

Ed King
Mid June 1963
Jailson
after Medgar
Jackson funeral
to war riot -
Pressure on
NAACP to
stop movement
and John S. Alden
+ E.K. told me
had been convicted
in secret trials
& new
43
many failed
prison
NO legal
- ok
we could
leave
state -
w. min
6 hours
or else

been proposed to the attorney by someone else, perhaps the white city official with whom he had talked earlier that morning. But who proposed the idea to start with? Washington?)

Charles
there
defining
but using
in to
lead
on a
section
Evangelical
Faith

We were not about to run. We refused the offer, the threat, the deal, of banishment from the state and the Jackson Movement. This weird business amazed both of us. John had been shocked at Medgar's murder but, as a white Mississippian, I knew violence and lynching was possible. But this was no white Dixie scheme. This latest twist had a stench of complexity and sophistication that did not smell of Mississippi mud. Something is rotten in the state of ... of ... somewhere.

Compton
imagine
how
my
putting
is
with
to
editors?

The black attorney explained he had to report our decision to some authorities hinting at a white city attorney. "They" were waiting to know. So, in our very presence, he phoned the unknown (to us) white authorities of Mississippi or Washington or, probably, both. We heard only the one call as he explained our refusal. (And only one week earlier this attorney and other men from National NAACP had been with Medgar Evers late that awful night. I know what Medgar told me. He must have told them the same thing, and refused their insistence that he obey the injunctions, end the demonstrations, and do what National NAACP and Washington wanted. Was someone phoned the word of Medgar's refusal and defiance?)

We were appalled and frightened but told the attorney we would drive back to Tougaloo College and begin calling all the national support groups we knew for help with our own pending imprisonment. We would especially call many national press contacts, Dr. Martin Luther King, the National Council of Churches and others, on our tapped phones.

There was no point in pleading our innocence of the riot charges. Our innocence

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could hardly matter to NAACP or whomever was pressuring them. Our influence with the Tougaloo students, with CORE, with SNCC, with Martin Luther King, and, especially, with the black people of Jackson who had loyally followed Medgar Evers did matter. The NAACP was taking this opportunity to get rid of us from the Jackson Movement as well as their fear of defending anyone charged with "rioting."

Police were watching the street door when we left and followed us on foot to John's well known car. We started the drive back and a police began tailing us. A few blocks away on Farish Street near Blair Street I became very worried. I leaned over John and locked his door; my own was already secure. The police followed us several miles as we started home on our usual route. We never got there.

After a few blocks we realized the police tail was not in sight but John continued his usual cautious driving, always about five miles below the speed limit, to try to avoid false traffic tickets. It would have been bizarre to have been given a \$15.00 traffic ticket then picked up an hour later on \$15,000.00 bond. We were discussing our strategy. We thought that even if not killed we would be in jail ten days or more. No one had tried to raise this amount of money. And I knew that even some church groups might be afraid to support us with the conviction of violence and assaulting a policeman. We worried about the direction of the Jackson Movement under national NAACP control and especially the importance of talking to the newly appointed Charles Evers, Medgar's brother, just announced as his replacement. We had to tell him about the struggle led by his brother the past few weeks.

Suddenly a car driven by a white man lunged out at us from a side street. The driver, an Ole Miss student from the campus of the Meredith riots only a few months earlier,

was the son of a noted white racist attorney, Citizens' Council leader, politician, and advisor to Gov. Ross Barnett. Salter, an alert driver, already moving cautiously because of light rain earlier and the police tail, spotted the charging car and swerved, but a third car was forced into our path by the white driver. Collision. The only serious injuries were to John Salter and myself. We were both unconscious. My last memory is of the white car seemingly deliberately coming at us.

Days later, in the hospital, John told me what else happened.

The white police arrived quickly. A crowd of white people (it was an all white neighborhood) gathered around the car. Salter regained consciousness and stared at me. I looked dead. I was still unconscious, my head and body covered in blood. He could not tell that a large part of my face had been sheared off when my head went through the window. John was then blinded from the blood from his own head injuries and blacked out again. A few moments later he awakened to the sound of laughter from the white men and women gathered around the car, talking this time about the hated Tougaloo College agitators. John was reassured about my condition when he saw a policeman examining me. The disgusted officer called to a second officer, "Hell, King's still alive." Now John knew I was not dead.

"How's Salter?" the man asked.

