

New York:

Tall Tale Blue Over Mobile Bay in Harlem

FROM *SOUTH TO A VERY OLD PLACE*

YOU CAN TAKE the “A” train uptown from Forty-second Street in midtown Manhattan and be there in less than ten minutes. There is a stop at Fifty-ninth Street beneath the traffic circle which commemorates Christopher Columbus who once set out for destinations east on compass bearings west. But after that as often as not there are only six more express minutes to go. Then you are pulling into the IND station at 125th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue, and you are that many more miles north from Mobile, Alabama, but you are also, for better or worse, back among homefolks no matter what part of the old country you come from.

But then, going back home has probably always had as much if not more to do with people as with landmarks and place names and locations on maps and mileage charts anyway. Not that home is not a place, for even in its most abstract implications it is precisely the very oldest place in the world. But even so, it is somewhere you are likely to find yourself remembering your way back to far more often than it is ever possible to go by conventional transportation. In any case, such is the fundamental interrelationship of recollection and make-believe with all journeys and locations that anywhere people do certain things in a certain way can be home. The way certain very special uptown Manhattan people talk and the way some of them walk, for instance, makes them homefolks. So whoever says you can't go home again, when you are for so many intents and purposes back whenever or wherever somebody or something makes you feel that way.

There is also the “D” train which you can take from Forty-second Street over on Sixth Avenue, because that way you still come into the “A” train route at Columbus Circle. Or you can take Number Two or Number Three on the IRT, and the uptown Avenue will be Lenox, and if you get off at 125th Street you walk west to the old Theresa Hotel corner at Seventh, the Apollo near Eighth, and Frank's Chop House, on over toward

St. Nicholas. At the 135th Street IRT stop you come out at the northwest corner of Lenox Terrace, and you are also at the new Harlem Hospital. From there, which is only a few steps from the AME Church that used to be the old Lincoln Theatre, you walk east to Riverton, Lincoln, and the water. But for the Schomburg Library, the YMCA poolroom, and Smalls Paradise, you walk west toward the hill and CCNY.

Sometimes, of course, all you need to do is hear pianos and trumpets and trombones talking, in any part of town or anywhere else for that matter. Or sometimes it will be pianos and saxophones talking and bass fiddles walking; and you are all the way back even before you have time to realize how far away you are supposed to have gone, even before you become aware of even the slightest impulse to remember how much of it you thought perhaps you had long since forgotten.

Sometimes it can be downhome church organs secularized to Kansas City four-four in a neighborhood cocktail lounge. It can be a Count Basie sonata suggesting blue steel locomotives on northbound railroad tracks (as "Dogging Around" did that summer after college). It can be any number of ensemble riffs and solo licks that also go with barbershops and shoeshine parlors; with cigar smoke and the smell and taste of seal-fresh whiskey; with baseball scores and barbecue pits and beer-seasoned chicken-shack tables; with skilletts of sizzling mullets or bream or golden crisp oysters plus grits and butter; and with such white potato salads and such sweet potato pies as only downhome folks remember from picnics and association time camp meetings. Or it can even be a stage show at the Apollo Theatre which sometimes rocks like a church during revival time. It can be the jukebox evangelism of some third-rate but fad-successful soul singer (so-called) that carries you back not only to Alabama boyhood Sundays with sermons followed by dasher-turned ice cream, but also to off-campus hillside roadside beer joints and Alabama pine-needle breezes.

So naturally it can also be Lenox Avenue storefront churches, whether somewhat sedate or downright sanctified. Or it can be the big league uptown temples along and off Seventh Avenue: such as, say, Big Bethel, Mother Zion, Metropolitan, Abyssinian Baptist, where on the good days Adam Clayton Powell, for all his northern-boy upbringing, sounds like Buddy Bolden calling his flock.

None of which is to suggest—not even for one sentimental flicker of an instant—that being back is always the same as being where you wish to be. For such is the definitive nature of all homes, hometowns, and hometown people that even the most joyous of homecoming festivities are always interwoven with a return to that very old sometimes almost forgotten but ever so easily alerted trouble spot deep inside your innermost being, whoever you are and wherever you are back from.

For where else if not the old home place, despite all its prototypical comforts, is the original of all haunted houses and abodes of the booger man? Indeed, was even the cradle only a goochie-goochie cove of good-fairy cobwebs entirely devoid of hobgoblin shadows; or was it not also the primordial place of boo-boo badness and doo-doo-in-diapers as well?

Once back you are among the very oldest of good old best of all good friends, to be sure, but are you not also just as likely to be once again back in the very midst of some snarled-up situation from which you have always wanted to be long gone forever?

And where else did you ever in all your born days encounter so much arrogant ignorance coupled with such derisive mockery and hey-you who-you crosstalk? Where else except in this or that Harlem are you almost always in danger of getting kicked out of a liquor store for instance for browsing too casually in the wine section. Where else except among homefolks is that sort of thing most likely to tab you not as an expense-account gourmet-come-lately but a degenerate wino? Or something worse.

But still and all and still in all and still withal if there are (as no doubt there have always been) some parts of Harlem where even such thugs and footpads as inhabited the London of Charles Dickens would probably find themselves more often mooched and mugged than mooching and mugging so are there at least one thousand plus one other parts and parcels also. Not to mention such browngirl eyes as somehow can always make even the smoggiest New York City skies seem tall tale blue over Mobile Bay.

Naturally there are those who not only allege but actually insist that there can only be ghetto skies and pathological eyes in Harlem and for whom blues tales are never tall but only

lowdown dirty and shameful. But no better for them. They don't know what they're missing. Or don't they? For oh how their pale toes itch to twinkle as much to the steel blue percussion as to all the good-time moans and the finger-snapping grunts and groans in Billy Strayhorn's ellington-conjugated nostalgia.