

We found Ophie waiting at a bus stop. She got in the passenger side back seat. As I pulled out Marti turned to face her.

"Do you usually take the bus?" She said.

"Never. Walking keeps me young and I ain't about to sit in the back or give up my seat to no white man. Sit in the back be okay if it was my choice."

"Even when it rains?" asked Marti.

Ophie harrumphed.

"That's why God invented umbrellas," she said.

We drove up 14th Street.

"I see they kicked you out of the end unit," said Ophie.

"Yeah," I said. "What's up with that anyway?"

"I'll tell you later."

I thought that odd and looked at her in the rear view mirror. She saw that and nodded toward Marti.

"What were you doing to get yourself hosed?" She asked.

I told her about being a reporter. She laughed.

"You got you a crazy aunt."

"He was at Ole Miss too," said Marti. "One of the soldiers protecting James Meredith."

"You a genuine civil rights hero then, eh?"

"Hardly. I didn't do much. Just pretended to be a student. Not like I saved his life or anything."

"Well, you done something anyway."

"Yes," said Marti. "That counts too. To be color blind is not enough. We must actively strive for justice and equality."

Both Ophie and I looked at her.

"John Howard Griffin?" I said.

"Of course." Then, to Ophie, she said, "This white guy darkened his skin to see what it was like being black. Then he wrote a book about it."

Ophie laughed.

"Did he use burnt cork?"

"No, no. Some chemical."

"Well," said Ophie. "Don't 'spose I need to read it to know what happened."

Then, to me she said, "You gotta be more careful. Them Hornsbys are both Klan. The motel be one of the ones the Klan stays in when they come to Birmingham."

"The Klan?" said Marti. "Are there any there now?"

"Not like they was for them freedom riders couple years back. Motel was full up then. I kept my ears open and told Reverend Shuttlesworth everything I heard. Fat lot of good it done."

We made a couple turns and entered a dirt street covered in gravel. There were no sewers here, just drainage ditches.

"Ophie," said Marti. "Are we in Dynamite Hill?"

"We sure are, honey. But don't you worry. Them Klanners too busy up in Georgia today to be paying us visits down here. Besides, they only come at night."

This area of Birmingham, or as Ophie and other blacks called it, Bombingham, got its nickname from being bombed so frequently. At the time of our visit there had

been over forty bombings in the last twenty years.

We parked outside Ophie's house and got out of the car. On our way to the front door I saw a neighbor lady in her front yard with her arms folded glaring at us.

"Don't mind ol' Elsie," said Ophie. "She don't like us getting involved with integration and white folks. We just stirring up trouble. Gonna get us all bombed."

"Have there been bombs on this street?" Marti asked.

"No," said Ophie. "We all try to stay low and unnoticed. We did get our front windows shot out last year, but that was probably random. They sometimes just drive around shooting at houses without knowing who lives there."

"Oh, my God," said Marti.

"We have a routine. All us folks around here. Second you hear something, gunshot, explosion, you hit the floor and try to get to the basement."

"Oh, my God," said Marti again.



Like so many black homes, the house was much nicer on the inside than on the outside. I knew from Bookie this was intentional. You didn't want white folks thinking you were too prosperous. Especially around here.

Ophie's husband met us at the door.

"I found him," he said, then looked at us.

When Ophie didn't respond, he said, "He's at the fairgrounds. He arrested himself."

"But he's okay?" said Ophie.

"So far."

It was only then Ophie introduced us. Turned out Gus, the husband, had been

talking about their son Cleon. Cleon had been arrested yesterday but had been one of the kids I saw jumping out the window of a school bus. It seems he regretted doing that and meant to get himself arrested today. He did get hosed--he was one of the kids in that group in the park--but not arrested. So he walked to the fairgrounds hoping to get arrested there. But there were no police there. In fact, said Gus, the gate was unlocked and some kids were leaving. But Cleon went in, and so now he's arrested.

"But there won't be any record of his arrest," said Ophie.

"Yeah," said Gus. "That's what I said, but he said none of the other kids had been processed either, just brung there and dumped."

"Oh Ophie," said Marti. "I'm so sorry."

"Well, it's what he wanted. I tried to talk him out of it, but he asked me if the demonstrations were a good thing and when I said they were he said, as long as it's some other mother's son doing it? What can you say to that?"

