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RALPH ELLISON GOES HOME

The author of "Invisible Man" revisits his Oklahoma childhood.

By Jervis Anderson

> Ah, here's Ralph again, talking about America. There's no goddam America out there.—*One of his detractors.*

As one quickly gathers from his conversations and occasional writings, Ralph Ellison is much preoccupied—as an individual, as a Negro American (an expression he persists in using), and as a writer—with the not so fashionable conviction that, when met with courage and determination, there is almost no predicament that cannot be converted into "benefits and victories." If Ellison, who is now sixty-two, is asked to explain the source of this optimism, he

might point to what he has been able to make of his own life. But since he dislikes calling attention to his achievement, he is more than likely to point to his background as an Oklahoman—to the "sense of possibility" he developed while growing up in one of the younger states of the Union. Hardly anyone who has listened to him speaking about the Oklahoma of his boyhood can have failed to come away with the impression that it retains an exceptional influence upon his outlook, and that he continues to harbor an affection for the region which far exceeds what people ordinarily feel for distant places in which they were raised.

By now, after forty years of living in the city, Ellison has every right to consider himself a New Yorker. Yet he still sees and describes—sometimes even introduces—himself as an Oklahoman and a Southwesterner. His writings have drawn deeply upon the materials of his early experience. "The act of writing," he has said, "requires a constant plunging back into the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike." In a talk I had with him not long ago, I asked him what some of the ways were in which, while living in New York, he remained in touch with his background. "Well, for one thing," he said, "I dream constantly of Oklahoma City. My childhood is there. And, as you know, you tend to dream, can't help dreaming, of your early experiences and of the people you first knew. Old faces and old things are always turning up. As a result, my early life stays fresh. Then, at least once a month, I get on the phone and call up people in Oklahoma City, people I've known since I was a child. So it's a continuing relationship." Ellison treasures a small medal stamped with the seal of Oklahoma which was given to him in 1966, when the governor of the state invited him back—along with Maria Tallchief, the ballerina, and Roy Harris, the composer—for a ceremony in honor of well-known Oklahomans in the arts. "I keep it," Ellison said to me, "partly out of my sense of ceremony, and partly to remind myself from whence I came."

One of Ellison's boyhood idols was the late Jimmy Rushing, the jazz singer, who was also an Oklahoman. In his later years, Rushing lived in Queens. And before Rushing died, Ellison—who lives in Washington Heights—made a habit of calling him up on the phone to talk about the blues and their common background as Oklahomans. Rushing's wife was an excellent cook, and sometimes Ellison travelled over to Queens for an evening of "down-home" cooking. Albert Murray—a novelist, essayist, teacher, and retired Air Force major—is one of Ellison's closest friends in New York. They have known each other since the nineteen-thirties, when they were students at Tuskegee Institute, in Alabama. In a sense, Murray, who is from Alabama, serves as Ellison's Southern—as opposed to Southwestern—connection. Murray shares with Ellison a seriocomic sense of things, especially things Negro-American. "Ralph is always close to his roots," Murray told me recently. "He keeps in touch with as many reminders of his background as possible. People are always saying you can't go home again. Well, hell, you're *always* home!"

In "North Toward Home," published in 1967, Willie Morris, who was raised in Mississippi, and educated partly in Texas and partly at Oxford, England, had this to say about some of his experiences in New York City, where he was an editor of *Harper's:*

> I first met Ellison at a cocktail party given by the *Paris Review* group in an art gallery on the Upper East Side. My wife, Celia, William Styron, Ellison, and I stood off in a corner and confessed to one another that the four of us probably had more in common than we had with all the other writers and authors and intellectuals and editors within hailing distance.
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> This original feeling was reinforced a few days later when Ellison

and his wife, Fanny, came to our apartment for dinner. I recognized from the first his distinctive *Southernness*, and how similar his was to my own. It would have been naïve to ignore the differences, but it was the similarities—temperamental, intellectual, imaginative—which interested me. . . . We shared the same easygoing conversation; the casual talk and the telling of stories, in the Southern verbal jam-session way; the sense of family and the past and people out of the past; the congenial social manner and the mischievous laughter; the fondness of especial *detail* and the suspicion of the more grandiose generalizations about human existence; the love of the American language in its accuracy and vividness and simplicity; the obsession with the sensual experience of America in all its extravagance and diversity; the love of animals and sports, of the outdoors and sour mash; the distrust in the face of provocation of certain manifestations of Eastern intellectualism, particularly in its more academic and sociological forms. . . . There would always be one's own complicated experience as a white Southern boy to come to terms with, yet during my first years in the Big Cave it was Ralph Ellison and our mutual friend Al Murray . . . who suggested to me as much as anyone else I had ever known the extent to which the

> and still live." Yet they tried to reduce their experience, not to polemicism but to metaphor. . . . They tried to understand themselves in the light of their own Southern and American experience. They refused to view their own Southern past apocalyptically, as if it had all been disaster. . . .At Al Murray's apartment in Harlem, on New Year's Day, 1967, the Murrays, the Ellisons, and the Morrises congregated for an unusual feast: bourbon, collard greens, black-eyed peas, ham-hocks, and cornbread—a kind of ritual for all of us. Where else in the East but in Harlem could a Southern white boy greet the New Year with the good-luck food he had had as a child, and feel at home as he seldom had thought he could in the Cave?

Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma City, in March of 1914. In 1933, when he was nineteen, he left to enter Tuskegee Institute on a music scholarship, two years after graduating from Douglass High School. In 1936, while he was still enrolled at Tuskegee, he took a trip to New York City, in search of employment for the summer. But his earnings were meagre, and, rather than go back to Tuskegee as insolvent as he had left, he decided to remain in New York, and after about two years here he decided to take up writing. He has been living in the city ever since—except for the winter of 1937, which he spent in Dayton, Ohio, where his mother had gone to live, and where she had suffered an accident that led to her death; the two years, from 1943 to 1945, that he served in the Merchant Marine as a baker and cook; and the two years, from 1955 to 1957, that he spent in Rome, as a fellow of the American Academy.

Ellison's decision to remain in New York worked out well when one thinks of the writer and intellectual figure he has become. But one is tempted to wonder how he might have turned out had he returned to Tuskegee and finished his studies. He played the trumpet, but his main ambition at Tuskegee was to be a

composer of symphonies. As a black man in the South or the Southwest, he would no doubt have had excellent chances of gaining recognition as a jazz trumpeter. But even he might not want to calculate the chances of attaining the first rank as a composer of symphonies. Yet one suspects he would have done rather well in either of those undertakings, in view of how patiently and rigorously he dedicated himself to mastering the craft of writing. So far, he has published only two books—"Invisible Man," the novel upon which his reputation chiefly rests, and "Shadow and Act," a collection of essays, literary criticism, speeches, interviews, and reviews. "Invisible Man," which came out in 1952, took him about seven years to write, and, for a novel of its thematic complexity and high technical accomplishment, seven years does not seem an unreasonably long time. He has been at work on his second novel—an excerpt has been published under the title "And Hickman Arrives"—for more than twenty years now. He started it in 1955, while he was in Rome. There was a terrible interruption—an event that Ellison describes as "one of the most traumatic of my life." In the late nineteen-sixties, he lost over three hundred and fifty pages of the manuscript in a fire that destroyed his summer house, in Plainfield, Massachusetts. Perhaps nothing more painful has occurred in the working life of a well-known writer since Thomas Carlyle lost the manuscript of the first volume of his history of the French Revolution, a servant in the home of John Stuart Mill having used it to help get a fire going. Carlyle is said to have sat down, with astonishing calmness, and reproduced what he had lost. Ellison found it difficult to begin the task of restructuring, rewriting, and recapturing the fluid composition and insights of the first draft. The subtleties and rhythms of a first inspiration are almost impossible to reclaim. But if it is at all possible to overcome these problems, then Ellison, with his belief that difficult circumstances can almost always be made to yield benefits and victories, is the sort of writer to do it.

Seldom has a writer gained so high a critical reputation on the strength of only one novel. It might even be said of Ellison—as it was said of E. M. Forster after he published "A Passage to India"—that his prestige seems to grow with every novel he doesn't write. "Invisible Man," the memoir of a hero without a name—and, for all the attention he has been paid in his life, also without a face—tells the story of a black youngster from the Deep South who journeys North, to Harlem and other sections of New York, during the Depression. In leaving the South, he has moved out of one of the undergrounds of black life, and come to what is supposed to be the center of economic opportunity, personal freedom, and enlightened conduct. He finds little or none of these things. His life in New York merely takes him through another series of undergrounds—whether it is in the work he finds to do, the radical political organization that recruits and uses him, or the oppressive conditions of life in Harlem. The worst underground of all is that of personal relationships, in which he is able to find no confirmation or recognition of his own individuality. Everyone tries to tell him who he is, what he should think, how he should behave—to make him into something he is not. After a riot in the streets of Harlem, during which he is chased and barely escapes with his life, he takes refuge in a manhole that leads to the abandoned basement of an apartment building. There—in yet another underground—he takes stock of himself and his quest. In attempting to discover at last the nature of his own individuality, he illuminates the basement, and himself, with thirteen hundred and sixty-nine light bulbs. "Light," he says, "confirms my reality, gives birth to my form." And continuing to report from his brightly lit hole in the ground, he adds, "All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of

my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man!" Ellison has described the novel as "a journey from illusion to reality." His friend Albert Murray has written, " 'Invisible Man' was *par excellence* the literary extension of the blues. It was as if Ellison had taken an everyday twelve-bar blues tune (by a man from down South sitting in a manhole up North in New York singing and signifying about how he got there) and scored it for full orchestra."

