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The First Chapter From Sundial

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On the main quadrangle, there were a few people about, though freshly painted signs welcoming the "Class of 72" signaled the beginning of a new year. We were walking along the diagonal path between Frederick Douglass Hall and the entrance to Founders Library when Pop left the path and moved towards a sundial a few yards away . . .

By L. C. Morse

Five years had passed since I had been there, or even spent time in that part of Washington. And afterwards, for a moment, I wondered whether I'd have consented as readily to being project architect had I known at the time that the cafeteria we were to convert was so very near it. But that is neither here nor there now.

The cafeteria was a small place on Georgia Avenue between Harvard and Fairmont streets, quite near the campus. It had been called the University Luncheonette when I was a student and I had eaten there frequently during the latter part of my third year; sparingly before, never after. It had been a sort of refuge for me in the aftermath of a difficult experience; a place to sit alone and feel the weight of a very private disappointment.

The door had been open when I arrived that day shortly after the lunch hour, but aside from two folding chairs in the corner to the left of the doorway, all that remained of the place as I had known it was the mural that covered three of its four walls. The stove, oven and grills were gone, as were the jukebox, cigarette machines and soda fountains; gone too the serving line and eating booths.

I had been standing inside only a matter of seconds when an elderly but spry gentleman entered from a rear door speaking in a strong voice as he walked towards me:

"Yes Sir! May I help you?"

"Yes. Yes you can. My name is William Bennett; I'm with . . ."

"You with Attorney Lewis?"

"Well, in a way, yes. I'm an architect with the firm that's going to do the renovations here."

"Oh, I see. That fellow Lewis sho' don't waste no time. Course I should'a known you was an architect or something like that; I see you got your tape-

measure and stuff. Well, you just take your time and do what you gotta do. I'm Emerson, Emerson McKnight, and I'm pleased to meet you. I'm the one who sold this place to Attorney Lewis. Opened my door here in nineteen hundred and thirty-three. Called this place the Varsity Luncheonette; course I changed the name back in the early forties. You ever been here before?"

"Yes, I have. I ate here quite often when I was at Howard."

"You don't say! When did you go there?"

"Sixty-eight to seventy-three."

"Goodness! You was 'round a long time, wasn't you? Bet you was chasing them pretty girls over there." We both laughed.

"Well, architecture at Howard was a five-year program then, so I'm really class of seventy-two"

"Oh, I see. Guess that makes sense; takes a lot of time to master something like that. Never went to college myself. Came up here from Birmingham, Alabama in 1925, just before the Depression hit; got me a job on the railroad. Had an uncle up here, my mother's older brother; stayed at his house so I could save some money. This property was originally his, you see. Helped me open up this place in thirty-three; I wasn't but twenty-seven years old then. Course I . . ."

It was clear to me that he could go on this way for quite some time. I had never seen him there during the time I was at school, and I subsequently learned from him that he hadn't personally managed the place in fifteen years. He was immediately likeable, and certainly talkative enough, but the simple truth of the matter was that I had work to do, and though I did not want to be rude or brief, neither could I afford to pass the afternoon listening to his entire life's story. So in an effort to short circuit this I asked him about the mural—whose idea it had been, who had painted it—hoping that this account would be brief but would at the same time allow me to discharge an obligation of courtesy. After a few minutes however, I was all but certain my strategy had failed, that I would have to listen a while longer, when a young man of perhaps twenty appeared in the rear door and asked him if he wanted to go along on the truck ride to the junk yard with him and another fellow, whom I did not see, or if he

would instead remain behind. Perhaps Providence was aware of my plight or simply wished to get on to other things for he decided to go along and turning to me to excuse himself said, in a low voice so as not to be heard by the young man:

"Those young fellows can't do nothing without me. If I let 'em go to the junk yard alone, the man will cheat 'em blind! Well Mr. . . . what's your name again?" "Bennett."

"Oh yeah, that's right. Well Mr.



Bennett, I'll be gone for a few hours so you just feel free to do what you gotta do. If you have to leave before I get back, just don't worry about trying to lock the place up or nothing. There ain't nothing here that anybody could walk off with. Nice meeting you again, you take care now."

