

SHORT STORY NIGHT

Everything That
Rises Must
Converge

Flannery O'Connor

Convergence

Alice Walker



Read these stories and join Neenah Public Library staff at Lion's Tail Brewing Monday, February 12th at 7:00 pm for a one-hour discussion featuring trivia, laughs, and other surprises. 21 and older.

Flannery O'Connor, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1963)

HER DOCTOR had told Julian's mother that she must lose twenty pounds on account of her blood pressure, so on Wednesday nights Julian had to take her downtown on the bus for a reducing class at the Y. The reducing class was designed for working girls over fifty, who weighed from 165 to 200 pounds. His mother was one of the slimmer ones, but she said ladies did not tell their age or weight. She would not ride the buses by herself at night since they had been integrated, and because the reducing class was one of her few pleasures, necessary for her health, and free, she said Julian could at least put himself out to take her, considering all she did for him. Julian did not like to consider all she did for him, but every Wednesday night he braced himself and took her.

She was almost ready to go, standing before the hall mirror, putting on her hat, while he, his hands behind him, appeared pinned to the door frame, waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to begin piercing him. The hat was new and had cost her seven dollars and a half. She kept saying, "Maybe I shouldn't have paid that for it. No, I shouldn't have. I'll take it off and return it tomorrow. I shouldn't have bought it."

Julian raised his eyes to heaven. "Yes, you should have bought it," he said. "Put it on and let's go." It was a hideous hat. A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. He decided it was less comical than jaunty and pathetic. Everything that gave her pleasure was small and depressed him.

She lifted the hat one more time and set it down slowly on top of her head. Two wings of gray hair protruded on either side of her florid face, but her eyes, sky-blue, were as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten. Were it not that she was a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school and who was supporting him still, "until he got on his feet," she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town. "It's all right, it's all right," he said. "Let's go." He opened door himself and started down the walk to get her going. The sky was a dying violet and the houses stood out darkly against it, bulbous liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness though no two were alike. Since this had been a fashionable neighborhood forty years ago, his mother persisted in thinking they did well to have an apartment in it. Each house had a narrow collar of dirt around it in which sat, usually, a grubby child. Julian walked with his hands in his pockets, his head down and thrust forward and his eyes glazed with the determination to make himself completely numb during the time he would be sacrificed to her pleasure.

The door closed and he turned to find the dumpy figure, surmounted by the atrocious hat, coming toward him. "Well," she said, "you only live once and paying a little more for it, I at least won't meet myself coming and going."

"Some day I'll start making money," Julian said gloomily- he knew he never would - "and you can have one of those jokes whenever you take the fit." But first they would move. He visualized a place where the nearest neighbors would be three miles away on either side.

"I think you're doing fine," she said, drawing on her gloves. "You've only been out of school a year. Rome wasn't built in a day."

She was one of the few members of the Y reducing class who arrived in hat and gloves and who had a son who had been to college. "It takes time," she said, "and the world is in such a mess. This hat looked better on me than any of the others, though when she brought it out I said, 'Take that thing back. I wouldn't have it on my head,' and she said, 'Now wait till you see it on,' and when she put it on me, I said, 'We-ull,' and she said, 'If you ask me, that hat does something for you and you do something for the hat, and besides,' she said, 'with that hat, you won't meet yourself coming and going.'"

Julian thought he could have stood his lot better if she had been selfish, if she had been an old hag who drank and screamed at him. He walked along, saturated in depression, as if in the midst of his martyrdom he had lost his faith. Catching sight of his long, hopeless, irritated face, she stopped suddenly with a grief-stricken look, and pulled back on his arm. "Wait on me," she said. "I'm going back to the house and take this thing off and tomorrow I'm going to return it. I was out of my head. I can pay the gas bill with that seven-fifty."

He caught her arm in a vicious grip. "You are not going to take it back," he said. "I like it."

"Well," she said, "I don't think I ought. . ." "Shut up and enjoy it," he muttered, more depressed than ever.

"With the world in the mess it's in," she said, "it's a wonder we can enjoy anything. I tell you, the bottom rail is on the top."

Julian sighed.

"Of course," she said, "if you know who you are, you can go anywhere." She said this every time he took her to the reducing class. "Most of them in it are not our kind of people," she said, "but I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am."

"They don't give a damn for your graciousness," Julian said savagely. "Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven't the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are."

She stopped and allowed her eyes to flash at him. "I most certainly do know who I am," she said, "and if you don't know who you are, I'm ashamed of you."

“Oh hell,” Julian said.

“Your great-grandfather was a former governor of this state,” she said. “Your grandfather was a prosperous land-owner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh.”

“Will you look around you,” he said tensely, “and see where you are now?” and he swept his arm jerkily out to indicate the neighborhood, which the growing darkness at least made less dingy.

“You remain what you are,” she said. “Your great-grand-father had a plantation and two hundred slaves.”

“There are no more slaves,” he said irritably.

“They were better off when they were,” she said. He groaned to see that she was off on that topic. She rolled onto it every few days like a train on an open track. He knew every stop, every junction, every swamp along the way, and knew the exact point at which her conclusion would roil majestically into the station: “It's ridiculous. It's simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence.”

“Let's skip it,” Julian said.

“The ones I feel sorry for,” she said, “are the ones that are half white. They're tragic.”

“Will you skip it?”

“Suppose we were half white. We would certainly have mixed feelings.”

“I have mixed feelings now,” he groaned.

“Well let's talk about something pleasant,” she said. “I remember going to Grandpa's when I was a little girl. Then the house had double stairways that went up to what was really the second floor - all the cooking was done on the first. I used to like to stay down in the kitchen on account of the way the walls smelled. I would sit with my nose pressed against the plaster and take deep breaths. Actually the place belonged to the Godhighs but your grandfather Chestny paid the mortgage and saved it for them. They were in reduced circumstances,” she said, “but reduced or not, they never forgot who they were.”

“Doubtless that decayed mansion reminded them,” Julian muttered. He never spoke of it without contempt or thought of it without longing. He had seen it once when he was a child before it had been sold. The double stairways had rotted and been torn down. Negroes were living in it. But it remained in his mind as his mother had known it. It appeared in his dreams regularly. He would stand on the wide porch, listening to the rustle of oak leaves, then wander through the high-ceilinged hall into the parlor that opened onto it and gaze at the worn rugs and faded draperies. It occurred to him that it was he, not she, who could have appreciated it. He preferred its threadbare elegance to anything he could name and it was because of it that all the neighborhoods they had lived in had been a torment to him -

whereas she had hardly known the difference. She called her insensitivity “being adjustable.”

“And I remember the old darky who was my nurse, Caroline. There was no better person in the world. I've always had a great respect for my colored friends,” she said. “I'd do anything in the world for them and they'd. . .”

“Will you for God's sake get off that subject?” Julian said. When he got on a bus by himself, he made it a point to sit down beside a Negro, in reparation as it were for his mother's sins.

“You're mighty touchy tonight,” she said. “Do you feel all right?”

“Yes I feel all right” he said. “Now lay off.”

She pursed her lips. “Well, you certainly are in a vile humor,” she observed “I just won't speak to you at all.”

They had reached the bus stop. There was no bus in sight and Julian, his hands still jammed in his pockets and his head thrust forward, scowled down the empty street. The frustration of having to wait on the bus as well as ride on it began to creep up his neck like a hot hand. The presence of his mother was borne in upon him as she gave a pained sigh. He looked at her bleakly. She was holding herself very erect under the preposterous hat wearing it like a banner of her imaginary dignity. There was in him an evil urge to break her spirit. He suddenly unloosened his tie and pulled it off and put it in his pocket

She stiffened. “Why must you look like that when you take me to town?” she said. “Why must you deliberately embarrass me?”

