

Chapter 9: Sunday Miracle

I awoke Saturday morning in a lot of pain. I'd had sore muscles before, but this was uncharted territory. This wasn't sore calves from running, or sore glutes from lunges, or sore pecs from push-ups. This was every muscle in my body, right down to the ones that wiggled my toes.

I was down in the dumps too. I thought maybe I'd have been better off if I'd never met Marti. Maybe now I'd be less depressed. I told myself, look, imagine if you'd never met her, imagine how you'd feel then. It wouldn't seem so bad, would it? So just feel like that. You can imagine how well that worked.

Going back to sleep seemed like my best plan but I had to pee. I managed somehow to roll out of bed and stumble into the bathroom. That's when I saw the bruises. My torso was purple and black. So it wasn't just sore muscles. I wanted to crawl back into bed, but something kept me moving. Aunt Charlie maybe, and wanting to "cover the story" for her. Or fantasies of becoming an actual reporter, starting a career with the Gettysburg Times. Or Marti maybe, who'd sat at a lunch counter in Birmingham freaking Alabama with blacks. Other white girls who'd done that had been cursed at, spit on, had drinks poured on their heads, been roughed up, and arrested. If Marti could risk that, the least I could do was go observe. Hell, I might even be witnessing an historic event.

But wasn't get dressed a bitch! Who knew putting on socks could be so hard? The maneuvering it takes! And tying your shoes! Yikes! I left the room scolding myself for not buying loafers. What an idiot I'd been!

As I passed the Redneck Restaurant I saw there were a couple seats at the counter but food was the last thing I wanted. But even if I were ravenous the Redneck would not be where I'd eat. On 2nd Avenue outside the Thomas Jefferson Hotel I ran into a cluster of newsmen, Charlie and Pete among them. Pete saw me first.

“Hey,” he shouted. “Here’s Crazy Legs!”

It seemed my mad dash with the girl under my arm had become newsworthy and I was now being likened to Elroy “Crazy Legs” Hirsch, football star of the time. To quote his Hall of Fame plaque, “When running downfield, his muscular legs seemed to gyrate in six different directions at once.”

We shot the breeze for a while, enjoying the morning cool. About then some other press guy came out and when Charlie went over to talk to him I saw he'd been standing in front of a sign in the window advertising the Birmingham Chess Open, May 11-12. Enquire within. So I did. Pete tagged along. There was a table with a couple guys and a registration sheet. I didn't sign up though, disappointing Pete who wanted me to register as Crazy Legs Stark. I wasn't even sure I'd still be here in a week. This was on Aunt Charlie's dime, after all. I'd have to run it by her. But I did buy the May issue of *Chess Review* from a stack they had there. It had a picture of Botvinnik looming over the board looking worried. The caption read, “Champion at Bay”. Was he losing to Petrosian? As we walked back outside Pete said he played chess too, we'd have to play sometime.

We found Charlie still outside the bar laughing with some other newsmen.

“Seems we're part of SCREW,” he told me. “Southern Correspondents on Racial Equality Wars.”

Pete didn't qualify, coming from Vermont.

We gassed a bit longer about this and that, the demonstrations, Ole Miss, baseball, then Charlie said we should get some sandwiches and head up to the park.

Saturday turned out even uglier than Friday. For us at the park it started the same way. Kids came out of the church singing about freedom and the firemen blasted them, the cops whacked and shoved them, the dogs lunged at them. But the kids kept coming. How could they keep doing this? How could their parents allow them? I saw one girl get hosed and do a back flip in slow motion. Even landed on her feet. Damn if I know how she did that. Nowadays we'd say she stuck the landing.

And then there was the old woman with the umbrella. Was she joking, walking by the park carrying that umbrella? The firemen got into the spirit of it though. They aimed a hose up in the air so the water would rain down on her. Unfortunately, the old woman couldn't handle the impact of such a volume of water, lost control of the umbrella and fell down drenched. A couple cops hauled her to her feet and frog marched her to one of the houses across the street. Did they know her? Was she a neighborhood celebrity? Crazy ol' Aunt Millie or something?