He shook my hand with extraordinary vigor, walked briskly to the rear door and closed it firmly behind him, the impact of its shutting causing the walls to vibrate for some time after he had gone.

Standing alone, near the center of the room, I turned my attention to the mural, thinking that I would spend a few moments savoring its story before proceeding to what I had come to do.

Nine years earlier, when first I realized the series of paintings along those walls told what appeared a simple story of student days at Howard during the mid-to-late nineteen forties, I had thought them cute—if disarmingly romantic; a chronicle of simpler, more innocent times. For when in subsequent years they had caused me to reflect on my own time there, I had seen in them only stark contrast. But standing there alone on that day in late March, I

thought of Hugo; how like him to have—in jest—called them hieroglyphs . . . and to have been right.

We had come there in the fall of '68 by very different paths, he and I. I had always known I would attend Howard, as had my parents, grandparents and paternal great-grandfather. And though, with the increased opening of Ivy-League colleges to us, I sensed a desire on my father's part that I should break with family tradition, the blood of alma mater ran too deep in his veins to allow him open objection to my intention; at least, not *this* one. My decision to study architecture and not medicine was an entirely different matter. Not only did he object, but quite vociferously. Grandfather was silent, as was my mother.

Some time passed before I was to learn just how and why Hugo Mackey had come to enter Howard, and many times since I have wondered if Time and Fate somehow conspired to bring us there together, that the bond that came to exist between us could be forged and that he might become the door through which I should re-enter a special time and place in my life. How strange to hear myself speak of him in this way now, for our first meeting did nothing to inspire immediate intimacy.

I had arrived the day before, having driven down to Washington from Baltimore with my grandfather, my parents and my sister Jeanne. For as long as I can remember, we had spent summers at the family beach house on the Chesapeake which we shared with my uncle and his family who lived in Baltimore. Mom and Aunt Jill were both school teachers and therefore had summers free. Dad would drive down from Montclair on the weekends and uncle Bob would come over from Baltimore. Pop—my Grandfather—would drop in whenever time and desire suited him. He managed to share a great deal of time with us during that particular summer, most of it talking to me, and as we neared the campus, if I experienced any sadness at all amidst my heightened anxiety, it was because I would now see less of him; that he, more than any of the others, I would miss.

Though I had visited Howard many times before, I had never set foot in Charles R. Drew Hall and as Dad struggled with my trunk and Pop stood by the car looking—in some vague manner,

without saying a word—supervisory, I grabbed my suitcase and suitbag and walked ahead, feeling myself already under the spell of impending independence. In the lobby, posted placards directed in-coming students to the registration area in the lounge.

The student behind the registration table did not look up as I entered the room. He seemed absorbed in filling out a form of some sort which on closer inspection turned out to be a crossword puzzle. I had been standing directly in front of him for perhaps twenty to thirty seconds before he finally acknowledged my presence with such an officious air one would have thought he owned the university, not to mention Drew Hall.

"Your *name* please?"

"Uh, Bennett. William Christopher Bennett."

"Just one minute please." He quickly flipped through the B's in the indexed box of envelopes in front of him.

"Bennett-Ceee, Bennett-Ohhh, Bennett-Double Uuuu. Yes. Here we are. *William Christopher Bennett-the third.*" The tone of his voice revealed considerable derision as he pronounced this last word, and though I have always been somewhat embarrassed by this extended tag of paternal pride, I was just a bit offended.

"Mr. Bennett, you have been assigned to room 514-B. Your roommate will be Hugo Alexander Mackey, also a freshman. This envelope—"

"Has he arrived yet?" I interrupted.

"Has *who* arrived Mr. Bennett?"

"My roommate. I believe you said his name was Mackey."

"If you will be kind enough to allow me to finish this procedure, I'll check. As I was saying, this envelope contains two keys—the larger for your room, the smaller for your mailbox in the lobby. Should you lose either of them you will be required to pay a fee of \$15.00 to have it replaced. Linen change is every Wednesday afternoon from one to four. Now about your roommate. Let's see—Mmmm, M-Aaaa, M-A-Cccc, Mackey! No! He hasn't arrived, so you may choose which ever side of the room you wish. Now, in order to get there you must turn around, go back out of the door through which you entered, turn left, get on the elevator, go up to the fifth floor, turn left, walk all the way down to the west wing, make another left and walk down to the end of the hall.

