Excerpt from Chapter 9 of Dust Tracks On A Road: An Autobiography by Zora Neale Hurston.
1942. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. p. 134-136

“An incident happened that made me realize how theories go by the board when a person’s livelihood is threatened. A man, a Negro, came into the shop one afternoon and sat down in Banks’s [barber shop] chair. Banks was the manager and had the first chair by the door. It was so surprising that or a minute Banks just looked at him and never said a word. Finally, he found his tongue and asked, “What do you want?”

““Hair-cut and shave,” the man said belligerently.

““But you can’t get no hair-cut and shave here. Mr. Robinson has a fine shop for Negroes on U Street near Fifteenth,” Banks told him.

““I know it, but I want one here. The Constitution of the United States–“

“But by that time, Banks had him by the arm. Not roughly, but he was helping him out of his chair, nevertheless.

““I don’t know how to cut your hair,” Banks objected. “I was trained on straight hair. Nobody here knows how.”

““Oh, don’t hand me that stuff!” the crusader snarled. “Don’t be such an Uncle Tom.”

““Run on, fellow. You can’t get waited on in here.”

““I’ll stay right here until I do. I know my rights. Things like this have got to be broken up. I’ll get waited on all right, or sue the place.”

““Go ahead and sue,” Banks retorted. “Go on uptown, and get your hair cut, man. Don’t be so hard headed for nothing.”

““I’m getting waited on right here!”

““You’re next, Mr. Powell,” Banks said on a waiting customer. “Sorry, mister, but you better go on uptown.”

““But I have a right to be waited on wherever I please,” the Negro said and started towards Updyke’s chair which was being emptied. Updyke whirled his chair around so that he could not sit down and stepped in front of it. “Don’t you touch *my* chair!” Updyke glared. “Go on about your business.”

“But instead of going, the made to get into the chair by force.

““Don’t argue with him! Throw him out of here!” somebody in the back cried. And in a minute, barbers, customers all lathered and with hair half cut, and porters, were all helping to throw the Negro out.

“The rush carried him way out into the middle of G Street and flung him down. He tried to lie there and be a martyr, but the roar of oncoming cars made him jump up and scurry off. We never heard any more about it. I did not participate in the melee, but I wanted him thrown out, too. My business was threatened.

“It was only that night in bed that I analyzed the whole thing and realized that I was giving sanction to Jim Crow, which theoretically, I was supposed to resist. But here were ten Negro barbers, three porters and two manicurists all stirred up at the threat of our living through loss of patronage. Nobody thought it out at the moment. It was an instinctive thing. That was the first time it was called to my attention that self-interest rides over all sorts of lives. I have seen the same thing happen hundreds of times since, and now I understand it. One sees it breaking over racial, national, religious, and class lines. Anglo-Saxon against Anglo-Saxon, Jew against Jew, Negro against Negro, and all sorts of combinations of the three against other combinations of the three. Off-hand, you might say that we fifteen Negroes should have felt the racial thing and served him. He was one of us. Perhaps it would have been a beautiful thing if Banks had turned to the shop crowded with customers and announced that this man was going to be served like everybody else even at the risk of losing their patronage, with all of the other employees lined up in the center of the floor shouting, “So say we all!” It would have been a stirring gesture, and made the headlines for a day. Then we could all have gone home to our unpaid rents and bills and things like that. I could leave school and begin my wanderings again. The “militant” Negro who would have been the cause of it all, would have perched on the smuddled-up wreck of things and crowed. Nobody ever found out who or what he was. Perhaps he did what he did on the spur of the moment, not realizing that serving him would have ruined Mr. Robinson, another Negro who had got wat he had the hard way. For not only would the G Street shop have been forced to close, but the F Street shop and all of his other six downtown shops. Wrecking George Robinson like that on a “race” angle would have been ironic tragedy. He always helped out any Negro who was trying to do anything progressive as far as he was able. He had no education himself, but he was for it. He would give ay Howard University student a job in his shops if they could qualify, even if it was only a few hours a week.

“So I do not know what was the ultimate right in this case. I do know how I felt at the time. There is always something fiendish and loathsome about a person who threatens to deprive you of your way of making a living. That is just human-like, I reckon.”