

## Down at the Cross

Letter from a Region in My Mind

By James Baldwin

Take up the White Man's burden –  
Ye dare not stoop to less –  
Nor call too loud on Freedom  
To cloak your weariness;  
By all ye cry or whisper,  
By all ye leave or do,  
The silent, sullen peoples  
Shall weigh your Gods and you.

– Kipling.

Down at the cross where my Saviour died,  
Down where for cleansing from sin I cried,  
There to my heart was the blood applied,  
Singing glory to His name!

– Hymn.

I underwent, during the summer that I became fourteen, a prolonged religious crisis. I use "religious" in the common, and arbitrary, sense, meaning that I then discovered God, His saints and angels, and His blazing Hell. And since I had been born in a Christian nation, I accepted this Deity as the only one. I supposed Him to exist only  
5 within the walls of a church – in fact, of our church – and I also supposed that God and safety were synonymous. The word "safety" brings us to the real meaning of the word "religious" as we use it. Therefore, to state it in another, more accurate way, I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid – afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without. What I saw around me that summer in Harlem was  
10 what I had always seen; nothing had changed. But now, without any warning, the whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue had become a personal menace. It had not before occurred to me that I could become one of them, but now I realized that we had been produced by the same circumstances. Many of my comrades were clearly headed for the Avenue, and my father said that I was headed that way, too. My friends  
15 began to drink and smoke, and embarked – at first avid, then groaning – on their sexual careers. Girls, only slightly older than I was, who sang in the choir or taught Sunday school, the children of holy parents, underwent, before my eyes, their incredible metamorphosis, of which the most bewildering aspect was not their budding breasts or their rounding behinds but something deeper and more subtle, in their eyes, their heat,

20 their odor, and the inflection of their voices. Like the strangers on the Avenue, they  
became, in the twinkling of an eye, unutterably different and fantastically present.  
Owing to the way I had been raised, the abrupt discomfort that all this aroused in me  
and the fact that I had no idea what my voice or my mind or my body was likely to do  
next caused me to consider myself one of the most depraved people on earth. Matters  
25 were not helped by the fact that these holy girls seemed rather to enjoy my terrified  
lapses, our grim, guilty, tormented experiments, which were at once as chill and joyless  
as the Russian steppes and hotter, by far, than all the fires of Hell.

Yet there was something deeper than these changes, and less definable, that  
frightened me. It was real in both the boys and the girls, but it was, somehow, more  
30 vivid in the boys. In the case of the girls, one watched them turning into matrons before  
they had become women. They began to manifest a curious and really rather terrifying  
single-mindedness. It is hard to say exactly how this was conveyed: something  
implacable in the set of the lips, something farseeing (seeing what?) in the eyes, some  
new and crushing determination in the walk, something peremptory in the voice. They  
35 did not tease us, the boys, any more; they reprimanded us sharply, saying, "You better  
be thinking about your soul!" For the girls also saw the evidence on the Avenue, knew  
what the price would be, for them, of one misstep, knew that they had to be protected  
and that we were the only protection there was. They understood that they must act as  
God's decoys, saving the souls of the boys for Jesus and binding the bodies of the boys  
40 in marriage. For this was the beginning of our burning time, and "It is better," said St.  
Paul – who elsewhere, with a most unusual and stunning exactness, described himself  
as a "wretched man" – "to marry than to burn." And I began to feel in the boys a  
curious, wary, bewildered despair, as though they were now settling in for the long,  
hard winter of life. I did not know then what it was that I was reacting to; I put it to  
45 myself that they were letting themselves go. In the same way that the girls were  
destined to gain as much weight as their mothers, the boys, it was clear, would rise no  
higher than their fathers. School began to reveal itself, therefore, as a child's game that  
one could not win, and boys dropped out of school and went to work. My father  
wanted me to do the same. I refused, even though I no longer had any illusions about  
50 what an education could do for me; I had already encountered too many college-  
graduate handymen. My friends were now "downtown," busy, as they put it, "fighting  
the man." They began to care less about the way they looked, the way they dressed, the  
things they did; presently, one found them in twos and threes and fours, in a hallway,  
sharing a jug of wine or a bottle of whiskey, talking, cursing, fighting, sometimes  
55 weeping: lost, and unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they  
knew it was "the man" – the white man. And there seemed to be no way whatever to  
remove this cloud that stood between them and the sun, between them and love and  
life and power, between them and whatever it was that they wanted. One did not have