Your room is the last room on the right."

He stated all of this with such precision and rapidity that I had barely retained "elevator," yet I was determined not to give him the satisfaction of asking him to repeat it all. As I turned to leave, he spoke again.

"Oh, by the way *William*, my name is Woodward, Lincoln L. Woodward, the fourth. Welcome to Howard," He extended his hand and for a brief moment I hesitated. When I did respond it was with an exceptionally firm grasp, the more to cloak the blow dealt to my all too new sense of independence.

Dad approached as I re-entered the lobby.

"You all squared away Son?"

"Yeah Dad. It's all straight."

"Good. Where've they got you bivouacked?"

"I'm gonna be on the fifth floor, room 514."

"Got you in the 'Penthouse', huh?"

"Well, we'll soon see." I smiled as he placed his right hand on my left shoulder. He seemed to be making a special effort at chumminess. Perhaps he felt the occasion called for it. Perhaps Pop had done so with him when he first arrived at Howard. Whatever the reason, I went along.

The room was fairly spacious, though sparsely and simply furnished. There were two of everything—beds, desks, bookshelves, closets, dresser drawers, mirrors. It would have been a picture in total symmetry were it not for two large windows, one of which, at the far end of the room, faced the door; the other broke the monotony of the wall which faced the campus. Mom and Jeanne sat on the bed beneath the side window and Pop looked out into the alley beneath the window at the end of the room. Dad slowly paced the length of the room to Mom's obvious annoyance.

"Bill, why don't you sit down! Get out of boy's way so he can unpack!"

"Oh, am I in your way Son? I'm sorry. Hadn't realized I was holding up the show. Truth is, I'm feeling just a bit light on the stomach. What say we all go some place to have a bite to eat?"

"No thanks Dad. I'm really not hungry at the moment. I think I'll just stay here and unpack a few things. You know, just . . . sort of get settled."

"Hell, you've got *five years* to get

settled!" I knew when he mentioned the five years that he was still upset about my not going pre-med but I also knew that arguing the matter wouldn't help. As usual, Mom covered my silence.

"Bill, if the boy's not hungry, he's simply not hungry. So, where are the rest of us going to eat?"

I thought we'd go up Georgia Avenue to Billy Simpson's. Haven't been there in quite a while. Pop are you coming?"

"No thanks, Junior. I'm not really hungry either. You and the girls go on. I think I'll stay here and help Chris unpack."

"You sure Pop? Simpson's used to put together one helluva club sandwich."

"I'll be fine right here."

"Good enough then. Well, you young fellows stay out of trouble. We should be back in, say an hour and a half, maybe two. See you then."

For a few moments after they had gone, Pop said nothing. I continued to unpack and had just removed one of my tennis rackets from the trunk when he spoke.

"Good choice."

"What? The racket or not confronting Dad?"

"Well, now that you mention it, those were both good choices too, but I was actually speaking of your having chosen this side of the room. I think the desk on this side receives more natural light during the day and for what you'll be doing, you'll need it."

It was Pop's way to be indirect about things. He never openly intervened between Dad and me so this was his way of letting me know that he could live with a grandson who wanted to be something other than a doctor. A quick smile passed between us, a smile of implicit understanding—and for a time nothing more on the matter was said.

"Listen Chris. I was just thinking. You know, it's been nine years since I was down here last. Let's take a walk through the campus."

"But they won't be gone that long Pop."

"Oh I know, but neither will we. Come on. We'll just take a quick stroll, be back before you know it. I'd kind of like to catch a quick glimpse of the 'Valley'."

How many times had I heard he and Dad, after much intake of alcohol, exchange stories about the goings on in the Valley—how it had "set minds on fire" and "laid the weak by the wayside." I

gathered that making it through the Valley was a baptism of sorts, though having had no intention of going pre-med or Greek, I seriously doubted there would ever come a day when I too would speak of it with reverence.