"Invisible Man" was a best-seller for thirteen weeks after it appeared. In 1953, it won the National Book Award, and is still the only novel by a black American to have been so honored. In 1965, two hundred well-known authors, editors, and critics—polled by *Book Week*, the literary-review supplement of the late New York *Herald Tribune*—selected "Invisible Man" as the most distinguished novel published by an American during the previous twenty years. It has by now appeared in fifteen languages. Here at home, paperback sales are still reasonably high, and the book has become required reading for many college courses in American literature. In recognition of his achievement, Ellison has been elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has served as a trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and as a member of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television. In 1968, André Malraux—whom Ellison acknowledges as one of his literary "ancestors"—made him a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, one of the highest formal compliments that France can pay a writer of foreign birth; and in 1969 President Lyndon Johnson awarded him the Medal of Freedom, this nation's highest civilian honor. Ellison has taught at Rutgers University, Bard College, and the University of Chicago, and in 1970 he was named the Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at New York

University—one of the country's more distinguished academic chairs.

More recently, Ellison received another accolade—one that meant a great deal to him—from his home town. This was when he and his wife, Fanny, flew down to Oklahoma City for a weekend after the Library Commission named a new branch library for him, as a celebrated son of Oklahoma City, and asked him to be present at the dedication ceremonies. Hearing that Ellison was coming for the occasion, members of the classes of '31 and '32 at Douglass High School organized a reunion for the weekend. With the Ellisons' permission, I went along.

Except for two or three hours on Saturday afternoon, when Ellison attended the dedication of the new library, his classmates monopolized him for virtually the entire weekend. Friday evening, shortly after he and his wife checked in at the

Lincoln Plaza Inn, they arrived at the home of one of their old friends, a man in his mid-sixties named James Stewart, who, like Ellison, is a member of the Douglass High School class of '31. He was launching the class reunion with a party, which he called a Sip and Dip. Stewart, who describes himself as a self-made man, is a prominent leader of the local black middle-class community. His is one of many expensive-looking houses in a neighborhood of northeast Oklahoma City inhabited by blacks of similar social and economic position. The poorer working-class blacks are still to be found on the crowded East Side, where Stewart and Ellison grew up. Stewart is just under six feet tall; he carries himself with a slightly formal bearing; and his speech alternates between being very ceremonious (when he thinks the occasion requires it) and very folksy (when he thinks it is time, or safe, to relax into the vernacular of his working-class background). He is an administrative officer of the Oklahoma Natural Gas Company, serves on the city's Urban Renewal Authority, is a member of the board of directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and has important connections in the city government—from the mayor on down.

At the Sip and Dip, one of his friends said to me, "Old Jimmy Stewart? That's the man you go to whenever you want to find out what's going on in this town."

Ellison said to me during the evening, "It is rather warming to see how Jimmy turned out. You know, when you are growing up together you tend to estimate one another. And it didn't seem like any of us was going to turn out to be a damn thing."

I asked Stewart about *his* memories of Ellison while they were growing up together.

"Well, I'll tell you," he said. "One of the things I remember most clearly is that he and I used to fight like cats and dogs. The rest of us couldn't stand him then, and I guess he couldn't stand us, either. I still remember a knockdown-drag-out fight he and I had under an old viaduct, near Douglass High School. Ralph wasn't a popular person in school. He was bright and he was studious, but he had a sharp tongue. Obnoxious as hell! He made the rest of us uncomfortable, probably because he knew we weren't as bright as he was, and because he didn't let us forget it. I imagine he was an A student—a B student, at the very least. He was a director of the high-school band, and he played tackle on the football team. He was a good running back, too—shifty runner—but he couldn't hold on to the football worth a damn. He would give you a good twenty yards, and then cough up the football when somebody gave him a good hit. He grew up just like the rest of us—poor. But he had the added problem of being fatherless. His mother, working by herself, could bring in only so much."

The Sip and Dip affair filled Jimmy Stewart's living room, den, dining room, and kitchen, and flowed over onto his back lawn, which was bright with moonlight. There were classmates, friends of classmates, and families of classmates, exchanging anecdotes of the old days. It seemed that almost all the women in their early sixties had on wigs, making them look a good ten or fifteen years younger. They certainly looked younger than their male contemporaries, who had nothing to hide the scalp showing through their thinning and graying hair. I wondered whether the men were more able to bear the signs—and the grief—of aging. Ellison's forehead, expanding behind the retreat of his hairline, had now reached far beyond its original boundaries. A few strands combed carefully across the top of his head served well enough to indicate that he was not at all happy about growing bald, but not so well that he could ever be tempted to fool himself about the condition. His eyes expressed a mixture of skepticism,

gentleness, resignation, inner strength, and pain. Yet, watching him throughout the evening—throughout the weekend—I noticed that many bright surprises are hidden behind his melancholy exterior. There may break out, at any time, a sudden burst of joyous laughter, a long stream of excited chatter, a flash of street swagger and savvy, a swift slash of sarcasm, a gracefully understated piece of wit, or a coolly self-deprecatory remark—followed by laughter.

Ellison is absorbed by the subject of style. And as to what his own style is there has been much public interest and curiosity. As far as I am able to make out, his style consists mostly of irony and elusiveness. He abhors narrow categories, and is always slipping out from under efforts to pin him to a spot. He said to a television interviewer some time ago, "I have to protect myself against a whole series of expectations. People expect me to be enraged all the time, when it's my temperament to be ironic, and even to throw a punch when I'm laughing with you. But, seriously, it is a matter of trying to preserve one's own sense of self, and to assert one's individuality without being too rambunctious about it." Reflecting on the broader background of his social experience, he has said, in one of his essays, " . . . there is also an American Negro tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain. It is a tradition which abhors as obscene any trading on one's own anguish for gain or sympathy; which springs not from a desire to deny the harshness of existence but from a will to deal with it as men at their best have always done." All this is surely related to his sense of the blues, of which he has written, "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it . . . by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."

Observing Ellison for any length of time, one is struck by his ease and self-possession. But it is also fairly clear that they are not consummate. He shows

small signs of a continuous effort to retain discipline and control over himself, to keep the lid on the volcanic parts of his personality—as though he knew only too well that his self-mastery is not a final victory but merely a temporary advantage that he must always struggle to preserve. He seems sometimes on guard, quick to defend himself. In an argument, or if he thinks someone is needling him, he can suddenly abandon his usual subtlety and become as truculent as a street fighter. He does not, however, care for easy victories. He will pull his punches if he notices that the opposition is not quite up to his own standard. He nicely judges an opponent's intellectual strength and engages him within those limits. Only the more perceptive of such adversaries realize that Ellison is fighting with one hand tied behind his back. He has a way of chuckling when something disagreeable or cutting is said about him. It is not to be taken for mirth, however. It is merely a diversionary tactic. It means, I thought as I observed him, that he is reeling from a blow, that he is concealing the pain, and testing its depth. But it is at just such a moment that he is at his most dangerous—regardless of the quality of the opposition. For it is usually about that time that he rebounds off the ropes with a deadly counterpunch that ends the contest.

Setting out for Jimmy Stewart's party, Ellison wore a white straw hat with a blue band, a double-breasted navy-blue blazer with a polka-dot handkerchief showing out of the breast pocket, a polka-dot necktie, a blue shirt, gray flannel trousers, and a sensational pair of black-and-white shoes. Altogether, he looked more like an elegant jazz musician of the nineteen-fifties than like one of the weightier literary intellectuals in America. Although Ellison was the prize attraction at Jimmy Stewart's, there were other notables there from the Douglass High School classes of '31 and '32. Several of them were high-school principals or superintendents, working in different parts of the South, the Southwest, and

the Far West. There was one flashily dressed and vociferous man who had recently been appointed the first black municipal judge in the history of Oklahoma City. There was Jimmy Stewart himself. And there were undoubtedly other conspicuously successful people whom I did not get a chance to meet.

But most of the old Douglass boys and girls had not made any famous mark in the world. As it happened, the classes of '31 and '32 had had the rough luck of graduating right out into the great Depression. Along with white Okies from the cities and farms, some of them made their way to California in search of jobs and had been there ever since. Yet, living there, they remained, in their hearts, Oklahomans. One woman who had come home for the class reunion said to me, "I've been living in California for some forty years now. Many of us black Oklahomans who went out there around the same time are still living there. In California, they call us the C.I.O.—the California Improved Okies. But that's all right. I come back to Oklahoma every chance I get. This is and will always be my home. When a group of us are flying back home, and the pilot announces over the intercom that we are now approaching Oklahoma City, a deep silence falls among us. I know that I stop talking right away. And for a moment a feeling that I can't quite describe pierces me."

