

I saw from the map that US 11 intersected US 31 in what was most likely downtown Birmingham where I assumed the library was. I figured I'd stop thereabouts and ask directions. The outskirts—Bessemer, Brighton, Midfield—were slow going and no sooner had I entered the city limits than I ran into a traffic jam. The cars ahead of me were merging into the left lane to get around some sort of roadblock. Given all the horn honking I figured it wasn't an accident. When I got close enough I saw it was a large group of black teenagers all singing and laughing. When I had pulled out to pass them I saw there were many, many more than I had supposed. I learned later there was about eight hundred of them. They were trailing along behind a convertible that overflowed with even more kids. My only thought at the time was to wonder whether May 2 was a local holiday. It was mid-day on Thursday—shouldn't those kids have been in school?

After another mile or so I saw a motel that had seen better days. I guessed from the name—the White Motel—that its now gray buildings had once been white. I pulled in, then sat in my car wondering why. I hadn't consciously thought about it but I now realized the day was nearly half over and my plan was to spend I didn't know how much time at the library and then what? I remembered food too. I hadn't eaten since breakfast and imagined that, at some point today, I'd be hungry. Was I then going to get back on the road? No, I was probably here for the night. What part of my brain had figured that out and turned the car into this parking lot?

The woman behind the desk was probably sneaking up on 50. Well fed, bleach blonde, boldly made up, hadn't given up on love, or sex anyway. Could have been a looker 20, 30 years ago. Big smile. I told her I needed a room. She handed me a ball-point pen so I could sign the register.

“Meridian,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Never been. Nice place?”

I shrugged.

“Ringing endorsement! Maybe I’ll stay right here when I want some fun.”

I smiled.

She smiled.

“I’m Trixie,” she said. Then she came out from behind the counter and said,
“Follow me.”

I followed, confused. Why hadn’t she simply handed me the key and pointed to the room? Were we going to walk to the room and then make me come back for my car? Why were we passing all these other apparently available rooms? And did she always wiggle this much? Her hind end was going every which way. We passed a room with a cleaning cart outside its open door. A black woman, fiftyish, came out with a mop, looked at me and turned away with a sigh. Trixie and I didn’t stop until we’d reached the very last unit. Was this some sort of perk for being the first customer of the day, to get the room with only one adjoining wall?

Trixie unlocked the door, stepped inside and held the door for me. When she closed the door she still kept the key. She showed me the bathroom, the TV, the phone, all of which I could see for myself. It occurred to me she wanted a tip. I was young.

Maybe it was an Alabama thing. As I reached into my pocket damn if she didn't plop down on the bed.

"Here's the key," she said.

When I took it from her she scraped her nails, the reddest, longest nails I'd ever seen, across my palm and smiled that smile they smile in the movies. Then she leaned back on both hands and aimed her impressive bosom at me like a double-barreled shotgun.

Now, I'll be honest with you. If I hadn't been in such a snit over my hallucination, I'm not sure what I would have done. I mean, I was young and full of beans, y'know? But I've also never been very impulsive—nay, spontaneous. And she had a wedding ring. Where was her husband? Who was minding the store? To this day I fret such details.

After a few long seconds she said, "Don't worry about Ophie, she can be deaf and dumb."

"Ophie?" I said.

"The maid."

"Well," I said pointedly looking at the bedside clock. "This is great, now I have to get to the library. Can you tell me where it is?"

She looked at me and heaved a sigh that made her breasts bounce.

"Well," she said, standing up, "If you decide to change sides you know where to find me."

I honestly didn't know what the hell she was talking about until I was halfway to the library. She had given me two routes. She said one "went through nigger town", but the white route was less direct. It was on 14th Street, on the more direct route, that the penny finally dropped. I wasn't even thinking about it but I suddenly realized she thought I was gay. I don't think we said "gay" back then though. Damn if I can remember what the polite word was though. Might very well be because there was no polite word. At any rate, I thought, okay, if it keeps her at bay, it works for me.