We had only walked a short distance along the sidewalk which leads to the main quadrangle when Pop stopped by the fence which surrounds the football stadium. For a few moments he just stood staring into the stadium, the palms of his hands on the fence. And though the bleachers were empty and the field deserted, he seemed as preoccupied as a schoolboy at a construction site. When finally he turned to walk on, an expression of distant wanderings had settled upon his face and he walked as though alone.

Out on the main quadrangle, there were few people about, though freshly painted signs welcoming the "Class of '72" signaled the beginning of a new year. We were walking along the diagonal path between Frederick Douglass Hall and the entrance to Founders Library when Pop left the path and moved towards a sundial standing a few yards away. I followed, though he made no motion that I should do so. As he reached out to touch the surface of the dial, I noticed that his hand was trembling and then a curious thing happened. After he had placed his hand firmly on the dial's surface, he stood suddenly tall, erect. Standing there as if beside an old debater's lectern, he began to survey the length of the campus. By this time I had begun to feel just a bit self-conscious about Pop's behavior and turned to see if any one else was looking on, but no one seemed to give us any special notice. When I turned to look at Pop again, the sudden vigor and vitality which had so completely transformed him only a moment earlier was slowly fading and in its place there now appeared a wistful vacantness, tinged with melancholy the like of which I had never seen before. Only when he removed his watch from his pocket and became lost in contemplating its cover, did I begin to make some sense of his unusual behavior.

You see, grandfather's watch had been a source of singular fascination for me since childhood. Among my earliest and fondest memories are those of being deposited at his office while my mother went out to shop. For whatever reasons,

there were times when she felt my companionship an encumbrance so I was left at grandfather's office to entertain myself and—I might add—not infrequently his patients. There, I lived in castles behind chairs, slay many a fire-breathing dragon, defended my kingdom and honor against all wayward knights and yes, rescued many an imperiled princess. It is one such occasion in particular which comes to mind now, for it was then that I first became aware of grandfather's watch and its importance to him.

The last patient of the day had just left and grandfather was in his clinic putting away various utensils. I had become trapped in a plot of my imagination's weaving and had gone running into the clinic to seek his help. The object of my affection was being held captive in a tower by an evil knight who demanded a huge sum of gold for her release. Since he threatened to dispose of her if his demands were not met, all of my armies were rendered useless. I had no recourse but to pay the ransom. The problem, of course, was that I had no gold; my 'coffers', you might say, were empty. Why I didn't simply dream some into existence escapes me now, but perhaps I simply wanted money for candy and this seemed a promising though circuitous way to get some. Grandfather, however, was not to be taken in.

After chiding me for running wildly into his clinic he went over to the sink, washed his hands, then turned to give my problem his full attention. A questioning smile played upon his lips as he sat in the chair behind his desk and placed me on his lap. I then explained to him, with a great deal of seriousness, my need for gold. To my surprise, grandfather removed his watch from his pocket and detached it from its chain. As he placed it in my hand he told me that it was worth more than all the gold in the world and would surely be more than enough to gain my sweetheart's release. But I was not to be so easily pacified and protested that the watch had writing on it. Grandfather was momentarily silent and the smile which had graced his lips began to fade.

"Shall I read it to you?" he asked.

"Yes please."

"Well, it reads: 'To William, With Eternal Love, Helen; August 1, 1922.'"

"What's 'Eternal' grandpa?"

"It means for a long, long time. Forever and ever, without end."

"But who's Helen, grandpa?"

"Helen was my wife and *your* grandmother. She died one month to the day before you were born. Here, I'll show you her picture."

"In the watch?"

"In its cover, year."

"But why is my daddy standing next to her in those funny clothes?"

"That man next to her isn't your daddy Chris. Its me."

"You?"

Yes, me. This picture was taken on my wedding day."

"Needless to say, I found it impossible to envision that man in the picture as having been my grandfather. Indeed, I had never been able to conceive of Pop as ever having been a young man. That is, until I saw him standing beside that sundial. There, I caught a fleeting glimpse of him as he had no doubt, for an instant, seen himself—young and full of fire, ready to take the whole world by its horns and turn it upside down.

