

Next morning, Friday, May 3rd, I went to the office to extend my stay. There were now a couple dusty cars and a battered pickup truck in the lot. There was a man at the counter. He wore a loud, flowery shirt, short-sleeved. He had bracelets on both wrists and rings on way too many of his fingers. One ring was the same gaudy wedding ring that Trixie wore. His face was a different color than his arms, kind of an orange tan. He had a neck wattle that swung around disconcertingly at every slight motion of his head. His hair should have had been salt and pepper, if not completely gray, but instead was jet black. It was all combed forward, top and sides, with pointy, finger-like strands plastered to his brow and temples. He smiled at me like he'd been waiting his whole life to meet me. I'm in my 80's now and to this day I've never seen an oilier.

"Ah, Mr. Stark," he said. "What can I do ya for?"

"I need to stay another day or so."

"Do you now?" he fairly cooed. "How marvelous!"

And then he did the damnedest thing. The only word I can think of is "coquettishly". He gave me the once over and I could swear he batted his eyelashes. Okay, I thought, or hoped, maybe he has something in his eye.

"And how long are you?" he said.

That took me a second.

"Staying?" I said.

"Yes, silly. What else?"

I swear to God he tittered.

"Well, I don't really know for sure," I said. "Can we just take it a day at a time?"

"My dear boy!" he crooned. "We can take it any way you like!"

I tell you, I was getting alarmed, even took a step back. I thought maybe I should just find another motel. But then, just like that, he changed, got all business like. I guess in that short moment he'd read the room. He scratched his head, smoothed down whatever hairs he'd displaced, then wiped his hand on his pant leg.

"Actually," he said. "Lemme talk with the Missus."

When he turned to go through the door behind him I saw that all his hair seemed to come from one spot in the center of the back of his head. From there it was combed over the top and around the sides. It was the mother of all comb-overs. It was a good five minutes before he came back. With Trixie.

"We'd need a week's fee in advance," she said.

"A week?" I said. "I don't know if I'm staying that long."

"We have to know if the room is available in case we get a lot of customers," she said.

"But what if I don't stay the whole week?"

She shrugged.

"Would I get a refund?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"Whether we needed the room or not."

Given the amount of business I'd seen so far I thought she must be joking. At any rate, it seemed a safe bet.

"Okay," I said.

"You can't stay in the end unit," she said.

"Okay," I shrugged.

"That's for special guests," she said, glaring at me.

"Okay," I said.

"That's for either my friends or Harry's," she said, nodding toward her husband.

"Okay," I said. They both stared at me for a long, awkward moment. It seemed odd, the importance they attached to that end unit. Moving to another unit meant getting my gear together, but if it made them happy to empty the end unit, so be it.

I forked over the cash and asked if there was a breakfast joint nearby.

Trixie went back to the other room and Harry gave me directions and the key to my new unit.

"Please move your junk now," he said.

Yes, he actually said "junk".

The diner was a few blocks from the motel. I sat at the counter. My presence caused a lull in the chatter. I was a stranger among people who all knew each another. But after ordering and maybe hearing my Mississippi accent, they gradually started talking again. The talk spanned the counter and multiple booths, was confused and simultaneous. The waitresses joined in and even the cook tossed out remarks over his shoulder. I can't report it verbatim, but I can summarize it. The two topics, of course, were the William Moore freedom marchers at the border and the kids in Birmingham. These people were true haters. It wasn't simply about segregation to them, these were Klan types, the folks who lynch. They were thrilled Moore had been murdered and considered his killer a hero. They hoped for nothing more than maiming and mayhem for today's marchers, be they at the border or around Kelly Ingram Park. In fact, many,

if not most, of them were heading to Georgia to be part of the "welcoming committee". They knew the Alabama state police, per Governor Wallace's orders, would be in force on the Alabama side to curtail shenanigans, so their best chance to harass the marchers would be in Georgia.

