AUTHOR OF DEATH AT AN EARLY AGE
& RACHEL AND HER CHILDREN

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SAVAGE INEQUALITIES

CHILDREN IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

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Looking Backward: 1964–1991

It was a long time since I'd been with children in the public schools.

I had begun to teach in 1964 in Boston in a segregated school so crowded and so poor that it could not provide my fourth grade children with a classroom. We shared an auditorium with another fourth grade and the choir and a group that was rehearsing, starting in October, for a Christmas play that, somehow, never was produced. In the spring I was shifted to another fourth grade that had had a string of substitutes all year. The 35 children in the class hadn't had a permanent teacher since they entered kindergarten. That year, I was their thirteenth teacher.

The results were seen in the first tests I gave. In April, most were reading at the second grade level. Their math ability was at the first grade level.

In an effort to resuscitate their interest, I began to read them poetry I liked. They were drawn especially to poems of Robert Frost and Langston Hughes. One of the most embit-

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tered children in the class began to cry when she first heard the words of Langston Hughes.

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?

She went home and memorized the lines.

The next day, I was fired. There was, it turned out, a list of "fourth grade poems" that teachers were obliged to follow but which, like most first-year teachers, I had never seen. According to school officials, Robert Frost and Langston Hughes were "too advanced" for children of this age. Hughes, moreover, was regarded as "inflammatory."

I was soon recruited to teach in a suburban system west of Boston. The shock of going from one of the poorest schools to one of the wealthiest cannot be overstated. I now had 21 children in a cheerful building with a principal who welcomed innovation.

After teaching for several years, I became involved with other interests—the health and education of farmworkers in New Mexico and Arizona, the problems of adult illiterates in several states, the lives of homeless families in New York. It wasn't until 1988, when I returned to Massachusetts after a long stay in New York City, that I realized how far I'd been drawn away from my original concerns. I found that I missed being with schoolchildren, and I felt a longing to spend time in public schools again. So, in the fall of 1988, I set off on another journey.

During the next two years I visited schools and spoke with children in approximately 30 neighborhoods from Illinois to Washington, D.C., and from New York to San Antonio. Wherever possible, I also met with children in their homes. There was no special logic in the choice of cities that I visited. I went where I was welcomed or knew teachers or school principals or ministers of churches.

What startled me most—although it puzzles me that I was not prepared for this—was the remarkable degree of racial segregation that persisted almost everywhere. Like

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most Americans, I knew that segregation was still common in the public schools, but I did not know how much it had intensified. The Supreme Court decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* 37 years ago, in which the court had found that segregated education was unconstitutional because it was "inherently unequal," did not seem to have changed very much for children in the schools I saw, not, at least, outside of the Deep South. Most of the urban schools I visited were 95 to 99 percent nonwhite. In no school that I saw anywhere in the United States were nonwhite children in large numbers truly intermingled with white children.

Moreover, in most cities, influential people that I met showed little inclination to address this matter and were sometimes even puzzled when I brought it up. Many people seemed to view the segregation issue as "a past injustice" that had been sufficiently addressed. Others took it as an unresolved injustice that no longer held sufficient national attention to be worth contesting. In all cases, I was given the distinct impression that my inquiries about this matter were not welcome.

None of the national reports I saw made even passing references to inequality or segregation. Low reading scores, high dropout rates, poor motivation—symptomatic matters —seemed to dominate discussion. In three cities—Baltimore, Milwaukee and Detroit—separate schools or separate classes for black males had been proposed. Other cities—Washington, D.C., New York and Philadelphia among them —were considering the same approach. Black parents or black school officials sometimes seemed to favor this idea. Booker T. Washington was cited with increasing frequency, Du Bois never, and Martin Luther King only with cautious selectivity. He was treated as an icon, but his vision of a nation in which black and white kids went to school together seemed to be effaced almost entirely. Dutiful references to "The Dream" were often seen in school brochures and on wall posters during February, when "Black History" was celebrated in the public schools, but the content of the dream was treated as a closed box that could not be opened without ruining the celebration.

For anyone who came of age during the years from 1954

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to 1968, these revelations could not fail to be disheartening. What seems unmistakable, but, oddly enough, is rarely said in public settings nowadays, is that the nation, for all practice and intent, has turned its back upon the moral implications, if not yet the legal ramifications, of the *Brown* decision. The struggle being waged today, where there is any struggle being waged at all, is closer to the one that was addressed in 1896 in *Plessy* v. *Ferguson,* in which the court accepted segregated institutions for black people, stipulating only that they must be equal to those open to white people. The dual society, at least in public education, seems in general to be unquestioned.

To the extent that school reforms such as "restructuring" are advocated for the inner cities, few of these reforms have reached the schools that I have seen. In each of the larger cities there is usually one school or one subdistrict which is highly publicized as an example of "restructured" education; but the changes rarely reach beyond this one example. Even in those schools where some "restructuring" has taken place, the fact of racial segregation has been, and continues to be, largely uncontested. In many cities, what is termed "restructuring" struck me as very little more than moving around the same old furniture within the house of poverty. The perceived objective was a more "efficient" ghetto school or one with greater "input" from the ghetto parents or more "choices" for the ghetto children. The fact of ghetto education as a permanent American reality appeared to be accepted.

Liberal critics of the Reagan era sometimes note that social policy in the United States, to the extent that it concerns black children and poor children, has been turned back several decades. But this assertion, which is accurate as a description of some setbacks in the areas of housing, health and welfare, is not adequate to speak about the present-day reality in public education. In public schooling, social policy has been turned back almost one hundred years.

These, then, are a few of the impressions that remained with me after revisiting the public schools from which I had been absent for a quarter-century. My deepest impression, however, was less theoretical and more immediate. It was

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simply the impression that these urban schools were, by and large, extraordinarily unhappy places. With few exceptions, they reminded me of "garrisons" or "outposts" in a foreign nation. Housing projects, bleak and tall, surrounded by perimeter walls lined with barbed wire, often stood adjacent to the schools I visited. The schools were surrounded frequently by signs that indicated DRUG-FREE ZONE. Their doors were guarded. Police sometimes patrolled the halls. The windows of the schools were often covered with steel grates. Taxi drivers flatly refused to take me to some of these schools and would deposit me a dozen blocks away, in border areas beyond which they refused to go. I'd walk the last half-mile on my own. Once, in the Bronx, a woman stopped her car, told me I should not be walking there, insisted I get in, and drove me to the school. I was dismayed to walk or ride for blocks and blocks through neighborhoods where every face was black, where there were simply *no white people anywhere.*

In Boston, the press referred to areas like these as "death zones"—a specific reference to the rate of infant death in ghetto neighborhoods—but the feeling of the "death zone" often seemed to permeate the schools themselves. Looking around some of these inner-city schools, where filth and disrepair were worse than anything I'd seen in 1964, I often wondered why we would agree to let our children go to school in places where no politician, school board president, or business CEO would dream of working. Children seemed to wrestle with these kinds of questions too. Some of their observations were, indeed, so trenchant that a teacher sometimes would step back and raise her eyebrows and then nod to me across the children's heads, as if to say, "Well, there it is! They know what's going on around them, don't they?"

It occurred to me that we had not been listening much to children in these recent years of "summit conferences" on education, of severe reports and ominous prescriptions. The voices of children, frankly, had been missing from the whole discussion.

This seems especially unfortunate because the children often are more interesting and perceptive than the grown-

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ups are about the day-to-day realities of life in school. For this reason, I decided, early in my journey, to attempt to listen very carefully to children and, whenever possible, to let their voices and their judgments and their longings find a place within this book—and maybe, too, within the nation's dialogue about their destinies. I hope that, in this effort, I have done them justice.