to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one's situation; one did not  
60 have to be abnormally sensitive to be worn down to a cutting edge by the incessant and  
gratuitous humiliation and danger one encountered every working day, all day long.  
The humiliation did not apply merely to working days, or workers; I was thirteen and  
was crossing Fifth Avenue on my way to the Forty-second Street library, and the cop in  
the middle of the street muttered as I passed him, "Why don't you niggers stay uptown  
65 where you belong?" When I was ten, and didn't look, certainly, any older, two  
policemen amused themselves with me by frisking me, making comic (and terrifying)  
speculations concerning my ancestry and probable sexual prowess, and, for good  
measure, leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem's empty lots. Just before and then  
during the Second World War, many of my friends fled into the service, all to be  
70 changed there, and rarely for the better, many to be ruined, and many to die. Others  
fled to other states and cities – that is, to other ghettos. Some went on wine or whiskey  
or the needle, and are still on it. And others, like me, fled into the church.

For the wages of sin were visible everywhere, in every wine-stained and urine-  
splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the  
75 pimps and their whores, in every helpless, newborn baby being brought into this  
danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue, and in every disastrous bulletin: a  
cousin, mother of six, suddenly gone mad, the children parcelled out here and there; an  
indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow, agonizing death in a  
terrible small room; someone's bright son blown into eternity by his own hand; another  
80 turned robber and carried off to jail. It was a summer of dreadful speculations and  
discoveries, of which these were not the worst. Crime became real, for example – for the  
first time – not as a possibility but as the possibility. One would never defeat one's  
circumstances by working and saving one's pennies; one would never, by working,  
acquire that many pennies, and, besides, the social treatment accorded even the most  
85 successful Negroes proved that one needed, in order to be free, something more than a  
bank account. One needed a handle, a lever, a means of inspiring fear. It was absolutely  
clear that the police would whip you and take you in as long as they could get away  
with it, and that everyone else – housewives, taxi-drivers, elevator boys, dishwashers,  
bartenders, lawyers, judges, doctors, and grocers – would never, by the operation of  
90 any generous human feeling, cease to use you as an outlet for his frustrations and  
hostilities. Neither civilized reason nor Christian love would cause any of those people  
to treat you as they presumably wanted to be treated; only the fear of your power to  
retaliate would cause them to do that, or to seem to do it, which was (and is) good  
enough. There appears to be a vast amount of confusion on this point, but I do not  
95 know many Negroes who are eager to be "accepted" by white people, still less to be  
loved by them; they, the blacks, simply don't wish to be beaten over the head by the  
whites every instant of our brief passage on this planet. White people in this country

will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this – which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never – the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.

100 People more advantageously placed than we in Harlem were, and are, will no doubt find the psychology and the view of human nature sketched above dismal and shocking in the extreme. But the Negro's experience of the white world cannot possibly create in him any respect for the standards by which the white world claims to live. His own condition is overwhelming proof that white people do not live by these standards. Negro servants have been smuggling odds and ends out of white homes for generations, and white people have been delighted to have them do it, because it has assuaged a dim guilt and testified to the intrinsic superiority of white people. Even the most doltish and servile Negro could scarcely fail to be impressed by the disparity  
105 between his situation and that of the people for whom he worked; Negroes who were neither doltish nor servile did not feel that they were doing anything wrong when they robbed white people. In spite of the Puritan-Yankee equation of virtue with well-being, Negroes had excellent reasons for doubting that money was made or kept by any very striking adherence to the Christian virtues; it certainly did not work that way for black  
110 Christians. In any case, white people, who had robbed black people of their liberty and who profited by this theft every hour that they lived, had no moral ground on which to stand. They had the judges, the juries, the shotguns, the law – in a word, power. But it was a criminal power, to be feared but not respected, and to be outwitted in any way whatever. And those virtues preached but not practiced by the white world were  
115 merely another means of holding Negroes in subjection.  
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It turned out, then, that summer, that the moral barriers that I had supposed to exist between me and the dangers of a criminal career were so tenuous as to be nearly nonexistent. I certainly could not discover any principled reason for not becoming a criminal, and it is not my poor, God-fearing parents who are to be indicted for the lack  
125 but this society. I was icily determined – more determined, really, than I then knew – never to make my peace with the ghetto but to die and go to Hell before I would let any white man spit on me, before I would accept my “place” in this republic. I did not intend to allow the white people of this country to tell me who I was, and limit me that way, and polish me off that way. And yet, of course, at the same time, I was being spat  
130 on and defined and described and limited, and could have been polished off with no effort whatever. Every Negro boy – in my situation during those years, at least – who reaches this point realizes, at once, profoundly, because he wants to live, that he stands in great peril and must find, with speed, a “thing,” a gimmick, to lift him out, to start him on his way. And it does not matter what the gimmick is. It was this last realization  
135 that terrified me and – since it revealed that the door opened on so many dangers –