Two young black women, students at the University of Oklahoma, went up to Ellison at the Sip and Dip, and asked to interview him for a few minutes. While he was walking with them toward one of the deserted corners of the house, he was intercepted by a few of his old classmates. One of them, a man, addressed him as "Dr. Ellison." He might have been putting Ellison on or he might have assumed that a professor at one of the large universities of the Northeast deserved no less. At any rate, Ellison laughed, and said to him, "Come on, you *know* I'm a college dropout. You *know* I don't have a college degree." The man smiled, as though relieved, shook Ellison's hand, and faded away.

A moment later, another man said, "Tell me, Ralph, do you remember the Adams boy who was at Douglass with us?"

"Well, as a matter of fact," Ellison replied, through one of his ironic chuckles, "I *was* at Douglass with the Adams boy, but his people didn't think too much of me. You see, I played music and I read books."

Another classmate touched him on the shoulder, and he spun around. "Stephen!" he exclaimed. "You can't still remember me."

Stephen said calmly, "Never *will* forget you, Ralph. I keep an old picture of you. Matter of fact, I pulled it out just last night and was looking at it."

"By the way," Ellison said, "I was just asking one of the girls if she remembers Professor Debnam. She said she didn't. Can you reproduce him in your imagination?"

Stephen laughed, and said, "Ralph, *you're* the one with the imagination."

A woman who had been waiting to get a word in now saw her chance and took it. Arms akimbo, she planted herself in front of Ellison, looked challengingly up into his face, and said, "I *bet* you don't remember me."

Ellison was caught off balance. He clearly did not remember her. Stalling for time, he said, "My God, it's you! How good it is to see you after all these years."

She did not go for it. "I *bet* you don't remember me," she said, arms still akimbo, face still challenging him.

Ellison now realized he was on a spot. He didn't remember her. And he knew

that *she* knew that he didn't remember her. "Well," he said, still holding off her challenge, "the color of your hair is different." It was a kind of counterpunch, for he saw that she was wearing a wig.

The woman was so taken up with her challenge that she missed his meaning. "But I've never colored my hair," she said.

"Hell," Ellison said to her, chuckling slyly and looking away, "I don't have much hair myself."

The contest was over. She understood him clearly this time. Declaring a truce, she leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"Oh, my God!" Ellison said, jumping back and looking her all over again. "It's Arzelia!" She looked up at him—demurely, this time—and fell into his embrace.

When Ellison joined the two students who wanted to interview him, one of them asked him what his feelings were about integration in the United States. "I would say that the idea of nonintegration is an absurdity," he replied. "It suggests a loss of direction, and it is a product of despair. Insight or pure common sense will show that there is no American culture which isn't part of the Negro experience. There is no American culture which exists independently of an Afro-American component. I don't care whether it is business, politics, or whatever. Many of the Supreme Court decisions which imposed legal order upon this nation have involved the existence of a racial component. So how are we going to remove ourselves from the culture of this country? I don't go along with the idea that integration is not inevitable. I don't play that game. That is one reason I don't play politics—because politics in this country depends upon the maneuvering and manipulation of what is inevitable."

It was hard to tell just how the two young women felt about what Ellison had said, whether it reinforced or violated opinions they themselves held. They made no rejoinders, and revealed no emotions. However, their manner remained respectful. Whatever else was going through their minds, they seemed to feel they owed him a certain deference, as one of their elders, and as one who had come back to them with a formidable reputation. Actually, they seemed nervous; it occurs to me they may have been more worried by the impression they were making on him than by anything else.

If so, they were not altogether typical of Ellison's experiences with black students. His travels as a lecturer have taken him before many hostile gatherings of students. In the late nineteen-sixties, he had come to expect some of his toughest moments from them. Such students usually rejected his views on Negro-American life and cultural identity. Nor did they have much use for what he has to say about writing: that it demands a stern dedication to the mastery of craft; that individual talent improves its prospects when it draws upon the traditions of the particular discipline within which it functions and when it understands the standards of achievement which have previously been set within that discipline; that the task of the serious novelist is to devote himself to the art of his literary form: to invest fictional affairs with the complexity of human life, to celebrate, investigate, or communicate a moral sense, and not to serve as a polemicist or spokesman for political and social programs. He once said in a television interview, "Now I am a writer in the larger culture. I would say my parallel goes this way: I am Afro-American genetically; I am an Oklahoman out of South Carolina and Georgia; but at the same time I am someone who has read American literature. This is the form in which I seek to express myself. And I am supported by the great achievements of that form—whether written by Melville, Hemingway, Henry James, or by the people who wrote the blues. I

don't make any separation."

Some years ago, James Alan McPherson—one of the younger black writers who hold Ellison and his ideas in high esteem—contributed an article to the *Atlantic* in which he wrote of Ellison:

> "He spoke at Tougaloo last year," a black exchange student at Santa Cruz told me. "I can't stand the man."
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> "Why?"
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> "I couldn't understand what he was saying. He wasn't talking to *us*."
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> "Did you read his book?"
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> "No. And I don't think I will, either. I can't stand the man." . . .
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> "He came to Oberlin in April of 1969," a black girl in Seattle recalled "His speech was about how American black culture had blended into American white culture. But at the meeting with the black caucus after the speech the black students said: 'You don't have anything to tell us.' "
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> "What did he say?"
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> "He just accepted it very calmly." . . .
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> "At Oberlin," the Seattle girl said, "one of the ideas they couldn't accept was Ellison's statement that black styles had historically been incorporated into American life. He went on to say that in the future, don't be surprised if white people begin to wear Afros because that's now a part of American popular culture. Well, the

> kids went out screaming, 'Who is he to insult what we wear? No honky could wear an Afro. They're stealing what is ours.' "
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> One year later, disenchanted white youth, on both coasts and in between, are sporting their versions of the Afro.

In "North Toward Home," Willie Morris wrote:

> I admired Ellison as a writer and as a human being because he remained honest to his own consciousness as an artist, and to his own perceptions as a man. Especially in the 1960s he was caught in a crossfire between the activists, on the one hand, who felt he should be more straightforwardly *engagé*, and some of the critics, on the other, who felt he was not being true to his experience as a Negro. The answer to both, I felt, was "Invisible Man."

The two young women at Jimmy Stewart's party consulted slips of paper, and one of them came up with the next question. "Do you find," she said, "that your schooling and experience in Oklahoma prepared you adequately?"

"What I would say," Ellison replied, "is that because Oklahoma became a state only in 1907, our schools were the beneficiaries of that stream of New England education which began to infiltrate the Afro-American communities during Reconstruction. So at Douglass High School I was actually being taught by teachers who had been taught firsthand—or, at least, secondhand—by some of these dedicated people who had come down from New England as teachers of the freed slaves. I had four years of Latin at Douglass. My teacher could speak Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. And there were lots of others—like Professor Rufus Youngblood, in biology—who were just as well trained. It was also important for me to know that I attended a school dedicated to the memory of Frederick

Douglass."

He was next asked, "Why do you, after all these years in New York, remain an Oklahoman?"

"First of all," he said, "it helps me to verify certain early hopes. There was a guy here tonight—we used to call him Rooster when we were growing up. As a kid, Rooster was a street hustler. He was an unsupported child, and he had to take care of himself. Rooster could mimic birds. And, added to this, he was a great buck dancer. You could always see him soft-shoeing on the sidewalks of Oklahoma City. But he had tenacity and a great will to survive. And, within his options, he had great talent. Rooster's next metamorphosis was into a pool shark. And he eventually became good enough to challenge Minnesota Fats. Well, that may not sound very important, but it helps to verify my sense of possibility, which, like Rooster's, came from Oklahoma. I have seen lots of transformations similar to Rooster's. And I have also seen a lot of concrete social and political reasons for why talent fails.

"Here tonight are principals of schools, women, classmates of mine, who are now working in different states," Ellison said. "There are ministers here tonight. There should be physicians—perhaps there *are* some. I know where all these people come from. I know something of their parents. I know their struggles. We were all part of the American experiment as that experiment manifested itself in the new state of Oklahoma. My own father came here only a few years after Oklahoma had become a state. How can I deny that background? I've said this to people here tonight more than I've ever done before. It is difficult to speak this way in a place like New York, where somebody might come up to me and say, 'Hey, you're some kind of a fink.' But in one way or another I've always affirmed that I'm an Oklahoman. It expresses my sense of roots. My father is

buried a few blocks from here, for God's sake. And I *saw* him put into the ground.

"Do you know what a native is in Oklahoma? A native in Oklahoma is a black American or Negro American who was part of the five great Indian nations that were swept into this virgin territory after 1830 under Andrew Jackson's Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. Many of the Negroes had been acquired through horse-trading or had simply run away from other states to join the Indian tribes. There is a blues lyric that goes—" And he sang:

> I'm going to the nation,
>
> Going to the territory.
>
> Going to the nation, baby,
>
> Going to the territory.