“If you'll never learn where you are,” he said, “you can at least learn where I am.”

“You look like a thug,” she said.

“Then I must be one” he murmured.

“I'll just go home” she said. “I will not bother you. If you can't do a little thing like that for me . . .”

Rolling his eyes upward, he put his tie back on. “Restored to my class,” he muttered. He thrust his face toward her and hissed, “True culture is in the mind, the mind,” he said, and tapped his head, “the mind.”

“It's in the heart,” she said, “and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you are.”

“Nobody in the damn bus cares who you are.”

“I care who I am” she said icily.

The lighted bus appeared on top of the next hill and as it approached, they moved out into the street to meet it. He put his hand under her elbow and hoisted her up on the creaking step. She entered with a little smile, as if she were going into a drawing room where everyone had been waiting for her. While he put in the tokens, she sat down on one of the broad front seats for three which faced the aisle. A thin woman

with protruding teeth and long yellow hair was sitting on the end of it. His mother moved up beside her and left room for Julian beside herself. He sat down and looked at the floor across the aisle where a pair of thin feet in red and white canvas sandals were planted.

His mother immediately began a general conversation meant to attract anyone who felt like talking. "Can it get any hotter?" she said and removed from her purse a folding fan, black with a Japanese scene on it, which she began to flutter before her.

"I reckon it might could," the woman with the protruding teeth said, "but I know for a fact my apartment couldn't get no hotter."

"It must get the afternoon sun," his mother said. She sat forward and looked up and down the bus. It was half filled. Everybody was white. "I see we have the bus to ourselves," she said. Julian cringed.

"For a change," said the woman across the aisle, the owner of the red and white canvas sandals. "I come on one the other day and they were thick as fleas—up front and all through."

"The world is in a mess everywhere," his mother said. "I don't know how we've let it get in this fix."

"What gets my goat is all those boys from good families stealing automobile tires," the woman with the protruding teeth said. "I told my boy, I said you may not be rich but you been raised right and if I ever catch you in any such mess, they can send you on to the reformatory. Be exactly where you belong."

"Training tells," his mother said. "Is your boy in high school?"

"Ninth grade," the woman said.

"My son just finished college last year. He wants to write but he's selling typewriters until he gets started," his mother said.

The woman leaned forward and peered at Julian. He threw her such a malevolent look that she subsided against the seat. On the floor across the aisle there was an abandoned newspaper. He got up and got it and opened it out in front of him. His mother discreetly continued the conversation in a lower tone but the woman across the aisle said in a loud voice, "Well that's nice. Selling typewriters is close to writing. He can go right from one to the other."

"I tell him," his mother said, "that Rome wasn't built in a day."

Behind the newspaper Julian was withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him. From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without. It was the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows. His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity.

The old lady was clever enough and he thought that if she had started from any of the right premises, more might have been expected of her. She lived according to the laws of her own fantasy world outside of which he had never seen her set foot. The law of it was to sacrifice herself for him after she had first created the necessity to do so by making a mess of things. If he had permitted her sacrifices, it was only because her lack of foresight had made them necessary. All of her life had been a struggle to act like a Chestny and to give him everything she thought a Chestny ought to have without the goods a Chestny ought to have; but since, said she, it was fun to struggle, why complain? And when you had won, as she had won, what fun to look back on the hard times! He could not forgive her that she had enjoyed the struggle and that she thought she had won.

What she meant when she said she had won was that she had brought him up successfully and had sent him to college and that he had turned out so well—good looking (her teeth had gone unfilled so that his could be straightened), intelligent (he realized he was too intelligent to be a success), and with a future ahead of him (there was of course no future ahead of him). She excused his gloominess on the grounds that he was still growing up and his radical ideas on his lack of practical experience. She said he didn't yet know a thing about "life," that he hadn't even entered the real world—when already he was as disenchanting with it as a man of fifty.

The further irony of all this was that in spite of her, he had turned out so well. In spite of going to only a third-rate college, he had, on his own initiative, come out with a first-rate education; in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts. Most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother.

The bus stopped with a sudden jerk and shook him from his meditation. A woman from the back lurched forward with little steps and barely escaped falling in his newspaper as she righted herself. She got off and a large Negro got on. Julian kept his paper lowered to watch. It gave him a certain satisfaction to see injustice in daily operation. It confirmed his view that with a few exceptions there was no one worth knowing within a radius of three hundred miles. The Negro was well dressed and carried a briefcase. He looked around and then sat down on the other end of the seat where the woman with the red and white canvas sandals was sitting. He immediately unfolded a newspaper and obscured himself behind it. Julian's mother's elbow at once prodded insistently into his ribs. "Now you see why I won't ride on these buses by myself," she whispered.

The woman with the red and white canvas sandals had risen at the same time the Negro sat down and had gone farther back in the bus and taken the seat of the

woman who had got off His mother leaned forward and cast her an approving look.

Julian rose, crossed the aisle, and sat down in the place of the woman with the canvas sandals. From this position, he looked serenely across at his mother. Her face had turned an angry red. He stared at her, making his eyes the eyes of a stranger. He felt his tension suddenly lift as if he had openly declared war on her.

He would have liked to get in conversation with the Negro and to talk with him about art or politics or any subject that would be above the comprehension of those around them, but the man remained entrenched behind his paper. He was either ignoring the change of seating or had never noticed it. There was no way for Julian to convey his sympathy.

His mother kept her eyes fixed reproachfully on his face. The woman with the protruding teeth was looking at him avidly as if he were a type of monster new to her.

“Do you have a light?” he asked the Negro.

Without looking away from his paper, the man reached in his pocket and handed him a packet of matches.

“Thanks,” Julian said. For a moment he held the matches foolishly. A **NO SMOKING** sign looked down upon him from over the door. This alone would not have deterred him; he had no cigarettes. He had quit smoking some months before because he could not afford it. “Sorry,” he muttered and handed back the matches. The Negro lowered the paper and gave him an annoyed look. He took the matches and raised the paper again.

His mother continued to gaze at him but she did not take advantage of his momentary discomfort. Her eyes retained their battered look. Her face seemed to be unnaturally red, as if her blood pressure had risen. Julian allowed no glimmer of sympathy to show on his face. Having got the advantage, he wanted desperately to keep it and carry it through. He would have liked to teach her a lesson that would last her a while, but there seemed no way to continue the point. The Negro refused to come out from behind his paper.

Julian folded his arms and looked stolidly before him, facing her but as if he did not see her, as if he had ceased to recognize her existence. He visualized a scene in which, the bus having reached their stop, he would remain in his seat and when she said, “Aren’t you going to get off?” he would look at her as at a stranger who had rashly addressed him. The corner they got off on was usually deserted, but it was well lighted and it would not hurt her to walk by herself the four blocks to the Y. He decided to wait until the time came and then decide whether or not he would let her get off by herself He would have to be at the Y at ten to bring her back, but he could leave her wondering if he was going to show up. There was no reason for her to think she could always depend on him.

He retired again into the high-ceilinged room sparsely settled with large pieces of antique furniture. His soul expanded momentarily but then he became aware of his mother across from him and the vision shriveled. He studied her coldly. Her feet in little pumps dangled like a child's and did not quite reach the floor. She was training on him an exaggerated look of reproach. He felt completely detached from her. At that moment he could with pleasure have slapped her as he would have slapped a particularly obnoxious child in his charge.