There was a family too. The mother rushed into the park to pull her daughter away and the father rushed in to pull Mom away. When the firemen found them the mother tried to shield the daughter while the father tried to shield the mother. The firemen showed their skill though. They artfully peeled the daughter away from her parents and washed her along the ground with mom and dad crawling after her.

But now there were a few hundred black onlookers who did not take kindly to the proceedings and started to heave stones and pop bottles at the forces of law and order.

And who could blame them? I wanted to chuck something myself. It was getting a tad hairy though. Charlie, despite his badly bruised ankle from a brick yesterday, limped around snapping pictures with Pete as his wingman. They might be oblivious to the missiles, but I wasn't. I was only here to observe, and I could do that from cover just well as in the open. I had missed the really bad stuff at Ole Miss, when the marshals were getting clobbered. Despite the gunshots and railroad spike and acid I had somehow not felt in much danger. Was that because I was Army? Because I was armed, helmeted, on the side of truth, justice, and the American way? Or because the bad guys were a bunch of disorganized knuckleheads and I was one of the hunters? But here now I had no helmet, gun, or bayonet. Not even a uniform. I held no currency, as the saying goes. Now I was just some guy who might, alas alack, become collateral damage, a footnote in the reportage like that French news guy who got shot out behind the Lyceum at Ole Miss. Who cared about him?

So I found a tree at the edge of the park to lurk under and immediately felt like I was cowering. Would Marti hide like this, I asked myself? Or her hero Griffin? Laughing at myself, I thought, what would Jesus do? That crazy masochist would run out into the thick of it and get himself killed, that's what. Which, by the way, was damn near exactly what I did yesterday. And what did that get me? The girl I rescued went right back into the chaos and I ended up with all these bruises. I remembered a bit of my military training that I had taken especially to heart. "Your job," they always told us, "is not to die for your country. Your job is to let the other guy die for his." No, I thought, discretion is the better part of valor and continued to hide under my tree.

Then, looking down, I saw a pale blue broken egg shell, and remembered it was spring. Those trees in the park were likely full of robin's nests with eggs, hatchlings, or fledglings. Squirrels too, baby squirrels. I remembered the dead squirrels and birds in Oxford killed by the tear gas. Did Bull Connor not have tear gas? I couldn't believe he wouldn't use it if he had it. It would be worse optics than even the dogs, but Connor did not seem the guy to care about optics. I tried to remember if I'd seen any squirrels or birds these last few days. I didn't recall any firemen squirting up into the trees so maybe they were safe up there. I tried looking but couldn't see anything. Had they all skedaddled? Then there was a hawk, gliding, swooping, playing with the air above the park. Did the heroism, hatred, and cruelty on the ground create warm updrafts? What was that hawk seeing? What did it make of the swarm of humans surging forward, then being shattered and decimated by the streams of water, then reforming and surging forward again singing, only to be repelled and crushed again, but never quitting, always coming back for more?

What did I make of it? What the hell was all this? The children were just trying to march on streets paved and cleaned with the taxes their parents paid, to exercise their Constitutional right to assembly and free speech. Indeed, the overall "demands" of the Birmingham blacks, the reason for the marches, were pretty pathetic. They asked only for desegregation of downtown department store facilities, vague promises of job opportunities for blacks, and the establishment of a biracial civic task force. They weren't even asking for big things like voting rights or equal representation or school integration. But, of course, it was a slippery slope and everyone knew it, blacks and whites both. Once started, this tide wouldn't ebb short of full equality.

It was about then I started to see cops unclipping their holsters. I looked around to see why and saw several black men with guns. I moved further under the tree, ready to slip behind the trunk. Then one black man near me approached a cop with a bullhorn and started to speak to him. The black guy wore overalls and, oddly enough, a yarmulke. I know now that was James Bevel, the guy behind getting the children to march. The cop handed him the bullhorn and he spoke to the crowd telling them if they weren't going to demonstrate in a nonviolent way to get away from here, to leave. When that didn't work he shooed all the children back into the church, which pretty much left the remaining whites and blacks nothing to fight over and so the battle ended.