I was following the path of least resistance regarding street lights, angling north and east. In a bit I came across the A.G. Gaston Motel. My first thought was, gee, I could have stayed even closer to the library, but then I saw the crowd in the courtyard. It was made up almost exclusively of black men dressed in suits or at least short sleeved shirts and ties. There was just a handful of women and a smattering of white men who seemed to be newsmen. I realized it must be one of those motels in The Negro Motorist Green Book that Bookie had told me about. There were three cops hanging about across the street, watching the men in the courtyard. Up ahead, at the next intersection there looked to be a barricade. There were fire trucks and firemen. I continued walking in that direction having no idea I'd just walked within thirty feet of Martin Luther King who, at that moment, was hiding in Room 30, scared shitless over what was about to happen.

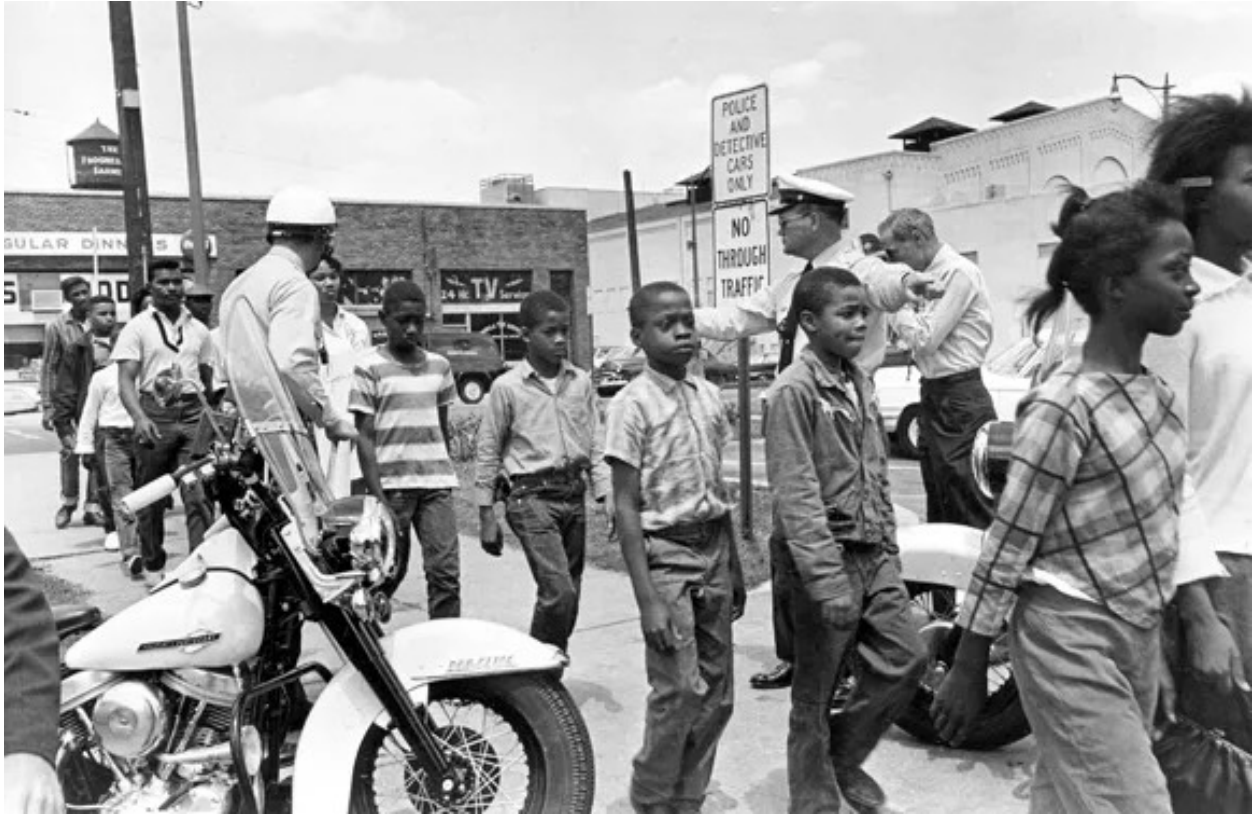
As I approached the intersection I could see more and more of a small park. It had a lot of trees and a lot of cops wearing helmets and carrying rifles and shotguns. There was probably a couple hundred blacks, mostly men, milling around there and the cops were moving through them holding dogs on leashes. It was Kelly Ingram Park and I

had unwittingly walked into ground zero, D-Day, H-hour of what came to be known as the Children's Crusade.

