

## My First Experience of Racism

I was seven. My two playmates, Ricky and Brother, and I were exercising our new freedom of going to the Arundel Ice Cream parlor three blocks away on the far side of busy North Avenue when we three went together with our parents' permission. Just ahead of us in line were four or five white boys not much older than us. For the first time, I noticed that they did not buy their ice cream cones and leave, as we always did when our parents accompanied us. No, they went through the swinging gate that separated the front counter from the seating area and sat in a booth to enjoy themselves. When the three of us got our cones, I said, "Come on," and headed to that swinging gate. A lady in an Arundel apron with her thick arms folded across her front blocked the gate completely. "Where do you think you're going?" she asked. I pointed to the booths. She shook her head slowly and decisively. When I explained we had had our afternoon baths and it was okay as long as we stayed clean for when our fathers came home, her reply, which I could not completely understand, made it clear that something about us, not our clothes or cleanliness, made us permanently unacceptable behind that gate.

We went home crying. My mother spent a long time trying to calm me down. All I could feel was the unfairness. When my father came home, She simply said, "Jack, he knows." They took me out that night for sandwiches and a movie at the classy Met Theater on North Avenue, and I pretended to

feel better. It was too late. I already had begun to realize why we never played with the white boys on Eutaw Street, even though the rear of our apartment houses on Madison Avenue shared the same alley; even though some of them from Appalachia actually moved into the garages behind Eutaw Street – with no plumbing. I realized then where the dividing line also separated our neighborhood to the west, Fulton Avenue. My quiet inner pledge to myself was that somehow I would show everybody white that “they” were not better than me, than us.