I found Charlie and Pete and we repaired to their hotel. Charlie went off to take care of some business while Pete and I bummed a board from the guys at the Birmingham Open table and played some chess. Pete was one of those guys who beat his uncle and cousin and thought he was hot stuff, but he didn't even know all the rules. He'd never heard of queenside castling, and capturing en passant. He had to consult the tournament guys before he believed I wasn't pulling his leg. I was a revelation to him, his first wee peek at the real world of chess. He could see how little I thought about my moves and was way too impressed with that. I tried to explain that I was relying on technique, ways of playing honed over hundreds of years by the best players in the world. He wasn't really playing me, he was playing me and Paul Morphy, Jose Casablanca, and Emmanuel Lasker. He shouldn't take it personally or think I was anything special. Nevertheless, he thought I was a shoo-in to win the tournament, couldn't imagine I could ever lose a game, no matter how much I assured him it was a frequent occurrence.

When Charlie came back it was cocktail time. I was twenty-one, new to this whole drinking thing. On my twenty-first birthday some months previous Bookie and I and a couple other guys hit the club and tried all sorts of drinks with the end result of me lying in my bunk in a spinning barracks and then stumbling outside to puke out of my nose. Since then I'd only had a few beers. But Charlie insisted I try a sidecar. He and Pete got a big kick out of me being carded. I looked about seventeen. But the sidecar was nice. Effective too. Almost found myself telling them about Marti but caught myself and asked if either of them had seen Mockingbird. They had and asked hadn't I. I told them about Aunt Charlie's instructions.



Pete said, y'know, that ain't a bad angle. At first Charlie agreed but then he said what kind of pictures could he get? Just the outside of the Melba Theater, maybe some customers. Maybe even some black customers going in the side door. Pete said it was a pity no blacks were protesting there. Yeah, said Charlie. Instead of the department stores they should raise hell outside the movie theater, get some pics of dogs and hoses under the marquee announcing Birmingham's own Mary Badham and Phillip Alford in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Now that would be drama. Pete joked about what an awful name Badham was for an actor. I nearly pissed myself laughing, I was that tipsy. That's when Charlie acted like he just thought of a great idea. I should continue to stay at the White

Motel and eat at the Redneck Restaurant and even see if I could worm my way into a Klan meeting or whatever. Once again I was being recruited to spy on racists. I promised to think about it and excused myself to go find a phone booth and make my daily call to Aunt Charlie.

On the way I pondered Charley's pitch. It felt way different this time. In Oxford I was a soldier following orders with the might of the 101st Airborne behind me. Plus, the only people there who might figure out I was a spy were students, a lot less scary than Klansmen. I slept tight at night surrounded by troops. Here I'd be all alone at the White Motel, favorite haunt of the Klan.

Aunt Charlie was not keen on the idea. Said the last thing she wanted was for me to get hurt. Zuri was dead set against it, said the Birmingham she knew would give Charlie all the pictures he needed without any help from me. We then talked about when I should leave Birmingham and when I mentioned the tournament Aunt Charlie said I should certainly stay and play, that I'd be sure to win it. I only wish I was as good as she and Pete seemed to think.

I wandered into white downtown, in the general direction of the Melba Theater and mulled it over. In the end, I figured it had been easy enough so far, kind of like that joke about the guy falling off a tall building. As he passes each floor he thinks, "So far, so good." I hadn't felt any danger at the motel, hadn't even seen Trixie or Edgar. In fact, I'd seen only Ophie and two other guests and neither of them had so much as looked at me. And while I wasn't keen on having breakfast at the Redneck, I hadn't felt any particular danger there either. Finally, there was the chess tournament, just a week away. I decided to take it day by day, see how it went. Spying had an upside—T-bones and sidecars

compliments of Charlie. Also, I was afraid of what might happen when my mind was no longer occupied with Birmingham and civil rights. Once back on the road would I start pining for Marti or obsessing over hallucinations? Or both?

Actually, wasn't I already spying for Aunt Charlie?

My meandering had gotten me to the theater just as a showing was coming out. Not much of a crowd, the movie had been there over a month. I picked one guy for no reason other than he was alone, followed him into a bar. He took a stool, I made a show of looking around, then sat next to him—in a nearly empty bar. He gave me the side eye. I said, “Hi”.

He said, “Hi”, but he didn't want to.

