

Home

I was born in St. Louis, Missouri, but from the age of three I grew up in Stamps, Arkansas, with my paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, and my father's brother, Uncle Willie, and my only sibling, my brother, Bailey.

At thirteen I joined my mother in San Francisco. Later I studied in New York City. Throughout the years I have lived in Paris, Cairo, West Africa, and all over the United States.

Those are facts, but facts, to a child, are merely words to memorize, "My name is Johnny Thomas. My address is 220 Center Street." All facts, which have little to do with the child's truth.

My real growing up world, in Stamps, was a continual struggle against a condition of surrender. Surrender first to the grown up human beings who I saw every day, all black and all very, very large. Then submission to the idea that black people were inferior to white people, who I saw rarely.

Without knowing why exactly, I did not believe that I was inferior to anyone except maybe my brother. I knew I was smart, but I also knew that Bailey was smarter, maybe because he reminded me often and even suggested that maybe he was the smartest person in the world. He came to that decision when he was nine years old.

The South, in general, and Stamps, Arkansas, in particular had had hundreds of years' experience in demoting even large adult blacks to psychological dwarfs. Poor white children had the license to address lauded and older blacks by their first names or by any names they could create.

Thomas Wolfe warned in the title of America's great novel that "You Can't Go Home Again." I enjoyed the book but I never agreed with the title. I believe that one can never leave home. I believe that one carries the shadows, the dreams, the fears and dragons of home under one's skin, at the extreme corners of one's eyes and possibly in the gristle of the earlobe.

Home is that youthful region where a child is the only real living inhabitant. Parents, siblings, and neighbors, are mysterious apparitions, who come, go, and do strange unfathomable things in and around the child, the region's only enfranchised citizen.

Geography, as such, has little meaning to the child observer. If one grows up in the Southwest, the desert and open skies are natural. New York, with the elevators and subway rumble and millions of people, and Southeast Florida with its palm trees and sun and beaches are to the children of those regions, the ways the outer world are, has been, and will always be. Since the child cannot control that environment, she has to find her own place, a region where only she lives and no one else can enter.

I am convinced that most people do not grow up. We find parking spaces and honor our credit cards. We marry and dare to have children and call that growing up. I think what we do is mostly grow old. We carry accumulation of years in our bodies and on our faces, but generally our real selves, the children inside, are still innocent and shy as magnolias.

We may act sophisticated and worldly but I believe we feel safest when we go inside ourselves and find home, a place where we belong and maybe the only place we really do.

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