He began to imagine various unlikely ways by which he could teach her a lesson. He might make friends with some distinguished Negro professor or lawyer and bring him home to spend the evening. He would be entirely justified but her blood pressure would rise to 300. He could not push her to the extent of making her have a stroke, and moreover, he had never been successful at making any Negro friends. He had tried to strike up an acquaintance on the bus with some of the better types, with ones that looked like professors or ministers or lawyers. One morning he had sat down next to a distinguished-looking dark brown man who had answered his questions with a sonorous solemnity but who had turned out to be an undertaker. Another day he had sat down beside a cigar-smoking Negro with a diamond ring on his finger, but after a few stilted pleasantries, the Negro had rung the buzzer and risen, slipping two lottery tickets into Julian's hand as he climbed over him to leave.

He imagined his mother lying desperately ill and his being able to secure only a Negro doctor for her. He toyed with that idea for a few minutes and then dropped it for a momentary vision of himself participating as a sympathizer in a sit-in demonstration. This was possible but he did not linger with it. Instead, he approached the ultimate horror. He brought home a beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman. Prepare yourself, he said. There is nothing you can do about it. This is the woman I've chosen. She's intelligent, dignified, even good, and she's suffered and she hasn't thought it fun. Now persecute us, go ahead and persecute us. Drive her out of here, but remember, you're driving me too. His eyes were narrowed and through the indignation he had generated, he saw his mother across the aisle, purple-faced, shrunken to the dwarf-like proportions of her moral nature, sitting like a mummy beneath the ridiculous banner of her hat.

He was tilted out of his fantasy again as the bus stopped. The door opened with a sucking hiss and out of the dark a large, gaily dressed, sullen-looking colored woman got on with a little boy. The child, who might have been four, had on a short plaid suit and a Tyrolean hat with a blue feather in it. Julian hoped that he would sit down beside him and that the woman would push in beside his mother. He could think of no better arrangement.

As she waited for her tokens, the woman was surveying the seating possibilities—he hoped with the idea of sitting where she was least wanted. There was something

familiar-looking about her but Julian could not place what it was. She was a giant of a woman. Her face was set not only to meet opposition but to seek it out. The downward tilt of her large lower lip was like a warning sign: DON'T TAMPER WITH ME. Her bulging figure was encased in a green crepe dress and her feet overflowed in red shoes. She had on a hideous hat. A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. She carried a mammoth red pocketbook that bulged throughout as if it were stuffed with rocks.

To Julian's disappointment, the little boy climbed up on the empty seat beside his mother. His mother lumped all children, black and white, into the common category, "cute," and she thought little Negroes were on the whole cuter than little white children. She smiled at the little boy as he climbed on the seat.

Meanwhile the woman was bearing down upon the empty seat beside Julian. To his annoyance, she squeezed herself into it. He saw his mother's face change as the woman settled herself next to him and he realized with satisfaction that this was more objectionable to her than it was to him. Her face seemed almost gray and there was a look of dull recognition in her eyes, as if suddenly she had sickened at some awful confrontation. Julian saw that it was because she and the woman had, in a sense, swapped sons. Though his mother would not realize the symbolic significance of this, she would feel it. His amusement showed plainly on his face.

The woman next to him muttered something unintelligible to herself. He was conscious of a kind of bristling next to him, a muted growling like that of an angry cat. He could not see anything but the red pocketbook upright on the bulging green thighs. He visualized the woman as she had stood waiting for her tokens—the ponderous figure, rising from the red shoes upward over the solid hips, the mammoth bosom, the haughty face, to the green and purple hat.

His eyes widened.

The vision of the two hats, identical, broke upon him with the radiance of a brilliant sunrise. His face was suddenly lit with joy. He could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson. He gave a loud chuckle so that she would look at him and see that he saw. She turned her eyes on him slowly. The blue in them seemed to have turned a bruised purple. For a moment he had an uncomfortable sense of her innocence, but it lasted only a second before principle rescued him. Justice entitled him to laugh. His grin hardened until it said to her as plainly as if he were saying aloud: Your punishment exactly fits your pettiness. This should teach you a permanent lesson.

Her eyes shifted to the woman. She seemed unable to bear looking at him and to find the woman preferable. He became conscious again of the bristling presence at his side. The woman was rumbling like a volcano about to become active. His

mother's mouth began to twitch slightly at one corner. With a sinking heart, he saw incipient signs of recovery on her face and realized that this was going to strike her suddenly as funny and was going to be no lesson at all. She kept her eyes on the woman and an amused smile came over her face as if the woman were a monkey that had stolen her hat. The little Negro was looking up at her with large fascinated eyes. He had been trying to attract her attention for some time.

“Carver!” the woman said suddenly. “Come heah!”

When he saw that the spotlight was on him at last, Carver drew his feet up and turned himself toward Julian's mother and giggled.

“Carver!” the woman said. “You heah me? Come heah!”

Carver slid down from the seat but remained squatting with his back against the base of it, his head turned slyly around toward Julian's mother, who was smiling at him. The woman reached a hand across the aisle and snatched him to her. He righted himself and hung backwards on her knees, grinning at Julian's mother. “Isn't he cute?” Julian's mother said to the woman with the protruding teeth.

“I reckon he is,” the woman said without conviction.

The Negress yanked him upright but he eased out of her grip and shot across the aisle and scrambled, giggling wildly, onto the seat beside his love.

“I think he likes me,” Julian's mother said, and smiled at the woman. It was the smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior. Julian saw everything lost. The lesson had rolled off her like rain on a roof.

The woman stood up and yanked the little boy off the seat as if she were snatching him from contagion. Julian could feel the rage in her at having no weapon like his mother's smile. She gave the child a sharp slap across his leg. He howled once and then thrust his head into her stomach and kicked his fret against her shins. “Be-have,” she said vehemently.

The bus stopped and the Negro who had been reading the newspaper got off. The woman moved over and set the little boy down with a thump between herself and Julian. She held him firmly by the knee. In a moment he put his hands in front of his face and peeped at Julian's mother through his fingers.

“I see yooooooooo !” she said and put her hand in front of her face and peeped at him.

The woman slapped his hand down. “Quit yo' foolishness,” she said, “before I knock the living Jesus out of you!”

Julian was thankful that the next stop was theirs. He reached up and pulled the cord. The woman reached up and pulled it at the same time. Oh my God, he thought. He had the terrible intuition that when they got off the bus together, his mother would open her purse and give the little boy a nickel. The gesture would be as natural to her as breathing. The bus stopped and the woman got up and lunged to the

front, dragging the child, who wished to stay on, after her. [...] His mother got up and followed. As they neared the door, Julian tried to relieve her of her pocketbook.

“No,” she murmured, “I want to give the little boy a nickel.”

“No!” Julian hissed. “No!”

She smiled down at the child and opened her bag. The bus door opened and the woman picked him up by the arm and descended with him, hanging at her hip. Once in the street she set him down and shook him.

Julian's mother had to close her purse while she got down the bus step but as soon as her feet were on the ground, she opened it again and began to rummage inside. “I can't find but a penny,” she whispered, “but it looks like a new one.”

“Don't do it!” Julian said fiercely between his teeth. There was a streetlight on the corner and she hurried to get under it so that she could better see into her pocketbook. The woman was heading off rapidly down the street with the child still hanging backward on her hand.

“Oh little boy!” Julian's mother called and took a few quick steps and caught up with them just beyond the lamppost. “Here's a bright new penny for you,” and she held out the coin, which shone bronze in the dim light.

The huge woman turned and for a moment stood, her shoulders lifted and her face frozen with frustrated rage, and stared at Julian's mother. Then all at once she seemed to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given one ounce of pressure too much. Julian saw the black fist swing out with the red pocketbook. He shut his eyes and cringed as he heard the woman shout, “He don't take nobody's pennies!” When he opened his eyes, the woman was disappearing down the street with the little boy staring wide-eyed over her shoulder. Julian's mother was sitting on the sidewalk.