We both ordered a beer. The bartender looked at my ID like he didn't believe I could really be twenty-one, but in the end I guess he figured what the hell. A sale's a sale and his ass was covered by my ID, genuine or otherwise.

“I saw you just now coming out of the theater,” I said to the other guy.

He looked at me that way again only more so.

“You following me?” He said.

I laughed.

“Yeah, I guess. Kinda. I'm a reporter—for the Gettysburg Times. My editor wants me to ask folks what they think of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

“The Gettysburg Times?”

“Yeah. In Pennsylvania.”

“I know where Gettysburg is. Been there actually.”

“Oh yeah? What did you think?”

“Nice place. Be a better place if we’d won.”

“Yeah, well.”

“You don’t sound sound like you’re from Pennsylvania.”

“Cuz I’m not. Never been there actually. I’m from Meridian.”

“So you’re a reporter for a paper in a place you never been?”

“Yeah, long story. I just happened to be passing through on my way to Gettysburg when those kids hit the streets.”

He sighed.

“Yeah, those kids. That crazy mailman, and now this fucking movie.”

“Yeah,” I said. Ace interviewer.

“Another damn stain on Alabama. Bad as Mississippi.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I was at Ole Miss.”

He looked at me differently now. Like maybe I’d been one of the Ole Miss rioters.

“Shit,” he said. “Sure we got our crazy rednecks, our Bob Ewells. They got crazy rednecks everywhere. Everybody got a Bob Ewell. They ain’t got nigger haters in New York, Philadelphia, or Chicago? They’s nigger haters everywhere.”

“Ain’t that right!” said the bartender who’d been a ways off cleaning glasses. “I ain’t seen that movie, don’t have a mind to neither. Like the man said (nodding to the first guy), sure we got nigger haters here, who don’t?”

The guy next to me looked at me and said, “Queer haters too.”

I mumbled some blarney about being sorry to intrude and vamoosed.

Back in my room I found a note from Ophie inviting me to Sunday dinner. We had arranged for her to hide notes under the bottom left corner of the mattress.

Sunday morning I went straight to the Redneck for breakfast. Call me Bond, James Bond. Here I was for the second time eavesdropping on racists. This time too it was hardly worth the effort. They were unhappy they hadn't been allowed a go at the marchers up at the Georgia border like they'd had at the freedom riders at the bus station and groused about the national attention the police dogs were getting. They told one another things like the blacks were purposely infuriating the dogs by blowing dog whistles and having T-bone steaks in their pockets or up their sleeves or even in their underwear. Nor were the bites serious since those kids were wearing three and four pairs of pants.

Another theme revolved around money.

"I'd like to know how much money these jumped-up niggers have collected from all this shit," said one.

"Yeah," said another. "And what's happened to it? Where did it go? Betchurass most of it's in King's pocket."

"That's what it's all about," said a third. "King don't give a flying fuck about civil rights and freedom and all that hoohah."

"What a coward, too," said a fourth. "Gets kids to do his dirty work, get themselves thrown in jail 'stead of him."

No one pointed out that King had indeed gotten himself incarcerated in the Birmingham Jail the month before, and I sure as hell wasn't going to.

Then the historian of the group came out with his dirty commie routine. You could tell he'd sung this song before. Big commie leaders thirty years ago, he claimed, said that the best way to spread Communism in the United States was to stir up racial

trouble, to push for integration. And so Commies started telling nigras that white folk made them second class citizens and if they became Commies the Commies would make them first class. And that's what King and his crowd are doing.

“Yeah,” said the guy who was jabbering about money. “If them Kennedy boys really wanted to do some good for the country they'd investigate King and his left wing bunch.”

So, all I got for my spying was a lot of crazy BS. In fact, Pete had more intel than me. When I got to the hotel he told me the demonstrations had been called off for today. So I grabbed a couple sandwiches, went back to the motel and got out my chess mag. I went over first six games of the Botvinnik-Petrosian match, the Game of the Month, the puzzles, and the Chess Solitaire section that featured Nimzovich playing the Nimzovich Attack, my favorite opening at the time. After a while there was a ball game on the tube, so I had that on while I analyzed chess. The Tigers walloped the Orioles. Yawn. If I was a fan of any team it was the Dodgers because of Jackie Robinson, but my enthusiasm cooled once they left Brooklyn. Just didn't seem like they had soul any more.

