The Plaintiff Speaks

From *The Education of a Photographer*, edited by Charles H. Traub, Steven Heller, and Adam Bell, Allworth Press, 2006, New York, excerpt from “The Plaintiff Speaks,” pp. 51-59.

From *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*
Edited by Deborah Willis, The New Press, 1994, New York , pp. 88-102,

I was a teenager when I first saw this group of photographs and the article that they appeared with, on June 1, 1956, in the Washington Post and Times Herald, the major daily newspaper in the Washington, D.C. area. Since I was one of the people in the pictures, I knew that they were to be published and had been looking forward to seeing them with great anticipation for several months. Now, as I recall the time when I first saw the photographs and read the words, I remember how I felt very disappointed and let down. I felt that I had been used, although back then, I had no one to whom I could try to articulate why I felt that I had been "wronged."

The difference between right and wrong had been etched in my mind, in large measure at the neighborhood Baptist church that we attended. At the Mt. Salvation Baptist Church, you were either on one side of the line or the other; there was never any "maybe" about it. The article appeared during the development of my second great period of cynicism. The first began at the early age of four years old, when it dawned on me that my oldest brother, Clarence Junior, controlled our household. No amount of telling my momma the mean things he did to me could protect me from his wrath.

I did not trust anyone except my brother Stephen, who was three years younger than me. But now that I had begun menstruating, more and more things in my life seemed too complicated and shameful to talk with him about.

I did not know anyone else who would understand me, who would not respond with blank looks or harsh disapproving words. The thoughts that ran through my mind were something like, "Be grateful! What do you expect? You are lucky to get any photograph in the Washington Post at all!" It was a newspaper for which we blacks were usually invisible, except as criminals or welfare recipients.

The mingled voices in my head were of my grandma, momma, daddy, the black preacher, and teachers all trying to teach me how to live in the world with a broken heart. As a young black female growing up in the American South of the 1940s and '50s, I was taught, in words and by example, how to stand on my own two feet and not expect too much from anybody, no matter how sincere they appeared.

They were trying to teach me how to survive. My grandmother's father and my mother's grandmother had been slaves in this country. They were afraid that if I

didn't "get it," I would end up in a madhouse or get myself killed. My father, however, didn't want me to become too independent. He would say that nobody would want to marry me.

I loved the out-of-doors, and I learned to do everything my brothers could do and relished the look on their faces when they saw me do it better. But my father's attitude was that doing women's work made a man a "sissy," and he would have no part of it. So I wondered, "Then why should I want to do it?" When he sent my brothers out to do chores in the yard, he would look at me and say, "Go help your mother." These words never failed to bring anger and disappointment to my heart. But I thought he would slap me down if I dared to talk back to him. Yet he never put a hand on me, except at my mother's urging, when she felt I was more than she could handle.

My father's only goal for me was to get a husband. He made it pretty clear to me that if I did not remain a virgin, or, worse, if I got pregnant, no man would ever want to touch me. He made it sound like I would spend the rest of my life wandering through hell. Yet I was aware at the same time that he felt that my failing to remain a virgin would be more a matter of another male getting over on him than it being a weakness on my part.

I knew my mother resented the isolated, tedious drudgery of raising babies and doing housework all the time. As the oldest girl, I was the only one who heard her complaints. Neither of us liked her life, and I knew she wanted more for me. So Momma and I were pretty excited when we found out that my picture was to be taken as part of a story about efforts to desegregate schools in Arlington. But Daddy did not want any part of it.

Two years earlier, in 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional, it was like an invisible bomb dropping on our neighborhood. We lived in one of four black communities in the county that was totally surrounded by whites. Since the time when I was about eight my mother had been taking me to state and national NAACP meetings where people gave reports on civil rights work that was going on throughout the South and discussed future strategies and ways to raise money for the legal work. I did not believe that things would ever change. Momma, however, would quietly sit and listen. She was not one of those people who asked questions or spoke out in public, but I could tell she was intensely interested, because when she wasn't she would be sound asleep, even while sitting upright in her chair.

Many times, she could not go because no one was available to stay with my three baby sisters, Gloria, Lillian, and Jean. My father refused to do any baby-related tasks. So, on those occasions, she would send me to the meetings with a neighbor or someone from our church. I was supposed to listen and come back and tell her everything that was said, a job I took very seriously.