He now stood looking at the picture in the watch and I felt myself an intruder, as if I had wandered—unaware—into a garden inhabited by two lovers. But as I turned to walk away grandfather reached out his hand to stop me.

"No, don't go Chris. I'm sorry, I guess I must look like an old fool. It's just that everytime I come to this spot I think of her. It's been forty-seven years now, . . . forty-seven years. Right after the 'long walk'. We were still in our caps and gowns. I brought Helen to this very spot, right here next to this sundial and asked her to spend her life with me.

"Damn bifocals. Always fogging up. Where's my handkerchief? There, that's better."

"Listen Chris. I want you to have this."

"But Pop, I can't! I can't take your watch!"

"Now wait a minute. Don't you go telling me what you can't do before you've heard what I have to say; just let me explain. When Helen and I were undergraduates here, she was forever trying to get me to loosen up a bit, to enjoy the whole business a little more. Unlike yourself, I never asked myself whether or not I really wanted to be a doctor. My father was a doctor and assumed I would be one too and I simply

never questioned it. Oh sure, I might've had a stray thought now and then but they never really amounted to much and by and large I've been satisfied with my profession. It has its rewards. As for *your* father, he's a born surgeon. I can't think of anyone more suited to the medical profession. He loves it! I remember Helen trying to get him interested in other things when he was growing up but everything took a back seat to his wanting to be a surgeon. Not that Helen found anything wrong in that; it's just that she wanted to broaden his scope a little. But getting back to my point, you see, when I was here I was always concerned about not letting my father down so I worked like hell all the time. Don't get me wrong now, there's nothing at all bad about applying yourself to your studies and we expect no less from you. But it was more than that with me. I went at the books with no let up. You know, sometimes on Sunday afternoons, Helen and I would spread a blanket and sit out on the slope by the reservoir—there was no fence around it then. I'd be there so absorbed in studying for a course sometimes that I wouldn't even notice the color of the sky, wouldn't hear the birds sing, wouldn't notice how the water in the reservoir appeared to change colors with the cloud movements. Ever so often Helen would manage to get me to just lie there and listen to her read a poem she'd written or something from a book she'd brought along. It's sort of funny, but of all the Sunday afternoons we must have spent out on that slope, the ones I remember most clearly are those when I just lay there looking up at the sky and listening to Helen's voice.

"One of her favorites was the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. I never paid much attention to the words then, it was Helen's voice that I listened to. But I must have read that thing a hundred times since she . . . well, since you were born." He paused for a long moment, and when he spoke again it was more to himself than to me.

"Dreaming when Dawn's Left Hand
was in the Sky.
I heard a Voice within the Tavern Cry,
'Awake,
my Little ones, and fill the cup Before
Life's
Liquor in its Cup be dry.'

"And, as the Cock crew, those who

stood before

The Tavern shouted—'Open then the Door!'

You know how little while we have to stay,
And, once departed, may return no more."

"It's amazing to think she understood it all . . . so young.

"Chris, this is the beginning of a very special period in your life, a special time. I've watched you closely since the day you were born and in a lot of your ways I see Helen. But I've also seen you struggle to suppress things in yourself that need expression in order to satisfy your father, and that worries me. I can just see you now, spending your whole time here so intent on trying to prove to him the worth of what you're doing that you look up one morning and it's all over, the time is gone. That's why I want you to have this watch. Each time you open it, I want you to look at this picture. I want you to see me as I was then and to think of me as you know me now. Keep your eyes open around here son, there's a whole lot to be learned here that you won't find out through your studies. Now! I'm through running my mouth, so let's get on down to the Valley so I can have a look."

That night, after they had gone, I sat on my bed thinking about all the things Pop had said to me. A light breeze, cooled by the reservoir nearby, floated through the windows and though it lacked the briny odor of the Chesapeake, the familiar smell of water diverted my thoughts to the shore: I could hear the low howling of the wind, the lapping noise of gentle swells rising and falling, the rippling sound of tiny waves headed for the shore as if racing each other to deposit there, in absolute exhaustion, their last bit of foaming spray. Somewhere on the floor, a phone began ringing uncontrollably, sharply interrupting my reverie, returning me in an instant to the dormitory. It was past eleven o'clock now and the sound of footsteps coming and going, which had accompanied the loud, uninhibited bravura of freshmen voices in the halls during the day, had given way to a low, gentle hush, which rose and fell quickly with the music allowed to escape from rooms where doors were suddenly opened and closed. In the distance, through the side window, I could see one

of the illumined faces of the clock in the tower above the Founders' Library. For a brief moment, I felt the clock somehow in conspiracy with Pop, that it too seemed to say that my time here, having already begun, would pass quickly.