"At least he's not in jail," said Gus. We can keep an eye on him at the fairgrounds. The parents of the kids in jail can't get them food or blankets, but we can."

"And he'll be out in a few days," said Ophie. "Unlike the Hornsby boy. He's in Draper prison for aggravated assault and rape."

"At least they know where he is," said Gus.

"They got no idea where they daughter is," Ophie told us. "She done run off with the circus or something."

I pointed to a photo of a young woman on the table by the door.

"Is this your daughter?"

"Glory. She's away at college. Gonna be a lawyer."

"Wow. That's terrific."

Nodding toward Marti, Ophie told Gus, "This one of them college girls from Woolworth's, and this one," nodding my way, "got hisself hosed today saving a little girl from the dogs."

Gus looked at me and said, "Well, young man, thank you for that."

I shrugged.

"I didn't know half what I was doing," I said. "I was just running around in a panic and don't even remember picking her up. Didn't even know I had her till it was over."

"Seems he was a soldier at Ole Miss too, in that riot."

"No kidding?" Said Gus. "A regular hero!"

"I didn't do anything, really. In fact, it was a bit of a lark."

"Well," said Gus. "Come, sit down. Y'all are staying for dinner. I wanna hear about Ole Miss."

I kept it short and sweet and then asked Gus if he'd been in the military. He had. He'd been a Marine in the Pacific, saw action in Peleliu. His group of black Marines rescued a detachment of white Marines who were grateful at the time but now no one in the Corps would admit it ever happened.

After dinner we repaired to the living room.

"Ophie," said Marti. "In the car you said something about passing information to Reverend Shuttlesworth."

"Yes, that was two years ago, with those freedom riders. Funny how the white folks always going on about outsiders like Reverend King coming to Birmingham to stir

up trouble, but it's just fine and dandy when Klanners come here to beat up Negroes."

"Not that we ain't got plenty of Klanners right here," said Gus.

"True enough," said Ophie.

"I wasn't here then," said Marti. "What was it like? Did you all get involved?"

"Oh yes," said Ophie. "Gus was in the rescue mission to Anniston."

"That was the Greyhound bus," said Gus.

"On Mother's Day," said Ophie.

Way back in 1946 the Supreme Court had ordered an end to segregation in interstate travel. Conservatives being for law and order when it suits them, the South ignored the order. The federal government, under Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, loathe to alienate Southern votes, lifted not a finger to enforce the order. Then James Farmer and CORE tried to do what James Meredith succeeded in doing a couple years later--force the federal government to honor its sworn obligations. That they failed makes Meredith's coup even more impressive.

There were two buses, a Greyhound and a Trailways. They each had blacks riding in the front and blacks and whites sitting together. The idea was to go from Virginia to New Orleans, through the heart of the Confederacy, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana. They actually made to South Carolina before anyone got beat up--a white man, a white woman, and John Lewis. But that was nothing compared to what happened in Alabama.

Seated in the back of the Greyhound were two white men, undercover state policemen, there to spy on the riders. This bus was the first to arrive in Anniston where it was surrounded by about fifty Klansmen armed with pipes, chains, and baseball bats.

The two state policemen kept the rioters out of the bus so they banged on it, smashed its windows, and slashed the tires. Despite having been alerted hours earlier there were no police. The Klansmen shouted, "Dirty Communists!", and "Sieg Heil!" Where there's Klan there's Nazis.

After twenty minutes of this the police showed up. Though they stopped the riot, for the moment anyway, they made no arrests. A single police cruiser then escorted the bus out of town, followed by thirty to forty cars and trucks. These were not well-wishers. Once outside the city limits the police abandoned the bus. It was immediately forced to stop. This was outside a grocery store around which had gathered another crowd. Two other highway patrolmen at the grocery watched as the mob again surrounded the bus. After more thumping, shouting slurs, and window smashing one Cecil Llewellyn, nicknamed "Goober", tossed a fire bomb through one of the smashed windows.

The bus caught fire.

The crowd barricaded the door with shouts of "Burn them alive!", and "Fry the goddamn niggers!" Good Christian folk these were, many still dressed in their Sunday-go-to-meeting best--suits and ties. Many had even brought their children. Did I mention this was Mother's Day?

The freedom riders were spared the flames when one of the fuel tanks exploded and the whites backed off. But no sooner were the riders off the bus than the whites regained their "courage" and fell upon them, beating them mercilessly.