Prior to the Supreme Court decision, I was "bussed" to the black high school on the south side of the county when I entered the seventh grade. One night while lying awake in bed, I heard my parents talk about how I was not getting much of an education. My bed was against the wall. I could also hear that they were not considering any plans to send me someplace else. I figured that it must have been because I was a girl. My two older brothers, Clarence Junior and Carroll, had been enrolled in the "better" schools of Washington, D.C.

Both of my parents completed high school. At that time, it was considered the minimum requirement for getting a "decent" job. My mother had come to the D.C. area from Hickory, North Carolina, in order to find work. She had had a dream of going to Howard University, but she had no money to do it. My father grew up in D.C. He had studied Latin and had read all the classics, but it did not seem to help him get any further than his job as a shipping-room clerk at the Bureau of Engraving. He griped about the stupid white men who were the bosses over his all-black group of workers. He was very bitter about it.

My mother had become a full-time domestic worker, shuttling to different white women's houses every day. She worked for a minimum wage until she was too old to do it anymore. Whenever she wanted to pull me up short, she would scream that if I didn't do well in school I would "end up working in some white woman's kitchen." To her that was as low as you could go. They struggled to make ends meet, and they knew that life would be very hard for us kids if we did not have at least a high school education. Without that diploma, the most widely available job opportunities for blacks, where we lived, were domestic work for women and ditch digging for men. I saw that my parents were shut out of jobs available to whites with far fewer qualifications. Of course, employment want ads in the Washington Post generally began "Whites Only" and that was one qualification they would never have, no matter how much education they got.

My high school was being remodeled, but when I started there two years earlier, the school barely met the state of Virginia's minimum requirements for black students. There had been no gymnasium, cafeteria, science lab, or rooms to take home economics and shop classes in. When it rained, we put buckets around the room in our physical education class to catch the water that poured in. We did not have a library and all our textbooks were used books sent over to us from the local white schools. I remember opening up the books and seeing the names of the white kids who had used them before they were handed down to us. When we complained about it Mrs. Mackley, our math teacher, would say, "Count your blessings. You are lucky to get anything at all."

My mother had thought that the Supreme Court decision would mean that I would begin tenth grade at the white high school that was located near us. I had been pushed by my teachers and I got good grades. However, I felt a little nervous about going, and I wondered how I would fare. After all, everybody knew that our black school was "not as good." Also, I did not think I was very smart. There were a lot of

kids in my neighborhood who I felt were smarter than me but who got lower grades. School was boring; there was no doubt about that. They essentially refused to read or discuss the totally racist materials we were given. It made us feel bad about who we were. They did not believe that it was going to make their lives any different or better. I did not believe it would either, but I was hoping that it might. And I knew, that in going to the white school, we would be expected to prove that we were just as good, which meant doing more work for the same or a lower grade.

Some schools in nearby D.C. and Maryland were desegregated the following fall. In Arlington, however, we were sent back to our segregated schools. In one southern Virginia county, all the schools were shut down in response to the Court's order. I was completely stunned that something like that could happen. This, however, did not deter my momma, who wanted more for her children than she had had for herself. I still recall the determination with which she went to meetings with people from the local NAACP and other black parents from our neighborhood to see what they could do about it. This was after being on her feet all day as a domestic worker. All of us kids had to help make dinner, but she saw that we sat down to eat. The following spring, when I was completing tenth grade, she asked me if I was willing to be part of a school integration court case with other kids from the neighborhood, and I agreed to do it. I figured it wouldn't be too bad if we all went together.

This, however, was the summer of 1955, when Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy, was lynched in Mississippi for "speaking to a white woman." It was in all the papers, but the local black newspaper, and Ebony and Jet magazines, which we followed carefully for the latest developments on school desegregation, wrote about it in great detail.

Two white men took him from his folk's house in the middle of the night, beat him and lunched him, tied weights to his body, and dropped him in the river. The black publications were the only ones we saw that showed photographs of Emmett Till's body after it came out of the river. Even after the undertaker "fixed up his body," it did not look like the face of a person who had ever been on the earth. I had grown up hearing about whites lynching black men, but because he was so near me in age, the horror of this truly seeped into my bones.