“I told you not to do that,” Julian said angrily. “I told you not to do that!”

He stood over her for a minute, gritting his teeth. Her legs were stretched out in front of her and her hat was on her lap. He squatted down and looked her in the face. It was totally expressionless. “You got exactly what you deserved,” he said. “Now get up.”

He picked up her pocketbook and put what had fallen out back in it. He picked the hat up off her lap. The penny caught his eye on the sidewalk and he picked that up and let it drop before her eyes into the purse. Then he stood up and leaned over and held his hands out to pull her up. She remained immobile. He sighed. Rising above them on either side were black apartment buildings, marked with irregular rectangles of light. At the end of the block a man came out of a door and walked off in the opposite direction. “All right,” he said, “suppose somebody happens by and wants to know why you're sitting on the sidewalk?”

She took the hand and, breathing hard, pulled heavily up on it and then stood for a

moment, swaying slightly as if the spots of light in the darkness were circling around her. Her eyes, shadowed and confused, finally settled on his face. He did not try to conceal his irritation. "I hope this teaches you a lesson," he said. She leaned forward and her eyes raked his face. She seemed trying to determine his identity. Then, as if she found nothing familiar about him, she started off with a headlong movement in the wrong direction.

"Aren't you going on to the Y?" he asked.

"Home," she muttered.

"Well, are we walking?"

For answer she kept going. Julian followed along, his hands behind him. He saw no reason to let the lesson she had had go without backing it up with an explanation of its meaning. She might as well be made to understand what had happened to her. "Don't think that was just an uppity Negro woman," he said. "That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure," he added gratuitously (because he thought it was funny), "it looked better on her than it did on you. What all this means," he said, "is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn." He thought bitterly of the house that had been lost for him. "You aren't who you think you are," he said.

She continued to plow ahead, paying no attention to him. Her hair had come undone on one side. She dropped her pocketbook and took no notice. He stooped and picked it up and handed it to her but she did not take it.

"You needn't act as if the world had come to an end," he said, "because it hasn't. From now on you've got to live in a new world and face a few realities for a change. Buck up," he said, "it won't kill you."

She was breathing fast.

"Let's wait on the bus," he said.

"Home," she said thickly.

"I hate to see you behave like this," he said. "Just like a child. I should be able to expect more of you." He decided to stop where he was and make her stop and wait for a bus. "I'm not going any farther," he said, stopping. "We're going on the bus."

She continued to go on as if she had not heard him. He took a few steps and caught her arm and stopped her. He looked into her face and caught his breath. He was looking into a face he had never seen before. "Tell Grandpa to come get me," she said.

He stared, stricken.

"Tell Caroline to come get me," she said.

Stunned, he let her go and she lurched forward again, walking as if one leg were shorter than the other. A tide of darkness seemed to be sweeping her from him.

“Mother!” he cried. “Darling, sweetheart, wait!” Crumpling, she fell to the pavement. He dashed forward and fell at her side, crying, “Mamma, Mamma!” He turned her over. Her face was fiercely distorted. One eye, large and staring, moved slightly to the left as if it had become unmoored. The other remained fixed on him, raked his face again, found nothing and closed.

“Wait here, wait here!” he cried and jumped up and began to run for help toward a cluster of lights he saw in the distance ahead of him. “Help, help!” he shouted, but his voice was thin, scarcely a thread of sound. The lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere. The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.

NAGUEYALTI WARREN

Introduction to Alice Walker's "Convergence"

In August 1964, Alice Walker had completed her sophomore year at Spelman College, had participated in the civil rights demonstrations in Atlanta, and was contemplating a transfer to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. On 3 Aug. 1964, Flannery O'Connor succumbed to lupus and died at the age of thirty-nine. Walker once lived down the Eatonton-to-Milledgeville road from O'Connor. The year was 1952 and Walker was eight years old. Separated by age, race, and class, Walker and O'Connor have more in common than might at first be expected.

Walker first encountered O'Connor's stories as a student at Sarah Lawrence. She describes her reaction to O'Connor's works in the essay "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor." Walker says that she "read her books endlessly, scarcely conscious of the difference between [O'Connor's] racial and economic background and [her] own" (*In Search* 42). The stories comforted Walker; the landscapes in O'Connor's books were familiar. She recognized O'Connor's South as her own—a depiction of home—for which she might have felt nostalgic. In 1966, Walker completed but never published a story that can be seen as the missing part of O'Connor's story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge." Walker dedicated the story to O'Connor. She titled the story "Convergence." The story is not just in conversation with O'Connor's story. Walker's subtitle "The Duped Shall Enter Last: But They Shall Enter" is a double-voiced parody of O'Connor's story "The Lame Shall Enter First."

Walker's story, printed here for the first time, covers the same period as O'Connor's story—post-1957 and the integration of public buses, but pre-full civil and human rights in the South. The issues of youthful pride and impatience are part of both stories, but Walker introduces elements that are missing in the O'Connor story, issues that Walker might have been studying at the time. Her school notebooks contain an essay on Saint Augustine. Walker analyzes his philosophy and traces it back to Plato. Then in the same essay she writes of a friend from the South who visits her in New York. He had participated in the Selma-to-Montgomery march, which took place in 1965. With him marched "priest, nuns, clergymen, rabbis, students, businessmen, people" (Box 35, MARBL). When Walker asked him what it felt like to participate in such a demonstration, unable to articulate his feelings, he finally said that it was "glorious." Walker is amazed that the poor black people of the South are fighting for their rights, and singing: "Over my head I hear trouble in the air. There must be a God somewhere." She writes, "These people never heard of Plato, have never known how or why or from where Christianity came to them" (Box 35, MARBL). The fact that the oppressed black people believed, had faith in the God they had been given is one issue. The other is that their belief had made them strong. Just as Teilhard de Chardin's philosophy influences O'Connor and leads her to the idea of convergence for the title of her story, Augustine's philosophy affects Walker's story.

Walker concludes her essay on Augustine by stating that Platonism and Stoicism are "selfish" philosophies, possibly because of their emphasis on the individual will. Augustine introduced the concept of Christian charity. This concept of charity Walker brings to play in "Convergence." When Walker's story is read with O'Connor's story, a fuller, richer concept emerges, not of the social and political era, but of the spiritual characteristic of

both writers. Together the stories constitute wholeness that Walker understands as truth. In the essay "Beyond the Peacock" she writes, "[T]he truth about any subject only comes when all the sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. For each writer writes the missing parts of the other writer's story" (*In Search* 49). The missing part of the O'Connor story is knowledge of the life of the black woman and child in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." Thus, a black mother and her daughter are the central characters in Walker's story. The Walker story is similar to O'Connor's in style and substance, even though of O'Connor's stories Walker writes, "[O]ne can tell an O'Connor story from any story laid next to it" (*In Search* 57). Walker creates in her characters those unique aspects of the black southern experience that O'Connor was wise enough to leave alone. In Walker's opinion, O'Connor's restraint when writing about black characters prevented her from creating stereotypes and caricatures.

Alice Walker, born in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1944, is best known for her award-winning novel *The Color Purple*. However, she is the author of seven novels, three collections of short stories, four collections of essays, four children's books, four volumes of poetry, two biographies of other writers, and the production of a film on female genital mutilation. While she has stated that she is now in retirement, this prolific writer continues to produce and publish new works. Her latest works include an essay collection, *The Cushion in the Road*, and a new collection of poetry, *The World Will Follow Joy*. The documentary film *Beauty in Truth* portrays Walker's remarkable life journey. ♻️

Note

"Convergence" is published with the permission of Alice Walker and the permission of the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

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ALICE WALKER

Convergence
The Duped Shall Enter Last: But They Shall Enter

“Really, Mama,” Adrienne practically snorted, feeling desperately close to tears, but angry too, and as if she were about to throw up. It was all so useless! “Won’t you ever understand that the white man doesn’t give a damn about you!”