By now, of course, I could see something was up, and that it was a civil rights thing. But I thought if I can just make it past this park it will probably clear up. I turned left and kept on the opposite side of the street from the park. There were blacks and cops here too, but less concentrated. People were constantly looking toward the church on the corner, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Clearly, everyone expected something to happen. I cut across the street before getting to the next intersection and started to head east again on Sixth Avenue at the north edge of the park.

That's when it started.

Someone yelled, "Here they come!" and everyone was looking and pointing past me in the direction of the church that was now behind me. I turned. A stream of blacks were coming down the church steps carrying signs. When they reached the sidewalk they turned left and headed in my direction. When they got a little closer I could read some of the signs: "Can you love God and hate your brother?" or "Don't Buy Segregation". Then I saw they were just kids, teenagers mostly but a lot of them were little kids, maybe eight, nine, ten years old. Even younger.



Are they crazy? I thought. Did they send children out here to confront Alabama cops? Oxford flashed through my mind but I took some small comfort that at least there was no mob of klansmen here, just the cops and firemen. And plenty of press. If some of it was national the cops might show some restraint.

As the kids got closer I could see the fear in their faces but also their determination. Those kids had guts. They were marching straight for a line of cops half a block up. Near the front of the line was a girl about 10 who had two plaits of fuzzy hair standing up on each side of her head and Lord help me I thought “pickaninny” in spite of myself. I quickly looked away from her and saw a boy about 8 staring wide-eyed up ahead at something. I followed his line of sight and saw for the first time Bull Connor’s

tank. It was really a car made up to look like a tank. No guns bristled from it but it managed nonetheless to look sinister and frightening. It was all white.

I looked back at the boy and suddenly saw Bookie at that age, Bookie marching straight into his fear. What had brought such a young boy to this point, I wondered? Had he already suffered so much racism?

The kids were singing now and some of the adults on the porches of a few houses across from the park joined in. As the children passed her one older woman got up from her chair and shouted, "Sing children sing!"

As the kids passed me I, and a whole lot of black spectators from the park, followed along beside them. What was going to happen? What had I gotten myself into? If the cops starting beating up that boy would I try to save him? Would I get between him and some heavily armed Alabama cops? It's easy enough when you're sitting on your couch to fantasize about being a hero, but was I about to find out how much easier it is to look the other way? Racists hated nigger lovers even more than they hated niggers. Would I be another William Moore? Or would I chicken out? I hadn't asked for this. You're just on your way to the library one day and bam! You're in a situation.

When the kids reached the cops they stopped.

A chubby little man in a suit and straw fedora, who turned out to be the one and only Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor, told them they were parading without a permit, and if they just turned around and went back to the church everything would be okay. A kid at the front said they knew they were parading without a permit and then they all knelt down and started to pray.

This was the critical moment. There were the kids, there were the cops, and behind them a few paddy wagons. Clearly, the cops intended to put the kids into the wagons. Would the kids resist? If so, what would the cops do? This was very different than Oxford. There I was one of the armed soldiers charged with restoring peace. Here I was just some guy who was maybe going to find out what he was made of.

But it didn't happen. The cops were quite civil, gentle even. And the kids wanted to get into the paddy wagons, they wanted to go to jail. I didn't know at the time but that was the whole point, to fill Birmingham's jails to overflowing. Gandhi's trick.

The cops started hauling the kids into them. Most of the kids went docilely while some needed to be dragged or carried. One boy, would might have been at most six, reached for the hand of a girl I assume was his big sister. She looked down at him and smiled. I was relieved my courage went untested as the cops didn't hit anyone or do anything awful. They barely had the doors of the last wagon closed when a shout went up. More were coming out of the church.