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CHAPTER 1

Life on the Mississippi: East St. Louis, Illinois

East of anywhere," writes a reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "often evokes the other side of the tracks. But, for a first-time visitor suddenly deposited on its eerily empty streets, East St. Louis might suggest another world." The city, which is 98 percent black, has no obstetric services, no regular trash collection, and few jobs. Nearly a third of its families live on less than $7,500 a year; 75 percent of its population lives on welfare of some form. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development describes it as "the most distressed small city in America."

Only three of the 13 buildings on Missouri Avenue, one of the city's major thoroughfares, are occupied. A 13-story office building, tallest in the city, has been boarded up. Outside, on the sidewalk, a pile of garbage fills a ten-foot crater.

The city, which by night and day is clouded by the fumes that pour from vents and smokestacks at the Pfizer and Monsanto chemical plants, has one of the highest rates of child asthma in America.

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It is, according to a teacher at the University of Southern Illinois, "a repository for a nonwhite population that is now regarded as expendable." The *Post-Dispatch* describes it as "America's Soweto."

Fiscal shortages have forced the layoff of 1,170 of the city's 1,400 employees in the past 12 years. The city, which is often unable to buy heating fuel or toilet paper for the city hall, recently announced that it might have to cashier all but 10 percent of the remaining work force of 230. In 1989 the mayor announced that he might need to sell the city hall and all six fire stations to raise needed cash. Last year the plan had to be scrapped after the city lost its city hall in a court judgment to a creditor. East St. Louis is mortgaged into the next century but has the highest property-tax rate in the state.

Since October 1987, when the city's garbage pickups ceased, the backyards of residents have been employed as dump sites. In the spring of 1988 a policeman tells a visitor that 40 plastic bags of trash are waiting for removal from the backyard of his mother's house. Public health officials are concerned the garbage will attract a plague of flies and rodents in the summer. The policeman speaks of "rats as big as puppies" in his mother's yard. They are known to the residents, he says, as "bull rats." Many people have no cars or funds to cart the trash and simply burn it in their yards. The odor of smoke from burning garbage, says the *Post-Dispatch,* "has become one of the scents of spring" in East St. Louis.

Railroad tracks still used to transport hazardous chemicals run through the city. "Always present," says the *Post-Dispatch,* "is the threat of chemical spills. . . . The wail of sirens warning residents to evacuate after a spill is common." The most recent spill, the paper says, "was at the Monsanto Company plant. . . . Nearly 300 gallons of phosphorous trichloride spilled when a railroad tank was overfilled. About 450 residents were taken to St. Mary's Hospital. . . . The frequency of the emergencies has caused Monsanto to have a 'standing account' at St. Mary's."

In March of 1989, a task force appointed by Governor James Thompson noted that the city was in debt by more

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than $40 million, and proposed emergency state loans to pay for garbage collection and to keep police and fire departments in continued operation. The governor, however, blamed the mayor and his administrators, almost all of whom were black, and refused to grant the loans unless the mayor resigned. Thompson's response, said a Republican state legislator, "made my heart feel good. . . . It's unfortunate, but the essence of the problem in East St. Louis is the people" who are running things.

Residents of Illinois do not need to breathe the garbage smoke and chemicals of East St. Louis. With the interstate highways, says a supervisor of the Illinois Power Company, "you can ride around the place and just keep going. . . ."

East St. Louis lies in the heart of the American Bottoms —the floodplain on the east side of the Mississippi River opposite St. Louis. To the east of the city lie the Illinois Bluffs, which surround the floodplain in a semicircle. Towns on the Bluffs are predominantly white and do not welcome visitors from East St. Louis.

"The two tiers—Bluffs and Bottoms—" writes James Nowlan, a professor of public policy at Knox College, "have long represented . . . different worlds." Their physical separation, he believes, "helps rationalize the psychological and cultural distance that those on the Bluffs have clearly tried to maintain." People on the Bluffs, says Nowlan, "overwhelmingly want this separation to continue."

Towns on the Bluffs, according to Nowlan, do not pay taxes to address flood problems in the Bottoms, "even though these problems are generated in large part by the water that drains from the Bluffs." East St. Louis lacks the funds to cope with flooding problems on its own, or to reconstruct its sewer system, which, according to local experts, is "irreparable." The problem is all the worse because the chemical plants in East St. Louis and adjacent towns have for decades been releasing toxins into the sewer system.

The pattern of concentrating black communities in easily flooded lowland areas is not unusual in the United States. Farther down the river, for example, in the Delta town of Tunica, Mississippi, people in the black community of Sugar

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Ditch live in shacks by open sewers that are commonly believed to be responsible for the high incidence of liver tumors and abscesses found in children there. Metaphors of caste like these are everywhere in the United States. Sadly, although dirt and water flow downhill, money and services do not.

The dangers of exposure to raw sewage, which backs up repeatedly into the homes of residents in East St. Louis, were first noticed, in the spring of 1989, at a public housing project, Villa Griffin. Raw sewage, says the *Post-Dispatch,* overflowed into a playground just behind the housing project, which is home to 187 children, "forming an oozing lake of . . . tainted water." Two schoolgirls, we are told, "experienced hair loss since raw sewage flowed into their homes."

While local physicians are not certain whether loss of hair is caused by the raw sewage, they have issued warnings that exposure to raw sewage can provoke a cholera or hepatitis outbreak. A St. Louis health official voices her dismay that children live with waste in their backyards. "The development of working sewage systems made cities livable a hundred years ago," she notes. "Sewage systems separate us from the Third World."

"It's a terrible way to live," says a mother at the Villa Griffin homes, as she bails raw sewage from her sink. Health officials warn again of cholera—and, this time, of typhoid also.

The sewage, which is flowing from collapsed pipes and dysfunctional pumping stations, has also flooded basements all over the city. The city's vacuum truck, which uses water and suction to unclog the city's sewers, cannot be used because it needs $5,000 in repairs. Even when it works, it sometimes can't be used because there isn't money to hire drivers. A single engineer now does the work that 14 others did before they were laid off. By April the pool of overflow behind the Villa Griffin project has expanded into a lagoon of sewage. Two million gallons of raw sewage lie outside the children's homes.

In May, another health emergency develops. Soil samples tested at residential sites in East St. Louis turn up disturbing quantities of arsenic, mercury and lead—as well as

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steroids dumped in previous years by stockyards in the area. Lead levels found in the soil around one family's home, according to lead-poison experts, measure "an astronomical 10,000 parts per million." Five of the children in the building have been poisoned. Although children rarely die of poisoning by lead, health experts note, its effects tend to be subtle and insidious. By the time the poisoning becomes apparent in a child's sleep disorders, stomach pains and hyperactive behavior, says a health official, "it is too late to undo the permanent brain damage." The poison, she says, "is chipping away at the learning potential of kids whose potential has already been chipped away by their environment."

The budget of the city's department of lead-poison control, however, has been slashed, and one person now does the work once done by six.

Lead poisoning in most cities comes from lead-based paint in housing, which has been illegal in most states for decades but which poisons children still because most cities, Boston and New York among them, rarely penalize offending landlords. In East St. Louis, however, there is a second source of lead. Health inspectors think it is another residue of manufacturing—including smelting—in the factories and mills whose plants surround the city. "Some of the factories are gone," a parent organizer says, "but they have left their poison in the soil where our children play." In one apartment complex where particularly high quantities of lead have been detected in the soil, 32 children with high levels in their blood have been identified.

"I anticipate finding the whole city contaminated," says a health examiner.

The Daughters of Charity, whose works of mercy are well known in the Third World, operate a mission at the Villa Griffin homes. On an afternoon in early spring of 1990, Sister Julia Huiskamp meets me on King Boulevard and drives me to the Griffin homes.