"You never heard that? Well, did you ever read 'Huckleberry Finn'? What does Huck say at the end of the book? He says he's had enough of civilization, that 'I got to light out for the territory.' Well, it is *Oklahoma* he is talking about. Oklahoma was a dream world. And, after Reconstruction had been betrayed, people—black and white—came to the territory. Out of the territory came the state of Oklahoma. The people who know nothing of this dare to criticize me for being proud to have come from Oklahoma."

After a while, one grows quite used to hearing Ellison uphold and defend his sense of connection with Oklahoma. But every so often he goes a bit further and calls himself a frontiersman. That has a strange sound coming from one of the country's more cultivated literary intellectuals. He also happens to be black—or Negro American, or whatever—and when the subject of the American

frontier comes up, people of Ellison's racial background are seldom mentioned. Moreover, most people find it difficult to believe that there are any frontiersmen left. However, when one looks closely at Ellison's ties to his past, one sees what he means. It has to do not only with the fact that the state of Oklahoma was only six years old when he was born but also with the fact that he was raised among some of the people who had come there to settle the territory before it became a state.

Although a small number of blacks had been living in Oklahoma (Choctaw for "Red People") in the days when it was mostly Indian country, it is not they who are usually considered to be Oklahoma's black pioneer stock. Rather, it is those blacks who began arriving in the mass migration of the late eighteen-eighties, after the territory had been opened up for general settlement—those, in other words, who were part of the specific migration that eventually transformed an undeveloped region into a new state. One of these black pioneers was a man named J. D. (for Jefferson Davis) Randolph. He reached Oklahoma City in December of 1889, and some twenty-eight years later he became a sort of adopted grandfather to Ellison. Soon after Randolph arrived, he started a school for black children. And it was that school which, after several stages of development, eventually became Douglass High School, the first high school for blacks in Oklahoma City. Ellison remembers J. D. Randolph as "a tall man, as brown as smoked leather, who looked like the Indians with whom he'd herded horses in the early days." Randolph and his family had come to Oklahoma from Gallatin, Tennessee. Many years later, his eldest daughter, Edna, gave this account of what their pioneer experience in Oklahoma was like:

> We went first to Purcell, where my uncle was. There was a big dugout on my uncle's property, perhaps eighteen by twenty feet, something like that, with a huge fireplace across the back. Several

families of us moved in there. They hung sheets and tarpaulins up to surround the beds of each family and give each a little privacy. Everyone cooked at the big fireplace.

We stayed there until December, while my father was learning all he could about Oklahoma, in addition to helping with the farming and hunting. My mother wasn't happy about living in the dugout. She had shipped most of her household goods, feather beds, pillows, cooking utensils, and things like that, and they took a long time coming. . . . In December, my father made the decision to come to Oklahoma City. We came up in an oxcart. . . .

My father bought a lot on First Street, between Santa Fe and the railroad tracks, and we lived right there, in a half-tent, half-board house. We stayed there about a year and a half, and I remember one Christmas while we were there. Our Christmas present that morning was a great big Indian who just opened the door and walked in. . . .

It was a strange place to me as a child, and I began to wonder if we'd all be wild and if we wouldn't get an education, as Papa always talked about. So many people began to come in wagon trains, and they had suffered so much to get here. Papa had taught us a lot about the Bible, and my uncle who was a preacher had told us all the Bible stories, and I began to think about Moses and the people going to the promised land. Then I began to look on this as the promised land.

In 1903, Edna Randolph married Dr. W. H. Slaughter, a general practitioner. "I believe my husband was the first Negro doctor who came to Oklahoma City and stayed," her account went on. "My brother was the first dentist." As for how the

"promised land" gradually revealed itself, she added, "At first, we lived in all parts of town, but then, later, there was a move toward one section, because we couldn't get services anywhere else. The men couldn't go to white barber shops; we couldn't go to white churches or schools, so we developed our own—our own services and our own organizations."

Those blacks who streamed into Oklahoma in the eighteen-eighties and nineties were refugees of a sort. They were getting away from areas of the South where, because of slavery and the attitudes concerning race which it had engendered or reinforced, opportunities for individual initiative were scarce; and they had chosen the fresh, open, and relatively unsullied air of a new territory to seek a wider freedom. Indeed, so many of them had arrived by the early nineteen-hundreds—and had set up so many all-black towns in different parts of the territory—that their leaders began to entertain dreams that Oklahoma might become a state governed predominantly by blacks.

That day did not come. Nor did Oklahoma, as it developed, distribute the dividends of freedom and opportunity as justly as the blacks had hoped. The movement into the new territory had carried with it the virus of racism—mainly among those whites who had come there from neighboring slave states. In no time, segregation, exclusion, and other forms of discrimination had infected the new state. Still, Oklahoma was a better place for blacks than the states from which they had come. Despite the heavy raids that violence and segregation made upon the hope of black freedom, large areas of possibility remained untouched. It was this circumstance that enabled young and poor black boys like Ellison to believe that they were capable of accomplishing great things in their lives.

Ellison's parents went to Oklahoma a few years after it became a state. His

father, Lewis, was a native of Abbeville, South Carolina. He had led a somewhat romantic and picaresque existence before settling in Oklahoma City. As a young man, he enlisted in the Army—going on to fight in Cuba, during the Spanish-American War, and in the Philippines. When he gave up soldiering, he returned for a time to Abbeville, where he and a partner operated an ice-cream parlor. By 1909, Lewis Ellison had moved to Chattanooga, where he was employed by a construction firm. He eventually ended up in Oklahoma City, where he settled down. "I can take you to buildings in this town on which my father worked as a construction foreman," Ellison told me in Oklahoma City. "He helped put up some of our first steel-and-concrete structures. He learned his skills from his father and uncles, who learned theirs during slavery."

Back in Abbeville, Lewis Ellison had met and married Ida Millsap, who was from the little town of White Oak, Georgia. When Ralph was born, they were living on First Street, on Oklahoma City's East Side, in a rooming house that was owned by J. D. Randolph. Lewis Ellison died in 1917, when his first surviving son—whom he had named Ralph Waldo—was three, and about four months after his second son, Herbert, was born.

The name Ralph Waldo was a weighty one for the young Ellison, and became a perplexing presence in his life. It was a while before he was able to guess why his father had reached back into the flowering of New England to choose a name for him. Ellison dealt with this problem in a speech he delivered at the Library of Congress in 1964, titled "Hidden Name and Complex Fate." He said:

> For in the dim beginnings, before I ever thought consciously of writing, there was my own name, and there was, doubtless, a certain magic in it. From the start I was uncomfortable with it, and in my earliest years it caused me much puzzlement. Neither

could I understand what a poet was, nor why, exactly, my father had chosen to name me after one. Perhaps I could have understood it perfectly well had he named me after his own father. . . . But why hadn't he named me after a hero, such as Jack Johnson, or a soldier like Colonel Charles Young, or a great seaman like Admiral Dewey, or an educator like Booker T. Washington, or a great orator and abolitionist like Frederick Douglass? Or again, why hadn't he named me (as so many Negro parents had done) after President Teddy Roosevelt?

Instead, he named me after someone called Ralph Waldo Emerson, and then, when I was three, he died. It was too early for me to have understood his choice, although I'm sure he must have explained it many times, and it was also too soon for me to have made the connection between my name and my father's love for reading. Much later, after I began to write and work with words, I came to suspect that he was aware of the suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming. . . .

I knew, also, that whatever his motives, the combination of names he'd given me caused me no end of trouble from the moment when I could talk well enough to respond to the ritualized question which grownups put to very young children. Emerson's name was quite familiar to Negroes in Oklahoma during those days when World War I was brewing, and adults, eager to show off their knowledge of literary figures, and obviously amused by the joke implicit in such a small brown nubbin of a boy carrying around such a heavy moniker, would invariably repeat my first two names and then to my great annoyance, they'd add "Emerson."

And I, in my confusion, would reply, "No, *no, I'm* not Emerson;

> he's the little boy who lives next door." Which only made them laugh all the louder. "Oh, no," they'd say, "you're Ralph Waldo Emerson," while I had fantasies of blue murder.

Ellison went on to say, in the same speech, that after he had read Emerson's "Concord Hymn" and the essay "Self-Reliance," he decided not only to avoid any further reading of Emerson's work but also to reduce the Waldo of his own name "to a simple and, I hoped, mysterious 'W' "—for, he confessed, "I shall never really master it." However, he also confessed, "I could suppress the name of my namesake out of respect for the achievements of its original bearer, but I cannot escape the obligation of attempting to achieve some of the things which he asked of the American writer."