To whom could I turn to express my rage and indignation at the injustices being done? How could the adults around me accept that the white men who killed him would never be punished? Why didn't the major newspapers treat it like the horrible crime it was? I did not know what to do. I felt like a caged animal in a burning house. What was going to happen to me in a white school? How was I going to be able to sit in a classroom without showing how I felt? Whenever I blurted out what was on my mind, my mother would punish me for not behaving myself. At that time I had no idea the price I was paying.

During the fall of 1955, as I returned for eleventh grade to my old school on the south side, the Virginia Legislature passed something called the "massive resistance

laws", which gave the governor the power to close down any school system that attempted to desegregate. I tried to talk with my momma about it, but she would say nothing to me about it. Still, she continued going to the NAACP meetings with the other parents from the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, miles away in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks was being arrested for not moving to the back of a city bus. The bus boycott that followed was exciting news to us. Everybody talked about it. Blacks were fighting back. We saw news photographs of elderly black people walking many miles to work. It inspired us to see that our people, who were further south than us, and in a more hostile environment, were determined not to take it anymore.

At first there was a lot in our local newspapers about it. I read every word of every article I saw. And when the local newspapers stopped reporting what was going on, I went with my mother to some of the meetings where people who had just come from Montgomery told about what was going on, and asked for donations to help out. I would hold my breath as I listened to the accounts of how the city council and the courts were trying to break up the bus boycott by harassing people in so many ways. I could not imagine that they would be able to keep going with the people in power using all their resources against them. After these meetings, I would go home and pray very hard that God would help them hold out. Finally, we heard Dr. Martin Luther King speak on television. Daddy was really impressed. And Daddy was a man who rarely gave anybody any credit at all.

The month after the bus boycott began in Montgomery, whites rioted on the campus of the University of Alabama for three days after Autherine Lucy, a black woman, enrolled there. Because I too was going to be a desegregation plaintiff, I wanted to know everything that was going on. After all, I might find myself in her shoes.

I read every word of every article about it that I saw. She was barred from attending classes. After the rioting ended, she was eventually suspended. I was looking for clues about what I could expect when my time came to enter our local white high school.

A few months later, my mother asked me if I would be willing to be the lead plaintiff in the Arlington school desegregation case. She explained to me that some of the students who had been selected previously were about to graduate and that another student withdrew because her father was going to be fired from his job is she stayed in. I never expected that the court case would take over a year to be put together. And I had definitely never expected to be singled out from what was originally a group of over twenty-five black students. I could only imagine that my life would be in shambles

I remember thinking, "Here I am already finished the eleventh grade. Why would I want to go to a white school for my senior year?'

Although Momma said I didn't have to do it if I didn't want to, I could tell she wanted me to agree. Terrible images flashed through my adolescent mind: of Emmett Till being killed for saying something to a white woman; of Rosa Parks going to jail rather than give up her seat to a white man; of all those elderly black folks walking miles to their jobs in Montgomery; of Autherine Lucy at the University of Alabama. I swallowed hard and told her that I would. Since the age of eight, I had been "in it"; I knew that I was expected to do my part.

On May 17, 1956, the NAACP attorneys filed our lawsuit: Clarissa Thompson et al. Vs. the Arlington County School Board et al. I had no idea what sort of changes it would make in my life. What was happening did not really sink in until the newspaper let us know that they wanted to come out tot take our pictures for an article about the case.

The photographs were taken by a newspaper photographer who accompanied the reporter to the home of Mrs. Barbara Marx, a white woman who was vice-president of the local NAACP chapter. Momma could not drive, and Daddy refused to be involved in what was going on. I rode with her in someone else's car to the neighborhood where Mrs. Marx lived. The group had asked my mother beforehand to have me prepare a statement.

During the interview, I was very nervous. I tried to act cool, but the underarms of my blouse were soaking wet. Cold sweat ran down the inside of my clothes. I sat and listened as the newspaper reporter interviewed the adults who were present; they included Edwin Brown, an attorney for the NAACP, and James Browne, the local NAACP chapter president. They talked about the history and background of the court action and about what they wanted to accomplish. When the reporter asked me why I wanted to go to a white school, I remember saying something about wanting equality and an end to being a second-class citizen.

