

And then I was alone. It was strangely quiet. I peeked through the car windows. There was still the surrounding din, there were still black people running and scrambling, dogs lunging and barking, cops swinging nightsticks and swearing, firemen spraying and laughing. But it now seemed far away, as if I were in a bubble.

I jumped up and ran, ran like a rabbit, skedaddled like the Union troops at First Manassas or the white militia at the Bladensburg Races that left Washington open for the British to burn. Though soon clear of the riot, I didn't slow down until I noticed passing white folks eyeing me and my sopping wet clothing. I straightened up, gathered my dignity, became just another sodden citizen strolling down the street with water sloshing in his shoes. Then someone touched my arm and I nearly leapt into the next county. I turned to see an angel, the prettiest girl I'd ever seen up close.

She was looking at me and her mouth was moving. I deduced she was talking to me, but damn if I knew what she was saying. Not that I couldn't hear her--I could. But it was just sound, nice sound but meaningless, like birdsong. She seemed concerned and her lips would move, then stop. Words. I had to assume she'd been saying words, but what words in particular? Then it dawned on me that her last word had looked like "okay". Had she asked if I was okay? That seemed to make sense. I tried to reply. Maybe I was coherent, probably not. I went back to staring at her red lips and white teeth, struggling to synch their movements with the birdsong. At one point it looked like she said the word "where", and I'm pretty sure I said, "Mississippi".

I could see from her expression that was the wrong answer so, inexplicably, I took my motel key out of my pocket and handed it to her. She looked at it, smiled, and started to walk away with it. She didn't have wings but I figured angels could probably hide

them somehow. After a few steps she looked back and saw I hadn't moved. She came back and took my hand. The clouds parted, the sun beamed, and a host of angels sang the Gloria.



I accepted that I had lost my mind. The hallucination, the dogs, the hoses, my mad dash into the chaos, the little girl in the torn blue dress, and now this angel. Was she real, I wondered? She looked real. She felt real. But so had my Confederate soldier. This time when she started walking I went with, hand in hand.

Soon I recognized the motel parking lot. The angel looked at the key and the numbers on the rooms and pulled me toward my room. On the way, we passed the maid who stopped dead and stared. A filthy, sopping wet man holding hands with an angel-- who wouldn't stare?

In the room the angel got a towel and rubbed my head and face. She rummaged

through my kit, found dry clothes, and told me to go into the bathroom, clean up, and put them on. Which I started to do but then caught a glimpse of someone in the mirror over the sink. His face was streaked with dirt and gravel and his hair was every which way. Who was that, I wondered. There was a knock on the door. Robotically, I left the bathroom to answer it but saw that the angel already had. So she must be real, I thought. Hallucinations can't open doors, can they?

It was the maid with an armload of towels.

"I need to come in," she said. Apparently my brain had reengaged enough to translate sound into language.

The angel stepped aside.

The maid put the towels on the bed.

"More towels if you need them," she said.

Then she turned to the angel and said, "I know you. You were one of those college girls at First Baptist. Reverend Shuttlesworth put his arm around you."

"That's right," said the angel.

"Then you were arrested at Woolworth's."

"Yes."

The maid nodded my way.

"And now he's all wet."

"He got caught by the hoses. Rescuing a little girl from the dogs."

"I did?" I said.

They both looked at me.

"He's a bit disoriented," said the angel.

"Is he your boyfriend?"

"No. I only just met him. He was wandering off soaking wet. He needed help to get here."

"Listen," said the maid. "I can't be in here long. They're watching."

"Who's watching?" said the angel.

"The Hornsbys. The owners. They Klan. They know he ain't."

Then, to me, she said, "Don't make any more phone calls from here. They listen in on them. They listened to your call last night."

She started to leave but the angel grabbed her arm.

"Wait," she said. "What's your name? Can we meet up later and talk more?"

It took a couple seconds but Ophie finally said, "Okay, I'll be at 2nd and 14th North around 5. I'm Ophie."

Then she left.

The angel looked at me.

"No," she said. "You're filthy. You have to shower. I'll wait outside."

With that, she moved the desk chair just outside the door and then she left too.

I can't say how long I stared at the closed door but I did not spring into action. I was kind of paralyzed. Then an odd thing happened. I sort of x-ray visioned through the wall and saw the angel sitting outside. I could see her sitting in the chair, facing the parking lot, her back to me with her dark brown hair and pony tail. Then I remembered the wild-haired, grimy faced person in the mirror. The angel wanted him cleaned up. So I went back to the bathroom and cleaned him up.

When I came out she stood up. "That's better," she said. Then she stuck out her

hand and said, "I'm Marti."

My knees buckled but I took her hand and said, "I'm AJ."

"Well, AJ. When did you last eat?"

I had to think about that.

"This morning."

"C'mon," she said.

And off we went. I had no will of my own and would have done anything she said, but when she said, "Oh here's a place", I had to speak up. It was where I'd had breakfast.

"Not there," I said. "You don't want to go in there."

So we moved on. At the next place she looked at me and asked if this one was okay. It was empty which seemed a good thing, so we went in. Marti picked an end booth. I got a BLT, Marti got a Coke.

"Where in Mississippi are you from, AJ?"

"Meridian."

"And why are you in Birmingham?"

"I needed a library."

"A library? They don't have one in Meridian?"