With a white benefactor—Dr. Ludwig Hebestreit, the orchestra and band director at Classen High School, in Oklahoma City—Ellison took advanced trumpet lessons, and Hebestreit also encouraged Ellison's exploration of the aesthetic secrets of Beethoven, Wagner, and Schumann, as well as of the technical aspects of symphonic structure. From his teachers at Douglass, from libraries, and from his mother, who brought back books and magazines from well-to-do white homes in which she did housework, he became acquainted with the literary culture of the larger society. Of his efforts as a boy to realize himself as broadly as possible, he has written:

> As a kid I remember working it out this way: there was a world in which you wore your everyday clothes on Sunday, and there was a world in which you wore your Sunday clothes every day—*I* wanted the world in which you wore your Sunday clothes every day. I wanted it because it represented something better, a more exciting and civilized and human way of living; a world which came to me through certain scenes of felicity which I encountered

> in fiction, in the movies, and which I glimpsed sometimes through the windows of great houses on Sunday afternoons when my mother took my brother and me for walks through the wealthy white sections of the city. I know it now for a boy's vague dream of possibility. . . . By early adolescence the idea of Renaissance Man had drifted down to about six of us, and we discussed mastering ourselves and everything in sight as though no such thing as racial discrimination existed.

He has also written:

> Seriously, though, you got glimpses, very vague glimpses, of a far different world than that assigned by segregation laws, and I was taken very early with a passion to link together all I loved within the Negro community and all those things I felt in the world which lay beyond. Put it this way: I learned very early that in the realm of the imagination all people and their ambitions and interests could meet.

Although the things he loved in the Negro community were numerous and various, they all seemed to be expressed in the musical culture—in jazz and the blues. Along these lines, his father had made an early impression on him. Ralph had learned to walk when he was six months old, and at the age of two he was doing rough imitations of dances his father and other relatives showed him—steps like the Eagle Rock and the Black Bottom, which were popular in the dance halls of Oklahoma City in those days. Ellison remembers a song he sang along with his father, part of which went, "I'm dark-brown chocolate to the bone."

Ellison was asked some time ago why he kept on using the term "Negro

American" when so many other people were using "black." "It is a personal choice," he replied. "My grandmother and grandfather were Negroes; my father and mother were Negroes; my friends, teachers, ministers, physicians were Negroes. I'm pretty close to black, but I'm pretty close to brown, too. In a cultural sense, the term 'Negro' tells me something about the mixture of African, European, and native-American styles which define me—as against a West Indian, a Brazilian, a Haitian, or an African who is black. Black, in America, connotes a certain ideological stance. In that sense, I'm not black. I am a Negro-American writer. I emphasize Negro because it refers specifically to American cultural phenomena." He has also written, "It is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament; a sharing of that 'concord of sensibilities' which the group expresses through historical circumstance and through which it has come to constitute a subdivision of the larger American culture."

After Ellison's father died, the full weight of raising two young boys fell upon his mother. She was forced to take on a variety of jobs, which ranged from doing housework to being responsible for the upkeep of an apartment building. This meant that she was away from her children for considerable lengths of time during the day. And at this point J. D. Randolph entered their lives more fully. He and his family began looking after Ralph and Herbert while their mother was at work. As a result of this relationship, Ralph grew up to regard the Randolphs as his "extended family" and old man Randolph as his adopted grandfather.

J. D. Randolph's son Taylor was active in Oklahoma City until his death last summer, at the age of eighty-one. Taylor, together with his younger brother James, helped run the Randolph drugstore, at the corner of Stiles Avenue and Second Street, on the East Side. This is a block over from where Ellison was

born, on First Street. (The rooming house is gone, and the site is now an open lot, overgrown with trees and shrubs.) During the weekend I spent in Oklahoma City, I travelled over to Second Street and had a talk with Taylor Randolph in the family drugstore. He was a lively old man with slightly bent shoulders and sharp, penetrating eyes. His light-brown face was leathery and smooth, with high cheekbones, a craggy brow, and deep eye sockets. It seemed obvious that he had some Indian blood in him. He was smoking a cigar, which, with elegant style, he kept transferring from his nicotined fingers to his clenched, nicotined teeth and back. "Yes, Ralph was born right over there, in the old Randolph home," he told me. "I can't remember the names of his parents right now, but we used to call his mother Brownie, and his father Bubba. He was older than she was. Brownie was a *beautiful* woman. Smart as hell, too. I remember the very moment when Ralph was born. I don't know whether it was upstairs or downstairs, but it was in our two-story house, right over there, on First. I remember my grandmother running out of the house into the street and saying, 'Brownie just had herself an eight-pound boy. He's a pretty little rascal.' I remember that very well. Later on, even after Brownie moved—because, when the father died, they were moving from place to place—our mother and father and sister cared for Ralph and Herbert. I remember one day when it was so cold and snowy that we didn't dream Brownie could have gone out to work. But our mother thought she had better go over and check anyway. And when she got there, she found that Brownie *had* gone out to work. And, sure enough, the fire had gone out, and Ralph and Herbert were huddled up, freezing. My mother took them right back to our house and kept them there until Brownie came home from work. This was a time when there was a great togetherness among families, and when there was a great sympathy for people who had to struggle to bring up their children."

Ellison's love of jazz and the blues was formed partly through his relationship with the Randolph family. When, as a boy, he was not selling newspapers or shining shoes, he was helping out in the Randolph drugstore—jerking sodas, delivering prescriptions, running errands. The part of Second Street on which the Randolph drugstore stands was then known, and still is, as Deep Second, because it is at the bottom of a long slope leading into the black neighborhood. In Ellison's boyhood, Deep Second was Oklahoma City's version of Harlem's 125th Street—the liveliest section of the black community. There were small shops, rooming houses, bars, funeral parlors, barbershops, hairdressing establishments, drugstores, shoe-shine stands, movie houses, juke joints, and dance halls. "It was also a battleground," Taylor Randolph told me. "A lot of cutting and shooting went on, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. There used to be a funeral parlor next door, and that man used to do heavy business on weekend nights. So much that people used to refer to Deep Second as the Bloody Bucket. This is where the Negro community of Oklahoma City started."

In New York, Ellison likes to remind people that "much of so-called Kansas City jazz was actually brought to perfection in Oklahoma by Oklahomans." When he says this, he is always thinking of Deep Second in the Depression and pre-Depression days. At jazz joints like Slaughter's Hall, travelling musicians—some from as far away as Kansas City—came together in jam sessions to polish their playing styles, and evolved a variety of jazz that came to be recognized as distinctly Kansas City, Oklahoma City, or Southwestern. Whatever it was, it was strongly influenced by the blues. Years later, many of them—Lester Young, the great saxophonist, being an example—moved on to greater things, in places like New York and Chicago. Slaughter's Hall occupied the top floor of the Randolph drugstore building. The building was then owned by J. D. Randolph's son-in-law, Dr. W. H. Slaughter. In the late twenties, the Blue Devils, led by Walter Page, on

bass, was the biggest jazz band in Oklahoma City, and one of the best in the Southwest. It played both at Slaughter's Hall and at Hallie Richardson's Shoe Shine Parlor nearby. Hallie Richardson was a patron of jazz, who helped out travelling musicians with money, food, and lodging. The Blue Devils included Edward Christian (brother of Charlie Christian, the brilliant jazz guitarist), on piano; Little Willie Lewis, also on piano; Edward (Crack) McNeal, on drums; Oran (Hot Lips) Page and Lawrence (Inky) Williams, on trumpet; Ermuel (Bucket) Coleman, on trombone; and Jimmy Rushing, vocalist. Ben Webster, on tenor saxophone, joined the band in the early nineteen-thirties. Nowadays, black Oklahomans like to claim all these musicians as natives, though not all of them were born in the state. Edward Christian grew up in Oklahoma City, and once played in the Douglass High School band, but he was born in Dallas, Texas. Hot Lips Page was also born in Dallas. Ben Webster was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and Walter Page was born in Gallatin, Missouri. One of the authentic Oklahomans was Jimmy Rushing, who was born in Oklahoma City and attended Douglass High School. Around 1930, Bennie Moten, a pianist from Kansas City, took over the leadership of the band. When Moten died—after a tonsillectomy—in 1935, the leadership passed to Count Basie, a native of Red Bank, New Jersey. Thus, it was the remnants of the Blue Devils that formed the nucleus of what eventually became the great Count Basie orchestra.

Ellison retains a clear memory of the musicians he heard playing on Deep Second while he was a high-school student. Some years ago, in a written tribute to Jimmy Rushing, he recalled:

> In the old days the voice was high and clear and poignantly lyrical. Steel-bright in its upper range and, at its best, silky smooth, it was possessed of a purity somehow impervious to both the stress of singing above a twelve-piece band and the urgency of Rushing's

own blazing fervor. On dance nights, when you stood on the rise of the school grounds two blocks to the east, you could hear it jetting from the dance hall like a blue flame in the dark; now soaring high above the trumpets and trombones, now skimming the froth of reeds and rhythm as it called some woman's anguished name—or demanded in a high, thin, passionately lyrical line, "Baaaaay-bay, Bay-aaaay-bay! Tell me what's the matter now!"—above the shouting of the swinging band. . . . Everyone on Oklahoma City's East Side knew that sweet, high-floating sound. . . . For Jimmy Rushing was not simply a local entertainer, he expressed a value, an attitude about the world for which our lives afforded no other definition . . .

