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## If he hollers let him go

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Although the city of Dayton is small and has been hit hard by the decline of industry, in Xenia and Yellow Springs the land is green, fecund, and alive, even in the relentless heat of summer. Xenia is three miles from where the first private black college, Wilberforce, opened, in 1856, to meet the educational needs of the growing population of freed blacks that crossed the Ohio River. Yellow Springs, a stop on the Underground Railroad, was initially established as a utopian community in 1825. In 1852, Horace Mann founded Antioch College and served as its president. During the '50s and '60s, Antioch and Yellow Springs were hamlets of anti-McCarthyism and antiwar and civil rights activism. Today there are a lot of hippies and there's even more tie-dye. Between the villages, you can drive over rolling hills and pastures and not see another car for miles, and only far off on the horizon will you be able to spot a farmhouse.

I spent a week in this part of Ohio, and during my stay I was invited to do all sorts of things with people of all kinds—rich and poor, white and black. I was invited to go flying, dig for worms at midnight, and plant raspberry bushes. My request to drive a tractor was turned down, not because I don't know how to drive but because the tractor had been put away. In Ohio, there is space for people to do what they want. There is a lot of land, plenty of it. This is where enslaved people ran to, certain that they had finally evaded capture. This is where America's first prominent black poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, wrote "We Wear the Mask." And somewhere in the midst of it all is Dave Chappelle's home.

From above, everything seems smaller and less complicated—or at the very least things are put into perspective. From a plane at thirty-five thousand feet it was much easier for me to understand why Dave Chappelle quit his hit TV show, *Chappelle's Show*, and said goodbye to all that, and didn't stop until he got home to Yellow Springs, Ohio. When news of his decision to cease filming the third season of the show first made headlines, there were many spectacular rumors. [...]

Chappelle didn't seem to understand that these rumors of drugs and insanity, though paternalistic, were just the result of disbelief and curiosity. Like Salinger's retreat from fame, Chappelle's departure demanded an explanation: how could any human being have the willpower, the chutzpah, the determination to refuse the amount of money rumored to be Chappelle's next paycheck: fifty million dollars. Say it with me now. Fifty. Million. Dollars. When the dust settled, and Chappelle had done interviews with Oprah and James Lipton in an attempt to recover his image and tell his story, two things became immediately apparent: Dave Chappelle is without a doubt his generation's smartest comic, and the hole he left in comedy is so great that even ten years later very few people can accept the reason he later gave for leaving fame and fortune behind: he wanted to find a simpler way of life. [...]

Dave Chappelle was in his teens when he first appeared on the comedy-club circuit. He was twenty-three when he and his friend Neal Brennan wrote *Half Baked*, a now-classic stoner flick about four hapless friends who try to enter the drug-dealing game so they can get bail money for their friend Kenny, who has landed in jail after inadvertently killing a cop's horse. They were young and had no expectations except to have fun and be funny. They certainly had no idea *Chappelle's Show*, another collaboration, would become the most talked-about show on television. But early into the show's first season, critics at the *New York Times* would take notice of Chappelle's "kind of laid-back indignation" and his "refusal to believe that ignoring racial differences will make anyone's life better." What Brennan and Chappelle were doing every week was so unusual that

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the *Times* declared that “it almost looks like a renaissance for African-American humor on television.”

Chappelle’s comedy found fans in many worlds. At a recent barbecue in Philadelphia, a friend of the host dutifully but disinterestedly interrogated me about my life, and got excited only when my mother let it slip that I was working on a piece about Dave Chappelle. “Aw, man. I miss that guy,” he said. “He was my friend. I really felt like he was my friend.” I hear this a lot, usually from white people, and usually from white people without many black friends—like this seventy-year-old comparative literature professor in Birkenstocks. Part of what made the show so ingenious was that Chappelle’s racial invective found friends in strange places. With a regularly broadcasted television show, Chappelle was finally able to display what writer and activist Kevin Powell described in an *Esquire* profile as a “unique capacity to stand out and blend in, to cross boundaries and set up roadblocks.” Almost overnight, Chappelle became America’s black friend. He was a polyglot. He told Powell that, growing up, he used to “hang out with the Jewish kids, black kids, and Vietnamese immigrants,” and it was apparent that Chappelle had used these experiences to become America’s consul and translator for all things racial.