That none of them planned to be at the children's demonstrations surprised me until it became clear they'd been told not to come by none other than Bull Connor. It seemed the jails were already overloaded so Connor's plan today was to arrest only a few and disperse the majority with hoses and dogs. The prospect had them jubilant. They bragged that Connor would handle things in Birmingham while they handled things in Georgia. I gulped down my coffee, paid the check, and left for the park.

Again the place was crawling with police--city, county, and state, all armed to the teeth and helmeted. There were fire trucks around every corner. The cops and firemen joked amongst themselves and chafed one another. There were some blacks in the park but most were around the perimeter. Okay, I thought. What would a reporter do? Observe I guessed. Case the joint. Listen. So I walked around the park.

On the corner near the church there were clumps of black men standing and sitting on the roof of a one story commercial building. Along the north side of the park there were a few wooden houses with tiny front yards. The porches of these houses were crowded with black folks, the older ones sitting on rickety chairs, the younger ones lounging on the steps. One woman was kneeling in her yard weeding. These spectators were all chatting, laughing, smoking, and drinking beer and soda. I saw the older woman who yesterday had exhorted the children to "Sing, children, sing!" At first I thought she was asleep, but then I noticed her gently rocking her chair. Maybe she could

do that in her sleep. Everyone, blacks, cops, firemen, the press scattered here and there, had the air of waiting for a concert to begin. Indeed, every now and then you'd catch a snatch of what was happening inside the church--some cheering or singing, very much like an orchestra tuning up while the audience shuffled to their seats.

As I walked around soaking up everything I began to notice cops watching me and I realized how out of place I looked. I imagined them wondering what this cracker was up to, was he gonna be trouble? I had, on Zuri's advice, and remembering Oxford, hidden my pen and notepad in my pants pockets, but now, trying to make it clear to the cops I was a reporter, I moved them to my shirt pocket. That didn't stop one cop from standing up, field stripping his cigarette and approaching me.

"Hey bud,"

"Hey."

This was the first time I got an up close look at the shield on a Birmingham cop's left sleeve. It depicted what seemed like a statue on a pedestal. The statue looked like a man dressed in a space suit with a closed umbrella in one hand and the other an upraised fist a la what would later come to be known as a Black Power salute. Across the top it said, "BIRMINGHAM, ALA.", on the pedestal it said, "POLICE", and across the middle, in fancy script, "Magic City". Reminded me of their motto, "It's Nice to Have You in Birmingham."

"Whatcha up to?" He asked.

I shrugged.

"Just looking around."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"Well, kinda on assignment from a newspaper."

"Kinda?"

I was having trouble with my new identity and said nothing, just sort of fidgeted around a bit.

"Who ya work for?"

"Gettysburg Times."

"Gettysburg? The Gettysburg?"

"Yeah."

"Credentials?"

I was stumped. It had never occurred to me anyone would ask me that. The press had credentials? All I'd ever seen was in the movies where a reporter might have a card that said "PRESS" stuck in the hatband of his fedora. All I could think of was to tell him I left them in my motel room, which I'm so sure he would have believed when someone behind be said, "Hey kid, there ya are!"

I turned and saw a guy not much older than me flashing some sort of credentials to the cop.

"You know this guy?" The cop asked him.

"I do," the guy said. "Rookie. Doesn't know all the rules yet."

The cop looked at me and I could see he knew damn well I and this guy didn't know each other. But I guess he figured he had bigger fish to fry and if this actual press guy was gonna get me out of his hair it was okay by him.

"Sure," he said, and went back to his pals who'd been watching.

My hero led me over to his car parked across the street.

"I'm Pete," he said.

"AJ."

"Gettysburg Times, eh?"

I explained the situation to him, thanked him for his help.

"Sure," he said. "But you're in the wrong place."

"How's that?"

"Action's gonna be up at the border, with those marchers. We're all heading up there now if you wanna to tag along."

I looked around at all the cops, firemen, fire trucks, paddy wagons, that crazy all white riot car that Bull Connor rode around in, and all the black spectators.

"Looks like something might happen here," I said.