"Shit. He'll live," said the one at John's window.

John managed to speak to the policeman. "Take us to St. Dominic's Hospital," he said, then passed out again. John revived as we were being placed in the ambulance. Looking around he saw happy white faces staring at him. He says I tried to say something about the white man forcing the wreck. He could hear the white giggling and snickering

until the ambulance siren drowned out other noises.

We were not taken to St. Dominic's (a segregated Roman Catholic institution where Tougaloo faculty were treated with a little more respect than the city's other segregated hospitals.) Instead we were taken to the Southern Baptist Hospital, a longer trip, bypassing the Emergency Room of the University of Mississippi Medical Center along the way. Since I was in critical condition I was given treatment first. I never regained full consciousness the first hours after the wreck. John was now awake but sometimes pretended to be asleep. He saw and heard many strange things in that emergency ward, all confirmed by friendly black orderlies and hospital aides and, later, by some of the white staff of the hospital.

The first problem came when the hospital discovered that we were not normal injured men but the allies of Medgar Evers, the notorious agitators accused of leading a mob riot after Medgar's funeral two days earlier. As John listened several men from the hospital business staff came to the ambulance entrance. We had both been placed on stretchers. One of the hospital authorities argued that they should refuse to treat us. During this weighty discussion several nurses were examining me and told the officials of my condition, now near death. The hospital officials were worried and the man who seemed to be in charge stated, "OK, if King's that bad off, we'll have to take them. If he dies here his wife will probably sue us. We can't have that. Go ahead. Take them both into Emergency. But all we have to do is keep them alive. That's all."

The businessmen found even that was not too easy. The first white physician came in to treat me. When told who his dying patient was, the doctor refused to treat me and walked out of the emergency room. The staff of the ER gave us all the immediate help we needed

until a new physician could come. This man, Dr. H. C. Ethridge, obviously knew who we were, but his professional ethics as a physician and his decency as a human, would never let Mississippi prejudice or emotion lead him to walk away from an injured person.

After some treatment I would regain consciousness for a few moments then pass out again. I strained to be alert.

"Where's the rest of his face?" The doctor was arguing with the ambulance crew-- about my missing face. This did arouse my curiosity. I had been determined to stay alive until I could do something to help John Salter. The words I heard seemed unreal. The doctor's voice grew angrier. "Get back out to that ambulance and find it! How many times do I have to tell you to bring all the parts, all the pieces? You better not have left his face in the street, in the gutter and dirt of that wreck. Find it now or go back out there and get it."

Eventually some attendant rushed back in with the trophy, the missing face, muttering, "We've found it. We've got it," (after, so I was told much later, a policeman went back and retrieved the rest of my face from the accident scene.) It did seem to me that now was the time to black out again but I thought I was dying so held on to help John.

Beyond the doctor's voice I heard several white voices discussing the wreck and the three cars involved. I assumed that Salter was already being blamed for the wreck. I was afraid I might die before I could say enough to clear him. I managed enough strength to mumble a few words about the white man who had come out of the side street at us, forcing the other driver and Salter into a wreck. I didn't know whether anyone could understand me or not, but I felt satisfied that I was protecting John. Now I could black out again. I had only a few moments of consciousness for the next 30 hours.

John Salter remained fully conscious. He said he was determined to remain conscious once he heard the hospital official debating about even treating me. John was trying to protect me but all he could do was keep awake and listen. From his cot he watched the parade of curious whites who had come to stare at the notorious agitators--nurses, secretaries, and other hospital personnel. Then came the police. At first John thought they might have come to give him some kind of traffic ticket. But they had just come to see the sight. As John feigned sleep over a dozen white policemen came into the area. They looked through the doorway into the room where I was receiving emergency treatment; then, in a single file, they paraded past Salter, looking down on him, he thought, as they might have done walking past a bier. As the last man in the line approached, Salter opened his one unbandaged eye and stared at the man. The policeman was startled and rushed off to join his sadistic comrades. When John was finally rolled into surgery he looked up at the white masked white faces hovering over him, ready to give him the anesthesia. Before he lost consciousness he made a determined effort to speak: "You'd like to kill me, wouldn't you?"