As we ride past blocks and blocks of skeletal structures, some of which are still inhabited, she slows the car repeatedly at railroad crossings. A seemingly endless railroad train rolls past us to the right. On the left: a blackened lot where gar-

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bage has been burning. Next to the burning garbage is a row of 12 white cabins, charred by fire. Next: a lot that holds a heap of auto tires and a mountain of tin cans. More burnt houses. More trash fires. The train moves almost imperceptibly across the flatness of the land.

Fifty years old, and wearing a blue suit, white blouse, and blue head-cover, Sister Julia points to the nicest house in sight. The sign on the front reads MOTEL. "It's a whorehouse," Sister Julia says.

When she slows the car beside a group of teen-age boys, one of them steps out toward the car, then backs away as she is recognized.

The 99 units of the Villa Griffin homes—two-story structures, brick on the first floor, yellow wood above—form one border of a recessed park and playground that were filled with fecal matter last year when the sewage mains exploded. The sewage is gone now and the grass is very green and looks inviting. When nine-year-old Serena and her seven-year-old brother take me for a walk, however, I discover that our shoes sink into what is still a sewage marsh. An inch-deep residue of fouled water still remains.

Serena's brother is a handsome, joyous little boy, but troublingly thin. Three other children join us as we walk along the marsh: Smokey, who is nine years old but cannot yet tell time; Mickey, who is seven; and a tiny child with a ponytail and big brown eyes who talks a constant stream of words that I can't always understand.

"Hush, Little Sister," says Serena. I ask for her name, but "Little Sister" is the only name the children seem to know.

"There go my cousins," Smokey says, pointing to two teen-age girls above us on the hill.

The day is warm, although we're only in the second week of March; several dogs and cats are playing by the edges of the marsh. "It's a lot of squirrels here," says Smokey. "There go one!"

"This here squirrel is a friend of mine," says Little Sister.

None of the children can tell me the approximate time that school begins. One says five o'clock. One says six. Another says that school begins at noon.

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When I ask what song they sing after the flag pledge, one says "Jingle Bells."

Smokey cannot decide if he is in the second or third grade.

Seven-year-old Mickey sucks his thumb during the walk.

The children regale me with a chilling story as we stand beside the marsh. Smokey says his sister was raped and murdered and then dumped behind his school. Other children add more details: Smokey's sister was 11 years old. She was beaten with a brick until she died. The murder was committed by a man who knew her mother.

The narrative begins when, without warning, Smokey says, "My sister has got killed."

"She was my best friend," Serena says.

"They had beat her in the head and raped her," Smokey says.

"She was hollering out loud," says Little Sister.

I ask them when it happened. Smokey says, "Last year." Serena then corrects him and she says, "Last week."

"It scared me because I had to cry," says Little Sister.

"The police arrested one man but they didn't catch the other," Smokey says.

Serena says, "He was some kin to her."

But Smokey objects, "He weren't no kin to me. He was my momma's friend."

"Her face was busted," Little Sister says.

Serena describes this sequence of events: "They told her go behind the school. They'll give her a quarter if she do. Then they knock her down and told her not to tell what they had did."

I ask, "Why did they kill her?"

"They was scared that she would tell," Serena says.

"One is in jail," says Smokey. "They cain't find the other."

"Instead of raping little bitty children, they should find themselves a wife," says Little Sister.

"I hope," Serena says, "her spirit will come back and get that man."

"And *kill* that man," says Little Sister.

"Give her another chance to live," Serena says.

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"My teacher came to the funeral," says Smokey.

"When a little child dies, my momma say a star go straight to Heaven," says Serena.

"My grandma was murdered," Mickey says out of the blue. "Somebody shot two bullets in her head."

I ask him, "Is she really dead?"

"She dead all right," says Mickey. "She was layin' there, just dead."

"I love my friends," Serena says. "I don't care if they no kin to me. I *care* for them. I hope his mother have another baby. Name her for my friend that's dead."

"I have a cat with three legs," Smokey says.

"Snakes hate rabbits," Mickey says, again for no apparent reason.

"Cats hate fishes," Little Sister says.

"It's a lot of hate," says Smokey.

Later, at the mission, Sister Julia tells me this: "The Jefferson School, which they attend, is a decrepit hulk. Next to it is a modern school, erected two years ago, which was to have replaced the one that they attend. But the construction was not done correctly. The roof is too heavy for the walls, and the entire structure has begun to sink. It can't be occupied. Smokey's sister was raped and murdered and dumped between the old school and the new one."

As the children drift back to their homes for supper, Sister Julia stands outside with me and talks about the health concerns that trouble people in the neighborhood. In the setting sun, the voices of the children fill the evening air. Nourished by the sewage marsh, a field of wild daffodils is blooming. Standing here, you wouldn't think that anything was wrong. The street is calm. The poison in the soil can't be seen. The sewage is invisible and only makes the grass a little greener. Bikes thrown down by children lie outside their kitchen doors. It could be an ordinary twilight in a small suburban town.

Night comes on and Sister Julia goes inside to telephone a cab. In another hour, the St. Louis taxis will not come into the neighborhood.

* * *

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In the night, the sky above the East St. Louis area is brownish yellow. Illuminated by the glare from the Monsanto installation, the smoke is vented from four massive columns rising about 400 feet above the plant. The garish light and tubular structures lend the sky a strange, nightmarish look.

Safir Ahmed, a young reporter who has covered East St. Louis for the *Post-Dispatch* for several years, drives with me through the rutted streets close to the plant and points out blocks of wooden houses without plumbing. Straggling black children walk along a road that has no sidewalks. "The soil is all contaminated here," he says.

Almost directly over our heads the plant is puffing out a cloud of brownish smoke that rises above the girders of the plant within a glow of reddish-gold illumination.

Two auto bridges cross the Mississippi River to St. Louis. To the south is the Poplar Street Bridge. The bridge to the north is named for Martin Luther King. "It takes three minutes to cross the bridge," says Ahmed. "For white people in St. Louis, it could be a thousand miles long."

On the southern edge of East St. Louis, tiny shacklike houses stand along a lightless street. Immediately behind these houses are the giant buildings of Monsanto, Big River Zinc, Cerro Copper, the American Bottoms Sewage Plant and Trade Waste Incineration—one of the largest hazardous-waste-incineration companies in the United States.

"The entire city lies downwind of this. When the plant gives off emissions that are viewed as toxic, an alarm goes off. People who have breathed the smoke are given a cash payment of $400 in exchange for a release from liability. . . .

"The decimation of the men within the population is quite nearly total. Four of five births in East St. Louis are to single mothers. Where do the men go? Some to prison. Some to the military. Many to an early death. Dozens of men are living in the streets or sleeping in small, isolated camps behind the burnt-out buildings. There are several of these camps out in the muddy stretch there to the left.

"The nicest buildings in the city are the Federal Court

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House and the City Hall—which also holds the jail—the National Guard headquarters, and some funeral establishments. There are a few nice houses and a couple of high-rise homes for senior citizens. One of the nicest buildings is the whorehouse. There's also a branch of the University of Southern Illinois, but it no longer offers classes; it's a social welfare complex now.

"The chemical plants do not pay taxes here. They have created small incorporated towns which are self-governed and exempt therefore from supervision by health agencies in East St. Louis. Aluminum Ore created a separate town called Alorton. Monsanto, Cerro Copper and Big River Zinc are all in Sauget. National Stock Yards has its own incorporated town as well. Basically there's no one living in some of these so-called towns. Alorton is a sizable town. Sauget, on the other hand, isn't much more than a legal fiction. It provides tax shelter and immunity from jurisdiction of authorities in East St. Louis."

The town of Sauget claims a population of about 200 people. Its major industries, other than Monsanto and the other plants, are topless joints owned by the mayor of Sauget, whose last name is Sauget, and an outlet for the lottery. Two of the largest strip clubs face each other on a side street that is perpendicular to the main highway. One is named Oz and that is for white people. The other strip club, which is known as Wiz, is for black people. The lottery office, which is frequented primarily by black people, is the largest in the state of Illinois.

