

DEATH OF MEDGAR EVERS

John Salter and I left Medgar Evers at the church and drove cautiously back to Tougaloo College. John took the students back to the dorms then came over to our house to repeat what had become nightly ritual. We would spend several hours analyzing the problems of the Jackson Movement and all America. Tonight there was some good news. Despite the silly stunts of Gov. Wallace and his being allowed by the Kennedys to stand in the school house door, the University of Alabama had been peacefully desegregated that day. Friends told us of a very impressive TV speech made by President Kennedy. He had announced that he wanted new civil rights legislation that would include public accommodations. Even more importantly, the President of the United States now called the race problem a "moral crisis" for the entire nation.

"You know, Ed," John said, "Kennedy would never be calling for such a broad law now if the demonstrations had ended after Birmingham."

"Yeah", I replied, "I guess all we've been through here in Jackson has done some good. If Kennedy's speech was as good as people say, it looks like he has learned one thing, anyway."

"What's that?"

"Well, he waited till after things were settled at Alabama. Don't you remember that big speech he made the night before Meredith was enrolled at Ole Miss? While Kennedy praised Mississippi for producing so many congressional Medal of Honor winners, the mob and the Ole Miss students started the riot."

"Oh, I remember that one. We were afraid Tougaloo would be attacked that night. It's good the President could speak this time when there is no major crisis."

Our conversation moved from Washington and Alabama back to our own depressing situation in Jackson. We agreed that a voter registration drive was important--even if few people could be registered under Mississippi laws. But we wanted voter registration to accompany a mass movement direct action campaign. To use voter registration as a device to stop the demonstrations was disgusting. Our discussion covered no new points. Nevertheless, we were both growing very tense and nervous.

"What's bothering you, John," I asked.

"You know how it is, Ed. Let's go inside. I don't like sitting out here like targets."

"You know I feel the same way, don't you?"

"Yes, I can tell you're worried."

"Well, the porch light is out. I don't think anyone can see us, but you may be right. If anybody's hiding in those weeds right over there by the football field he could almost be standing, at the foot of that terrace, and we wouldn't see him."

"But there's still enough light for him to see us. Let's get inside."

So we continued the talk behind the closed blinds in our livingroom. Jeannette brought us coffee. (Eldri Salter was no longer here. We had had so many telephone death threats that, although we never felt any particular call was for real, we were still nervous. John always remembered the Christmas night shooting into his home, from a sniper hidden in that very same field, fired a shot that passed just above the crib of their baby, Maria.

Almost every night the past two weeks shots had been fired at the campus from speeding cars. The past Friday and Saturday nights gun shots had struck the walls of two campus homes nearest to County Line Road. We all knew there would be more attacks. So a few days earlier, after the injunction was issued, John had sent Eldri and Maria off to Minnesota to visit her father, a Lutheran minister. To book the tickets Eldri found it safer to use her maiden name rather than sign as Mrs. Salter.)

"Good coffee, Jeannette," muttered John.

"Thanks, John," she replied. "You know we still have that extra bed. I still think you should stay here at night. Eldri thought you were going to stay with us when she left. You just shouldn't be in your place all alone."

"Now, Jeannette, you know I'm not alone. I have that rifle Medgar loaned me and I know how to use it. I keep it under the edge of the bed, right at my fingertips. You and Ed are the ones who aren't being careful. And any time you're ready I've got that other gun you can have."

(I had wondered if the reason John chose to stay in his house alone instead of moving into our house was his knowledge that we did not want him bring any guns into our place. He probably was much safer at his own home.) I quickly spoke up, "No use, John, we just don't want any guns. I don't want to kill anybody, even the klansmen. Besides neither of us knows how to use a gun. God, if I had a rifle here I'd end up shooting you or myself by accident."

Jeannette supported me. "Ed's right, John. We just don't want any guns."

"Well, you know I don't intend to kill anyone," John responded. "I've had guns all my life. In Arizona we know what guns are for. But no white racist is coming into my house. I'll shoot in the air, on the ground, or worse, if I have to. I don't think nonviolence means a man can't protect his own home, his own family. You should get a gun. You know Medgar has guns in his home and in his car."

(I knew all this. I also knew that John Salter was a very gentle man, a man of incredible strength and will, but still a kind and loving man. He supported the nonviolent principles of the Movement. He believed in nonviolence in his own way, and not just as a tactic. I knew he was ready to die on a demonstration if need be. He carried no weapons at the Woolworth's sit-in and never said a word as vinegar and salt were poured onto his wounded, bleeding head. I would not argue with him about guns in his home. Nor would I question the right of Medgar Evers to have guns in his car and home.)

We finished our second cup of coffee. It was already past midnight. We had exhausted all the variations of strategy we could think of. I was feeling very tired. Then I began to feel tense, nervous, and afraid, as I had earlier on the unprotected front porch. Fear began to fill me. Terror. Dread. I had to express my strange thoughts to John.

"John," I murmured, "You know, there is just one thing that could save the Jackson Movement now. It's probably too late even for Dr. King to come. But if something big happened, even bigger than the Woolworth's sit-in, or the students' march, then the people of this town might all come together and really demand action. Then Martin Luther King might come and lead major demonstrations."

"Oh, Ed, you know the Jackson Movement is dead," muttered Salter. "We can't even stage any major demonstrations now."

I knew that John Salter already knew my thoughts. It had nothing to do with any demonstration the Movement might produce. I was convinced that I did not have to speak for John to know my thoughts at that moment. But I knew, for myself, that I had to say it. My thought had to be verbalized. I could not keep it alone. Salter had to respond to it. So I told him.

"John, you know that's not what I mean. What I'm thinking is that the Jackson Movement will come alive only if something really bad, really terrible happens. All I can think of now is the death, the murder of a leader...the death of a Negro leader in Jackson...some man that every Negro in this city would identify with."

"I know that's you're thinking," agreed John, cutting me off. "We've talked enough for tonight. You know I have one of those early morning summer school classes to teach tomorrow. I'd better go."

"Be careful while you cross the campus. Stay out of the lighted areas," I urged.

"You say that every night, Ed. I can take care of myself. You're the one that ought to worry."

"Alright, John, alright. Good night."

As John walked away he gave his traditional farewell message, "We're gonna' win. We re gonna' win!"

The time was slightly past 12:30 a.m. Jeannette and I watched Salter cross the campus and move out of sight beyond Dean Branch's house. Then we turned on all our outside lights (a nightly precaution), turned off all the inside lights, and went to sleep.

A fierce pounding on our front door awakened us. It was still the middle of the night. I froze in the bed, so frightened I could hardly move. Then I recognized John's voice calling, "Ed, Jeannette, let me in."

I hurried to the door, fearing something had happened to John, feeling guilty that we had let him go home alone. I let him in. Jeannette had grabbed a robe and was standing in the diningroom. John stared at both of us then told it: "MEDGAR HAS BEEN KILLED! THEY SHOT HIM. HE'S DEAD."