

HOME SWEET HOME

by **Mary Gravina**

With his nose pressed tightly against the dirt streaked window of the train, the young boy admired the scenery as he anxiously awaited his destination. After many hours and hundreds of miles, the unfamiliar tree-lined streets began to disappear and were replaced by tall brick buildings and smog-filled skies. The repulsive aroma of the polluted waters embellished his nostrils. His mind began to wonder aimlessly as he recalled the highlights of his trip and in what order he would tell them to his family. He laughed quietly to himself as he remembered the numerous times he had offended his old aunt and uncle because of his lack of knowledge concerning their customs. Three long months of adventure, excitement, and most importantly, equality.

The iron wheels of the monstrous train screeched to a stop as the conductor bellowed, "Penn Station, last stop." Enthusiastically he gathered his belongings and followed the crowd. At the men's room the line was long but the youngster waited patiently. As his turn grew closer, a huge man in his middle thirties forced his way into a place in line. Remembering the advice of his father, the young boy spoke up politely, "Excuse me sir, but I've been waiting." With a cold stare the man said: "You've got a right to wait — nigga." The words pierced the vulnerable youth. He quickly changed his mind about the men's room and instead decided to go home immediately by subway.

The weight of his bags slowed him down considerably, but he finally made it to the subway. Once inside, he literally collapsed from exhaustion on a rickety old bench which was situated in the middle of the platform. An ugly feeling of nausea overcame him as he was approached by an old drunk who reeked of urine and booze. Too tired to budge, he endured the man and his smell. As the old man swallowed the last drop of his bottle, which was neatly hidden in a brown paper bag, he leaned across the bench and breathing heavily asked, "Ay bl-bl-black boy, you got any money? C'mon brillo head, ha, ha, ha, gimme your dough or you'll be sorry." Without hesitation the terrified youngster reached down into the pockets of his cold trousers and willingly surrendered his last two dollars. The drunk greedily grabbed the money, mumbled something under his breath, and staggered on his way. The boy realized that his father would not have approved of his gesture but at that point he was void of any courage, strength or selfpride.

He found a seat on the subway and dozed on an off until the train reached his stop. He had only three blocks to walk. The old white house, incongruous in New York City, with the paint-chipped shutters still hanging on with half a hinge. A big, black, jovial woman threw open the front door and enveloped the boy in her huge arms while smothering him with kisses. Tears rolled down both their faces as his Mama's words rang in his empty head: "Home sweet home son, you're home sweet home." The family gathered together around the festive table his mother had so lovingly prepared. He didn't have the strength to lift his fork, but he did his best to cover up his anxieties; he knew that the meal before him was something very special. Roast beef, fresh vegetables, and real mashed potatoes. He knew they couldn't afford that. "They must have starved all week", he thought to himself. After answering a million questions about his vacation, the tired boy excused himself from the table and retired to his room.

As he lay in bed he couldn't help but remember the words of his Mama. After being abroad all summer he hardly thought of America or New York, for that matter, as "home sweet home". The Mississippi, the Delaware, all the rivers of America whose banks echoed the cries of Negro spirituals — that was home. It was the farming plantations which covered the South, the black man who worked ten hours a day for a few cents a week and the rich plantation owners who purchased slaves from auction blocks and then gave them a home in the barn with a bed of dirt. It was Abe Lincoln and his Emancipation Proclamation and over a hundred years later, Martin Luther King, Jr., with his non-violent protests and crowded Southern jails filled with black freedom fighters. It was segregated hotels, segregated trains, and segregated restaurants, the white grocery stores and the black grocery stores, the white water fountains and the black water fountains, the white pay toilets and the black toilets. It was the hassles he had to tolerate on his trip home; the constant pain of harassment. How can home be the dirt filled streets of New York where the proud Negro tries to free himself from the prejudice which suffocates him? The white Americans in constant competition with the black Americans; people in poverty surrounded by those living in prosperity; a house divided against itself. Filled with anger, he tried desperately to understand how this could be referred to as home sweet home. It suddenly occurred to him that this was all they had, so he, like his mother, may as well call it home.