"The lottery advertises mostly in black publications," Ahmed says. "So people who have nothing to start with waste their money on a place that sells them dreams. Lottery proceeds in Illinois allegedly go into education; in reality they go into state revenues and they add nothing to the education fund. So it is a total loss. Affluent people do not play the lottery. The state is in the business here of selling hopes to people who have none. The city itself is full of bars and liquor stores and lots of ads for cigarettes that feature pictures of black people. Assemble all the worst things in America—gambling, liquor, cigarettes and toxic fumes, sewage,

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waste disposal, prostitution—put it all together. Then you dump it on black people."

East St. Louis begins at the Monsanto fence. Rain starts falling as we cross the railroad tracks, and then another set of tracks, and pass a series of dirt streets with houses that are mostly burnt-out shells, the lots between them piled with garbage bags and thousands of abandoned auto tires. The city is almost totally flat and lies below the Mississippi's floodline, protected by a levee. In 1986 a floodgate broke and filled part of the city. Houses on Bond Avenue filled up with sewage to their second floors.

The waste water emitted from the sewage plant, according to a recent Greenpeace study, "varies in color from yellow-orange to green." The toxic substances that it contains become embedded in the soil and the marshland in which children play. Dead Creek, for example, a creekbed that received discharges from the chemical and metal plants in previous years, is now a place where kids from East St. Louis ride their bikes. The creek, which smokes by day and glows on moonless nights, has gained some notoriety in recent years for instances of spontaneous combustion. The Illinois EPA believes that the combustion starts when children ride their bikes across the creek bed, "creating friction which begins the smoldering process."

"Nobody in East St. Louis," Ahmed says, "has ever had the clout to raise a protest. Why Americans permit this is so hard for somebody like me, who grew up in the real Third World, to understand. . . .

"I'm from India. In Calcutta this would be explicable, perhaps. I keep thinking to myself, 'My God! This is the United States!' "

By midnight, hardly anyone is out on foot. In block after block, there is no sense of life. Only the bars and liquor stores are open—but the windows of the liquor stores are barred. There is a Woolworth's store that has no windows. Silently in the persistent rain a dark shape looms before us and cuts off the street: a freight train loaded with chemicals or copper, moving slowly to the north. There is no right or wrong side of the tracks in East St. Louis. The tracks are everywhere.

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Behind us still: the eerie specter of the lights and girders of Monsanto. In front of us, perhaps two miles away: the beautiful St. Louis Arch and, under it, the brightly lighted skyline of St. Louis.

"The ultimate terror for white people," Ahmed says, "is to leave the highway by mistake and find themselves in East St. Louis. People speak of getting lost in East St. Louis as a nightmare. The nightmare to me is that they never leave that highway so they never know what life is like for all the children here. They *ought* to get off that highway. The nightmare isn't in their heads. It's a real place. There are children living here.

"Jesse Jackson came to speak at East St. Louis High. There were three thousand people packed into the gym. He was nearly two hours late. When he came in, the feeling was electric. There was pin-drop silence while he spoke. An old man sat beside me, leaning forward on his cane. He never said a word but he was crying.

"You would think, with all the chemical and metals plants, that there would be unlimited employment. It doesn't work that way. Most of these are specialized jobs. East St. Louis men don't have the education. I go into the Monsanto plant and almost every face I see is white.

"The biggest employer in the town is public education. Next, perhaps, the Pfizer plant, which is situated just behind one of the high schools. After that, the biggest businesses may be the drug trade, funerals and bars and prostitution. The mayor's family owns the largest funeral home in East St. Louis. The Catholic high school was shut down last year. There's talk of turning it into a prison."

There is a pornography theater in the center of the town but no theater showing movies suitable for children. East St. Louis is the largest city south of Springfield in the state of Illinois but was left off the Illinois map four years ago. The telephone directory that serves the region does not list phone numbers of the residents or businesses of East St. Louis, even though the city lies right at the center of the service area that the directory is supposed to cover. Two years ago, the one pedestrian bridge across the Mississippi River to St. Louis was closed off to East St. Louis residents.

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"It's a third bridge, smaller than the others," Ahmed says, "very old—the only one that's open to pedestrians. It puts you right into downtown St. Louis, quite close to the Arch. The closing of the bridge was ordered on the day before a street fair that takes place each summer during the July Fourth celebration. Three or four million people flood into the city. There are booths for food, and rides and music. For people in East St. Louis, it's an opportunity to bring their children to the city and relax. Mothers walk their kids across the bridge. . . .

"The police announced that they were shutting down the bridge. The reason they gave was that there had been some muggings in the past. They were concerned, they said, that teen-age blacks would mug the people at the fair, then run across the bridge and disappear into the streets of East St. Louis. Regardless of the reason, it was a decision that denied the folks in East St. Louis access to the fair."

According to a story published later in *Life* magazine, black leaders in East St. Louis said "it looked suspiciously like a racist action." The fact that it was pegged to Independence Day intensified the sense of injury. The president of the NAACP in East St. Louis said, "We seem to have been isolated. . . ."

The bridge was later opened by court order.

"In recent years," says Ahmed, "letters have been going out to people who have homes in a half-mile zone next to Monsanto. The letters offer to buy your home, no questions asked, for cash: $4,000 flat for any house. The speculation is that Monsanto wants a buffer zone to fend off further suits for damages from chemical emissions. These offers are appealing to poor people who have nothing and who have no faith the courts would ever honor their concerns. . . .

"The land between the two main bridges and along the river is regarded as prime real estate by white developers. Given the fantastic view of the St. Louis skyline and the Gateway Arch, the land would be immensely valuable if its black residents could be removed. When people ask, 'What should we do with East St. Louis?' they don't speak about the people. They are speaking of the land."

Emerging from another rutted street of houses that do

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not appear to be inhabited, but from the interior of which some lights are seen, we pass the segregated topless joints again and stop the car along Monsanto Avenue to scrutinize Big River Zinc, Cerro Copper ("American's Largest Recycler of Copper," according to its sign) and the Monsanto plant. Then, making a U-turn, we head west onto the access road that climbs back to the bridge across the Mississippi.

"Every time I cross that bridge I feel that I am getting off a plane within a different country," Ahmed says.

From the St. Louis side, one sees the dark breadth of the river, another wider strip of blackness where the dwellings of East St. Louis lie, and the glowing cluster of industrial illumination slightly to the south. Off to the east lie the Illinois Bluffs, far above the chemical pollutants.

East St. Louis—which the local press refers to as "an inner city without an outer city"—has some of the sickest children in America. Of 66 cities in Illinois, East St. Louis ranks first in fetal death, first in premature birth, and third in infant death. Among the negative factors listed by the city's health director are the sewage running in the streets, air that has been fouled by the local plants, the high lead levels noted in the soil, poverty, lack of education, crime, dilapidated housing, insufficient health care, unemployment. Hospital care is deficient too. There is no place to have a baby in East St. Louis. The maternity ward at the city's Catholic hospital, a 100-year-old structure, was shut down some years ago. The only other hospital in town was forced by lack of funds to close in 1990. The closest obstetrics service open to the women here is seven miles away. The infant death rate is still rising.

As in New York City's poorest neighborhoods, dental problems also plague the children here. Although dental problems don't command the instant fears associated with low birth weight, fetal death or cholera, they do have the consequence of wearing down the stamina of children and defeating their ambitions. Bleeding gums, impacted teeth and rotting teeth are routine matters for the children I have interviewed in the South Bronx. Children get used to feeling constant pain. They go to sleep with it. They go to school

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with it. Sometimes their teachers are alarmed and try to get them to a clinic. But it's all so slow and heavily encumbered with red tape and waiting lists and missing, lost or canceled welfare cards, that dental care is often long delayed. Children live for months with pain that grown-ups would find unendurable. The gradual attrition of accepted pain erodes their energy and aspiration. I have seen children in New York with teeth that look like brownish, broken sticks. I have also seen teen-agers who were missing half their teeth. But, to me, most shocking is to see a child with an abscess that has been inflamed for weeks and that he has simply lived with and accepts as part of the routine of life. Many teachers in the urban schools have seen this. It is almost commonplace.