Not all the whites had lost their humanity, however. Twelve year old Janie Miller had a five gallon bucket she filled and refilled with water for the riders, ignoring the threats and insults of the rioting whites. She and her family later found they were no

longer welcome in Anniston and were forced to relocate.

After a second fuel tank explosion, the two highway patrolmen at last decided that was enough. A few warning shots dispersed the crowd, no doubt exhilarated at their performance.

Again there were no arrests.



Eventually, one of the patrolmen finally called an ambulance but when the driver refused to accept the black riders, the whites who had boarded disembarked. One of the states who'd been on the bus gave the driver a stern talking to and finally the riders were taken to a local hospital.

The white riders received scant and reluctant care, the black riders none at all.

When the location of the riders became known in town the hospital was surrounded by yet another mob of howling whites. The hospital administration was cowed and demanded the riders leave.

Neither the local, county, or state police agreed to transport them or to even escort them.

Then someone called Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham and he organized a rescue mission of eight cars. Turns out one of those cars was driven by Gus.

"Fore we left," said Gus. "Reverend Shuttlesworth lectured us on nonviolence and told us not to bring any weapons. But I ain't no crazy hero, and neither was the others. We had shot guns, pistols, and rifles stashed under the seats and in the trunk. No way we were gonna get ourselves kilt trying to rescue those riders."

"I still think the Reverend knew very well what y'all was doing," said Ophie.

"Could be," Gus laughed.

"They's a time and place for nonviolence," said Ophie. "And that wasn't one of them. Not when they gonna kill you. That be forever."

So, at the hospital Gus and the others openly displayed their weapons and wouldn't you know it? The big, brave white mob backed off. Bookie and I discussed it at the time.

"They're bullies," he'd said. "That's all. Letting them beat up on you just eggs them on. Punch back and they find someone else to pick on."

Bookie and I both decided we were not cut out for things like that bus ride.

"It was with the Trailways bus I got involved," said Ophie. "It almost didn't happen. We knew the Greyhound was destroyed and wasn't coming to Birmingham but the Klanners didn't. So they were at the Greyhound station waiting for it. It was supposed to arrive first, you see. But then someone at the police department told them and they all ran over to the Trailways station. Got there just in time."

"Course," said Gus. "Some of the riders was already beat up pretty bad. That bus had Klansmen on it and when they reached Anniston they found out what happened to the Greyhound bus. A cop told them the same thing would happen to them if they didn't get the Negroes to the back of the bus and so the Klansmen beat a few of them half to death, then tossed them unconscious in the back."

"They beat that white man, Jim Peck was his name, real bad," said Ophie. "They might hate nigger lovers even more than they hate us."

"They beat him up even more when he got off the bus and went into the station," said Gus. "Course they beat up the Negro he was with real bad too."

"Some of them got away," said Ophie. "Got on city buses or even caught a cab. But the ones in the station really got it."

Police dispatchers, per plan, had cleared the area. Bull Connor had promised the Klan and another group, the National States Rights Party, fifteen minutes before the police would show up. Connor put Detective Tom Cook in charge and, when the two groups quarreled, he told them, "You boys should work together."

And work together they did. The riders caught in the station were dragged into corridors and punched, kicked, and slammed with lead pipes and chains. One of the most enthusiastic assailants was FBI informant Gary Rowe. Both inside and outside the station reporters were beaten, their cameras smashed. After fifteen minutes Detective Red Self told Rowe, "Get the boys out of here. I'm ready to give the signal for the police to move in." Funny how they always refer to the cretinous racists as "the boys".



As in Anniston, the riders were refused medical treatment, this time at Carraway Methodist Hospital. More good Christians. Once again, Fred Shuttlesworth came to the rescue. Once again, Gus and the others rounded up the wounded. They spent the night either at the parsonage or in volunteer homes. Ophie and Gus housed two of them.

"Next day," said Gus, "some of those riders had had enough but others, especially the more beat up ones, wanted to keep going. Next stop would have been Montgomery. But the governor, it was still Patterson, said they wouldn't get no police protection. Not from the state, county, or municipal police."

They didn't get much help from the feds either. JFK's main interest was to downplay the events, to keep the more sensational aspects out of the press. He asked

one liaison person, "Can't you get your goddamned friends off those buses?" When learning, however, that no, in fact, his people could not get their goddamned friends off those buses, he had his brother try to get them a bus. But no willing driver could be found, and when they were told the route was lined with KKK, the riders decided to fly to Montgomery. Shuttlesworth organized yet another motorcade to take them to the airport.