"Oh sure," he said. "Like yesterday. Kids come out, cops load 'em up, haul 'em off. Bit of a snooze. The Klan and nutjobs are all on US 11. Up there they got adults to beat up, not kids. Better optics."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said, and told him what I'd heard at breakfast, that Conner was gonna "make war" today. He made me tell him some specifics of what I'd heard, then whistled.

"Charlie should hear this," he said and started looking around. "Ah, there he is. Come with me."

"Who's Charlie?" I asked, catching up.

"Charles Moore."

I looked blank.

"You may not know his name," he said. "But I bet you've seen his pictures in Life

or Look."

"Oh yeah? What kind of pictures?"

"Well, most recent would be the ones from Ole Miss."

"Ole Miss?"

"Yeah. You know, the James Meredith thing."

"Yeah, I was there."

He looked at me like he was trying to see me as one of the rioters, so I told him I'd been in the 101st.

"No shit," he said. "Small world."

Charles Moore was getting into his car.

"Hey Charlie," Pete called. "Hold on a sec."

Moore turned, still had his car door open.

"What's up Pete?"

"Listen, I got this kid here, says he's a reporter for the Gettysburg Times but he ain't really--nobody actually hired him, his aunt just put him up to it. He was one of the paratroopers at Ole Miss. Anyway, he had breakfast this morning in some redneck restaurant and overheard some Klanners saying Connor was gonna use the dogs and hoses today."

"What's your name, kid?"

"AJ. AJ Stark."

"You sound Southern."

"So do you."

"I'm from Alabama. You?"

"Mississippi. Meridian."

"And you're in the 101st or 82nd?"

"101st. But I'm out now. Got out just after the Peanut Patrol shut down."

"Peanut Patrol? You were on that?"

"I was."

"With that second looey, whasisname?"

"Gallagher."

"And now you're in Birmingham covering the demonstrations?"

"That's right. I was just passing through and happened on this business yesterday."

"Hey, wait a second. Mississippi paratrooper on the Peanut Patrol. Are you that spy guy?"

"Well, I did go undercover." Me James Bond.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. "I had to scrap one of my pictures because you happened to be in it in full combat uni."

"Sorry," I said. "First I heard of it."

"So tell me what you heard this morning."

"Well, shit," he said when I'd finished. He and Pete looked at each other.

"Bound to be some ruckus at the border," said Charlie.

"Sure," said Pete. "But hoses and dogs against children?"

"Yeah, can't top that, can you?"

"And, y'know, might not be all that much at the border. Lotsa staties there. Wallace doesn't want headlines."

"Yeah, and Connor doesn't give two shits about headlines."

And so they decided to stay.

Charlie said his plan was to hang around Bull Connor. He was the villain in the piece, he was where the story would be. That made sense to me so I tagged along and the three of us started to look for him when the first group of kids came out of the church singing. We trailed alongside them as they headed down 16th Street. They turned at the corner onto Fifth Avenue and headed east, toward white Birmingham and a whole lot of cops and fire trucks. When they reached the barricade we could see Bull Connor in his suit and tie and straw fedora watching just behind the police line like a general surveying the battlefield.



A cop with stars on his collar and a bullhorn told them to disperse or get wet.

The kids did not disperse.

I looked at the firemen. It took four of them to manage one hose. Other hoses were mounted, in pairs, on big metal tripods. Water cannons, so-called.

"Last chance," warned Evans.

The kids did not disperse.

"Oh shit," I thought. "Are they really gonna do this?"

I looked at Charlie. He was moving around, looking for good angles I suppose. He seemed completely unconflicted, all in on what was about to happen. He was here for this, but was I? I was a free man. I could leave. I could get my car and drive to Pennsylvania. Didn't I have enough on my mind, what with hallucinating Civil War troop trains?

Then Connor said something I couldn't hear, and they turned on the water. At first they just misted the kids like they were watering a garden but when that didn't stop them they turned on the pressure.

Holy shit.

Take an ordinary garden hose. Crank the water up full blast. Screw the nozzle down to get a narrow stream of water and point it into a tin bucket. You can hear the force. Point it at the back of your hand. You can feel the sting. You're not even in the ballpark. Try to imagine it a hundred times stronger. You can't, but you might begin to get the idea.