Compounding these problems is the poor nutrition of the children here—average daily food expenditure in East St. Louis is $2.40 for one child—and the underimmunization of young children. Of every 100 children recently surveyed in East St. Louis, 55 were incompletely immunized for polio, diphtheria, measles and whooping cough. In this context, health officials look with all the more uneasiness at those lagoons of sewage outside public housing.

On top of all else is the very high risk of death by homicide in East St. Louis. In a recent year in which three cities in the state of roughly the same size as East St. Louis had an average of four homicides apiece, there were 54 homicides in East St. Louis. But it is the heat of summer that officials here particularly dread. The heat that breeds the insects bearing polio or hepatitis in raw sewage also heightens asthma and frustration and reduces patience. "The heat," says a man in public housing, "can bring out the beast. . . ."

The fear of violence is very real in East St. Louis. The CEO of one of the large companies out on the edge of town has developed an "evacuation plan" for his employees. State troopers are routinely sent to East St. Louis to put down disturbances that the police cannot control. If the misery of this community explodes someday in a real riot (it has happened in the past), residents believe that state and federal law-enforcement agencies will have no hesitation in applying massive force to keep the violence contained.

As we have seen, it is believed by people here that white

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developers regard the land beside the river and adjacent sections of the city as particularly attractive sites for condominiums and luxury hotels. It is the fear of violence, people believe, and the proximity of the black population that have, up to now, prevented plans like these from taking shape. Some residents are convinced, therefore, that they will someday be displaced. "It's happened in other cities," says a social worker who has lived here for ten years. "East St. Louis is a good location, after all."

This eventuality, however, is not viewed as very likely—or not for a long, long time. The soil would have to be deleaded first. The mercury and arsenic would have to be dealt with. The chemical plants would have to be shut down or modified before the area could be regarded as attractive to developers. For now, the people of East St. Louis probably can rest assured that nobody much covets what is theirs.

"The history of East St. Louis," says the *Post-Dispatch*, is "rife with greed and lust and bigotry." At the turn of the century, the city was the second largest railroad center in the nation. It led the nation in sale of horses, mules and hogs, and in the manufacture of aluminum. Meat-packing, steel, and paint manufacture were important here as well. Virtually all these industries were owned, however, by outsiders.

Blacks were drawn to East St. Louis from the South by promises of jobs. When they arrived, the corporations used them as strikebreakers. In 1917 a mounting white resentment of strikebreaking blacks, combined with racial bigotry, ignited one of the most bloody riots in the nation's history. White mobs tore into black neighborhoods. Beatings and hangings took place in the streets. The mob, whose rage was indiscriminate, killed a 14-year-old boy and scalped his mother. Before it was over, 244 buildings were destroyed.

It may be said that the unregulated private market did not serve the city well. By the 1930s, industries that had enticed black people here with promises of jobs began to leave for areas where even cheaper labor could be found. Proximity to coal, which had attracted industry into the area, also ceased to be important as electric power came to be commercially available in other regions. The Aluminum Ore

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Company, which had brought 10,000 blacks to East St. Louis to destroy the unions, now shut down and moved to the Deep South. During the Depression, other factories—their operations obsolete—shut down as well.

The city underwent a renaissance of sorts in World War II, when deserted factory space was used for military manufacturing. Cheap black labor was again required. Prostitution also flourished as a market answer to the presence of so many military men at nearby bases. Organized crime set up headquarters in the city. For subsequent decades, East St. Louis was the place where young white men would go for sexual adventures.

Population peaked in 1945 at 80,000, one third being black. By 1971, with the population down to 50,000, less than one-third white, a black mayor was elected. A second black mayor, elected in 1979, remained in office until 1991.

The problems of the streets in urban areas, as teachers often note, frequently spill over into public schools. In the public schools of East St. Louis this is literally the case.

"Martin Luther King Junior High School," notes the *Post-Dispatch* in a story published in the early spring of 1989, "was evacuated Friday afternoon after sewage flowed into the kitchen. . . . The kitchen was closed and students were sent home." On Monday, the paper continues, "East St. Louis Senior High School was awash in sewage for the second time this year." The school had to be shut because of "fumes and backed-up toilets." Sewage flowed into the basement, through the floor, then up into the kitchen and the students' bathrooms. The backup, we read, "occurred in the food preparation areas."

School is resumed the following morning at the high school, but a few days later the overflow recurs. This time the entire system is affected, since the meals distributed to every student in the city are prepared in the two schools that have been flooded. School is called off for all 16,500 students in the district. The sewage backup, caused by the failure of two pumping stations, forces officials at the high school to shut down the furnaces.

At Martin Luther King, the parking lot and gym are also

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flooded. "It's a disaster," says a legislator. "The streets are underwater; gaseous fumes are being emitted from the pipes under the schools," she says, "making people ill."

In the same week, the schools announce the layoff of 280 teachers, 166 cooks and cafeteria workers, 25 teacher aides, 16 custodians and 18 painters, electricians, engineers and plumbers. The president of the teachers' union says the cuts, which will bring the size of kindergarten and primary classes up to 30 students, and the size of fourth to twelfth grade classes up to 35, will have "an unimaginable impact" on the students. "If you have a high school teacher with five classes each day and between 150 and 175 students . . . , it's going to have a devastating effect." The school system, it is also noted, has been using more than 70 "permanent substitute teachers," who are paid only $10,000 yearly, as a way of saving money.

Governor Thompson, however, tells the press that he will not pour money into East St. Louis to solve long-term problems. East St. Louis residents, he says, must help themselves. "There is money in the community," the governor insists. "It's just not being spent for what it should be spent for."

The governor, while acknowledging that East St. Louis faces economic problems, nonetheless refers dismissively to those who live in East St. Louis. "What in the community," he asks, "is being done right?" He takes the opportunity of a visit to the area to announce a fiscal grant for sewer improvement to a relatively wealthy town nearby.

In East St. Louis, meanwhile, teachers are running out of chalk and paper, and their paychecks are arriving two weeks late. The city warns its teachers to expect a cut of half their pay until the fiscal crisis has been eased.

The threatened teacher layoffs are mandated by the Illinois Board of Education, which, because of the city's fiscal crisis, has been given supervisory control of the school budget. Two weeks later the state superintendent partially relents. In a tone very different from that of the governor, he notes that East St. Louis does not have the means to solve its education problems on its own. "There is no natural way," he says, that "East St. Louis can bring itself out of this situa-

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tion." Several cuts will be required in any case—one quarter of the system's teachers, 75 teacher aides, and several dozen others will be given notice—but, the state board notes, sports and music programs will not be affected.

East St. Louis, says the chairman of the state board, "is simply the worst possible place I can imagine to have a child brought up. . . . The community is in desperate circumstances." Sports and music, he observes, are, for many children here, "the only avenues of success." Sadly enough, no matter how it ratifies the stereotype, this is the truth; and there is a poignant aspect to the fact that, even with class size soaring and one quarter of the system's teachers being given their dismissal, the state board of education demonstrates its genuine but skewed compassion by attempting to leave sports and music untouched by the overall austerity.

Even sports facilities, however, are degrading by comparison with those found and expected at most high schools in America. The football field at East St. Louis High is missing almost everything—including goalposts. There are a couple of metal pipes—no crossbar, just the pipes. Bob Shannon, the football coach, who has to use his personal funds to purchase footballs and has had to cut and rake the football field himself, has dreams of having goalposts someday. He'd also like to let his students have new uniforms. The ones they wear are nine years old and held together somehow by a patchwork of repairs. Keeping them clean is a problem, too. The school cannot afford a washing machine. The uniforms are carted to a corner laundromat with fifteen dollars' worth of quarters.