"They do, but I was on the road."

"That old hearse in front of your room. That's yours?"

"Yeah."

"So you were on the road in your hearse, and then discovered you needed a library."

I nodded.

"What for?"

"I needed to find out how long magnolia trees live."

She laughed and sun beams splashed into the booth.

"Wait," she said. "Where were you going?"

"Gettysburg."

"In Pennsylvania? So you left Meridian, what, this morning, headed for Gettysburg, then all of a sudden you wanted to know how long magnolia trees live so you stopped in Birmingham and got yourself hosed rescuing a little girl from police dogs.

That about it?"

"Not exactly. It was yesterday morning."

"Ah, yes," she said. "The motel. Right. You spent the night."

"Yes."

"Of course. The maid said you made a phone call from your room last night. Why didn't you go to the library yesterday?"

"I did."

"And?"

"And what?"

"How long do magnolia trees live?"

"Could be up to 120 years."

"And what's this phone call the motel owners listened in on?"

"That was Aunt Charlie."

"Okay," she said. "Who's Aunt Charlie?"

"Oh, she's my long lost great aunt."

"Of course," she said. "Who doesn't have a long lost great aunt? And, naturally, she wants you to be her heir, right?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. Kinda."

And I told her about getting out of the Army and wanting to go to college and my job at the gas station and having my tonsils lanced and almost getting Bobby Lee arrested for kiting checks and Aunt Charlie's letter and getting involved in the demonstrations yesterday and Aunt Charlie making me a reporter. I left out the Magnolia Tree.

"So," she said when I was done. "If it hadn't been for suddenly needing to know how long magnolia trees live you might be driving your hearse through Virginia or Maryland right now."

"Yeah, I guess so. If it made it that far."

Then she asked what I did in the Army and I told her about being a paratrooper and Oxford and being a spy for Nicholas Katzenbach, which I hoped would impress her but she'd never heard of him. She did want to hear about Ole Miss and Meredith however and laughed at the Gallagher stories, especially his kidnapping the Navy shore patrolman. When that subject ran dry I asked her about getting arrested.

"I joined a few other demonstrators at a lunch counter downtown. The others were Negroes so we all got arrested. The others went to jail, but they took me back to campus."

"Why didn't they arrest you?"

"Well, technically, what law was I breaking? I'm white. Also, I'm a girl. You they might have arrested, law or no law."

"So what happened? Did you have to pay a fine or anything?"

"The powers that be forced the school to expel me. Well, not expel exactly. They made me quit. I'll have to transfer."

"And you did all this because..."

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We cannot afford to be silent bystanders."

All I could say to that was, "Wow."

Marti laughed.

"I quote John Howard Griffin a lot," she said.

When she saw I didn't know John Howard Griffin, she said, "He wrote Black Like Me. He's a white man who took some drug that turned his skin dark, then he traveled around the South as a black man. I read it a few years ago and it changed my life. I was never a racist, but I was like so many white people who feel as if segregation and discrimination were Negro problems. Griffin made me see it's a problem for all of us. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

I wanted to agree with the beatific Marti, but at this point in my evolution the sentiment struck me as a bit grandiose and it was probably something in my face that led to her to ask, "Why did you rescue that little girl?"

"Actually, I had no idea I had. I lost my mind and was just running around and only discovered when I got behind the car that I had her. There were no high principles involved."

"Y'know," she said. "In a way, that's even better. It shows who you truly are, that you don't even have to think about it, you just do the right thing instinctively."

"I dunno," I laughed. "But if you want to think I'm a good guy, that's fine by me."

We sat quietly for a few minutes. I looked out the window and watched the people and cars go by, occasionally sneaking a peek at Marti who was looking down at the table and tugging her ear lobe and turning my stomach to jelly. Finally she looked up.

"AJ," she said. "What's that for? Andrew Jackson?"

I laughed.

"I wish. No, I've been blessed with a couple weird names."

Now she laughed.

"Tell you what," she said. "You tell me your weird name and I'll tell you mine."

I didn't see how there could be anything ludicrous about Marti, but she wanted to know my name and I figured she might as well know the worst of it. So...

"Amos Jasper," I said. "Amos Jasper Stark."

"Pleased to meet you Amos Jasper Stark. I'm Martha Owen Turnipseed."

"Turnipseed," I said. "You're kidding."

"Afraid not."

"Wow," I said. "You win."

"I usually do."

"Now this aunt of yours. Why is she so interested in what's going on in Birmingham?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Remember, I've never met her. Maybe she's just a concerned citizen. Maybe she just likes a ruckus."

"And now you're supposed to write a report on what you saw today?"

"Yep."

"And then what? You read it to her over the phone, or you wire it to her or something? How does it get into the Gettysburg paper?"

"Geez," I said. "I never thought about that. Yesterday's report is still back in my room. So I guess it never got into the paper. Aunt Charlie never said what to do with the reports, just to make them."

"Interesting," said Marti. "Well, you have some historical events to report today."

Until Marti said that, the historicity of what was going on in Birmingham hadn't occurred to me. Now I leaned back in my seat and looked into Marti's eyes.

"Extraordinary," I said.

After a few seconds she said, "What is? What's extraordinary?"

I snapped out of my trance.

"These last two days," I said.

"Yes," she said. Then, looking at the clock over the counter, she said, "It's time to meet Ophie."