In those days I lived near the Rock Island roundhouse, where, with a steady clanging of bells and a great groaning of wheels along the rails, switch engines made up trains of freight unceasingly. Yet often in the late-spring night I could hear Rushing as I lay four blocks away in bed, carrying to me as clear as a full-bored riff on "Hot Lips" Page's horn. Heard thus, across the dark blocks lined with locust trees, through the night throbbing with the natural aural imagery of the blues, with high-balling trains, departing bells, lonesome guitar chords simmering up from a shack in the alley—it was easy to imagine the voice as setting the pattern to which the instruments of the Blue Devils Orchestra and all the random sounds of night arose, affirming, as it were, some ideal native to the time and to the land. When we were still too young to attend night dances, but yet old enough to gather beneath the corner street lamp on summer evenings, anyone might halt the conversation to exclaim, "Listen, they're raising hell down at Slaughter's Hall," and we'd turn our heads westward to hear

> Jimmy's voice soar up the hill and down, as pure and as miraculously unhindered by distance and earthbound things as is the body in youthful dreams of flying. . . . Jazz and the blues did not fit into the scheme of things as spelled out by our two main institutions, the church and the school, but they gave expression to attitudes which found no place in these and helped to give our lives some semblance of wholeness. Jazz and the public dance was a third institution in our lives, and a vital one; and though Jimmy was far from being a preacher, he was, as official floor manager or master-of-the-dance at Slaughter's Hall, the leader of a public rite.

It is not surprising that music should have been Ellison's chief interest during his years at Douglass High School, where he was a leader of the marching band and played first trumpet in the school orchestra. It seems, however, that his musical experience at Douglass was frustrating. He had become equally attached to jazz and classical music, and sought while he was at Douglass to master both forms, with a view to blending them, eventually, in his own work. But to most of the music teachers at Douglass, all of whom were black, jazz was an expression of the low life—hardly deserving of serious consideration as an art form, let alone of consideration equal to that accorded the expression of high culture. As Ellison later put it, the "mistaken notion" of his teachers was that "classical music had nothing to do with the rhythms, relaxed or hectic, of daily living." Nevertheless, he did well enough at Douglass to graduate with a music scholarship to Tuskegee—only to find, when he arrived there, that black music teachers at Tuskegee did not think differently from those back in Oklahoma City.

Ellison was almost unable to take up his scholarship. In Oklahoma City, he gave me this account of his difficulties and of how he overcame them: "The people at Tuskegee had told me I had to be on campus by a certain date in June. Out of

my limited funds, I had to buy a trumpet, quickly, because the one I was using at Douglass belonged to the school. I also had to buy clothing, after which I had only thirty-two dollars left. I was making only eight dollars a week, running an elevator part-time. So I really had no money to take off. But I *had* to get there. So I asked a friend of the Randolph family to help me. He was a professional hobo. He looked like a white man, and was as small as a jockey. He was constantly riding the rails out of Oklahoma City and back. I said to him, 'Charlie, I've got to get out of this town. I've got to get to Tuskegee, and I don't have enough money. Will you teach me to hobo?' This was a Sunday afternoon, and we were standing on the corner of Deep Second right in front of the Randolph drugstore. He looked at me and said, 'Well, you get Brownie's permission, and I'll help you.' After a great deal of pressure, I got my mother's permission. She was quite religious, and she said, 'I'll pray for you. And if you get there, I'll send your clothes.' Charlie had promised to meet me in the railroad yards, and I turned up in my travelling gear. I had on comfortable shoes, and I was wearing a beret. I carried an extra shirt, and the little money I had was in my shoes. But when I got to the rail yards, Charlie wasn't there. I waited for hours, and he didn't show. So I went back to Deep Second, and I found him standing around. 'What the hell are you doing here?' I said to him. 'You told me to be at the rail yards, and I was there.' He looked at me and smiled, and said, 'Well, I just wanted to be sure you meant business. You be there tomorrow.'

"The next day, he took me onto one of the trains. He said, 'Now, we can't go across Arkansas.' I asked him why. He said, 'Because they're liable to shoot you or throw you in a chain gang.' He showed me how to get on and off the moving freight train, how to protect myself from thieves, bums, and perverts, how to read the manifests on the sides of the boxcars. I think our first big task was getting up to and through St. Louis. Once we got out of Oklahoma, Charlie put on his

white personality. People who didn't know anything about him assumed he was white. When we got to St. Louis, he said to me, 'Now, I can go on over without any trouble, but you will have to get past the guard somehow.' So I got off the train and walked on across the bridge into East St. Louis. Sure enough, as I approached the bridge a man stopped me and challenged me. 'Look,' I told him, 'I simply want to get to East St. Louis to pick up a train to take me over to Evansville. I'm on my way to Tuskegee, where I have a scholarship waiting.' He bought it. He said, 'All right, go on across, and God bless you.' So I went on across, and picked up Charlie on the other side.

"This was early in the morning, and about four o'clock I said to Charlie, 'Let's get something to eat.' He said, 'I don't want to eat. What I want is a drink.' I said, 'Well, what do you want?' He said, 'Give me fifty cents. You stay here and eat, and I'll be back in a few minutes.' This was at a lunch counter. After a while, Charlie came back with two quart bottles full of white lightning or something. At that time of day, I don't know where he got the goddam bootleg stuff, but he bought it with the fifty cents. And, sure as hell, there were consequences. We had to wait a few hours in the hobo jungle in East St. Louis to pick up the other train that Charlie said we would need. It became very hot by midmorning, and Charlie was still working on that damn liquor. We hopped onto the train as it was slowing down in the yard, and the last thing I saw of Charlie, after I got on, was him hanging on to one side of the boxcar and yelling instructions to me. The next time I looked around, there was no Charlie. So I climbed up on top and ran back along the boxcars looking for him—taking chances, because we were right there in the railroad yard. Still no Charlie. I panicked and jumped off the train. When I found him, on the side of the tracks, I discovered that—between the heat and that scrap-iron stuff he was drinking—he had suffered a sunstroke and fallen off the train.

"I dragged him outside of the rail yard, stretched him out in the shade of a tree, and went across the street to get some ice water for him. I said to the man in the luncheonette, 'You see that white man over there? He has fainted, and he needs some water.' 'Yes, I see him,' the man said, 'but it'll cost you twenty-five cents for a can of ice water.' I thought he was joking, but he wasn't. I paid him the twenty-five cents, took the water over, and revived Charlie. When he came to, he was still feeling lousy, so he told me, 'Look, there's no need for you to wait around for me. You have to get to where you are going, and I have taught you everything about how to get on and off the trains, and how to avoid the different kinds of riffraff you're liable to meet. You give me two dollars and fifty cents to see a doctor, and I'll be all right.' I gave him the money, and we parted.

"Travelling as Charlie instructed me, I got to Tuskegee in about a week. By then, Charlie was back in Oklahoma City. I got a letter from my mother saying, 'Charlie is back, and I suppose you're going to get where you're going.' So I owe my education to Charlie."

The morning after the Sip and Dip at Jimmy Stewart's, Ellison and his classmates were out together again. This was Saturday, at around ten. The occasion was a brunch at the University of Oklahoma's Faculty House, in another of the city's prosperous residential neighborhoods. The brunch had been arranged as a preliminary to dedication ceremonies for the new library. Everybody was dressed to go on over to the library after brunch, which consisted of fruit juice, scrambled eggs, sausage and bacon, grits, home-fries, and coffee. The continued ritual swapping of school-day jokes, gibes, and memories was interrupted by a few comments from the mayor of Oklahoma City. The mayor—a small and attractive middle-aged woman named Patience Latting—praised the old Douglass grads for their contributions to the life of the city, and welcomed Ellison as "a distinguished American, a gentleman whom Oklahoma City

honors as a son by naming a library for him."

Ellison was scheduled to deliver the main address at the library, and had hoped to get away without being asked to say anything at the brunch. But when the Mayor sat down, Jimmy Stewart said, "Ralph, stand up and say a few words to the people." Not enjoying the role of home-town-boy-who-made-good before his old friends, he got up reluctantly, and there was something of a tremor in his voice. "What is there for me to tell you?" he said. "You all know me. Although I'm supposed to be a novelist, there's no way for me to convey to you how important it is to see all your faces again—old friends, old antagonists, old teammates, old scapegoats and scapegoaters. I know that there are some among us who took off to explore the wider world during the Depression. We were taking chances; we had no idea how it was going to turn out. But you all came through. And you inspire me. You affirm my sense of life. You are testimonies to the faith of your fathers and mothers—especially the mothers."