Other football teams that come to play, according to the coach, are shocked to see the field and locker rooms. They want to play without a halftime break and get away. The coach reports that he's been missing paychecks, but he's trying nonetheless to raise some money to help out a member of the team whose mother has just died of cancer.

"The days of the tight money have arrived," he says. "It don't look like Moses will be coming to this school."

He tells me he has been in East St. Louis 19 years and has been the football coach for 14 years. "I was born," he says, "in Natchez, Mississippi. I stood on the courthouse steps

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of Natchez with Charles Evers. I was a teen-age boy when Michael Schwerner and the other boys were murdered. I've been in the struggle all along. In Mississippi, it was the fight for legal rights. This time, it's a struggle for survival.

"In certain ways," he says, "it's harder now because in those days it was a clear enemy you had to face, a man in a hood and not a statistician. No one could persuade you that you were to blame. Now the choices seem like they are left to you and, if you make the wrong choice, you are made to understand you are to blame. . . .

"Night-time in this city, hot and smoky in the summer, there are dealers standin' out on every street. Of the kids I see here, maybe 55 percent will graduate from school. Of that number, maybe one in four will go to college. How many will stay? That is a bigger question.

"The basic essentials are simply missing here. When we go to wealthier schools I look at the faces of my boys. They don't say a lot. They have their faces to the windows, lookin' out. I can't tell what they are thinking. I am hopin' they are saying, 'This is something I will give my kids someday.' "

Tall and trim, his black hair graying slightly, he is 45 years old.

"No, my wife and I don't live here. We live in a town called Ferguson, Missouri. I was born in poverty and raised in poverty. I feel that I owe it to myself to live where they pick up the garbage."

In the visitors' locker room, he shows me lockers with no locks. The weight room stinks of sweat and water-rot. "See, this ceiling is in danger of collapsing. See, this room don't have no heat in winter. But we got to come here anyway. We wear our coats while working out. I tell the boys, 'We got to get it done. Our fans don't know that we do not have heat.' "

He tells me he arrives at school at 7:45 A.M. and leaves at 6:00 P.M.—except in football season, when he leaves at 8:00 P.M. "This is my life. It isn't all I dreamed of and I tell myself sometimes that I might have accomplished more. But growing up in poverty rules out some avenues. You do the best you can."

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In the wing of the school that holds vocational classes, a damp, unpleasant odor fills the halls. The school has a machine shop, which cannot be used for lack of staff, and a woodworking shop. The only shop that's occupied this morning is the auto-body class. A man with long blond hair and wearing a white sweat suit swings a paddle to get children in their chairs. "What we need the most is new equipment," he reports. "I have equipment for alignment, for example, but we don't have money to install it. We also need a better form of egress. We bring the cars in through two other classes." Computerized equipment used in most repair shops, he reports, is far beyond the high school's budget. It looks like a very old gas station in an isolated rural town.

Stopping in the doorway of a room with seven stoves and three refrigerators, I am told by a white teacher that this is a class called "Introductory Home Ec." The 15 children in the room, however, are not occupied with work. They are scattered at some antiquated tables, chatting with each other. The teacher explains that students do no work on Friday, which, she says, is "clean-up day." I ask her whether she regards this class as preparation for employment. "Not this class," she says. "The ones who move on to Advanced Home Ec. are given job instruction." When I ask her what jobs they are trained for, she says: "Fast food places—Burger King, McDonald's."

The science labs at East St. Louis High are 30 to 50 years outdated. John McMillan, a soft-spoken man, teaches physics at the school. He shows me his lab. The six lab stations in the room have empty holes where pipes were once attached. "It would be great if we had water," says McMillan.

Wiping his hand over his throat, he tells me that he cannot wear a tie or jacket in the lab. "I want you to notice the temperature," he says. "The heating system's never worked correctly. Days when it's zero outside it will be 100 Fahrenheit within this room. I will be here 25 years starting September—in the same room, teaching physics. I have no storage space. Those balance scales are trash. There are a few small windows you can open. We are on the side that gets the sun."

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Stepping outside the lab, he tells me that he lives in East St. Louis, one block from the school. Balding and damp-looking in his open collar, he is a bachelor 58 years old.

The biology lab, which I visit next, has no laboratory tables. Students work at regular desks. "I need dissecting kits," the teacher says. "The few we have are incomplete." Chemical supplies, she tells me, in a city poisoned by two chemical plants, are scarce. "I need more microscopes," she adds.

The chemistry lab is the only one that's properly equipped. There are eight lab tables with gas jets and water. But the chemistry teacher says he rarely brings his students to the lab. "I have 30 children in a class and cannot supervise them safely. Chemical lab work is unsafe with more than 20 children to a teacher. If I had some lab assistants, we could make use of the lab. As it is, we have to study mainly from a text."

Even texts are scarce, however. "We were short of books for four months last semester. When we got replacement copies, they were different from the texts that we already had. So that presented a new problem. . . .

"Despite these failings, I have had two students graduate from MIT."

"In how many years?" I ask.

He tells me, "Twenty-three."

Leaving the chemistry labs, I pass a double-sized classroom in which roughly 60 kids are sitting fairly still but doing nothing. "This is supervised study hall," a teacher tells me in the corridor. But when we step inside, he finds there is no teacher. "The teacher must be out today," he says.

Irl Solomon's history classes, which I visit next, have been described by journalists who cover East St. Louis as the highlight of the school. Solomon, a man of 54 whose reddish hair is turning white, has taught in urban schools for almost 30 years. A graduate of Brandeis University in 1961, he entered law school but was drawn away by a concern with civil rights. "After one semester, I decided that the law was not for me. I said, 'Go and find the toughest place there is to teach. See if you like it.' I'm still here. . . .

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"This is not by any means the worst school in the city," he reports, as we are sitting in his classroom on the first floor of the school. "But our problems are severe. I don't even know where to begin. I have no materials with the exception of a single textbook given to each child. If I bring in anything else—books or tapes or magazines—I pay for it myself. The high school has no VCRs. They are such a crucial tool. So many good things run on public television. I can't make use of anything I see unless I can unhook my VCR and bring it into school. The AV equipment in the building is so old that we are pressured not to use it."

Teachers like Mr. Solomon, working in low-income districts such as East St. Louis, often tell me that they feel cut off from educational developments in modern public schools. "Well, it's amazing," Solomon says. "I have done without so much so long that, if I were assigned to a suburban school, I'm not sure I'd recognize what they are doing. We are utterly cut off."

Of 33 children who begin the history classes in the standard track, he says, more than a quarter have dropped out by spring semester. "Maybe 24 are left by June. Mind you, this is in the junior year. We're speaking of the children who survived. Ninth and tenth grades are the more horrendous years for leaving school.

"I have four girls right now in my senior home room who are pregnant or have just had babies. When I ask them why this happens, I am told, 'Well, there's no reason not to have a baby. There's not much for me in public school.' The truth is, that's a pretty honest answer. A diploma from a ghetto high school doesn't count for much in the United States today. So, if this is really the last education that a person's going to get, she's probably perceptive in that statement. Ah, there's so much bitterness—unfairness—there, you know. Most of these pregnant girls are not the ones who have much self-esteem. . . .

"Very little education in the school would be considered academic in the suburbs. Maybe 10 to 15 percent of students are in truly academic programs. Of the 55 percent who graduate, 20 percent may go to four-year colleges: something like

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10 percent of any entering class. Another 10 to 20 percen may get some other kind of higher education. An equa number join the military. . . .