“Heah chile, you cut out that cussin’ round me. Respect these gray hairs.” And her mother kept rocking back and forth in the beat-up old rocker, her silvery head like a burst of white rose petals over a burnt cork jug. Back and forth, back and forth she rocked, busy at her sewing.

“And I wish you wouldn’t bring home that filthy white man’s drawers to sew up!” cried Adrienne, her voice getting away from her, out of control. She wanted to scream at her mother, to claw the hideous yellowed flannel under-suit out of her hands. But her mother sat there, placidly sewing, like a squat little black toad in glasses, like a cow, like any idiot who would sew up the drawers of someone who hated them.

“They ain’t done nothing to me. Ain’t done nothing to you neither. I don’t know what the matter is with you. Your daddy and me scraped and saved to send you to school,” biting the thread and smoothing out the worn long-johns over her knee, “and whut do we git for it? Nothing but disrespect and abuse from you who ain’t even dry behind the ears yet. And you shore God don’t seem to be gitting no smarter.” She sighed. “I wonder if I ought to take in this here seam. Mr. Kelly’s got so thin here recently.”

“Well, come on if you want me to go with you to work today.” Adrienne wondered how she would be able to stand being in the white house where her mother worked. But in order to have any time with her at all during vacations she had to go to the house and talk to her while she scrubbed and waxed and polished and cooked apple pie and fried chicken for the Kelly brats. She never let Adrienne help her with the work and had lectured her severely when Adrienne had suggested it. Heaving a deep sigh that shook her thick chest and small breasts, her mother dragged herself out of her hunched over position, groping around the bottom of her chair for the fan that had fallen as she moved to get up.

Adrienne followed her as she treaded heavily across the rickety porch to the sagging screen door. Her mother ran her fingers tenderly and proudly around some flower petals near the door with an awed curiosity in her small weak eyes that never failed to make Adrienne sorry for whatever she had done. Today, however, her mother’s soft vulnerability had less effect on her than ever, as it always was on Adrienne’s first days home from college.

“I wonder if I ought to take miz Kelly a sprig of this here callidendrum,” her mother mused as she fingered a plant on the front steps that pushed out aggressive thick green and white leaves from a rusty old coffee can painted thinly and sadly in “cheerful” yellow paint.

“For God’s sake, Mama, don’t give that old buzzard a thing!”

She could never get used to her mother’s saying “yes ma’am” and “no ma’am” to a lot of pissy little creeps who were no older than she was. And it burned her up that Mrs. Kelly, the woman her mother had started working for soon after Adrienne started college, called her mother “Katie” instead of “Mrs. Taylor,” and although her mother knew how much

she hated it she made a point, even when talking to Adrienne, to call Mrs. Kelly "Mrs.," although they had played together as children.

"Ain't I told you to be more respectful, young'un?" said her mother, remorsefully rather than forcefully, for she loved this angry daughter of hers. Her reproaches were always soft-spoken, as if her disagreement with her daughter's philosophy was too settled to be stirred by words, no matter how vehemently spoken. "Why cain't you never understand nothing" she murmured on, busily attacking the root of the calodendrum with a hoary and calloused finger. "You is just lak your uncle Ulus, all the time griping about the white man—and lord look at whut happened to him." She straightened up, a hand pressed hard to her right side. "Been dead these many years."

"Oh, Mama, be quiet and just come on!" Adrienne said, stamping her foot childishly with frustration, then holding her mother tight around her protruding middle and kissing her leathery cheeks. She felt near tears and knew her mother felt even worse, for her brother, Ulus, had been roasted alive, then lay around the town for nearly a week before anybody got up nerve enough to get him and bury what was left of him.

"Let's go."

Getting the battered old Packard out of the yard was always a feat. It choked and gurgled, and snorted and farted and finally quit altogether. "May be it need some air in the tires," was the curiously naïve remark her mother always made when the car wouldn't start, or choked down, or ran over something.

"No, Ma, it *ain't* the tires," and, pulling up the emergency brake Adrienne went and peeked under the hood, blew her breath over the motor a couple of times, and got back in. The ancient blue and white beauty, freshly washed and polished, but rotten to the core, started with a lurch, only to stop again as it came against fat raised oak roots that crawled about the yard like so many twisted snakes. "Damn it all!" Adrienne muttered. Then, "oh hell, I'm sorry," for her mother had thrown her a look of such mild reproach that she could do nothing else. The mother, for her part, watched her girl out of the corner of her little overstrained eyes and could not seem to understand the actuality of what sat beside her. "I shore don't see a-tall how you got to be my daughter. Ain't none of my people been big cussers. I reckon you takes after your pa's side. You take his sistuh, your Aunt Rye, not that I believes in talking bout peoples, but that sistuh of your pa's—say, Andy, I just thought of something, maybe whut the car needs is some wa-tuh. You never can tell when thangs is thirsty. Now franexample, you take my flowers, they cain be just as pritty as they cain be and just bout ready to die from lak of wa-tuh. Or lak some peoples—" but by then the car had started and Adrienne had given her mother another quick kiss, this time between chin and collarbone, a very "winning" spot as she knew from long practice aimed at stopping charming but inane monologues, and they were off, the farty old car dispelling gallons of bilious smoke in its extravagant wake.

What angered Adrienne more than anything or as much as anything or as little as anything was that her mother refused to leave the house without her apron, on. So that when they came abreast of the post office her mother suddenly remembered that she expected a package from "the House of God," located somewhere in Chicago, and, bouncing out of her side of the car with more speed than gracefulness, she hurriedly waddled up the steps of the post office while Adrienne was torn between running after her and ripping off the stupid apron, which streamed out in snowy butterfly wings behind, and finding a place to park close by the post office building so that when her mother came bobbing out she would not have to walk through the entire congregation of the town.

"SHIT!" Adrienne cried in her rage as she narrowly missed a pursed-mouth, dried up old white lady in a crepy black suit that nearly touched the ground. The old lady shook her umbrella at her, and Adrienne heard her screech "nigger!" and it was all she could do to keep from swirling the car around and sweeping down upon the little black and white insect, crushing it like a wrinkled moth into the dusty concrete.

Oh fuck it all, Adrienne frowned, who had her mother stopped to chat with!? On the steps of the post office her mother was talking to a pallid, round milk jug dressed in gray. Grinning, they both turned and looked in her direction. "Cum here, Andy baby," her mother called. "Here's mis Thomson wants to see you!" Her mother knew she hated these confrontations. And Mrs. Thomson (the milk jug) was especially unbearable to her; for she had provided her with baby clothes as a child, that her own daughter had out-grown, and seemed to feel that Adrienne owed her a special debt. And although Adrienne had never felt and still did not feel gratitude for her magnanimous gift she knew that her mother did. "Deah God, please hep me to be more respectful," she thought, and she slowly prodded herself across the street where her be-aproned mom, "Katie" to them, stood beaming at her, her eyes glowing, as if she were about to present the queen of the May.

"How do you do," Adrienne said formally, throwing her mother a look that said "YOU KNOW BETTER, and whatever happens is your fault, although I'll try to do my best FOR YOUR SAKE!" Her mother smiled nervously and pushed her fat little arm through Adrienne's skinny one.

