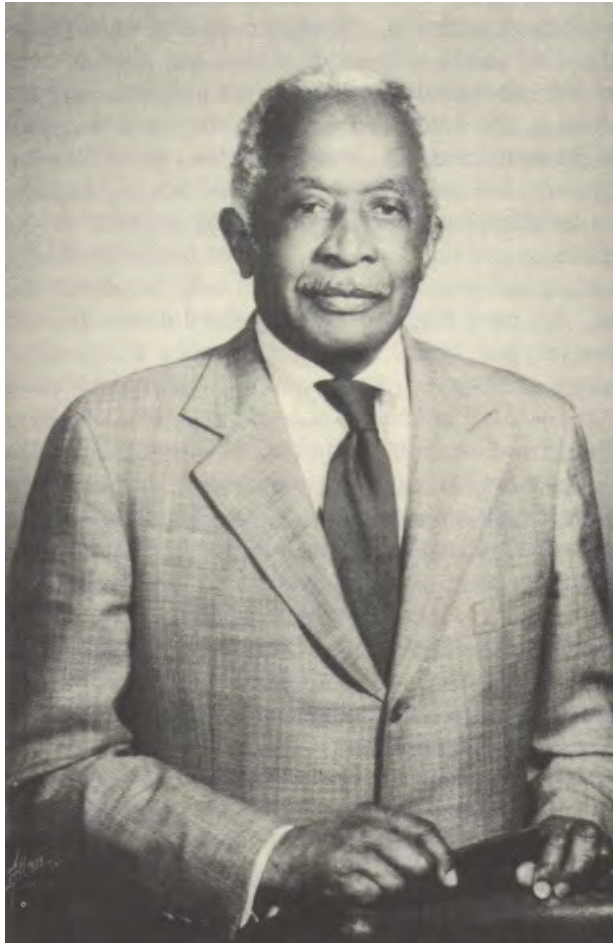
What a provocative glimpse into his own childhood and into our community history J. Saunders Redding gave us with this first chapter of *No Day of Triumph*. He told a very personal story with this autobiographical portrait, and not always a pretty one, but we are lucky to have such a vivid account from the African-American community. Redding wanted us to know, to understand, what it was like to grow up in Wilmington, and to be black and middle class and gifted. Emotional and intellectual tension characterized his world.

Wilmington was a tough town for African-Americans in the early twentieth century. Delaware was a "Jim Crow" state and Wilmington a "Jim Crow" city. Laws, not just custom, discriminated against blacks and kept blacks and whites separated in most areas of life. Black children could not go to school with white children and could not play in the city parks. Hospitals placed all black patients in basement wards. White-owned restaurants did not have to serve black customers. Theaters owned by whites either did not let blacks in to watch movies and plays or made their African-American customers use a separate entrance and sit in the balcony, away from the white audience. African-Americans had fewer choices than whites for where they could live too. Most blacks could not buy homes in nice neighborhoods. This was partly because the big businesses and big department stores rarely hired black workers, and even then usually for only the lowest-paid jobs. So, most blacks could not afford decent housing. However, part blame also lay with white home-sellers, realtors, and bankers. Real estate and lending institutions often would not sell houses or lend money to blacks trying to buy in the nicer neighborhoods. This discrimination explains why the Reddings had to sneak into their new home on a pleasant elm-covered block of East Tenth Street. Saunders Redding, his family, and the other blacks who eventually moved onto his block, knew they were the lucky few.

Redding's pleasant surroundings gave him many happy childhood

memories. He liked his neighborhood and his home, and he felt secure and loved there. He lived near many of his teachers, like the venerable Edwina Kruse mentioned in *No Day of Triumph*, and they encouraged him and wished him success in life. He came from a respected middle-class family that did not want for necessities. By working hard, Redding's father made enough money so that the children always had not only food to eat but books to read, and could go to school every day.

Yet, Saunders Redding was a sensitive young person, and he felt angry and confused by the discrimination African-Americans faced in Wilmington, in America. The way lighter-skinned, wealthier blacks discriminated against the darker-skinned, poorer members of his race disturbed him even more. Redding understood middle-class blacks had learned their prejudice from the realities of white society, but he also understood how that prejudice hurt. It perhaps hurt the middle-class blacks most of all, because it made them feel a part of neither the black world nor the white world.



Saunders brother, Louis, Delaware's first black attorney
Photo courtesy of Wilmington News Journal

Redding learned the hurt caused by color and class prejudice within his own family. The contrast between the background of his dark-skinned, ex-slave Grandmother Redding and that of his lively, light-skinned Grandmother Conway engrossed him. Grandmother Conway was not "better" than Grandmother Redding, but she clearly had "more"—more sophistication, more money, more education, more confidence, just more. This had bothered the child Saunders; it still bothered the adult.