And the sound. First come's a whoosh, then a hissing and when the water hits something there's a snapping sound and you can just tell that it really fucking hurt.

Most of the kids were swept back but a small knot of them had the utterly baffling grit and guts to hold their ground, teenagers and younger, boys and girls, huddled together clinging to one another, drenched, still singing about freedom. In the famous Iwo Jima scene the Marines are all slanted forward. These children all slanted backward. Some had raised arms as though appealing to Heaven. I felt in that moment as if I was looking at a heroic or holy painting in real life.



Again I had the urge to leave, to simply melt into the crowd and slink off. What was this to me? Sure, I wanted the blacks to have the same rights and opportunities I had, and I would vote for it every chance I got. But did I also have to be part of this? Then I thought about what I would say to Aunt Charlie and what she'd think of me. And then it was too late.

"Blast them with that water!" Connor yelled. And the kids were flattened. One boy tried to stand, was hit in face and flipped over backward. Soon kids were sprawled everywhere. When they tried to run away the firemen chased them across 16th Street and pinned them against the store fronts there. The kids today were screaming. Yesterday had been a lark. Packed into paddy wagons or buses and hauled off to jail. That was where they paid the price for exercising their Constitutional rights of assembly and free speech. Today's kids paid it right there on 16th and 17th Streets, on Fifth and Sixth Avenues, and in Kelly Ingram Park. The firemen washed them down the gutters,

head over heels, scooting them along willy-nilly. The water was so powerful it dislodged chunks of sidewalk. In the park some firemen amused themselves by stripping the bark off an elm tree.

And the kids kept coming. The church doors would open and we'd all look up. They'd stream down the steps singing about freedom and march into chaos. Water stripped the shirts off boys, there were girls in slips because their skirts and dresses had been shredded. The firemen, not content with simply knocking down a teenaged girl, flushed her fifty feet down the gutter. Another girl they playfully tried to cartwheel through the park. They were having fun, searching out targets, yelling, "Knock the niggers down!"

By now a few hundred whites had gathered behind police lines to cheer and whistle and egg the firemen on. Oddly, my attention latched onto one woman. She seemed an ordinary housewife, had that early 60's beehive hair-do. She carried a shopping bag, had perhaps been at the department stores downtown. She'd gotten out of bed that morning, just another weekday, got the kids fed and dressed and off to school, kissed hubby goodbye. Then she'd put on a nice outfit, did up her hair and makeup, caught the bus downtown. Now, after some fun shopping and a nice lunch, maybe with a friend, here she was raving and screaming. Her face, which you could tell was pleasant enough normally, was now contorted with hate. Why did she, why did they all, hate these kids so much? Whence all this venom? Did she really care so much about segregation? Or was it merely the excuse, the opportunity to scream and yowl and let out all the resentment that had built up over the years. Could be her life was not the Donna Reed, Mayberry RFD life she had envisioned--no one's was. Maybe her husband

was no longer the man she married--maybe he never was. Maybe her children were brats or numbskulls or in some other way not the children she had dreamed of. When you can't take it out on yourself or your "loved ones", you can always take it out on a nigger.

And the dogs. Man's best friend. More people were pummeled by the water than were bitten by the dogs, but a snarling dog lunging at you strikes a more elemental and more primal fear. The water is impersonal, akin to an act of God, not so the frenzied dog. Its mindless, cruel fury is intimate, exclusive, its hate is aimed solely at you.



One cop kept yelling things like "Go Nigger!" and "Back Nigger!" which I thought odd until I realized Nigger was the name of his dog. The dogs knew exactly who to go after too. There were whites sprinkled here and there, the press, myself: no dog so much as sniffed one of us.

Here too was Bull Connor, suit jacket gone, sweating and chafing the K-9 cops for not bringing more vicious dogs, while cheering on the ones they did bring.

"Look at them dogs go!" He whooped.

