

Lorraine Hansberry

from To Be Young, Gifted and Black

Chicago: South Side Summers

1.

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

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

2.

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

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

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

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

3.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We have changed little. . . .

4.

Seven years separated the nearest of my brothers and sisters and myself; I wear, I am sure, the earmarks of that familial station to this day. Little has been written or thought to my knowledge about children who occupy that place: the last born separated by an uncommon length of time from the next youngest. I suspect we are probably a race apart.

The last born is an object toy which comes in years when brothers and sisters who are seven, ten, twelve years older are old enough to appreciate it rather than poke out its eyes. They do not mind diapering you the first two years, but by the time you are five you are a pest that has to be attended to in the washroom, taken to the movies and "sat with" at night. You are not a person--you are a nuisance who is not particular fun any more. Consequently, you swiftly learn to play alone. . . .

5.

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

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

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

"May I?"

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

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

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

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

A giant step to where?

6.

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

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

7.

The man that I remember was an educated soul, though I think now, looking back, that it was as much a matter of the physical bearing of my father as his command of information and of thought that left that impression upon me. I know nothing of the "assurance of kings" and will not use that metaphor on account of it. Suffice it to say that my father's enduring image in my mind is that of a man whom kings might have imitated and properly created their own flattering descriptions of. A man who always seemed to be doing something brilliant and/or unusual to such an extent that to be doing something brilliant and/or unusual was the way I assumed fathers behaved.

He digested the laws of the State of Illinois and put them into little booklets. He invented complicated pumps and railroad devices. He could talk at length on American history and private enterprise (to

which he utterly subscribed). And he carried his head in such a way that I was quite certain that there was nothing he was afraid of. Even writing this, how profoundly it shocks my inner senses to realize suddenly that *my father*, like all men, must have known *fear*. . . .

8.

April 23, 1964

To the Editor,
The New York Times:

With reference to civil disobedience and the Congress of Racial Equality stall-in:

. . . My father was typical of a generation of Negroes who believed that the "American way" could successfully be made to work to democratize the United States. Thus, twenty-five years ago, he spent a small personal fortune, his considerable talents, and many years of his life fighting, in association with NAACP¹ attorneys, Chicago's "restrictive covenants" in one of this nation's ugliest ghettos.

That fight also required that our family occupy the disputed property in a hellishly hostile "white neighborhood" in which, literally, howling mobs surrounded our house. One of their missiles almost took the life of the then eight year-old signer of this letter. My memories of this "correct" way of fighting white supremacy in America included being spat at, cursed and pummeled in the daily trek to and from school. And I also remember my desperate and courageous mother, patrolling our house all night with a loaded German Luger, doggedly guarding her four children, while my father fought the respectable part of the battle in the Washington court.

The fact that my father and the NAACP “won” a Supreme Court decision, in a now famous case which bears his name in the law books, is -- ironically -- the sort of “progress” our satisfied friends allude to when they presume to deride the more radical means of struggle. The cost, in emotional turmoil, time and money, which led to my fathers early death as a permanently embittered exile in a foreign country when he saw that after such sacrificial efforts the Negroes of Chicago were as ghetto-locked as ever, does not seem to figure in their calculations

That is the reality that I am faced with when I now read that some Negroes my own age and younger say that we must now lie down in the streets, tie up traffic, do whatever we can -- take to the hills with guns if necessary--and fight back. Fatuous people remark these days on our “bitterness.” Why, of course we are bitter. The entire situation suggests that the nation be reminded of the too little noted final lines of Langston Hughes’ mighty poem.²

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore-
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over-
Like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Sincerely,

Lorraine Hansberry

From the book TO BE YOUNG, GIFTED AND BLACK: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words, adapted by Robert Nemiroff. Copyright 1969 by Robert Nemiroff and Robert Nemiroff as Executor of the Estate of Lorraine Hansberry.

Copyright 1959, 1951 by Langston Hughes. Reprinted from THE PANTHER AND THE LASH, by Langston Hughes, by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and Harold Ober Associates, Inc.

1. NAACP, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

2. *Langston Hughes’ mighty poem, “Harlem,”* later published under the title “Dream Deferred.”

Mr. Marshall
English 8

To Be Young, Gifted and _____?
An 8 Part
Autobiography

100 pt. Major Grade

Each of you will write an eight part paper in which you will write about the same elements of your life as Lorraine Hansberry wrote about hers. For the eighth section, you should write about something for which you feel great passion, as Hansberry felt about her ethnicity.

You will write the sections in this order: **5, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 1.**

The length and depth of each section is up to the individual writer, but the topics will be determined as follows:

1. Why is it important to write about me.
2. The place where I grew up and how it influenced me.
3. How members of my family relate to each other emotionally.
4. How birth order affected me.
5. Games I played as a child.
6. Things we did as a family.
7. My _____.
8. To be young, gifted, and what?

You will format your paper like Hansberry's. Errors should be minimal. Remember, you will share this with your family when completed and you will want to, hopefully, save it forever.