I was nine years old and the year was 1961. It was summer and time to start our journey from Los Angeles to Louisiana. My great grandmother was 106 and dying from cancer. My Los Angeles family wanted to see her one more time. It was also time to introduce us youngsters (me, and my cousins Robert, Gus Jr., and Grundy) to our relatives back home. Though we were born and raised in Los Angeles, Louisiana was the birthplace of our parents. My uncle Gus brought a new Chrysler for this trip. There were no interstate highways in those days, only Route 66. In his new Chrysler we were packed like sardines. In the front seat were my Uncle Gus and Aunty Leola. I had to share the back seat with my cousins. To say the least, it was crowded and I could not wait that first day on the road until we would finally stop to sleep at a Holiday Inn.

"Uncle Gus?" I finally said, after driving most of the day and night. We must have been somewhere in western Texas.

"Yes Joe," he answered, looking at me in his rear-view mirror.

"When are we going to stop to sleep at the Holiday Inn?"

He laughed. But then remembering, I guess, that I was not born and raised in the South, he replied in a serious tone, "Negroes cannot stay at the Holiday Inn."

"Then let's go to another hotel," I said.

"We cannot stay there either."

"Why?"

"No white hotels rent to Negroes."

"Where will we sleep then?"

"Right where you are."

"In the back of a car seat?"

"That's it. Right in the back seat."

"What about food when we get hungry?"

"Don't worry, your Aunty Leola packed everything we need in the trunk until we arrive in Louisiana."
Sometimes the stores in the South will not sell us food because we're black. Other times, we have to go to the back of the store, so that white customers won't see us."

"Why is that?"

"Many white owners think that if white customers see us they won't buy the food."

"Don't you pay with money like them?"

"Yes."

"So why do we have to go in by the back way?"

"Well, Joe, that's the way things is in the South. This is not Los Angeles, this is the South and that's just the way things are here. I don't much like them, but there is nothing we can do. Nothing!"

We drove on without stopping. Even when we finally stopped for gas, uncle Gus kept the engine running. He was afraid the white gasoline station people would not sell us gas. I remember several gas stations refused to sell us gas because they did not "sell gas to niggers."

I remember that we stopped somewhere in central Texas at a Texaco gas station that also sold food and other items. For some reason, I don't recall now why, we all walked into the station's diner and took a seat to eat. The manager immediately came over and said, "Sir, excuse me."

My uncle answered, "Yes sir."

"We don't serve your kind."

"You mean you don't want our business?"

"No, I mean we don't serve or sell to niggers here at the table. You all have to go around the side of the station and we serve niggers there." And the more he talked, the more agitated he became with us. "This is Texas. I see your Yankee license plate is from California. You know we kill niggers in this town. Do you know where you are boys? This is the South. Now you all just move your collective ass to the back entrance before I call the police."

"Is it okay for us to buy gas?" my uncle asked.

"Yea, I'll take your money. It's green ain't it?"
As we were walking around the side of the building toward the rear entrance, we stopped to use the restroom. It was a large, clean, fully-equipped bathroom. The owner suddenly ran out of the store and blocked the entrance to the restroom. "Nigger, can't you read the sign? It says 'Whites Only.'"

My uncle asked politely, "Where is the restroom for coloreds?"

"It's there in the middle of the field. See right there, that's the one for niggers."

He had pointed to a cow patch in the middle of the wilderness. I walked to the spot, which was quite a distance from the road, and I kept hearing my Uncle Gus yell for me to watch out for snakes. The "colored" restroom was an old outhouse. The door was hanging off and there were holes throughout. Anyone passing could see everything. It stank and looked horrible.

As we were about to leave after getting our gas, the owner walked over to the car. He looked serious but not so mean now. He said to my uncle in a voice kind of under his breath but clear, "Boy I'm goin' give you some friendly advice. You niggers be out this town by nightfall. I would not like to see something happen to your family. I can't tell you much, but by nightfall y'all better be gone from here." It was nearly dark and we just wanted to get back on the road.

We jumped into the car and took off, bone tired but also plenty scared. My Uncle Gus had been driving more than two days and nights without sleep or rest.