"We-ll, we-ll, if it ain't 'our' lil Andy-girl!" the old southern charmer gushed. "My, my, my, how you *have* grown. Bet you thank you're a lil lady now—don' she Katie," she beamed, turning to her mother, good will and condescension written all over her face, obvious and superficial, like her make-up. "You're here on va-cation?" the bloated belle thrust onward.

"Yes." Adrienne heard her mother's pitiably audible intake of breath when the "yes" came out, but she ignored it.

"How do you like being up yonder in Atlanta at school and away from us down here?" The red painted mouth, smiling widely, kept twitching at the corners.

"Love it." Adrienne replied shortly and with emphasis.

"You mean to say you don' miss us a-tall?" asked the scarlet mouth, letting the smile go.

Adrienne's look said plainly enough "are you nuts?" before she condescended to answer in her own southern dialect and drawl, "Thet's jest zackly whut ah mean to say, miz Thomson," she refused an impulse to scratch the back of her head, "as the lord iz mah widnis, although ah sometimes misses mah Ma, ah jest didn't miss de rest of yall a-tall." Adrienne was aware that her mother was pulling at her arm. Mrs. Thomson, that old weatherer of grudges, storms, and wars, overlooked the pointed mimicry, but Adrienne felt her draw away from her. "All of my *good* lil ba-be close," the cold blue eyes seemed to say. "All my *good* lil ba-be close, gone to wa-ste on that gal who don' even preshate it enough to say 'yes ma'am' to me, who am old enough to be her mother! Lordy, lord, what *is* this world coming to." After a few bland pleasantries during which Adrienne gave in to her mother's pressure on her arm and spoke in her normal voice, the threesome broke up. Adrienne tried to joke about Mrs. Thomson, calling her "Mrs. Tumson" because of her jutting hillock of stomach, but Mrs. Taylor hugged the corner of the seat and would not speak to her.

"By the way, what ya got in that package from God's house?" She asked in the light "homey" manner she used when she wanted to bring her mother out of a pout. Her mother

was holding a thin package wrapped in brown paper, a picture of a thin fellow with a beard and his arms raised like he was about to fly, pasted on the outside. The picture was in color and the Christ, for that's who the man was supposed to be, was a waxen, sick-looking pink, like a plastic doll. She knew that if she asked about the picture and the package her mother would feel prompted to give her a lecture on religion, but to get back into her good graces she was willing to talk about anything, the church, and baptisms, and preachers, and revivals, and even Jesus Christ, of whose very sacred person her mother was holding an exact color drawing, done from life.

Her mother wasn't stupid, just full of faith. Once she had tried to convince her that Christ couldn't possibly look like that. All rouged and painted. But her mother had smiled at her naiveté and said that *she knew that*, but that they had to make him look wasted away for he was newly risen and hadn't eaten probably for "snever so long," and at the same time they had to paint him brilliant so as to show the glory was on him . . . etc., etc. She wondered if she would ever recover from her mother's faith? She thought not. She had tried, in many a brightly lit study room at school, in many a book-laden library in college, in many a bar and in many a strange and motley company (of which her mother would die if she knew, feeling that any discussion that expressed doubt about the existence of God—and especially with white folks and particularly with white young men—would put Adrienne "way out of her 'place'"). But the fact that God was dead and Jesus ailing along as only a prophet and incapable of bringing about miracles could never be brought home to her mother. And whereas a few God-deniers she knew had thrown themselves from fifteen-story apartment windows and others had "flipped out," her mother stayed sane as an ant.

"Say, Lovie, what's in the package?" she asked pleadingly. She wanted to make a quip about the picture on the outside of the package, but thought she'd better not. Nothing riled her mother as quickly as having somebody make fun of "her Jesus." "With all my education, I'm a goddamn bum," Adrienne thought. "And she's a bloody saint capable of miracles much more essential than that creep on the outside of that package!" How else could she have sent Adrienne to college on twelve dollars a week? There was something miraculous about that, one had to admit. Even "her Jesus" couldn't have done it, if he had had the guts to father and try to raise a nigger child in the first place.

In a small pathetic and distracting way "Lovie" began a hymn. The thumping revival always in session in her breast, came pulsing out, and mourn after mourn of "Je-sus ke-ee-p me ny-aer the cross!" rolled out of her chest and her lumpy short fingers pulled in time at the crisp cotton of her bright print housedress. Why did this chile of hers plague her so? "I reckon I got a right to try to keep in contact wid my Je-sus," her eyes said, making a scathingly wounded sweep of Adrienne's body behind the wheel. She pulled the wrapped package, which Adrienne guessed contained new Sunday school books—her mother was a teacher—closer to her humming body. "Je-sus ke-ee-p me ny-aer the cross!" she intoned, looking meaningfully at Adrienne, as if to drive away an evil spirit that lurked within her daughter's flesh.

"The trouble wid you all young'uns is that you don't know your place." Her mother started in just where Adrienne had hoped most she would not. She groaned to hear her start on the subject of how all "new generation" people were "mix-placed" and "mis-placed" persons.

"Good grief! Sweetie-pie," said Adrienne, masking her annoyance with a strained profile grin, "what I been trying to tell you for god knows how many years, is that I don't *have* a place, that I've got to *make* myself a place, and if some old white bitch is in the place

I want to be then she'd better move over and make some room, or else vacate the spot altogether! Now I ask you, what could be wrong with that? Ain't there at least some right in my wanting in the first place to share? It ain't exactly as if I wanted to eat the whole damn cake by myself!" Ah crap, what was the use? When if ever was her mother going to wake up and begin to fight for the "place" she deserved?

"Well, all I know is that I is satisfied wid where I is, wid what I is, and as I is," and she smoothed out the apron over her lap, a gesture aimed at making Adrienne ashamed that she had been ashamed of it. "At least my generation knows its place—leastways most of us do. Though here recently I seen a whole lot of peoples who ain't got no respect for themselves and nobodies else out marching and gallivantin' around like they think they know more'en anybody's else whut's been going on in the world. Like they been saved and the rest of us ain't. But I been in this here world just as long as they and I know whut's been going on, and a whole lot of marching and sanging ain't going to change nothing. They got to git right wid they maker fore anything going to change. They seem to be forgittin' about him; but let me tell you young'un, widout him, the sun don't shine and the moon don't wane!"

There was a pause. Her mother always ended lectures like these by saying that she knew all this for a fact. And since the sun had always shone and the moon had always waned, Adrienne figured she had the proof, though how her mother figured the shining and waning were anybody's doing was beyond her.

"And I know all this here I'm telling you for a fact," her mother said, vigorously nodding her head.

The old car battered down the dirt roads of the Negro "quarter" in greasy whorls of smoke and dust. A little Negro girl was on her way, late, to school, and wore a bright blue dress with white around the tail and a pair of brand-new red sneakers. She was practically in a trot.

"That there's one of the ones going to the white school," Mrs. Taylor offered with the cool speculation in her tone of someone calmly expecting an argument. "That's annuther thang—I don't see why you all (meaning everybody under twenty-five) wants to go to the white folks school. You all claim you hates them so much. Yit and still you wants to go to they school. Why you all cain't be satisfied wid your own thangs is whut I cain't understand. I'm telling you chile, the secret of success is that you makes do wid whut you got!"

"Yes Ma," Adrienne sighed, "all that you say is very logical. Not the point at all, but logical. How many times have I got to tell you that 'going to the white folks school' just because it's got white folks in it is not the point. The point is that our schools are inferior to their schools, and as long as there is a choice between attending a school that is first rate and a school that is second rate a person would be a fool to choose the one that is second rate. Now that's got some logic too, hasn't it? Don't you see yet that although it may be true that the key to success is 'making do wid whut you got,' we ain't got nothing to make do wid!"