Afterward, the reporter, looking at eight-year-old Ann, said, "Isn't she included in the case too? Let's include her in the photographs!"

The photographer began by taking pictures of Mrs. Marx and her daughter, Ann. He asked her to hold up a piece of paper as though she was reading something. I remember her fumbling around in a drawer until she found an envelope, took out a letter and held it up. It is only now, in looking back, that I realize how nervous she too must have been.

Next, the photographer decided to take photographs of Ann and me outdoors. I felt very stiff; I recall that I was very surprised that Ann and I would be photographed together. As I listened to the adults talk, it was the first time that I heard that her mother had included her and her sister Claire, who was about to graduate from high school, in the suit. She was one of three white students in the class-action suit of twenty-two students. I was one of nineteen black students. It hardly seemed equal

to me.

The photographer shot a number of pictures of Ann and me together. By now she seemed to be enjoying the attention and was very relaxed. I, on the other hand, was freaking out. Here I was, a sixteen-year-old very self-conscious black female, with these white folks up in this white neighborhood, and I'm supposed to be relaxed? They killed Emmet Till. In addition to trying to keep myself together, I felt very awkward towering above this little girl, in height, as the photographer took shots of us standing together. I was sixteen years old and she was eight, not twelve as stated in the newspaper photo caption. Somehow, it seemed insulting to me to be photographed with an eight-year-old. At the same time, I felt bad that the other black students in the suit were not there. Despite the feelings I had, I tried hard to look agreeable and pleasant. I was hoping that the photographs would come out well, so that people would think I was an "all right" person. After taking several shots, he asked us to walk toward him. Then he asked us to carry a book in our hands as we walked toward him. Finally, he said, "Okay, that's it." I was glad when it was over.

When the photographs were published, a picture of Barbara and Ann Marx appeared at the top of the page, just above the headline, which read: SUIT CHARGES BIAS AGAINST WHITE PUPILS. The photograph, which was taken at fairly close range, was shot at just about eye level. Ann is standing next to her mother, who is seated at what appears to be a desk or a table. This makes Ann's head a little higher than her mother's. The edges around both of their heads appear to have been painted in order to make them stand out against the background. The shape of the shadows cast by their heads suggest circular forms, giving the effect of halos behind their heads similar to those in the Christian religious art of the Middle Ages.

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The mother and daughter are holding a piece of paper, supposedly a page from the papers filed in the suit; they are both smiling, as if they are happy and satisfied with what they have done. If I am a viewer who is at all sympathetic toward them, I look at this image without thinking how wonderfully honorable and courageous they must be. If I am a viewer who is angered by what they have done, I will be aware that any action I take against them is going to make me look like a "bad guy," so I am not going to express my feelings very publicly.

The second photograph, a closely cropped headshot of me, was placed to the upper right of the picture described above. It was shot from below my eye level, so that I appear to be looking down at the camera. You can tell by the shadow areas under my eyes, nose, and face, that the light source comes from the upper left hand side. This cropped headshot reminds me of the way photographs of "monsters" are lighted and shot. The angle of the lens, pointing up into my nostrils, also suggests to me certain European paintings of horses being ridden into battle. Moreover, the placement of the picture seems to suggest that the mother and daughter are placing themselves at risk by taking the moral action and putting themselves into this position, and that I am their "white man's burden." The caption read: "Clarissa Thompson…asks for equality." The small amount of white background does not give the viewer any clues as to where the picture was taken.

My head was printed larger than that of Barbara or Ann Marx, and the placement of the top of the photograph just above the top of their picture makes it pop off the page more than the other image. Even though the photograph of me is about one

third the size of the photograph of Barbara and Ann Marx, the angle of the shot of my dark-skinned face puts my blackness in opposition to their whiteness. The relative placement of the photographs seems to suggest that people who are white are human and nice and that people who are black are threatening to those nice white people.

This meant that whites would only be able to see that generic black face they carried in their minds. They would not have to wonder about the life, the aspirations, the universal humanity hidden behind my dark skin. They would not be forced to examine, in a personal way, the injustice of the life I was forced to live.