Then it was time to head over to Ophie's. They'd been to church that morning—three times. They were part of a plan to integrate twenty-one city churches. The first one that Ophie and Gus went to, Southside Baptist, “referred” them to a nearby black church. At the second, a Methodist church, they were met on the steps by a dozen hostile whites threatening to stone them. At a third they were serenaded with shouts of “Negroes go home!” I wondered if the whites had used the polite “Negro” in honor of the Lord's day.

“Try to imagine Jesus standing on those steps throwing stones at us,” said Ophie.
“Or yelling ‘Negroes, go home!’”

Then she asked about Marti. Had I seen her since Friday? When I told them Marti had left Birmingham, Ophie said that was a shame, we made such a nice couple. Yeah, my thoughts exactly. Before I bewailed my fate too much, however, I remembered their son was in jail.

Ophie said his court date was Tuesday morning. I said that was great, they’d get him back then.

“Cept he’ll just get himself arrested again,” said Ophie.

Looking at Gus, she said, “Wanda had to take Seely to get rabies shots.”

“If I know that gal,” said Gus. “She’ll be back at it tomorrow.”

Wanda was Ophie’s sister, Seely her niece.

There was no sidecar before dinner, not even a beer. Gus was allowed one beer every day but Sunday. We talked about the demonstrations the last couple days. At one point Gus said something about De Lawd standing in the doorway of the church blessing the children as they went out. When Ophie saw I was puzzled she said, “He means Reverend King. They call him De Lawd.”

“When he ain’t looking,” said Gus.

“How come?” I asked.

“Well, he kinda high and mighty. I mean, he a good man and all, but, well, like I said, kinda high and mighty.”

Then Ophie said, “Reverend King know how to talk about it, Reverend Shuttlesworth know how to do it. Glad I ain’t married to neither of them though.”

“Now Ophie,” said Gus.

“Don’t ‘Now Ophie me’. The things Freddie tells us.”

“Yeah, well, ain’t like nobody knows.”

“Freddie is the Reverend Shuttlesworth’s son,” Ophie told me. “Cleon knows him. Rather knew him. His wife Ruby moved to Cincinnati couple years ago, took the kids with her. Ain’t never forgiven him for that stunt at Phillips High.”

“Fred was pretty loose with his family’s safety,” said Gus.

“Ain’t that the truth!” Said Ophie. “Took them two girls to that white school, tried to get them enrolled.”

“Got the shit beat out of him,” said Gus.

Ophie frowned at Gus’s language on a Sunday.

“Nearly got those girls killed,” she said. “And Freddie says his daddy mighty free with the strap too.”

“Whatcha gonna do?” Said Gus. “Maybe heroes just be like that.”

“Well,” said Ophie. “Don’t you go being no hero. You make sure you always got some protection. All this nonviolence be just for the white folks in the world, to make sure they see we the victims. Ain’t no good in some back alley though, when you can get yourself kilt and nobody be wringing they hands over it. Birmingham a dangerous place to be black. Magic City indeed. Most of the magic be making black folks disappear. Now you see ‘em, now you don’t.”

“Mind me of that story ‘bout the Negro from Chicago,” said Gus. “Wakes up one morning and tells his wife that Jesus come to him in a dream. ‘Really?’ She says. ‘What He want?’ ‘Tole me to go on down to Birmingham’. Wife be horrified. ‘Did Jesus say

He'd go with you?' she asks. 'Well,' says the man. 'Jesus said He'd go as far as Memphis.'"

"Oh, you and that dang story!" shouted Ophie.

"But you always laugh!" said Gus.

"Yes I do. Jesus gone far as Memphis!"

About then Gus got a phone call, left Ophie and me in the living room. When he came back he said, "Something going on down at New Pilgrim. Sounds like maybe we should go."

"What's up?" I said.

"Cops arrested Guy Carawan."

"Who's that?"

"He a white folk singer. Taught Martin and them that song "We Shall Overcome".

"What he arrested for?" Asked Ophie.

"Trying to get into the church."