"I get $38,000 after nearly 30 years of teaching. If I went across the river to one of the suburbs of St. Louis, I'c be earning $47,000, maybe more. If I taught in the Chicagc suburbs, at a wealthy high school like New Trier, for exam· ple, I'd be getting close to $60,000. Money's not an issue foi me, since I wouldn't want to leave; but, for new, incoming teachers, this much differential is a great deterrent. When you consider that many teachers are afraid to come here in the first place, or, if they are not afraid, are nonetheless offended by the setting or intimidated by the challenge of the job, there should be a premium and not a punishment for teaching here.

"Sometimes I get worried that I'm starting to burn out. Still, I hate to miss a day. The department frequently can't find a substitute to come here, and my kids don't like me to be absent."

Solomon's advanced class, which soon comes into the room, includes some lively students with strong views.

"I don't go to physics class, because my lab has no equip- ment," says one student. "The typewriters in my typing class don't work. The women's toilets . . ." She makes a sour face. "I'll be honest," she says. "I just don't use the toilets. If I do, I come back into class and I feel dirty."

"I wanted to study Latin," says another student. "But we don't have Latin in this school."

"We lost our only Latin teacher," Solomon says.

A girl in a white jersey with the message DO THE RIGHT THING on the front raises her hand. "You visit other schools," she says. "Do you think the children in this school are getting what we'd get in a nice section of St. Louis?"

I note that we are in a different state and city.

"Are we citizens of East St. Louis or America?" she asks.

A tall girl named Samantha interrupts. "I have a com- ment that I want to make." She then relates the following incident: "Fairview Heights is a mainly white community. A friend of mine and I went up there once to buy some books. We walked into the store. Everybody lookin' at us, you know,

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and somebody says, 'What do you want?' And lookin' at each other like, 'What are these black girls doin' here in Fairview Heights?' I just said, 'I want to buy a book!' It's like they're scared we're goin' to rob them. Take away a privilege that's theirs by rights. Well, that goes for school as well.

"My mother wanted me to go to school there and she tried to have me transferred. It didn't work. The reason, she was told, is that we're in a different 'jurisdiction.' If you don't live up there in the hills, or further back, you can't attend their schools. That, at least, is what they told my mother."

"Is that a matter of race?" I ask. "Or money?"

"Well," she says, choosing her words with care, "the two things, race and money, go so close together—what's the difference? I live here, they live there, and they don't want me in their school."

A boy named Luther speaks about the chemical pollution. "It's like this," he says. "On one side of us you have two chemical corporations. One is Pfizer—that's out there. They make paint and pigments. The other is Monsanto. On the other side are companies incinerating toxic waste. So the trash is comin' at us this direction. The chemicals is comin' from the other. We right in the middle."

Despite these feelings, many of the children voice a curiously resilient faith in racial integration. "If the government would put a huge amount of money into East St. Louis, so that this could be a modern, well-equipped and top-rate school," I ask, "with everything that you could ever want for education, would you say that racial segregation was no longer of importance?"

Without exception, the children answer, "No."

"Going to a school with all the races," Luther says, "is more important than a modern school."

"They still believe in that dream," their teacher says. "They have no reason to do so. That is what I find so wonderful and . . . ah, so moving. . . . These kids are the only reason I get up each day."

I ask the students, "What would happen if the government decided that the students in a nearby town like Fairview Heights and the students here in East St. Louis had to go to school together next September?"

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Samantha: "The buses going to Fairview Heights would all be full. The buses coming to East St. Louis would be empty."

"What if East St. Louis had the very best computer classes in the state—and if there were no computer classes in the school of Fairview Heights?"

"The buses coming here," she says, "would still be empty."

When I ask her why, she answers in these quiet words: "I don't know why."

Sam Morgan, principal of East St. Louis High, was born and raised in East St. Louis. He tells me he didn't go to East St. Louis High, however. "This was the white high school in those days," he says.

His office was ruined in a recent fire, so he meets me in a tiny room with space for three chairs and a desk. Impeccably dressed in a monogrammed shirt with gold links in his cuffs, a purple tie and matching purple handkerchief in his suit pocket, he is tall, distinguished-looking and concerned that I will write a critical report on East St. Louis High. When I ask, however, what he'd do if he were granted adequate funds, he comes up with a severe assessment of the status quo.

"First, we're losing thousands of dollars in our heating bills because of faulty windows and because the heating system cannot be controlled. So I'd renovate the building and install a whole new heating system and replace the windows. We've had fire damage but I see that as a low priority. I need computers—that's a low priority as well. I'd settle for a renovation of the typing rooms and new typewriters. The highest priorities are to subdivide the school and add a modern wing, then bring the science laboratories up to date. Enlarge the library. Buy more books. The books I've got, a lot of them are secondhand. I got them from the Catholic high school when it closed. Most of all, we need a building renovation. This is what I'd do to start with, if I had an extra $20 million."

After he's enumerated all the changes he would like to make, he laughs and looks down at his hands. "This, of

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course, is pie in the sky. You asked me what I need so I have told you. If I'm dreaming, why not dream the big dreams for our children?"

His concerns are down-to-earth. He's not pretentious and does not appropriate the cloudy jargon that some educators use to fill a vacuum of specifics—no talk of "restructuring," of "teacher competency" or any of the other buzzwords of the decade. His focus is on the bare necessities: typewriters, windows, books, a renovated building.

While we are speaking in his temporary office, a telephone call from the police informs him that his house has just been robbed—or that the theft alarm, at least, has just gone off. He interrupts the interview to try to reach his wife. His poise and his serene self-discipline do not desert him. I gain the impression this has happened before. He's a likable man and he smiles a lot, but there is tremendous tension in his body and his fingers grip the edges of his desk as if he's trying very hard to hold his world together.

Before I leave the school, I take a final stroll along the halls. In a number of classrooms, groups of children seem to be involved in doing nothing. Sometimes there's a teacher present, doing something at his desk. Sometimes there's no adult in the room. I pass the cooking class again, in which there is no cooking and no teaching taking place. The "supervised" study hall is still unsupervised.

In one of the unattended classrooms on the second floor, seven students stand around a piano. When I stick my head into the room, they smile and invite me to come in. They are rehearsing for a concert: two young women, five young men. Another young man is seated at the piano. One of the students, a heavyset young woman, steps out just before the others. When she sings, her pure soprano voice transforms the room. "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child," she begins. The pianist gazes up at her with an attentive look of admiration.

The loveliness and the aesthetic isolation of the singer in the squalor of the school and city bring to my mind the words of Dr. Lillian Parks, the superintendent of the East St. Louis schools. "Gifted children," says Dr. Parks, "are everywhere in East St. Louis, but their gifts are lost to poverty and

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turmoil and the damage done by knowing they are written off by their society. Many of these children have no sense of something they belong to. They have no feeling of belonging to America. Gangs provide the boys, perhaps, with something to belong to. . . .

"There is a terrible beauty in some of these girls—terrible, I mean, because it is ephemeral, foredoomed. The language that our children speak may not be standard English but there still is wisdom here. Our children have become wise by necessity."

Clark Junior High School is regarded as the top school in the city. I visit, in part, at the request of school officials, who would like me to see education in the city at its very best. Even here, however, there is a disturbing sense that one has entered a backwater of America.

"We spend the entire eighth grade year preparing for the state exams," a teacher tells me in a top-ranked English class. The teacher seems devoted to the children, but three students sitting near me sleep through the entire period. The teacher rouses one of them, a girl in the seat next to me, but the student promptly lays her head back on her crossed arms and is soon asleep again. Four of the 14 ceiling lights are broken. The corridor outside the room is filled with voices. Outside the window, where I see no schoolyard, is an empty lot.

In a mathematics class of 30 children packed into a space that might be adequate for 15 kids, there is one white student. The first white student I have seen in East St. Louis, she is polishing her nails with bright red polish. A tiny black girl next to her is writing with a one-inch pencil stub.