This bunch took a different direction, and I hustled after them. Truth be told, I kind of welcomed the situation. At least now I wasn't worried about my sanity. This group ran into a different bunch of cops but with the same result. Then the doors opened again and another group of kids streamed out. It was evident this was the strategy. I wondered how many kids they had in that church and I began to wonder how many paddy wagons the cops had, then realized they'd come back for more once they dumped their current load. Before long, the cops were literally cramming kids into the wagons. It would take three or four of them to shoulder the doors shut. After a while they started to cart them off with school buses.

In my meandering throughout the area I occasionally found myself close enough to one or another of the scattered knots of white onlookers to catch snippets of their talk.

“Niggah kids been comin’ in all morning,” said one man. “From ever which way, singing they niggah songs, holin’ up in that niggah church”.

“That church is bigger’n mine!” said another.

“Fancier too!” this from a woman. “Where these people get the money for that?”

“Children!” said another woman. “Those nigras in charge oughta be ashamed!”

“They should be in school”.

“Just trying to give us a black eye”.

“6 o’clock news all over the dang country.”

“Got them damned marchers coming in from Georgia and now this.”

“It’s all a plan! They know some nigger hater gonna do something and get headlines all over the world.”

“Godamn martyrs.”

“Dumbass kids think this is a lark. Wait’ll they’re in jail. Won’t be no fun no more,” said a man who looked to be experienced.

“Put their parents and teachers in jail with them. See how they like that.”

“That damned King and his crowd too. Birmingham Jail just the place.”

“See how they like chain gangs.”

It hadn’t occurred to me to keep count of the number of groups that came out of the church. I did guess correctly that there was about 50 kids in a group. I saw in the

paper the next day there were something like 800 to 1000 kids in the various jails around Birmingham. If they did this again tomorrow they just might succeed in filling up the jails. Speaking of the local papers, throughout this whole week of demonstrations and arrests neither paper ever deemed the events important enough to warrant first page coverage. That honor went to stories like the guy who lost a bet and had to fondle a boa constrictor at the zoo, or the fun event at Birmingham Southern University where everyone wore Bermuda shorts and the history professor's scrawny legs were declared the best looking on campus.

At one point a black man in overalls and yarmulke, who I learned later was James Bevel, the architect of the Children's Crusade, came out of church, and walked up to Bull Connor.

"Your men have to take a break," he said.

To my surprise, Connor agreed.

And so everyone had a snack. The police department ordered numerous boxes of sandwiches and Cokes, and the folks in charge in the church placed their own orders for themselves and their remaining kids. After a bit Bevel walked back outside and crossed the street. He took a sandwich from one of the cops' boxes, unwrapped it and started to eat it.

"Hey!" Connor shouted. "What's that nigger doing eating our sandwich?"

Bevel laughed, walked back into the church, and moments later the next group of fifty marched out. The cops had to get their butts up from the curb, guzzle down their

Cokes and get back to arresting children for parading without a permit. Turns out, by the way, that a permit had been applied for and refused. Also turns out that six years later the Supreme Court ruled that the city ordinance that Bull Connor used to refuse said permit constituted a prior restraint on speech and thus violated the First Amendment.

I was caught off guard by all this. Back in Meridian I'd seen only one report of protests in Birmingham. A couple weeks earlier MLK and some other black leaders had been arrested. Other than that, nothing, even though it had apparently been going on for over a month. The Mississippi papers had kept close tabs on the murder of William Moore, a postman from Baltimore, but originally from Meridian, who'd been walking from Chattanooga to Jackson to deliver a message to Mississippi governor Ross Barnett, a message asking him, basically, not to be such a racist asshole and instead embrace the American ideal of equality for all. Moore phrased it more politely. God knows what he thought he would accomplish. Some grocery store owner shot him in the head up on US 11 and now a group of freedom marchers were trying to complete his trek. As I said, however, almost nothing about Birmingham. Of course, this was the first time they'd used children.

This process of transporting children from the church to jail lasted nearly two hours and when it had clearly ended I resumed my route to the library.