The cops strained to keep them leashed. God knows what would have happened if they hadn't. I'm sure each cop expended more energy controlling his dog than he would have simply bashing heads with his baton. Which they also did. While the dog was leaping at your throat the cop was whacking you with his stick. Man and beast both berserk.

Then, in the midst of this chaos, the church doors opened yet again and out came yet another group of kids. This group was led by a woman holding the hand of a boy who couldn't have been more than five. Do you know how young a five year old looks? How vulnerable? At the bottom of the stairs, at the intersection, at the skirmish line, she yelled, "This baby is mine and he's in it too!"

She and the boy were bowled over by the hoses, and the onlookers--had to be more than a thousand of them--started to boo and throw things at the firemen--stones, bits of sidewalk called brickbats, pop bottles. Something hit Moore in the leg, knocked him down. Pete and I helped him up and he immediately went hobbling around snapping photos almost indiscriminately. Connor turned the hoses around and blasted the onlookers, then the cops waded in swinging their billy clubs. A man ran past me with blood streaming down the side of his face. He ran into the park, grabbed a teenaged boy by the arm and dragged him off. At one point, in this bedlam, in this whooshing and crashing of the hoses and water cannons, in the screaming and yelling and the singing and the rumbling noise of Bull Connor's riot car, one of the hoses got loose. It writhed and wriggled like a giant python still spewing water at more than a hundred pounds per square inch. A fireman tried to grab it and the nozzle whacked him in the face and laid him out cold. The crowd cheered, and so did I.

Charlie didn't notice, but Pete turned and grinned at me, and in that grin I understood that I was being unprofessional. I was involved, participating. I was not beyond the fray, I was not outside looking in. Not that I was the only one. A pressman nearby shouted to Moore, "I've never seen anything like this in my life!"

Moore lowered his camera and shouted back, "Pandemonium! Worse than Oxford!"

So I bottled my emotions, shelved my own self, my own problems. Hallucination? Phooey on that. I was a reporter. I watched everything and everyone, I took notes, I took names, I became the cool, aloof observer. My only fear was that I might not be in the best place. Maybe something bigger was going down over on the next street, maybe I should go see. I turned to look that way, maybe I could see from here what was happening across the park, but there, in the park, were two cops and a dog pummeling a protester lying on the ground. The dog got loose and made a beeline for a girl who couldn't have been more than seven.

And just like that I snapped. Gone was my faux professionalism, gone the detached observer, the outsider, the nonparticipant. I found myself running full tilt into the park. I can only assume my goal was to save that little girl, I can't think why else I was running or where else I might have been going. It's all moot, however. I didn't even get close to her before the firemen found me. I got it in my left side, hard. Bowled me right over, then they shooed me along the ground like a leaf blower shooing leaves. I washed up behind an elm tree and could hear the water hitting it on the other side. I was seized by this image of it making its way around the tree to find me, like some water dragon. I jumped up and took off. If there was a way to manufacture that degree of fear

and panic at will I could have won Gold at the next Olympics. Another hose found me, or rather, I found it since it hadn't been seeking me out. I think it knocked me down. If so, I must have scrambled to my feet because I found myself running again and then was finally I was out of the park and across the street. I hid behind a parked car. To my surprise, I found I was carrying someone. Imagine not realizing that. It was a girl, not the one I tried to rescue but also about 7. She had to be at least fifty pounds and I had been carrying her tucked under one arm like a football without even realizing it. Like me, she was soaked through. The hair on her temple was gone as though it had been shaved off. I didn't let go of her until we were slumped on the ground behind the car. We stayed huddled there for several moments. Then the water was pounding the car. It was deafening. A few black kids appeared from in front of the car, being hustled along by the water, then being flung and crushed against the brick wall of the building right there. That's when the girl pulled away from me. We looked at one another, then she got up and ran into the water with the other kids while I watched from the shelter of the car.

Then the water stopped and cops ran in to grab the kids and drag them off. One grabbed the girl, my girl, by the arm and turned to haul her off but first he looked at me and sneered.