helped to hurl me into the church. And, by an unforeseeable paradox, it was my career in the church that turned out, precisely, to be my gimmick.

140 For when I tried to assess my capabilities, I realized that I had almost none. In order to achieve the life I wanted, I had been dealt, it seemed to me, the worst possible hand. I could not become a prizefighter – many of us tried but very few succeeded. I could not sing. I could not dance. I had been well conditioned by the world in which I grew up, so I did not yet dare take the idea of becoming a writer seriously. The only other possibility seemed to involve my becoming one of the sordid people on the Avenue, who were not really as sordid as I then imagined but who frightened me  
145 terribly, both because I did not want to live that life and because of what they made me feel. Everything inflamed me, and that was bad enough, but I myself had also become a source of fire and temptation. I had been far too well raised, alas, to suppose that any of the extremely explicit overtures made to me that summer, sometimes by boys and girls but also, more alarmingly, by older men and women, had anything to do with my  
150 attractiveness. On the contrary, since the Harlem idea of seduction is, to put it mildly, blunt, whatever these people saw in me merely confirmed my sense of my depravity.

It is certainly sad that the awakening of one's senses should lead to such a merciless judgment of oneself – to say nothing of the time and anguish one spends in the effort to arrive at any other – but it is also inevitable that a literal attempt to mortify  
155 the flesh should be made among black people like those with whom I grew up. Negroes in this country – and Negroes do not, strictly or legally speaking, exist in any other – are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world. This world is white and they are black. White people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks (intrinsically, that is: God decreed it so), and the world has  
160 innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared. Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it. Every effort made by the child's elders to prepare him for a fate from which they cannot protect him causes him secretly, in terror, to begin to await, without knowing that he is doing so, his mysterious and  
165 inexorable punishment. He must be "good" not only in order to please his parents and not only to avoid being punished by them; behind their authority stands another, nameless and impersonal, infinitely harder to please, and bottomlessly cruel. And this filters into the child's consciousness through his parents' tone of voice as he is being exhorted, punished, or loved; in the sudden, uncontrollable note of fear heard in his  
170 mother's or his father's voice when he has strayed beyond some particular boundary. He does not know what the boundary is, and he can get no explanation of it, which is frightening enough, but the fear he hears in the voices of his elders is more frightening still. The fear that I heard in my father's voice, for example, when he realized that I really believed I could do anything a white boy could do, and had every intention of

175 proving it, was not at all like the fear I heard when one of us was ill or had fallen down  
the stairs or strayed too far from the house. It was another fear, a fear that the child, in  
challenging the white world's assumptions, was putting himself in the path of  
destruction. A child cannot, thank Heaven, know how vast and how merciless is the  
nature of power, with what unbelievable cruelty people treat each other. He reacts to  
180 the fear in his parents' voices because his parents hold up the world for him and he has  
no protection without them. I defended myself, as I imagined, against the fear my father  
made me feel by remembering that he was very old-fashioned. Also, I prided myself on  
the fact that I already knew how to outwit him. To defend oneself against a fear is  
simply to insure that one will, one day, be conquered by it; fears must be faced. As for  
185 one's wits, it is just not true that one can live by them – not, that is, if one wishes really  
to live. That summer, in any case, all the fears with which I had grown up, and which  
were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall  
between the world and me, and drove me into the church.