"Some of those riders needed a lot of help to get into the cars," said Gus. "We took a roundabout route to the airport, didn't run into no Klanners."

"Then they flight to Montgomery was cancelled due to a bomb threat," said Ophie. "And they was stuck at the airport."

"No one there would feed them," said Gus. "We had to bring them food. Finally, Bull Connor told the airport manager to get rid of them and so they snuck them onto a flight to New Orleans."

"And that was the end of that," said Ophie. "Y'know, I helped patch up that white man. He lucky he ain't dead. I swear, I don't understand those folks. Him and that William Moore, got hisself kilt carrying them signs. Easy enough to understand the black folks doing such stuff. We been held down and bullied all our lives. And worse. This house might even get bombed this very night. We gotta do what we be doing. White folks be different. One of them black riders said to me, that Jim Peck, he some kinda saint or something. He can just go back to being white but here he is getting hisself half kilt. Maybe you all understand better."

"Don't look at me," I said. "I didn't risk nothing at Ole Miss and only got myself hosed today kinda by accident. Certainly didn't sign up for it."

"But didn't you say you was shot at back at Ole Miss?" Said Gus.

"Well, yeah, guess I was. But I was there under orders. I didn't volunteer to go in there, like them freedom riders or William Moore."

"Y'know," said Gus. "I hate to say it but if I'm being honest, I gotta wonder about the sanity of folks like Jim Peck and William Moore. Maybe they masochistic or something."

Suddenly I was awash with shame. I too had thought that very same thing. Not fully consciously, not articulately, but I'd had a feeling, a feeling I held down and didn't want to let up. Back then with Jim Peck and the other white riders, and now lately with William Moore and the whites now trying to complete his mission. It was a feeling there was something wrong with them, something that made them seek trouble and disaster, for the sake of trouble and disaster. They went too far. And then Marti chimed in.

"Or maybe," she said, "They're just people who don't see color, who just see other people, other citizens and who know that the quest for equality is not a fight for one race, but a struggle for the rights of all, as John Howard Griffin said."

"Honey," said Ophie. "Everybody see color."

And then we all just sat there looking at one another for what seemed a very long time. Finally, Marti said, "Was anyone arrested? For attacking the riders at the bus station?"

Gus and Ophie laughed.

"What you think, honey?" Said Ophie. "Any white folks ever get arrested for any of that kind of funny business?"

After more silence, Marti said, "I'm sorry."

"Ain't your fault, honey. White folks was all like you and AJ there'd be no problem."

When Marti excused herself and went to the bathroom Ophie leaned toward me.

"That room, that end unit," she said, "is reserved for guests who, uh, entertain Trixie or Harry."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"There are women who like Harry?"

"I never said women."

"Really? But aren't they married, Trixie and Harry?"

"They are, and they share many common interests. Men be one of them."

"I'll be damned."

"When I saw Mizz Hornsby take you to the end unit I was surprised she came back out so soon. I figured she'd be in there at least an hour."

"Why the end unit anyway?"

"Room next to it has a spy hole. They watch one another. Did the mister have a go at you as well?"

"Maybe. He did act pretty weird."

"Real girly, right?"

"Yeah, but then suddenly he was all business."

"Maybe he could see you weren't that way."

"Maybe."

When Marti returned I changed the subject.

"Say, Ophie, have you and Gus seen To Kill a Mockingbird?"

They hadn't. Not many black folks had, she said. Didn't need to, already knew the story in real life all too well. All except the part about the lawyer saving the black man.

"But," said Marti. "He didn't actually save him did he? They found him guilty and shot him."

"There ya go," said Ophie. "Like I said."

"Cleon saw it with his class," said Gus. "Told me they didn't like how that Robinson fella was done--whatsisname?"

"Tom," said Marti.

"Right. Tom Robinson. Cleon said they showed the white lawyer's reaction to the verdict, but nothing on the black guy. Not to mention his family. Cleon said you couldn't tell at all if he even had a family."

"Well," I said. "I have to go. My crazy aunt wants me to interview people at the movie to see what they think about it."

"Do you have time to give me a ride?" Marti asked.

"Of course."

We said our good-nights and thanked Ophie and Gus for dinner and were out the door where I suddenly found myself panic stricken. Marti and I were about to part. She would go back to being Marti-without-AJ and I would be AJ-without-Marti.