The third photograph was printed on a different page. It is a picture of me and Ann walking toward the photographer, and he was crouching down when he shot it. It is close to evening. The photographer has his back to the sun. In the picture, I am on the left, Ann is on the right. We are both smiling and we each carry a book. The image is cropped to show our full bodies, but my right arm is nevertheless cut off. It looks as though I am walking out of the frame. It may even suggest that I am less than a whole person. Portions of the areas around our heads and shoulders have been painted to make us stand out from the background.

This photograph of me and Ann reminds me of similar images of young whites pictured with older, usually adult, blacks. Three references that immediately come to mind are Huckleberry Finn with the slave Jim, various movies of Shirley Temple in which she shows benevolence to an older, black, white-haired male servant/slave, and, of course, images from Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The article itself was written about the few whites who worked with us on the school desegregation case. None of the adults from my neighborhood, who had worked on the case for over a year, and who were the parents of the twenty-five black students, were even mentioned. In photographs and words, Barbara Marx and her daughter, a white mother and child, were thus highlighted and elevated to a position of significance over all the black people involved in the case.

If I had not been there on the two occasions when the reporter interviewed us, I would never have known that black adults participated in those meetings. I remember how seriously and carefully they made sure that what they said to the reporter was accurate and correct; how they helped each other find the words to describe exactly what they meant; how they sometimes told jokes to break the tension. Why was none of what they said included?

Except for me, none of the other black students was named in the article. The next to the last sentence in the article states, "The case will be known as Clarissa Thompson et al. Vs. the Arlington County School Board et al. because the 11th grade Negro girl leads the list of plaintiffs." It was made clear that my photograph was there only because my name was at the top of a list. Simply by looking at the photographs, both whites and blacks would think that the suit was initiated and organized by whites.

Today, I can still remember the safety I felt being surrounded by the black adults from my community during the interview. I remember all their faces but only a few of their names. By leaving them out of the article and photographs, the newspaper made them invisible. If one reads the article today, it looks like they never existed. Their being left out also made me feel unprotected and more vulnerable than ever as time went by. Their courage had been devalued. Their lack of power, of control over the situation, was magnified before my eyes. Even then, it was clear to me that readers of the newspaper would get the message that it was whites, not blacks, who were leading the interracial group to fight racial segregation in Virginia. It reinforced the stereotype that we had to be led by whites.

Today, I ask myself how those meetings with the reporter and photographer might have been different. Why were the interviews held at Barbara Marx's rather than the NAACP president James Browne's house? Both of their homes were equally convenient from the highway. If the group had not made the decision beforehand to include Barbara Marx's daughter in the photo session, why didn't they object when the reporter suggested it? Were the black adults afraid to give the appearance of "slighting" a little white girl? Had they in some way gone along with their exclusion from the decision-making process? Had we blacks been excluded from participating in the so-called democratic decision-making process for so long and in so many ways, that any ordinary white person took our exclusion for granted-and so, perhaps, did we?

Today, I also ask myself about the motivations of the reporter. I remember her as being a white woman; yet the reporter's name, as published, appears to be masculine. Was it a pseudonym? As a southern white, would she have been capable of writing a news article that included a black person's point of view? Was she able or willing to hear any of the things we blacks were saying? Did she come there intending to write a story about white people? Certainly a story about the civil rights movement that included whites got more attention than one about blacks alone. It later became a tactic which the black leaders in the movement themselves took advantage of. They saw that photographs of whites being beaten up while exercising their civil rights got much more attention; here was something unbelieving American whites could identify with, much more so than with photographs of black protestors being beaten by whites.

When the article was printed I felt betrayed. I had thought that it was really going to be a piece of investigative reporting about our work to win our civil rights under the Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education. I wanted terribly to believe that I could have rights under the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees equal protection under the law. I wanted to believe in the Pledge of Allegiance, the National Anthem, the Bible, and all that other shit I had to regurgitate in school, even though I knew it clearly did not apply to me. I wanted the article to show that black people from my neighborhood were part of the struggle against legalized racial segregation too.

My mother did not say much to me about the article after it appeared. She did mention in passing, that some of the people from the same community who had met with the reporter were not happy with the way the article turned out. Still, she seemed happy and satisfied that her daughter's picture was in the Washington Post. It was a big thing that would elevate her status in the neighborhood and beyond. She did not seem to feat that she would lose any of her domestic work; on the contrary, she seemed to be looking forward to the reaction of her employers.