In a seventh grade social studies class, the only book that bears some relevance to black concerns—its title is *The American Negro*—bears a publication date of 1967. The teacher invites me to ask the class some questions. Uncertain where to start, I ask the students what they've learned about the civil rights campaigns of recent decades.

A 14-year-old girl with short black curly hair says this: "Every year in February we are told to read the same old speech of Martin Luther King. We read it every year. 'I have

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dream. . . .' It does begin to seem—what is the word?" She ıesitates and then she finds the word: "perfunctory."

I ask her what she means.

"We have a school in East St. Louis named for Dr. King," he says. "The school is full of sewer water and the doors are ɔcked with chains. Every student in that school is black. It's ike a terrible joke on history."

It startles me to heard her words, but I am startled even nore to think how seldom any press reporter has observed he irony of naming segregated schools for Martin Luther King. Children reach the heart of these hypocrisies much quicker than the grown-ups and the experts do.

"I would like to comment on that," says another 14-year-old student, named Shalika. "I have had to deal with this all of my life. I started school in Fairview Heights. My mother ɔushes me and she had wanted me to get a chance at better education. Only one other student in my class was black. I was in the fifth grade, and at that age you don't understand he ugliness in people's hearts. They wouldn't play with me. I couldn't understand it. During recess I would stand there ɔy myself beside the fence. Then one day I got a note: 'Go ɔack to Africa.'

"To tell the truth, it left a sadness in my heart. Now you ıear them sayin' on TV, 'What's the matter with these colɔred people? Don't they care about their children's educaıion?' But my mother did the best for me she knew. It was not my mother's fault that I was not accepted by those people."

"It does not take long," says Christopher, a light-skinned boy with a faint mustache and a somewhat heated and perspiring look, "for little kids to learn they are not wanted."

Shalika is small and looks quite young for junior high. In each ear she wears a small enameled pin of Mickey Mouse. "To some degree I do believe," she says, "that this is caused by press reports. You see a lot about the crimes committed here in East St. Louis when you turn on the TV. Do they show the crimes committed by the government that *puts* black people here? Why are all the dirty businesses like chemicals and waste disposal here? This is a big country. Couldn't they find another place to put their poison?"

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"Shalika," the teacher tells me afterward, "will go to college."

"Why is it this way?" asks Shalika in a softer voice again. But she doesn't ask the question as if she is waiting for an answer.

"Is it 'separate but equal,' then?" I ask. "Have we gone back a hundred years?"

"It is separate. That's for sure," the teacher says. She is a short and stocky middle-aged black woman. "Would you want to tell the children it is equal?"

Christopher approaches me at the end of class. The room is too hot. His skin looks warm and his black hair is damp. "Write this down. You asked a question about Martin Luther King. I'm going to say something. All that stuff about 'the dream' means nothing to the kids I know in East St. Louis. So far as they're concerned, he died in vain. He was famous and he lived and gave his speeches and he died and now he's gone. But we're still here. Don't tell students in this school about 'the dream.' Go and look into a toilet here if you would like to know what life is like for students in this city."

Before I leave, I do as Christopher asked and enter a boy's bathroom. Four of the six toilets do not work. The toilets stalls, which are eaten away by red and brown corrosion, have no doors. The toilets have no seats. One has a rotted wooden stump. There are no paper towels and no soap. Near the door there is a loop of wire with an empty toilet-paper roll.

"This," says Sister Julia, "is the best school that we have in East St. Louis."

In East St. Louis, as in every city that I visit, I am forced to ask myself if what I've seen may be atypical. One would like to think that this might be the case in East St. Louis, but it would not be the truth.

At Landsdowne Junior High School, the *St. Louis Sun* reports, "there are scores of window frames without glass, like sockets without eyes." Hallways in many schools are dark, with light bulbs missing or burnt out. One walks into a

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school, a member of the city's board of education notes, "and you can smell the urinals a hundred feet away. . . ."

A teacher at an elementary school in East St. Louis has only one full-color workbook for her class. She photocopies workbook pages for her children, but the copies can't be made in color and the lessons call for color recognition by the children.

A history teacher at the Martin Luther King School has 110 students in four classes—but only 26 books. Some of the books are missing the first hundred pages.

Each year, Solomon observes of East St. Louis High, "there's one more toilet that doesn't flush, one more drinking fountain that doesn't work, one more classroom without texts. . . . Certain classrooms are so cold in winter that the students have to wear their coats to class, while children in other classrooms swelter in a suffocating heat that cannot be turned down."

Critics in the press routinely note that education spending in the district is a trifle more than in surrounding districts. They also note that public schools in East St. Louis represent the largest source of paid employment in the city, and this point is often used to argue that the schools are overstaffed. The implication of both statements is that East St. Louis spends excessively on education. One could as easily conclude, however, that the conditions of existence here call for even larger school expenditures to draw and to retain more gifted staff and to offer all those extra services so desperately needed in a poor community. What such critics also fail to note, as Solomon and principal Sam Morgan have observed, is that the crumbling infrastructure uses up a great deal more of the per-pupil budget than would be the case in districts with updated buildings that cost less to operate. Critics also willfully ignore the health conditions and the psychological disarray of children growing up in burnt-out housing, playing on contaminated land, and walking past acres of smoldering garbage on their way to school. They also ignore the vast expense entailed in trying to make up for the debilitated skills of many parents who were prior victims of these segregated schools or those of Mississippi, in

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which many of the older residents of East St. Louis led their early lives. In view of the extraordinary miseries of life for children in the district, East St. Louis should be spending far more than is spent in wealthy suburbs. As things stand, the city spends approximately half as much each year on every pupil as the state's top-spending districts.

It is also forgotten that dramatic cuts in personnel within the East St. Louis schools—for example, of 250 teachers and 250 nonprofessional employees, as demanded recently by state officials—would propel 500 families with perhaps 2,000 children and dependents to the welfare lists and deny the city the stability afforded by a good chunk of its rapidly diminished lower middle class. Nothing, in short, that the East St. Louis school board does within the context of its penury can benefit one interest in the city without damaging another.

It is accurate to note that certain of the choices and priorities established by the East St. Louis school board do at times strike an observer as misguided, and state politicians are not hesitant to emphasize this point. The mayor of the city for many years, a controversial young man named Carl Officer, was frequently attacked by the same critics for what sometimes was alleged to be his lack of probity and of far-sighted planning. There may have been some real truth to these charges. But the diligence of critics in observing the supposed irregularities of his behavior stands in stunning contrast to their virtual refusal to address the governing realities of destitution and near-total segregation and the willingness of private industry to flee a population it once courted and enticed to East St. Louis but now finds expendable.

In very few cases, in discussing the immiseration of this city, do Illinois officials openly address the central fact, the basic evil, of its racial isolation. With more efficient local governance, East St. Louis might become a better-managed ghetto, a less ravaged racial settlement, but the soil would remain contaminated and the schools would still resemble relics of the South post-Reconstruction. They might be a trifle cleaner and they might perhaps provide their children with a dozen more computers or typewriters, better stoves for cooking classes, or a better shop for training future gas-

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tation mechanics; but the children would still be poisoned
ı their bodies and disfigured in their spirits.

Now and then the possibility is raised by somebody in
:ast St. Louis that the state may someday try to end the
solation of the city as an all-black entity. This is something,
ıowever, that no one with power in the state has ever con-
emplated. Certainly, no one in government proposes bus-
ng 16,000 children from this city to the nearby schools of
3ellevue, Fairview Heights or Collinsville; and no one in-
ends to force these towns to open up their neighborhoods
o racially desegregated and low-income housing. So there
s, in fact, no exit for these children. East St. Louis will likely
)e left just as it is for a good many years to come: a scar of
,orts, an ugly metaphor of filth and overspill and chemical
:ffusions, a place for blacks to live and die within, a place for
)ther people to avoid when they are heading for St. Louis.

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