Only now, with the advantage of much hindsight, do I realize that then I understood so very little of what my grandfather was trying to say to me and I have come to believe that it could not have been otherwise; that much there is to know about living and about oneself is revealed slowly, and often in unexpected ways.

That night, however, I was certain that the twelve bells which tolled midnight's passing echoed my thoughts and grandfather's admonition, and feeling momentarily secure in this, I prepared for bed.

* * *

Hugo had not arrived when I left the room for breakfast the following morning and since I did not return to the dormitory until after lunch, I don't know when, within that interval, he did arrive. But that he had was clear when I opened the door to my room, or perhaps I should say "our room," as it was shortly to become so. Though he was not there, at the foot of his bed was a dark green glen-plaid, cloth-covered suitcase, of the type which opened with a large zipper on one side. On his bed lay a brown vinyl suitcase and draped over the back of the chair at his desk was a tan, lightweight waist-jacket, of a sort which had been popular a few years before. A small brown utility bag and a copy of a recent popular magazine were on his desk.

I had been in the room for at least an hour when I heard voices and footsteps, some distance away, growing gradually louder as they approached the near end of the hall. As the voices reached a peak there was a burst of laughter and I heard the sound of a key being inserted in the knob on the door and before I could get up from the bed on which I was sitting, I was confronted with the smiling face of Hugo Mackey, followed by three other guys in various stages of convulsive laughter. This dropped off sharply as they all seemed to realize in unison that the room was already occupied and Mackey, still smiling, moved towards me with his right hand extended, speaking in a southern accent so thick, that for the first time in my life, I was aware that I

harbored regional prejudices.

"How you doin'? You must be William Bennett! I've been looking all over for you, askin people if they'd met you and stuff. I'm Hugo Mackey. Most of my friends just call me Hugo. Should I call you William, Bill or . . ."

"Chris."

"Okay then. Chris, I want you to meet my home-boys, Leroy, Cuffy, Bezo Gant and Ronald Maxwell."

We all shook hands, pronouncing each other's names as we did so.

"Man, you have to excuse us for comin in here laughin so hard like that" Hugo said, "but we were just talkin about Bezo's reaction to the ladies on campus. We were out on the main quadrangle just sort of hangin around you know; nobody was sayin nothin, we were all just lookin. Then out of nowhere man, Bezo says 'God Almighty, this place is crawlin with babes! How we supposed to study here?!"

And again there was convulsive laughter.

It was Leroy Cuffy who finally asked where I was from and in response to the same question I learned they were all from Florida—Mackey, Cuffy and Maxwell from Tampa, and Gant, whom the former three had met in the club car of the train on the way up, from Miami. Mackey said he planned to study History and Political Science while Cuffy and Gant were both planning pre-med majors. Only Ronnie Maxwell was undecided about his future course and perhaps it was the apparent discomfort he felt in saying so that caused him to leave after a minute or two, ostensibly to unpack. And apparently, in the excitement of arrival, none of them had bothered to unpack before going out to explore the campus, for Ronnie's mention of doing so prompted seconds from both Leroy and Bobby who decided to leave also.

After the three of them had gone, there followed a few seconds of awkward silence, during which time Mackey nor I seemed to have anything to say. I was greatly relieved when he finally spoke:

"How long have you been here Chris? I mean, when did you arrive on campus?"

"Yesterday morning."

"By train?"

"No. I drove down with my family. We were already in Baltimore at my uncle's;

that's only an hour or so away."

"I see. You ever been down here before, I mean to visit, you know, see a football game or anything like that?"

"Sure, lot's of times. Both of my parents went to school here, but I usually came down with my Dad."

"You and your old man pretty close, huh?"

"Yeah. You might say that. We get along okay."

