

## Guests in the Promised Land

---

Some people can't stand for anybody to be too nice to them. My friend Robert is like that. Give Robert a piece of candy and he'll look at it like it's poisoned, then hand it back to you. Invite him to your house, he'll look behind all the doors to see if somebody's back there waiting to jump on him. Try and be his friend, he'll fight you every chance he gets. Cause he figures you're really his enemy.

I used to wonder how Robert got that way, but then I figured as a race of people we're all suspicious, cause we're scared of what the Man is going to pull next. If the Man *does* give us something, we think there's a catch to it. Most of the time we're right. But, right or not, we all got plenty of reasons to feel that way.

I just figure Robert got an extra dose, cause he's little, and popeyed, and bowlegged, and some ugly. And cause they ain't nothing else in his family but girls. Big bad-mouth girls who push him around and beat up on him. 'Sides which, one of Robert's shoulders is higher than the other, so he always looks like he left the coat hanger in his clothes.

How I got to be Robert's friend, and I mean his only friend, is by helping him do what he likes most in this world. Which is playing the piano. There ain't no room for a piano at his house, even if they had the money to buy one. There ain't even room for all the people, with all them sisters growing up and having babies. And Robert won't play at his church because it's full of girls and women. No guys go there except shaky old deacons and the fat rich preacher.

But my daddy tends bar, and in one corner of the bar where he works is a little stage with a piano. The bar ain't much, just a neighborhood hangout. It ain't had live entertainment in years. They just never bothered to get rid of the piano, is all. The piano ain't much either—it's old and beat-up and needs tuning. But Daddy lets Robert play it sometimes, and Robert loves it like it's a solid gold Steinway.

It would be nice if I could say Robert was another Les McCann or Erroll Garner. But the truth is all he can play is gospel music, and he don't play that very well. His mother and sisters drag him to church all the time, so gospel is the only music he knows. Old draggy hymns played with a slow funky beat.

Church music is OK if you like it, I guess. But I never spent much time in church, so I don't go for it much. Neither do most of the men who hang out in the bar, which is why Robert never gets to play very long. Somebody always turns on the jukebox and drowns him out with James Brown.

Robert would sleep in that piano if they let him. But my daddy only lets him play when the bar ain't too crowded.

Last summer the boss put in an air conditioner, so the bar *stayed* crowded. Robert hardly ever got a chance to play.

It was a dull summer all around. A man got shot by his wife; people got robbed; a couple of guys got stabbed. The usual ordinary things that go on on our block. But nothing much happened to us except our trip to the Cedarbrook Country Club. Everybody's sorry about the way it turned out, but it wasn't really Robert's fault.

Mr. Brown arranged the trip. Mr. Brown is a man who is always trying to improve conditions on the block. People keep telling him, forget it, it's no use. But he goes right on organizing block clubs and cleanup days and outings for kids. The next week the block is as dirty as ever and the kids are still going nowhere. But Mr. Brown keeps trying.

What he did was go to the Junior Chamber of Commerce to ask them for some outings for us. And the Jaycees, who are white businessmen, decided to let the kids visit their country clubs. Kids all over the city would have a day at a country club. A different club and a different day for each neighborhood.

Our club was Cedarbrook. And our day was July 19th.

None of us knew exactly what a country club was, but we were pretty excited. When the bus pulled up, Mr. Brown introduced us to the men who had invited us. He

said, "This is Mr. So and So, and this is Mr. Such and Such." But they all asked us to call them Chuck and Buzz and Bud and Bill.

I never got the names straight because they all sounded alike. The men all looked alike too, with square jaws and thin lips and big horn-rim eyeglasses that hid their eyes. They all tried hard to be friendly. They tried so hard we all piled on the back of the bus and let them ride up front with Mr. Brown.

Most of us had never been out of the city before. As the bus rolled past houses with lawns a mile wide, I couldn't believe my eyes. We passed one house that had at least twenty rooms. I whispered, "That must be the country club."

"No, man," said Leroy, "that's somebody's house. My Mom works for people with a bigger house than that."

"Them whiteys got everything," said Jesse. "And you better believe they ain't givin' none of it away."

"They givin' us a day at this place, ain't they?" I asked.

"Shoot, that's just a loan," said Jesse, who is the baddest mouth on our block. "You they guest today. But you better be a *good* guest. Behave yourself and act grateful and don't take too much."

The bus rolled on through neighborhoods with hundreds of places that looked like movie stars' houses. And Jesse rapped on about always being guests and never owning nothing for ourselves. I guess if those guys up front had known how mad we were getting, they'd have called the whole thing off.

But they had no idea. The way we smiled when we got off the bus, you'd have thought we were a bunch of Moseses seeing the Promised Land.