Where the Ralph Ellison Branch Library stands—on Northeast Twenty-third Street—was all fields and woodland when Ellison was growing up. One of his pastimes since the age of eleven has been hunting, and as he was arriving at the library for the opening ceremonies, he turned to one of his classmates and said, "Hell, this is where I got my first rabbits." The area is one of many once undeveloped tracts that Oklahoma City—one of the most sprawling towns in the Southwest—has annexed as it has spread gradually outward during the past fifty years. The new library gives the impression of geometric dissonance. Built of earth-tone bricks and concrete slabs, it is a low-lying, gently sloping structure with slanting split levels. One of eleven branch libraries in Oklahoma County, it is fourteen thousand square feet in area, has shelf space for fifty thousand books, and seats seventy-two people at reading tables, fourteen in a lounge area, and a hundred and twenty-five in a meeting room. Against a wall in the foyer is a

steel-and-bronze sculpture featuring two facial studies of Ellison—one moody and introspective, the other somewhat more sunny in disposition. The sculpture was done by Ed Wilson, a professor of art at the State University of New York at Binghamton, who is a friend of Ellison's. Wilson, who was on hand for the opening of the library, described one of the studies as "Ellison the private man and contemplative artist" and the other as "Ellison the man of the world."

Hundreds of Oklahomans, both black and white, turned out for the opening. They included the Mayor, city and state politicians, the local press, library administrators and personnel, Douglass High School graduates of all ages, local community leaders and preachers, and a jazz band, off to one side, playing the blues. There was also Ellison's brother, Herbert—an extremely silent, pensive man—who lives in California, where he works for the City of Los Angeles. As is usual at homecoming affairs, the speeches were too many and too long. Every citizen of any standing in Oklahoma City was introduced. Care was taken to see that every politician present stood for a bow. One of the shorter speeches was made by Hannah Atkins, a black state representative, who introduced Ellison. In closing, she said, "In all of Ralph Ellison's writings, we know that he is speaking to us about human beings, reflecting his deep understanding of man's frequent inhumanity to man. He has delineated symbolically and directly the inequities and brutalities of our society. But in the midst of all this he has not become bitter. In the constant and continuing struggle for human liberation, he has provided us with sound philosophical reflections. Ralph Waldo Ellison, you have brought honor to Oklahoma, you have done us proud. Let us all stand and welcome home Ralph Ellison."

Ellison's own speech was a long one, full of graceful touches. Here are a few excerpts:

"Since this is *your* day, rather than mine, I congratulate you. For, though I've remained all these years, and proudly so, an Oklahoman, it has been those of you who stayed here who made today a reality. . . . I know more than a few of you personally, but I am aware that I am bound to the majority of you through our common identity as Oklahomans. I am proud to share that identity, and I am grateful for my role in your triumph today. . . . I would remind you that the essence of what has brought us here today is highly symbolic. . . . Thus, while it is my own truly bewildering fate to have been chosen for such a prominent role in the ceremony, the symbolism of the occasion radiates far beyond my individual significance. For, indeed, the ceremony gives recognition, and resonance, and glamour to an experience that was shared by all of us, and which has had an important role in shaping our lives. This is especially true of you, my old schoolmates, whose lives were touched by the establishment of the first branch library on the East Side of Oklahoma City, many years ago. . . .

"This occasion is an experience which has elevated my name and image to dimensions of which I could never have dreamed. Such reminders, of course, are for myself, not you. But it helps me to restore my perspective, and it allows me to realize that, but for the accidents of our individual fates, and because of certain personal choices of my own, any one of you might well be standing here struggling to reduce the mystery of our experience to an order of words. I am honored to be here, but I assure you that there are pressures that go with the honor. And all the more so because I am at home, where there are so many in this audience who know from whence I come, and who appreciate the irony of how unlikely—given my temperament, or intemperance—my role really is. . . .

" 'Geography is fate,' as someone has said. And certainly this is true for Oklahomans. The outcome of that national tragedy the Civil War brought the parents of many of us, both black and white, to the Oklahoma territory, seeking

a new beginning. This I see as their enactment of a strongly held American proposition that men make their own fate through the humanization of geography and by the concerted assertion of their human will. At any rate, our forefathers collected here, and strove anew to make manifest the American Dream. They came from many places, with many philosophies, and with conflicting interpretations of the democratic compact which our nation's founding fathers had made with history.

"It was not until I was a young man and a writer that I realized I was born into a state that at the time was only six years old. It is most astonishing; for, to my young eyes, Oklahoma appeared to have been here forever. . . . But, like most Americans, I was ignorant of American history. I did know, however, that historical events which had gone before my time were very much operative in our daily lives on the East Side. And I knew, too, that there were special forces which bore down upon Afro-American Oklahomans—most of whom were from the South, no more than forty years from slavery, and hardly twenty-five years from the terrible events which accompanied the end of the Reconstruction. I knew also that there were adults in the Negro community who knew the historical time of day; and that even the unlettered among them possessed an unshakable belief in the power of language to make men truly free. They voiced it in classrooms, they associated it with the word of God from the pulpit, they projected it in barbershops, pool halls, and on popular forums—and especially, on rainy days, at the drugstore.

"I shall be ever awed by, and thankful for, the honor you've bestowed upon me today. And I have no doubt that within these walls other writers—black, white, Indian—will emerge. And, if so, it will be because the library is a place where a child or an adult can make a connection between the rich oral tradition which we have inherited from the past and the literary rendering of American

experience that is to be found in the library. This function of language makes it possible for men and women to project the future, control their environment. It offers feedback. This goes on, and will continue to go on as long as men can utter words, or use symbolic gestures. What we have to worry about is the maintenance and enlargement of the library. It is no accident that Fascists despise and fear books. They burn libraries. Why? Because the library is a nexus of dreams. The library is a place where we are able to free ourselves from the limitations of today by becoming acquainted with what went on in the past—and thus project ourselves into the future."

That night, Ellison's classmates took him and his wife out dancing. This was back at the Faculty House, where the day had begun over brunch. An Oklahoma City jazz combo played some of the tunes that Ellison and his schoolmates had danced to when they were younger. The band's vocalist sang a few of the blues numbers that were popular in the late twenties and early thirties. On the dance floor, Ellison, a fine dancer, proved what he has always claimed—that he can stomp and riff with the best of his contemporaries.

The reunion ended on Sunday morning, after a memorial service at the Calvary Baptist Church, not far from Ellison's old neighborhood near Deep Second. The Douglass graduates were eulogized from the pulpit, and mentioned in prayers. The service ended with the singing of the hymn that begins, "Be not dismayed, whate'er betide, God will take care of you." Coming out of the church, Ellison was surrounded by people reaching for his hand, saying goodbye. He paused on the church steps, slung a powerful-looking Nikon camera around his neck, and began taking pictures of his old friends. The Nikon is one of the three or four cameras he owns, photography being one of his many hobbies.

Ellison is a fiend for electronics. As a boy, he learned to build crystal sets by

reading *Popular Mechanics* and *American Boy* magazines. In the late nineteen-forties, he supported himself partly by building and selling hi-fi equipment. His apartment has an elaborate stereo system and a set of digital clocks, which he built mostly by himself. It also has a large library and a collection of Romare Bearden's paintings, some based on jazz. Ellison is an avid bird-watcher, both at his country house, in Plainfield, which was rebuilt after the fire that destroyed his manuscript, and at his New York City apartment, looking out across Riverside Park and the Hudson River. Up in Plainfield, he spends the early morning hours looking for woodchucks, bird-watching, and gardening—the poet Richard Wilbur, who owns a place nearby, and who also loves to work the land, having shown him how to put in a garden. When Ellison is in New York, a typical day for him begins around six. He likes, in his words, "to rise with the dawn light." His wife rises somewhat later. After making coffee and toast for himself, he tunes in, at six-thirty, to "Sunrise Semester," an educational program that is televised over CBS under the supervision of New York University, where Ellison has taught since 1970 on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons. At seven, he stays tuned for the "CBS Morning News" with Hughes Rudd, whose dry delivery and wry observations on the news Ellison admires. When Rudd leaves the air, at eight, Ellison attends to the houseplants. By nine, he repairs to his study, and begins jotting down ideas he will be working on during the day. These may be ideas for his novel, for an essay, or for a speech. He starts writing shortly thereafter, and, if it is going well, writes until four or four-thirty in the afternoon. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, when he teaches at N.Y. U., the schedule may vary somewhat. He may not write on those mornings, but may spend the hours between nine and eleven going over his notes and preparing his lectures. Soon after midday, he leaves his apartment, and rides the Seventh Avenue subway downtown to the university's Washington Square campus. There, until four, he teaches a course called "Fiction and Democracy," which traces, among other

themes, the development of the American language in projecting what Ellison calls "the Americanness of the American experience." After four, he rides the subway back to his home, unwinds over a Martini or two, watches the six-o'clock news, and dines at around six-thirty. He then talks on the telephone, attends to whatever correspondence his wife has not already dealt with, does some reading, and retires by nine-thirty or ten. In bed, he may read light fiction (especially mysteries) and listen to jazz or classical music—unless there is an old John Ford western on television, Ford being one of his favorite directors.

After snapping his last photograph and saying his last goodbye outside the Calvary Baptist Church, in Oklahoma City, Ellison, along with his wife and me, got into Jimmy Stewart's Lincoln Continental for the ride back to the Lincoln Plaza Inn. The sky was a pure blue—hardly a cloud in it, and not a hint of smog. The roof lines of Oklahoma City are so low compared with New York City's and they afforded such a sweeping view of the horizon in almost every direction that the city seemed literally under an inverted bowl—one of broad expanse and striking cleanness. The city's population is rather small for a place of its size. Traffic was light. The streets were relatively quiet, like those of a small town where almost everybody goes to church on Sunday or spends the day relaxing on the front porch.