"Well, it ain't they fault if you all ain't as bright as they," Mrs. Taylor said, glancing back at the hurrying girl climbing the hill to the white folks school. Adrienne felt like strangling her for being so brainwashed and dense. She pushed in on the accelerator but quickly slowed the car lest careening around one of the bumpy twisted "streets" she ran over some unheeding, late young rebel on her way to school "wid the white folks."

"Mama, don't you think that little girl is as bright as they are?"

"We-ull—"

"Alright then, don't you think I'm as bright as any of them? And if you say no you can just get out and walk to work!"

"But Andy, you's different—"

"No I'm not Ma. I'm black too. By the way," dropping the subject of intelligence because it always ended with her mother saying that it looked like to her the blacker the child the dumber he was, and Adrienne always had to fight the temptation to suggest that maybe that was why she wasn't any genius, "how did the white folks act the first day that little girl went? Did they give her a hard time, or did they act civilized for once?"

"Nearly blinded her," her mother said laconically, as someone agreeing with a judgement.

"But Mama," Adrienne kept wanting to run the side of the car her mother was on against a tree, "where were all of *you* all? Where was the goddamn 'Negro leadership'?" ("I wish you would quit that cussin' it don't make whut you trying to say come out no stronger") "I mean what did she have to do, walk down a line of clubs to get to that da—place!"

"Her ma was wid her. The two of them got stoned pretty bad—But I had done tol'em and tol'em, 'you all ain't got no bidnis gitting out your place!' That's the *all white* school I tol'em, but they got sassy wid me. 'Well, it won't be the all white school once *my* daughter gets in it!' is whut the ma said to me." Mrs. Taylor mimicked the woman's language. She was a school teacher and talked "proper." "So I just tol'em to go on ahead, but just remember when the bricks started flying that they was out of they place!"

"Oh screw y—," Adrienne began, then quickly bit her lip and counted to five.

"But Mama," she began again, "what if it had been you and me? What if we had gone up that walk and all those little babies you had nursed on your knee suddenly started throwing rocks at you—what would you have done, and what would you have felt? Don't tell me you would have stood there thinking about 'place'!"

"Wouldn't have been me in the first place. I knows where I belongs and I stays there, and longs' I stays there ain't nobody going to bother me, be they white, green or colored." "Green is colored, Lovie."

Her mother always worried about getting to work on time but since they had to drive from one small townlet to another—both in the same county and obnoxious—Adrienne could not understand how Mrs. Kelly could scold her mother for being late. After all, she wasn't building her mother a fortune with those twelve dollars a week.

"Whut time is it Andy?"

"Nearly nine, we'll be there before long." And the car swung onto the smooth black asphalt, which coiled and twisted like a lean black cat slowly falling through the green countryside. To the right and left were tiny cattle farms, dairy barns, chewing cows bunched together under flat-leaved oaks and silvered poplars. The spring sun was very warm and the blossom of the honeysuckle glistened like pale yellow flames and the heady wine of the scent pervaded the whole air, leaving not one space, even inside the car, empty of its presence.

There did not seem to be grounds this morning for an argument. An argument of any kind, and Adrienne felt with relief how far the pastoral scene all around was from all the recent demonstrations, the publicity surrounding the President's latest gall-bladder operation, the war in Asia. In her town of Briersville, Georgia, life went on its way, always the same as before, and even she, at nine o'clock on such a peaceful June morning was

lulled into thinking that nothing should disturb the rest of the quaint and drowsy little village.

They swung around the corner of the street that led to the courthouse on the square, and the first thing she noticed was a picket line spread out around the drugstore on the other side. Her fingers tightened on the wheel and she would have said nothing to her mother, whose eyes were bouncing indignantly about the sidewalk, had not Mrs. Taylor said disgustedly: "Well, I see there's some more poor peoples out pounding the sidewalk this morning instead of working—I wonder whut *they* wants?"

About forty Negro girls and boys, almost none of them out of their teens, were marching, two abreast, twelve feet apart, up and down the quickly awakening street. The drug store under attack had pulled down its shades and the man who operated it was scuttling across the street to collaborate with the sheriff, who stood outside his tiny house of glass that was in one corner of the courthouse lawn. He looked both helpless and dismayed. All he could do was scowl at the young pickets, since they were obeying all the laws of picketing.

The signs the picketers carried were bold and imaginative, but some completely off the subject, which was that in future Negroes demanded the right as customers to sit down while they drank the cokes they bought in the drugstores. One left-wing slogan said, "Support the Black Panthers, Support Black Power," picked up no doubt from a passing SNCC group. Another very colorful sign, carried by an old Negro granny of about ninety, urged "MAKE LOVE NOT WAR!" Adrienne could have kissed her. Apparently the old woman couldn't read and had no idea what the sign said, for when a young boy walked up and whispered something in her ear she tore it off her chest, not bothering to unfasten the safety pins. Adrienne laughed gleefully as the spry old woman immediately took up another sign that read "Burn, Whitey, burn. Soon, Whitey, soon." Grinning widely and showing that she had not a tooth in her head she marched away, chin up and stepping high, the last white baby she had dawdled on her ancient knee the steadily reddening sheriff who gave her wine and hard candy at Christmas and called her "his" Aunt Lou-ise.

"Ought to be shamed of herself, the silly old fool. Ought to be down on her knees right this minute thanking the lord she done made it for as long as she has. Whut she need to be setting anywhere drinking a co-cola anyhow!" Mrs. Taylor said as Adrienne slowly passed by, waving and yelling and throwing kisses to the old lady—who *was* a bit out of her head if the truth were known.

"Times are changing!" Adrienne said.

"Bob Dylan's right you know Mama," she said happily, even though her mother claimed she never could understand what the boy was "sanging" about, he "slurged" his words together so bad. "I tell you the truth," her mother said to her one day as she sat listening to Dylan, "I have always said that white folks cain't sang, but that poor chile—he cain't even talk!"

"The times they sure are a changin' and brother, am I glad to see the day!" Adrienne said.

"Might be changin' for the wust," her mother said, and gave a nervous look of impending doom which Adrienne knew meant all was not right in her little country world.

"Slow down Andy."

"Why, what's the matter?" She wanted to drop her mother quickly and get back to the picket line. Strings of whites were beginning to fill the streets and she felt her blood tingle. The only way she wanted to confront the whites in this town was from a picket line telling them just where the hell to get off.

"Heah, just a minute. Looks to me lak I sec the Kelly boy over yonder in the crowd. He ain't got no bidnis gallivantin' round heah. He ought to be in school. I wish you could have seen his grades last year—they almost put his ma and pa both in the horspital. Stop the car."

"Mama," Adrienne hollered. "I certainly will not stop the car! Have you lost your *mind*! It is not your business and not your duty to see that that snotty brat gets to school." Brainwashed she knew her mother to be, as much as she loved her, but was she crazy as well? She couldn't be serious, she just couldn't! That was all!

"You heah me, Andy. I say stop this car and lemme out," said her mother, beginning to look at her with a look that promised she would jump out while the car was still running. "Ah," her mother looked pained, "he's just lak the rest of his generation. He don't know his place. It shore ain't here watching a bunch of misguided cullid chillen who ought to be in school this morning trying to start trouble. You going to stop this car or not?"