As I look back, everything I did seems curiously deliberate, though it certainly  
190 did not seem deliberate then. For example, I did not join the church of which my father  
was a member and in which he preached. My best friend in school, who attended a  
different church, had already "surrendered his life to the Lord," and he was very  
anxious about my soul's salvation. (I wasn't, but any human attention was better than  
none.) One Saturday afternoon, he took me to his church. There were no services that  
195 day, and the church was empty, except for some women cleaning and some other  
women praying. My friend took me into the back room to meet his pastor – a woman.  
There she sat, in her robes, smiling, an extremely proud and handsome woman, with  
Africa, Europe, and the America of the American Indian blended in her face. She was  
perhaps forty-five or fifty at this time, and in our world she was a very celebrated  
200 woman. My friend was about to introduce me when she looked at me and smiled and  
said, "Whose little boy are you?" Now this, unbelievably, was precisely the phrase used  
by pimps and racketeers on the Avenue when they suggested, both humorously and  
intensely, that I "hang out" with them. Perhaps part of the terror they had caused me to  
feel came from the fact that I unquestionably wanted to be somebody's little boy. I was  
205 so frightened, and at the mercy of so many conundrums, that inevitably, that summer,  
someone would have taken me over; one doesn't, in Harlem, long remain standing on  
any auction block. It was my good luck – perhaps – that I found myself in the church  
racket instead of some other, and surrendered to a spiritual seduction long before I  
came to any carnal knowledge. For when the pastor asked me, with that marvelous  
210 smile, "Whose little boy are you?" my heart replied at once, "Why, yours."

The summer wore on, and things got worse. I became more guilty and more  
frightened, and kept all this bottled up inside me, and naturally, inescapably, one night,  
when this woman had finished preaching, everything came roaring, screaming, crying

215 out, and I fell to the ground before the altar. It was the strangest sensation I have ever  
had in my life – up to that time, or since. I had not known that it was going to happen,  
or that it could happen. One moment I was on my feet, singing and clapping and, at the  
same time, working out in my head the plot of a play I was working on then; the next  
220 moment, with no transition, no sensation of falling, I was on my back, with the lights  
beating down into my face and all the vertical saints above me. I did not know what I  
was doing down so low, or how I had got there. And the anguish that filled me cannot  
be described. It moved in me like one of those floods that devastate counties, tearing  
everything down, tearing children from their parents and lovers from each other, and  
making everything an unrecognizable waste. All I really remember is the pain, the  
225 unspeakable pain; it was as though I were yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not  
hear me. And if Heaven would not hear me, if love could not descend from Heaven – to  
wash me, to make me clean – then utter disaster was my portion. Yes, it does indeed  
mean something – something unspeakable – to be born, in a white country, an Anglo-  
Teutonic, antisexual country, black. You very soon, without knowing it, give up all  
230 hope of communion. Black people, mainly, look down or look up but do not look at  
each other, not at you, and white people, mainly, look away. And the universe is simply  
a sounding drum; there is no way, no way whatever, so it seemed then and has  
sometimes seemed since, to get through a life, to love your wife and children, or your  
friends, or your mother and father, or to be loved. The universe, which is not merely the  
235 stars and the moon and the planets, flowers, grass, and trees, but other people, has  
evolved no terms for your existence, has made no room for you, and if love will not  
swing wide the gates, no other power will or can. And if one despairs – as who has  
not? – of human love, God’s love alone is left. But God – and I felt this even then, so  
long ago, on that tremendous floor, unwillingly – is white. And if His love was so great,  
and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far? Why? In  
240 spite of all I said thereafter, I found no answer on the floor – not that answer, anyway –  
and I was on the floor all night. Over me, to bring me “through,” the saints sang and  
rejoiced and prayed. And in the morning, when they raised me, they told me that I was  
“save.”

245 Well, indeed I was, in a way, for I was utterly drained and exhausted, and  
released, for the first time, from all my guilty torment. I was aware then only of my  
relief. For many years, I could not ask myself why human relief had to be achieved in a  
fashion at once so pagan and so desperate – in a fashion at once so unspeakably old and  
so unutterably new. And by the time I was able to ask myself this question, I was also  
250 able to see that the principles governing the rites and customs of the churches in which I  
grew up did not differ from the principles governing the rites and customs of other  
churches, white. The principles were Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first  
principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others. I would

love to believe that the principles were Faith, Hope, and Charity, but this is clearly not so for most Christians, or for what we call the Christian world.

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*To be continued...*