"Listen," I said. "Have you seen the movie?"

"Not yet," she said. "I've been meaning to though."

"Come see it tonight with me," I said.

She considered this a minute.

"Sure," she said, and my head exploded.

The crowd in the theater was sparse. We walked to the front row so I could look into the balcony to see how many blacks were there. There was only two, though maybe more came before the movie started. Marti and I sat close to the middle. Aunt Charlie had told me to move around the theater, eavesdrop, find out what viewers were thinking, but no way was I leaving Marti. I owed Aunt Charlie but I didn't owe her that much. I paid zero attention to the show, spent most of my time trying to decide what to do. Maybe I could try to hold her hand, but her hands were in her lap. She didn't even have an elbow on the arm rest we shared. I tried leaning in her direction, seeing if I could reach her shoulder with my own, but I ended up on tilt and still inches away. Should I say something? "What do you think? How do you like the cinematography?" I amused myself with my own derision. I'd had a girl friend back in high school and a few brushes in the Army, but no way could I muster being as confident and decisive with Marti. For at least half the film I only managed a few sneak peeks at her. Each time she'd been intent on the screen. Then I got caught. She smiled. I said, "Atticus Finch". Hey, I was winging it. I had no screen writer feeding me clever lines.

"Yes," she said and went back to the movie.

I was miserable, unmanned, disappointed in myself. I tried to concentrate on the movie, but only really tuned in near the end when the blacks in the balcony stood up for Atticus Finch. Something about that scene always bothered me. Atticus never once looks up at the balcony. Why not? Was he purposely avoiding looking at them? How could it never have occurred to him? He knows they're there, he knows their interest. He must know he failed them. No look up, no sigh for them, no shake of the head?

Whatever. Marti could see how mopey I was.

"Are you okay?"

I blurted it out. I didn't mean to, it just happened. Like running into the park for that little girl. I'll spare you the saccharine words I actually spoke and just say I told her how I'd wanted to hold her hand or something and couldn't work up the nerve. She listened seriously and didn't smile though I could see her face went soft.

"Oh, Amos," she said. "We can't. I might have liked to but we can't. You'll be off to Pennsylvania any day now and I'll be headed for Mobile. I have to go home for the summer."

She paused, then added, "And I already have a boy friend."

So that was that. But she had said she might have wanted to, so I'd keep that. I decided to take it like a man. Then I started to cry. Oh, I wasn't sobbing or anything like that, just tearing up a bit. Well, quite a bit. She led me to a recess in the building next door so that we were out of the light of the marquee.

She started to apologize and probably to reiterate her reasons but I told her it wasn't just that, though that was bad enough, but that it was also the hosing and something that had happened to me yesterday morning. When she asked what that was I nearly told her, but then grew afraid she'd think I was crazy. So instead I told her about the near accident in Eutaw. I could sense something in her reaction but was it a let down or was it a suspicion I kept something from her? I never found out.

Why am I talking so much about Marti? Doesn't have much to do with what happened. Just an old man remembering ladies past. Maybe she was my first love. Maybe not. I did have that girl friend in high school, Alice, and was, I thought, madly in

love with her. We wrote each other torrid love letters for almost the entire first year of my tour in the Army, but then the letters dwindled and then stopped. When I learned she'd married I didn't even care anymore. So was that love? Is it love when you feel it at the time but not later? Is that all it takes, is feeling it for a while? If so, for how long? Surely it can't just be for an hour or a day. So then, how many days? I loved Alice for years and then shed not a tear when she married. I loved Marti for just a few days. No, that's not right. I continued to pine for her later in Gettysburg. For years I hoped we'd somehow meet again. Then she too married and again I shed no tears. I've told myself many times it wouldn't have worked out, she was very religious and I'm not only unreligious, I blame religion for much of what's wrong in the world. Well, it's complicated. There are small-c christians like Marti and MLK, they're just vastly outnumbered by the faux Christians like Jerry Falwell, the Bakkers, and Pat Robertson. But I ramble, I'm an old man. Suffice to say I still have a soft spot in my heart for Marti Turnipseed.

Bottom line, I got zero interviews about Mockingbird that night. I drove Marti home--she was staying with some friends across town--and then slunk back to the White Motel to write my daily report that would not appear in the Gettysburg Times.