The publication of those photographs, however, placed me in a new relationship to both the white and the black worlds. It wrenched me from what I considered to be the safety and security of my anonymous family into the spotlight of the hostile public's scrutiny. People began to notice me. I could no longer be just another black girl, or just myself. I had to mind my p's and q's. My behavior, my grades and test scores, my interests and accomplishments became public information.

I began to be expected to address groups of liberal white people, whose support was being solicited for our case. As a young black person, my personal contact with whites had been minimal before this. In fact, I had heard mostly bad things about them, so I was always scared to be with them. In Arlington, we were barred from the movies, restaurants, white churches, and most other public places. I could check out a book from the public library, but I could not sit down to read it. On my way home from the District of Columbia I often sat alone on the bus, even when it was crowded, because none of the whites would sit beside me. I used to get upset about it, but then tried to act like I didn't see them.

Before I had been invisible. Now I was being scrutinized, not only by whites, but also by the black adults who took me into these new situations. I went along with it, but I tried really hard to hide what I really thought and who I really was.

I felt lucky to have met my boyfriend, Albert, before the photographs were published, because afterward I could not just hang out with my classmates or even slip into some of the places that were considered off-limits for "good girls." Nicknamed "Professor" by some of my classmates, I was never among the more popular girls at a party anyway. Now I could tell I was being seen in an even more distant light.

My teachers did not like my boyfriend, Albert. Considered a street guy, he was not heavy into the books. "Before the photographs," I regularly got good grades and that seemed to be enough; but now they expected me to be outstanding in every way. And even though my teachers were anxious about the future of their jobs if school desegregation were to occur, now I was a representative of their work and they wanted me to look good. They wanted me to succeed. Only one of them came out and said it, but the message from all of them came down to this: Don't you mess up everything by getting pregnant or getting into some other kind of trouble.

To people outside my neighborhood, I was considered a representative not only for black girls but for all young black people. I began to get some understanding of what it must be like to be a Joe Louis or a Jackie Robinson. When they knocked out a white man or hit a home run, it was not just for themselves but for all black people. For whites who did not believe we could do it or who were against us, taking a jab at me was like striking a blow at all blacks. Who I really was and how I really felt was not important. The group was more important. I was a good choice for the role. Because I was a good girl, I tried really hard to be better in every way I could.

This state of tension was the beginning of my learning to live a divided and alienated life. Even as a young person, I knew I had made the decision to allow myself to be used in a way that was unpleasant and uncomfortable to me. It is true that I had been trained for it, but I could have opted out. I was hoping that it would lead to opportunities that would give me more economic independence and make my life better than my mother's. I learned how to hide myself and my thoughts by keeping my mouth shut, by covering my terror with a smile, and by acting as if everything was going to be all right. In order to get through it, I searched for support, for meaning to my life in the Mt. Salvation Baptist Church. Whenever tough times came, rather than argue or fight, I turned inward and prayed very hard. Later, when the church disappointed me, as it surely had to, I began to smoke and drink. Fortunately for me, stronger drugs were not as available to young people as they are now.

Since those days the nonobjective reporting of newspaper journalism has always been of interest to me. To the average person, news photographs represent reality, but I ask "Whose reality?" and "Why?" As I travel from city to city and from country to , I see how newspapers vary tremendously in their points of view. I see how photographs are used to reinforce the credibility of stories, and how the same picture is often used to reinforce stories written from opposing points of view. Placing one photograph beside another changes the way the viewer reads it. Adding words to a photograph can make it say almost anything.

It is hard for photographers not to base the photographs they make on pictures they already have in their minds. Even so, their specific intent can easily be altered by an editor's intent, which may be controlled, in turn, by the newspaper's publishers. And then, of course, advertisers often influence what publishers "feel comfortable" including in their pages.

I became a photographer partly in response to the continuous omission and misrepresentation of me and my point of view as a black working-class female who grew up poor. I know I can make a photograph say a lot of different things. However, I hope that the way I make images helps the viewer become better aware of how photographs are really abstracted constructions.

Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography, edited by Deborah Willis, The New Press, 1994, New York, NY, "The Plaintiff Speaks," pp. 88-102.

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