Saunders Redding felt very close to and proud of his family. Born October 13, 1905, Saunders was the third of the five Redding children to survive infancy. The Redding household was a warm, albeit a disciplined and intellectual, one. The children dearly loved Mary Ann, their "Ma-MA," and her early death left a void in the family, but not a permanent one. Lewis Redding, "Pa-PA," fulfilling a promise he had made to Mary Ann on her deathbed, married his wife's sister Lillian, who took over the mother's responsibilities in the home. Lewis was a leader of the African-American community in Wilmington. One of the first black postal carriers in the state, he tried in many other ways to break racial barriers and improve the quality of life of his community. Lewis participated in Republican party politics, helped found Wilmington's NAACP branch, and was an early lobbyist for the YMCA to open a branch to serve the black community.

All of the Redding children, including Saunders, went on to impressive careers. The eldest son, Louis, became the first black lawyer in the state of Delaware. Louis was responsible for ending the separation between whites and blacks in the state's schools, restaurants, theaters, and hospitals. One of his cases went before the United States Supreme Court as part of the *Brown v Topeka Board of Education* suit that ended school segregation across the nation. Louis and Saunders had three sisters, although only two lived into adulthood. Those two, Gwendolyn and Lillian, both became beloved and respected teachers in the Wilmington public schools.



Lillian and Carroll (Saunders's second youngest sister and her husband)

Saunders also had his own family. In 1929, one year after he graduated from Brown University (the New England school described in *No Day of Triumph*), Redding married his longtime sweetheart, Esther Elizabeth James. He had known Esther since both attended Howard High School, and over the years the couple had become completely devoted to each other. They married secretly while Redding was teaching at Morehouse College in Atlanta, and they lived apart for the first year because he could not support her on his salary and she faced losing her job as a public school teacher if her principal discovered she had married. After that first year, however, Saunders Redding rarely spent time apart from "his Esther." The couple had two sons. Conway, named after "Ma-MA's" family, came first in 1935. Lewis, named after "Pa-PA," followed nearly ten years later in 1944.

Only this first chapter of *No Day of Triumph* depicted Redding's family life and his Wilmington childhood. The rest of the book focussed on the journey that J. Saunders Redding took by car through the black South. In 1940, as a young English professor at a small Southern black college, Redding had been hired to research and write a book. Chapter two of *No Day of Triumph* explains his mission:

"In 1940, with funds provided by one of the great Foundations [the Rockefeller Foundation], a liberal Southern institution [the University of North Carolina] invited me to do a job....

'Go out into Negro life in the South.

Go anywhere you like.' "

So Redding rode out onto the back roads, into farm lands and mining towns, into small towns and big cities. He painted a vivid picture of the hopes and dreams, the trials, poverty, and powerlessness of Southern blacks—and of African-Americans in general. For his efforts, Redding won a great deal of critical praise and the Mayflower Award for literature, becoming the first African-American to win this North Carolina literary prize given each year by that state's Mayflower descendants.

J. Saunders Redding loved to write. Before his marriage, he had told his fiance that she would always be his second love. Yet, writing came hard for Redding. He once spent a whole day in his office, laboring over a story, only to announce at dinner that he had written just one acceptable line, and even

that might be scrapped. Nonetheless, Redding was a prolific author. *No Day of Triumph* was his second book, and he would pen six more, co-edit two others, and publish many articles and essays.

The theme of most of Redding's work revolved around race and race relations. He usually wrote, as he did in *No Day of Triumph*, about the particular difficulties faced by blacks in America, often focussing on the peculiar circumstances of middle-class blacks such as himself. In *On Being Negro in America*, perhaps Redding's greatest book, he wrote, "from adolescence to death there is something very personal about being Negro in America. It is like having a second ego which is as much the conscious subject of all experience as the rational self." Later he discussed his weariness with continuous wrestling over the race issue; "I do not wish to live with the race problem for the next one hundred years—though of course I shall not live that long. I do not wish to die knowing that my children and theirs to the third generation must live with it. I have known it too long and too intimately already. It has itself been an imperative, channeling more of my energies than I wished to spare through the narrow gorge of race interest."

Saunders Redding was also one of the first scholars to write about black history, about the experiences of African-Americans and about the contributions to American history and culture of various black writers, philosophers, doctors, scientists, soldiers, and adventurers. Redding, in fact, criticized some of the great white historians for neglecting this very real part of American history. Great historians, he believed, should have known better than to ignore an entire people. Redding also wrote about black literature, and he had his students read the works of black authors. He always taught African-American literature, history, and culture in his classes, but he liked to teach about the black experience within the context of the American experience. Saunders Redding argued that African-Americans as well as whites had helped create and mold this country. No one could properly teach about America without including blacks, nor could they teach about blacks without including white Americans. He took it upon himself—indeed, it became his mission—to integrate literature, history, and culture studies.