"Why couldn't he get in?" I asked. Whites had often been in black churches lately, usually spying for Connor.

"I dunno," said Gus. "Integration laws probly."

"Hey," I said. "Okay if I call this Life photographer I know?"

"Sure. Sound like just the guy we want there."

Ophie already had her hat and purse and was headed for the door.

"Whoa," said Gus. "You going in your Sunday best?"

"Yes, I am," said Ophie. "I gets hosed I want to look good for AJ's photographer."

We couldn't get any closer to the church than a block and a half away. New Pilgrim Baptist Church was on 9th Street and Sixth Avenue South, about a mile south of 16th Street Baptist Church, the one at the center of all the action so far. Ophie and Gus joined the group of blacks on the church steps. I went looking for Charlie and Pete. Within minutes they came trotting onto the scene, already strategizing. Charley wanted to get into the church. I assume he thought he'd get some good pics inside. There were two barriers he'd have to get through. First was the line of cops. They'd already turned away other whites, threatened to arrest Joan Baez, and actually arrested Carawan. If Charlie made it past them he'd have to convince the blacks at the door to let him in. It never came to that though. While he was haggling with the cops people started spilling out of the church. A lot of people. At first they milled around disorganized. A few moved back and forth, in and out of the church, talking. Looked to be trying to coordinate something. Then out came James Bevel in his overalls and yarmulke. Next to him was a squat man in a preacher robe I didn't recognize but later learned was Charles Billups, an associate pastor of the church.

Odd how much misinformation there is about this event. It's often said it was at 16th Street Baptist, but it wasn't. It's often said they marched toward City Hall, but they didn't. They marched in the opposite direction, west, on 6th Avenue South. 16th Street Baptist was on 6th Avenue North, which might explain the confusion. Nor were King or Shuttlesworth involved, though King afterward spoke of it as though he had been there. This was a very different collection of marchers from the previous three days. Now there were more adults than children and all were dressed in their Sunday best, dignified men in suits, matronly women in hats, heels, and necklaces with purses on their arms, dutiful

children in tow. At first we thought they were being led by Bevel but then Billups spoke to Bevel and Bevel moved to the rear of the column.

We media types were unable to get close to the marchers. The police kept us well apart. We assumed the goal was the Southside Jail. Not only was Carawan probably there, but, like all the jails in the area, it was awash with black kids. No doubt there were many parents of those kids in the procession.

Of course, there was simply no way Bull Connor was going to let them get anywhere near that jail. Cops and fire trucks and water cannons lined the road. I tried to find Ophie and Gus in the crowd but couldn't. When the marchers reached the police they knelt down and Reverend Billups approached a police big shot who turned out to be Captain Glenn Evans. We could not hear what they said and there were varying and conflicting accounts afterward.

We did, however, hear Bull Connor yell for the firemen to hit them with the water. That was the beginning of the so-called Miracle. None of the firemen reacted. It was as though they hadn't heard him, which was impossible because we heard him and were slightly further away. Then Connor yelled again, quite clearly, "Dammit! Turn on the hoses!" Still nothing happened. He then accosted a man who we later identified as fire chief John Swindle and they had words.

Meanwhile, it seems Billups and Evans had come to an agreement and the police and firemen let the marchers into Memorial Park, across the street from the jail. There, they again knelt and prayed for a while, then straggled back to the church.



Now, I saw no firemen crying, as has been reported. Maybe I just didn't happen to see it. Reports often say that "one fireman was heard to say, 'We're here to put out fires, not people.'" Again, I did not happen to hear that particular fireman and I have to wonder who did. Was this remark heard by multiple people or just one person?

Whatever happened, it soon became known as Miracle Sunday. But it seems that the fire chief had previously given orders that no water was to be turned on except on direct orders from him. He later claimed he hadn't heard Connor's order, which was ridiculous. Connor later said something about not wanting to get the marchers' Sunday dresses wet, which was even more ridiculous.

Was it a miracle? I guess it depends on your definition. As I write this Donald Trump is President for the second time and his approval rating is above 40% instead of

0%, so yeah, if people behaving rationally and civilly and living up to the American ideal counts as a miracle, then I guess it was one.