Some of this may have helped to put Jimmy Stewart in a relaxed and expansive mood. Driving along at moderate speed, he kept throwing his head to right and left as he called the Ellisons' attention to points of interest along the way. One of these was the office of the *Black Dispatch,* Oklahoma City's first black newspaper. Stewart venerates the *Dispatch* and worships the memory of Roscoe Dunjee, the man who founded it in 1915. Dunjee, who died in 1965 at the age of eighty-one, was a crusading editor and the most famous civil-rights advocate in the history of Oklahoma. In the late nineteen-twenties and early thirties, he led the city's

blacks in resisting restrictive covenants that barred them from owning property in certain of its all-white areas. Without Dunjee's leadership and the aggressive editorial support of his newspaper, the campaign, which was marked at times by violence and bloodshed, might well have failed.

Ellison said that the *Dispatch* was one of the papers he sold on the streets of Oklahoma City when he was a boy. He also recalled that in 1934, while he was away at Tuskegee, his mother had been one of the ringleaders in the movement to break the restrictive covenants, often by attempting to occupy apartments or houses in the forbidden areas. "They threw her in jail over and over again," Ellison said, laughing. "But every time they arrested her, Roscoe Dunjee went down, bailed her out, and sent her right back to resist the covenants again."

Stewart drove past the grounds of the capitol buildings. Nearby were oil pumps, working away on a serene Sunday forenoon. Stewart passed them without comment or notice, but the sight of oil pumps in the very shadow of the buildings where government went on was enough to stir humility and envy in a visitor from New York City. Ellison pointed out that the oil under the capitol buildings extended eastward to land that had not been considered of much value in his childhood and had been purchased by blacks. In the nineteen-twenties, when the oil was discovered, blacks who owned property above the oil were able to lease it at considerable profit. But, after doing so, many of them had nowhere else to go. The East Side was already overcrowded. And until Roscoe Dunjee's campaign began to meet with some success, they were barred from living elsewhere in the city. After Jimmy Stewart deposited his passengers at the Lincoln Plaza Inn, he drove on over to his quiet, tree-lined neighborhood, where no black Oklahoman could have lived when he and Ellison were boys.

Fanny Ellison is an attractive, light-skinned woman in her late fifties. She is small, looks rather delicate, and speaks in a fragile, high-pitched timbre. Ladylike, she handles strangers with a nice mixture of reticence and civility. Like her husband, she is given to occasional bursts of hearty laughter and animated chatter. But on the whole she seems the sort of person who keeps back a lot of opinions. One matter on which she speaks freely is the fact that she thinks her husband talks too much—by which she means he can't resist giving his time to people who talk too much. She may also mean that he would be better off putting his talk into his work. When they are out together and her husband is being lionized, she keeps in the background. But after a while she begins to indicate to him—with facial signals that married couples understand between themselves—that it may be time for him to break things up and move on. Ellison is amused by his wife's opinion that he talks too much, but he agrees with her. And though he may not always respond right away to what her face signals, he relies on her presence as a control on the way he spends the conversational time of day.

Fanny Ellison was clearly tired when Jimmy Stewart let us off at the Lincoln Plaza Inn. She was also relieved that the weekend was almost over. But, perhaps sensing that her husband had something further to say to me about the Oklahoma frontier, she allowed me to visit their suite for a few more minutes of his time. Ellison brought out a couple of cigars, handed me one, and settled down comfortably on a couch. Handling his cigar with ease and skill, he looked closely at me—while appearing not to be doing so—as if to see whether I had similar assurance. I formed the impression that he was both relieved and disappointed to find that I offered him no great contest in the control of a cigar.

"The movement toward the frontier—the movement from the East to the West and Southwest—was not simply a geographical movement," Ellison said. "It was

also a movement toward a more vernacular American character. When I say vernacular, I don't mean the vulgar. I mean the intermixing of traditional styles and perspectives, in response to the experience of extending the nation geographically. These styles and perspectives were affected by climate, but more so by their distance from the centers of American taste—or whatever taste Americans had developed out of Europe as they built the nation. America began to take on this special character as the nation built up Chicago, the Middle West, St. Louis, and so on. It is no accident that Mark Twain should have come out of Missouri, and should have had an association with the Mississippi, the great highway around which the integration of values and styles was taking place. So the farther out you got, you knew you weren't in the East but you didn't worry about it. F. Scott Fitzgerald makes the point about how people in Minnesota, even in Chicago, were responding to the East. But out here in Oklahoma we were not responding. We had not been here so long. We were very young. For instance, we didn't give a damn about what kind of jazz they were playing in the East, because we had swing—what we called 'stomp music.' Around 1936, people started saying that Benny Goodman invented swing. But we had developed it. So here you had a vernacular American style being influenced not by a movement from the East but by a movement out of the Southwest.

"There is another thing—the provincialism of certain New Yorkers. They have never been out this way. They don't know all the differences that make up a unified nation. I was shocked, when I went to live in New York, to find—after all the hymns of praise to the greater freedom—that people in Harlem did not go to the opera, they did not attend concerts, they didn't go to Carnegie Hall, they didn't go to the museums, and so on. And very often they didn't read the books, didn't read the magazines. These I had read as a boy, because I was a lover of the

library, and because my mother worked in literate homes and brought us magazines like *Vanity Fair*. When I met Fanny, who was raised in Colorado and Chicago, she had saved up copies of the same magazine. At different times, in different places, we had been reading the same magazine. So out here in Oklahoma, when you were young you were responding to certain possibilities, and identifying with them—without the loss of any sense that you were black or that you were limited politically."

Ellison was married once before. But the marriage failed, partly because his wife's parents had little respect for writing as a vocation and did not see it as a reliable or responsible means of making a living. His present wife, the former Fanny McConnell, has always felt drawn to the world of writing. Born in Louisville, Kentucky, she grew up in Pueblo, Colorado, and in Chicago, and attended Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee. At Fisk, she worked as a secretary for the late James Weldon Johnson, the poet and diplomat, who was one of the founders of the N.A.A.C.P. She had written to Johnson expressing an interest in writing, and asking his help in obtaining a fellowship or a job. Johnson hired her as his secretary, and later got her a fellowship to the University of Iowa, where she studied drama and speech. When she graduated from Iowa, she returned to Chicago and organized a small theatre group.

"I met Ralph after I had moved to New York, in 1944, and married him in 1946," she told me during a talk we had in Oklahoma City. "He and I had a mutual friend, who kept telling me about Ralph's wonderful library. I adored books. And writing *had* been my first love. Ralph and I spoke on the phone, and we decided to meet in front of Frank's Restaurant, on a Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street. He told me what the color of his coat would be, and I told him what the color of my dress would be. I was conscious of the financial aspect of the meeting. After all, he was a writer, and I didn't know what his financial position

was. So I ordered chicken à la king, which is not the best thing to order in restaurants. And, not wanting to embarrass me, Ralph ordered the same thing. I had begun to feel, before I met Ralph, that I wasn't a writer. After I met him, I was convinced I wasn't. I did not have the sustaining power or the memory. However, Ralph still thinks I should write."

Before taking leave of the Ellisons, I asked what his feelings were about having played the central part in the events of the weekend. "Well," he said, after staring for a moment at his cigar, "I have to maintain a sense of proportion about it. The whole thing was a general communal experience. But someone had to be the focal point, and it fell to me. On occasions like this, you have to discount, very consciously, the nice things people are saying about you—while by no means losing the feeling of appreciation. But mostly I have a great feeling of regret that some of the people who were most helpful to me, and had such faith in me when I was growing up, were not here—people like old J. D. Randolph and my mother. I was never able to do anything for my mother. I really didn't see my mother alive after 1935, when I came home from Tuskegee for the summer. After that summer, she moved to Ohio, and the following year I moved to New York. In 1937, she was dying. She had fallen off the back porch and cracked a hip. The physician, without giving her an X-ray, diagnosed it as arthritis. She died from tuberculosis of the hip. Remembering such negligence on the part of that doctor, how can I, as my mother's son, not stress the value of mastering one's craft? So to have had some recognition in my town, in her town, and her not being here—that is the sad part. I don't feel any sense of triumph. As a novelist, I'm much too disciplined to irony."

At this point, Fanny Ellison stood up. It was time for the conversation to end.

On my way to the airport the following day, I found myself passing through the East Side, and asked the taxi-driver to stop by the Randolph drugstore, on Deep Second. I ran in to say goodbye to Taylor Randolph, who detained me for some final comments. "You know," he said, "even as a boy, Ralph was a hell of a self-made fellow. He never had time for foolishness, outside of cracking a joke every now and then. Whenever you saw him, he had music sheets or a book under his arm. I am proud of what he has turned out to be. Very, very proud. I'd compare him with any outstanding Negro who came out of Oklahoma City. In fact, I'd put him No. 1. Not only because he was born in our house but because of what he had to go through to make himself." ♦

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