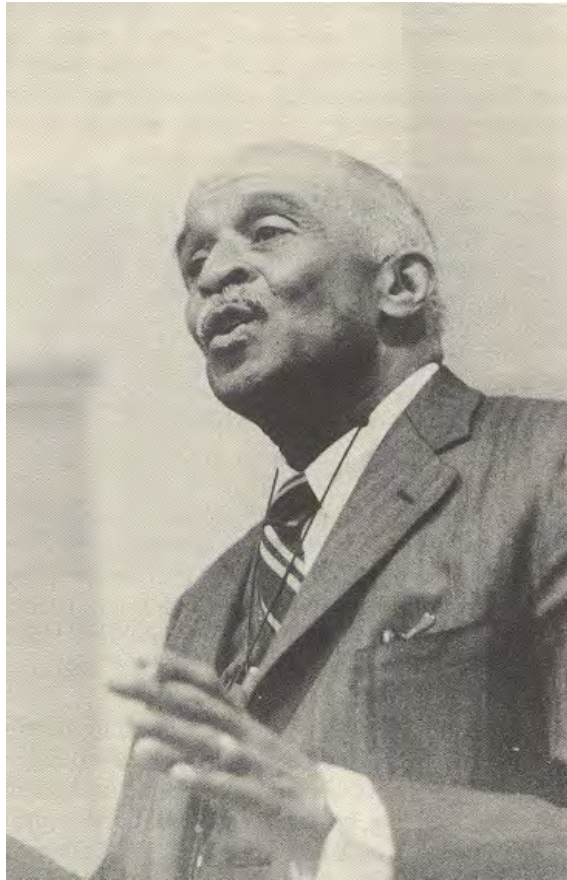


Saunders and Esther with children Conway and Lewis at Hampton Institute, circa 1951

Much of Redding's work, like *No Day of Triumph*, sounded a sad, pessimistic, or angry note. Redding often did feel despair about American race relations and intra-race relations, but he did not live a sad and pessimistic life. He enjoyed both a successful career and a happy, love-filled private life.

J. Saunders Redding's career did not, in the end, fit the troubled image he painted in the final pages of chapter one of *No Day of Triumph*. After getting fired from Morehouse for being too liberal, Redding went back to graduate school at Brown, where he earned an M.A. degree in English, and then to Columbia University, where he took a few additional courses. He enjoyed his years as a graduate student, and then moved into his career as an author and academic. Redding worked very hard and eventually became known as an elegant, eloquent intellectual, a skilled and very demanding teacher of English, and a born writer.

Redding spent his early career teaching at several small black colleges in the South. In the days before the civil-rights movement, white universities did not hire black professors. Redding, however, would soon move into the inner circle of the black academic world. His talents and his first two books earned him a job in 1943 at Hampton Institute in eastern Virginia, one of the oldest and most important black schools. Redding eventually became Hampton's James Weldon Johnson professor of English, a highly prestigious position, and the Reddings felt they had found a home. During his years at Hampton, Saunders Redding wrote most of his books and gradually became well known outside the black college circle. The civil-rights movement created new opportunities for African-American scholars. Redding began to travel extensively, often with Esther, for vacation and for work. He accepted many invitations to speak at major universities, and he sometimes left Hampton for whole semesters to serve as visiting professor at other universities. In that capacity, he spent a semester at Duke University and travelled to Africa, to lecture at several universities there. In 1949, he taught courses at his alma mater, Brown University, becoming the first African-American to teach in the Ivy League.



Saunders lecturing at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri

In 1967, a professional conflict with Jerome Holland, the flamboyant new president of Hampton Institute, prompted Saunders Redding to give up his much-loved job. Now in his 60s, Redding moved to Washington, D.C., to consult for the National Endowment for the Humanities and, later, to teach part-time at George Washington University. By 1970, he might have thought about retiring, but once again the Ivy League called.

Cornell University wanted J. Saunders Redding on their faculty and they offered him an important professorship, the Ernest I. White chair, in their English department. Esther believed that she and her husband went to Ithaca, New York, for a weekend interview only on a lark, but to her surprise, Saunders took the job. Their children now grown, the Reddings moved to Cornell to enjoy the rest of their career and life together.

At Cornell, Redding stood as a venerable figure, but the later stages of the civil-rights movement had made him a bit of a relic, as well. He found himself locked in argument against his younger black students and colleagues who wanted to form separate black-studies departments, separate black-studies courses, and separate black student unions and student centers. Redding continued to stand for integration and argued that separatism, even when desired by the minority group, carried the stigma of inferiority. While Redding fought in vain for integrated African-American studies and activities only, his opponents never lost respect for the now-aging "dean of black letters."

In his last years, Saunders Redding suffered from Alzheimer's disease, a cruel fate for someone with his active and restless intellect. Fortunately, he did not suffer long. He died on March 2, 1988, nursed in his Ithaca home to the very end by "his Esther." In recent years, interest in Redding's work has reappeared and two of his books have been reprinted. The Delaware Heritage Commission reprint of chapter one of *No Day of Triumph* reflects this rekindled interest. It is well that we remember him.

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Saunders and Esther together at home in Ithaca, New York about 1974

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