That's what it was, all right. Only it didn't say nowhere it was promised to us. Not the lake, not the hills, not the lawns, not the trees, none of it.

"Welcome to Cedarbrook, fellows," said Buzz or Bud or Bill. "The place is yours. We want you to have a good time. If you'd like to play golf, go with Chuck here. Those who want to play tennis, go with Mike. If you want to swim, come with me."

The guys made a lot of phony excited noises and broke up into groups. I looked around for Robert. I was a little worried about him. He had been very quiet on the bus while Jesse and them were rapping. I had had a hard time talking him into the trip in the first place, and I had made up my mind to stay with him all day. But he'd vanished.

Then I saw his raggedy old red shirt disappearing up the hill toward the clubhouse.

Mr. Brown saw it too. "Brunson!" he shouted at me. "Go get Shields and bring him back here!"

"Now, now, Mr. Brown," said Scoop or Chuck or Mike, "let the boys do what they want. I *said* the place was theirs."

He looked nervous, though. So did Mr. Brown. I think they had already decided the clubhouse would be off limits to us. But didn't neither of them stop me from following Robert.

I found him in what I guessed was the dining room. At

the door was a sign, GUESTS NOT ALLOWED WITHOUT MEMBERS. But I didn't need a sign to know we didn't belong in that room, unless we were waiters or busboys. It had thick carpets and mirrors and about forty tables covered with cloths. A bar was along one wall. On the other wall was a big, shiny grand piano. The kind that costs thousands of dollars.

If it had been anybody else I would have said, "Come on, let's get out of here."

But it was *Robert*, hiding his head behind his high shoulder, and rubbing his scruffy shoes together, and looking at that piano with eyes big as teacups.

So I said, "Go on. They won't mind."

The only other person in the room was the bartender. He looked at us kind of funny, but he didn't say anything.

"Go on," I said again.

So Robert sat down and started playing "Oh, Happy Day." It wasn't bad, if you like church music. Of course he hit a lot of wrong notes, but he made up for that with feeling. He went on to "Joy of My Salvation" and "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." By then, he was so wrapped up in the music you couldn't have got him away from that piano if a bomb had fallen on the place.

So I didn't bother to tell him that behind his back the Jaycees and some other men were drifting into the room. They got their drinks and stood at the bar, silently staring at the little black boy at the big black piano.

Then Mr. Brown showed up, out of breath from running. What's-his-name, the one in charge, was with him.

So were Leroy and Jesse and the rest of the guys.

"Ahem," said What's-his-name.

Robert wouldn't stop playing.

"My friend," said What's-his-name, "wouldn't you rather be outdoors in the sunshine? There's a beautiful golf course out there."

But what does a kid like Robert, who's never even seen *grass*, know about a golf course?

I got the message, though. We weren't supposed to be in that room. Or anywhere in that building.

Mr. Brown got the message too. He grabbed Robert from behind and snatched his hands off the keys.

The men at the bar, who had been so quiet, suddenly came to life. "Give the kid a hand!" one cried. They all applauded and shouted things like "Bravo!" and "Wonderful!" as Robert got up from the piano.

Robert just stood there, his eyes darting around suspiciously. It doesn't pay to give him compliments, even if you mean it, because he doesn't believe you. But even *I* had a suspicion *these* cats weren't sincere.

There was a click, and a blade appeared in Robert's hand. Everyone gasped. I guess they thought he was going to use the knife on Mr. Brown or on What's-his-name.

What he did instead showed how really bad he was hurting. He turned and slashed a deep scar into that shiny piano. And another scar. And another.

"Why, you little *animal!*" cried What's-his-name. Mr. Brown got the knife away from Robert.

But that was the signal. All of us sort of exploded at once. We knew they didn't really want us there, and all those phony smiles and handshakes didn't mean a thing. Now it was out in the open. If Robert was an animal, we all were animals. We decided we might as well prove it.

No golf got played that day, but plenty of plates got smashed, windows got broken, and carpets got gashed and torn. I snatched down the GUESTS NOT ALLOWED sign and ripped it to pieces. By the time they called the security guards to herd us back on the bus, we must have done a thousand dollars' worth of damage.

The white men didn't ride back with us. Just Mr. Brown. He looked sad, hurt, and bewildered. Like he was thinking, How could you do this to me and those nice white men?

Robert looked sad too. But I knew what to say. "Don't worry, Robert," I whispered to him. "They won't invite us back again." Robert is a funny cat. He looked happier right away.

After a while we started singing "Oh Freedom" and "I'm on My Way" and other freedom songs. Robert joined in because they were hymns, and he knew them. I knew he'd never be quite so lonely again. I also knew we'd never go back there unless we could eat in the clubhouse and listen to him play, wrong notes and all.

Because it ain't no Promised Land at all if some people are always guests and others are always members.