

An extract from **Black Boy by Richard Wright**

Richard Wright was brought up in the “Jim Crow” southlands in the 1930s and 40s, the time that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was set. As a young black man, this fascinating autobiography shows what it is like to live in hunger and fear, fear from prejudice by day and the fiery lords of the KKK by night.

My life now depended upon my finding work, and I was so anxious that I accepted the first offer, a job as a porter in a clothing store selling cheap goods to Negroes on credit.....

One morning, while I was polishing the brass out front, the boss and his son drove up in their car. A frightened black woman sat between them. They got out and half dragged and half kicked the woman into the store. A white policeman watched in the corner, twirling his night stick; but he made no move. I watched out of the corner of my eye, but I never slackened the strokes of the chamois upon the brass.

After a moment or two I heard shrill screams coming from the rear room of the store; later the woman stumbled out bleeding, crying, holding her stomach, her clothing torn. When she reached the sidewalk, the policeman met her, grabbed her, accused her of being drunk, called a patrol wagon and carted her away.

When I went to the rear of the store, the boss and his son were washing their hands at the sink. They looked at me and laughed uneasily. The floor was bloody, strewn with wisps of hair and clothing. My face must have reflected my shock, for the boss slapped my reassuringly on the back.

“Boy, that’s what we do to niggers when they don’t pay their bills”, he said.

His son looked at me and grinned.

“Here, hava cigarette”, he said.

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Later, I was walking along the hot, dusty road, sweating, when a car slowed at my side.

“What’s the matter here boy?” a white man called. I told him that I was walking back to town.

“Hop on the running board”, he said.

He stopped the car. I clung to the side of the car. The car started. It was full of young white men. They were drinking. I watched the flask pass from mouth to mouth.

“Wanna drink, boy?”, one asked

The memory of my six-year-old drinking came back and filled me with caution. But I laughed, the wind whipping my face.

“Oh no!” I said

The words were barely out of my mouth before I felt something hard and cold smash me between the eyes. It was an empty whisky bottle. I saw stars, and fell backwards from the speeding car into the dust of the road.

The car stopped and the white men piled out and stood over me.

“Nigger, ain’t you learned no better sense’n that yet?” asked the man who hit. “Ain’t you learned to say *sir* to a white man yet?”

Dazed, I pulled to my feet. My elbows and legs were bleeding. Fist doubled, the white man advanced.

“Nigger, you sure ought to be glad it was us you talked to that way.

You’re a lucky bastard, ‘cause if you’d said that to some other white man, you might’ve been a dead nigger now.”

I was learning rapidly how to watch white people, to observe their every move, every fleeting expression, how to interpret what was said, and what was left unsaid.



Write down your reaction to this eye witness account, how you feel about what happened to the black population in Southern USA states.

How did the whites feel about the blacks? Give reasons for your answer.

What do you think made whites feel superior to black people?

Why didn't the black people complain and protest about their treatment to the state or government?