"Oh hell," Adrienne grimaced. She pulled over to the curb as far away from the pickets and the obscenity throwing whites as she could without having her mother bash something over her head for not obeying her sooner. Then Mrs. Taylor, "Katie" to them, was bustling down the sunny street, bumping into everybody, seeing nobody, saying a brisk "scuse me" to everyone she hit, going on toward the Kelly boy lost somewhere in the jeering white crowd. "Oh lord," sighed Adrienne, as she followed as closely as she could her mother's flying streamers, "why has thou forsaken us!" And I tell you right now Jesus—she felt the hatred welling up inside her as she conducted the mental angry monologue—I don't want nothing to do with you if you desert little fools like Mama who never did nobody no harm and send then flying through a goddamn white mob trying to make some goddamn stupid white boy go to school and make good marks so his "poor ma and pa" won't end up in the "horspital." One of the few decent things her father had told her before he ran out on them was that although it might be true, as her mother often said, that God was on their side, they were not to be running through no damn mobs to find out. But Mama hadn't listened and hadn't learned. Was she just dumb, or what?

"Mama wait!" Adrienne whispered as she caught up with her. "Don't you realize you can't do this. Don't you realize you don't know these people, have never known these people, and if you keep going on this way, *will* never know these people? And you needn't think they know you either. You're just another "nigger" to them. Won't you see that Mama. Please stop and come home with me. To hell with the Kelly boy. Let him stay where he is, the most that can happen to him is that he'll pick up some new names to call you. What do you care about *his* education. You think the Kellys give a damn about *my* education? Do you?" She was almost in tears. "They don't give a shit whether I get good marks or not, whether you get put in the hospital or not, whether you die or not. How many times have I got to tell you that!" Her mother was about to tell her to quit her cussin' but changed her mind because they were approaching the thick crowd of whites who presented a fiercely solid wall in front of the pickets across the street. Her eyes scanned the crowd, the obscene remarks they threw at the children in front of the drugstore lost on her as she tried to catch sight of the Kelly boy.

"Mama, darling, please—won't you come back with me. Your place isn't here trying to make these white folks behave. They haven't ever behaved and the only way you can make them is to beat it into them that you ain't gonna take no shit from 'em. Mama, that across the street is not a social gathering—that in front of us is a mob. And the sooner you realize that the happier you will be—" but they had already reached the edge of the crowd.

"Niggers!," "Coons," and "Go back to the jungle" were shouts yelled into their very ears. They plunged into the crowd where feeling was most intense, the fire hottest, the breathing of the men making a menacing rustle of hatred that splayed over them like cascading slime. Her mother, sensing some danger for Adrienne, had grabbed her by the hand and held her tight as she worked her way, with more determination than ever, through the red-necked crowd. At first the whites, especially the women, were too dazed to notice that they were being pushed aside by a colored woman and a girl. But as they passed heads turned, for no other black person had dared turn his face in their direction, except for the "mised children" picketing the drugstore. So it was, with the entire crowd's attention, that Mrs. Taylor, "Katie," hustled up to Tommy Kelly, a thirteen year old with a confederate flag in his lapel, and grabbing him under the elbow began to tow him away, all the while saying "Ain't you shamed of your self. Whut would your ma and pa say if they knowed you was here and not in school. Stop that hanging back and cum on here!" and holding Tommy with one hand and Adrienne with the other she began to drag them both away from the scene so "degeneratin' to their morals."

It was easy to see Tommy had no idea what to do. On the one hand she had always been his friend. On the other she was a nigger. He seemed almost on the point of letting himself be carried off, his little flag dangling loosely by its wood handle from his pocket. His narrow blue eyes blinked a couple of times as he looked down at the ground between his sneakers. Then his scrawny, none-too-clean neck began to redden. He had seen Adrienne and recognized her as a "colored *girl*," according to his mother one of the most hateful kinds of uppity niggers. "Take your hands off of me, you crazy old nigger woman!" and Adrienne saw her mother's back sway as if she had been hit. The next minute she had been, for the non-repentant Tommy drew back a bony fist and hit her as hard as he could right under the arm she was holding him by. "You cain't tell me what to do, you ugly old monkey!" And he ran back to his friends, who had watched his capture and escape with approval and loud yells and hand-clapping. Adrienne started to go after him, she wanted to get his skinny neck between her hands, but her mother pulled her back. She was holding her side with the hand that had been holding Tommy, and her eyes rested on the crowd of whites milling and muttering around her as if she'd never seen them before. Yet she knew them all, knew them by name, knew their fathers and mothers and birthdays, knew their children, had cooked and cared for them when they were ill—as some of them had done for her when she had been sick. Now she just looked at them, and a few of them dropped their heads and slinked away to the back of the group, a few of them walked away altogether, sobered by what they had seen. They did not even glance at the singing, clapping Negroes who had gained entry to the drugstore and swayed and bounced up and down on the shiny red stools, their hard-earned cokes downed in one exuberant gulp.

"Dear God, what has this mess done to her?" Adrienne wondered, as they made their way slowly back to the car. Some laughter directed at the pitiful spectacle they made coming from whites behind them. Her mother had never looked so gray. She was breathing hard and her eyes were brimful of tears. Her crumpled butterfly apron strings dangled limply behind her as she walked.

"Why the hell doesn't she say something!" Adrienne's own heart had contracted into a tight ball of pity for her. She had wanted her to learn her lesson, but not this way. This was too hard for an ailing old black woman whose brother had been roasted alive.

"Mama, you want to go back to the house now?"

Her mother seemed not to hear, but as they neared the car she began pulling off her apron and brushing at the stray wisps of white hair that had come out from under her hairnet. "You got a comb, Andy?" she asked as she leaned over to look into the side-view mirror, and tossed her apron into the car. She took the comb and ran it around the band of the hairnet, pushing the hair back into it. Then she brushed down her bosom with a heavy hand but firm, thorough strokes. Adrienne was surprised to see another look beginning to take the place of the hurt. What she saw growing in her mother's formerly meek eyes was a veritable blaze of anger. But at whom was it directed? At herself? At Adrienne?

"Mama, aren't you going to get in the car?" she asked over the top of the hot automobile. Her mother had begun to walk back down the street. "It's too hot for you to be walking in this sun."

"—Mama, where on earth are you going. Don't you know you can't go back there fooling with that ass-hole of a boy?" Her mother walked on, her eyes straight ahead. Adrienne followed her, feeling like the world's second biggest fool. And down the street they went again. Bumping into the same people, saying "scuse me" to the same people, hurrying on down the street, a fat black tugboat and its charge.

"Mama, don't *do* this—" Adrienne had begun to plead, when she noticed her mother had slowed down as she came abreast the pickets, and looking still a bit suspicious of them, crossed their lines and stalked into the drugstore, pulling Adrienne behind her. And now they stood in the middle of the white-vacated drugstore, with the exception of the soda jerk, who was not white but red as he served dozens of laughing Negroes who took turns replacing each other on stools under which was written "White Seats Only."

Going up to the only vacant stool Mrs. Taylor plopped her body on it, and the dark-skinned, grinning boy who occupied the one next to it quickly hopped up and offered it to Adrienne, who accepted it with a smile. "What are we having?" she asked her mother, still a little afraid that what her mother had really come into the store to do was preach a sermon on "place" to the Negroes who were gathered there. But when the soda jerk got to them and asked in a contemptuous drawl "whut ya'll *want*?" Her mother casually remarked to him, looking him straight in the eye with a blue-ringed look, "We wants two of them cokes that's causing so many peoples here today to forgit they place—and make it snappy young'un, we ain't got all day!"

"Hallelujah!" Adrienne shouted, as she looked with bright eyes at her mother's militant profile.

"Out of the mouths of babes," her mother retorted, drily, slurping her coke complacently, as if this wasn't the first time she'd been able to sit down with it. ◉

June 28, 1966

Dedicated to the memory of Flannery O'Connor