He paused a moment, as if to think about this and then said rather abruptly: "Well, guess I'd better be doing some unpacking myself."

As he got up from the bed on which he had been sitting and lifted his suitcase onto it, I looked at him closely for the first time and slowly realized that it was not just his voice which struck such dissonant chords in me, but almost everything about him. His hair was closely cropped and parted on the left side; he wore a yellow short-sleeved summer knit shirt and legs of his slacks were straight and narrow at the bottom. Altogether, he appeared someone completely out of touch with the times.

I watched him as he opened his suitcase and took from it the framed black and white photograph of a girl standing beside a palm tree. He placed it carefully on his desk, at the side nearest the head of his bed.

"Picture of your lady?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Mind if I have a look?" He smiled easily but continued to unpack as he answered:

"Not at all. You might as well get used to seeing it. It'll be here as long as I am."

"She's very attractive", (and in truth she was), "Have you known her long?"

"Thanks for the compliment. I'll tell her you said so when I write her tonight. We've been goin' together now for almost two years."

"What about Leroy and Ronnie?"

"What about 'em?"

"I mean, have you known them long?"

"I've known Leroy almost all my life—well, since the first grade anyway. Yeah,"—he shook his head as if to tell himself that he was right—"we've been tight a long time. Just met Ronnie Maxwell about a month ago though. Cuffy and I went to a party given by one of my girl's friends who lives out where Ronnie

does. His Daddy's a pretty well-known lawyer and mortician in Tampa; they live out in one of the newer suburbs. Ronnie went to private schools so I'd never crossed his path. I mean, you know, I knew Atty. Maxwell had a teenaged son and everything—there was always something in the local black newspaper about him and his family—but I had never met the dude before. So anyway, Cuff and I went to this party out in that section of town and Ronnie was there. We found out he was going to Howard in the fall, so we asked him to ride the train up with us, you know; he'd have probably flown up with his folks otherwise. The dude acts sort of young, you know, but other than that he seems okay. Look, uh, what time is dinner served in the cafeteria?"

For as long as I live, I'll never forget the way he pronounced the word "time." Somehow, he managed to endow it with two syllables and I was so unaccustomed to hearing it pronounced this way that I completely missed the remainder of his question. So for a moment we each stood there, looking at the other as if he had done something strange, until he finally asked:

"Hey! Is something wrong man?"

"Wrong? Huh, wrong?! No, no nothing's wrong. It's just that I didn't quite understand your question."

"Well, I asked you what *time* they served dinner in the cafeteria and you just sort of froze."

"Oh. I'm sorry about that. Guess I just . . . just went off somewhere for a minute. Uh, five to six-thirty in Cook Hall and I think from five to seven at the main cafeteria down at the Women's Quad."

"Which one are *you* going to?"

"Probably Cook."

By this time he had removed the contents of his suitcase and zipping it shut, placed it in his closet. Leaning over his bed, he lifted the pillow and pulled back the top sheet. As he pulled his shirt over his head he spoke again, and I had to suppress the urge to laugh at the voice coming from this now headless figure:

Well, I'm gonna' set my clock here for about five or so and take myself a nap; didn't sleep too much on the train last night—spent half the night in the club car. You mind waking me up if this thing don't go off?"

"Not at all."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

As he pulled the sheet slowly over his shoulders and settled himself comfortably in bed, I thought about the strangeness of it all—being hundreds of miles away from home, in a strange room, with an equally strange person, wondering whether I'd eventually feel comfortable with either. The truly amazing thing is that, in spite of the hundreds of others around me who must have been experiencing the same sort of thing, I somehow managed to feel alone in this initially, there seeming to have been an invisible barrier between me and the knowledge that my situation was not at all unique. But one moved through many such barriers in those first few days and between Hugo and me, the formality which accompanies newness dissolved rather quickly, though distance there remained. □

The above was reprinted (with author's permission) from SUNDIAL, a novel by L. C. Morse, a 1973 graduate of Howard University. Readers interested in the book (\$15 hardcover + \$1.50 shipping) may write to Stonehill Press, Inc., P.O. Box 1362, Boston, MA 02104. See review on page 28.