The hospitalization of Salter and King was major news in Jackson and only two days after the local Sunday papers had proclaimed us as riot leaders and implied we were Reds. At Tougaloo College Pat Hutchinson (whose husband, Bill, had been jailed with us in a demonstration the week before Medgar's murder) was watching TV that day. A special news bulletin announced that the two white Tougaloo agitators, Salter and King, had just been seriously injured in an automobile accident. The TV gave the hospital where we had been taken. Pat rushed out of her house and over to tell Jeannette. Fortunately she had not gotten the news yet on TV or radio. She and Pat called the hospital and got more details. Then

they called Dr. Beittel, President of the College, who took Jeannette to the hospital. After making sure of our condition and treatment and after signing all the hospital statements proving we were affluent enough to pay our bills, Jeannette finally was able to phone Eldri Salter, who was momentarily staying with her family in Minnesota. She had gone there after escalating bomb threats to protect their baby, Maria. They too well remembered the recent Christmas season when a sniper fired a rifle through her window, the bullet passing just above her crib.

Jimmy Ward and the staff at the Jackson Daily News had to work hard in order to print a picture of Salter's damaged Rambler on the top front page of the late edition of the afternoon newspaper. The article made it evident that Salter and King both had been seriously injured and would be hospitalized a long time. In Jackson that was treated as major news. The Clarion-Ledger the next morning also carried a picture with its story. This was very unusual treatment for an automobile accident in which there were no fatalities.

At some point the next day I awakened. Jeannette was there. Salter was in the bed next to me asleep. I tried to talk to Jeannette but could not say much. She then left the room to get a coke. Almost as soon as she closed the door behind her I heard voices in the hallway. The door opened slightly and a young white woman peeked in. Someone behind her said, "Are you sure this is the right room?"

The head in the doorway answered, "Of course it is. I know it's them, I've already seen them twice. His wife is gone and they're both asleep. Come on in and look." The tour guide led in two more young women. They did not know I was awake. The three women, all in their early twenties, were dressed in colorful summer outfits. They were not

nurses uniforms. Their clothes, voices, and bouffant hairdos made me think they were secretaries, telephone operators, or some kind of hospital clerical staff. The experienced guide gave her lecture. "This one, with all the bandages, is King," she said sweetly and then, with just the right touch of drama in her voice and pointing with her finger, "and that one is Salter." All three stood at the foot of the bed, almost trembling. It was if they had come to see some captured wild animals who had been terrorizing the village.

"Let's go," said one nervous bouffant. "They might wake up." The ladies quietly backed out of the door and gently closed it.

By the time Jeannette returned I was asleep again. Much later that afternoon I mentioned the incident to Jeannette and John, wondering if I had dreamed it. No, I certainly had not, they assured me. Both of them had often seen hospital staff, men and women, open the doors to stare at us.

There was a strange kind of benefit to Jeannette and me from our special status as curiosities in the hospital. Jeannette's mother, Mrs. Emily Sylvester, was a nursing supervisor who had worked at Baptist Hospital for many years. Although John and I were not placed on her floor she could still come by to check on us and speak to Jeannette. Having us in the hospital should have been terribly embarrassing to her and she could have chosen to hide the fact that she was my mother-in-law. But her professional sense of duty was shocked at the behavior of the physician whose prejudice had kept him from helping us. As typical of many good white Southerners, Mrs. Sylvester did not like to think about the race crisis. She wanted all people to be treated fairly and assumed that segregation simply meant "separate but equal." But when a medical doctor was so full of hatred that he could

refuse to treat an injured man, she knew something was wrong. As my mother-in-law saw the power of hatred so dominant in people she had respected she began to comprehend the depth of the sickness in Mississippi and part of the reason Jeannette and I believed in the necessity of agitation and joining the Movement. Our family relationship, which had been so disrupted because of my civil rights activities, began to be restored.

Jeannette had talked to my mother, Mrs. Julia Tucker King, in Memphis and convinced her I was not seriously injured. My mother was so hostile to our civil rights work and so afraid of what other white Southerners would say that it was best to keep her away from the hospital to prevent an emotional breakdown on her part. She had spent enough time in hospitals with my father, Ralph, whose death from heart attacks had occurred less than two months earlier. Fortunately my mother did not read the Jackson papers or see the local television or she would have known both of us were seriously injured.

My family in Vicksburg, 45 miles away, did know. Marie Tucker, the aunt who had been closest to me of everyone outside the immediate family heard and read about the injuries. She decided to come to Jackson to visit me in the hospital. One of my uncles went to her (as she later explained to me) and persuaded her not to come. My aunt was a public school teacher. She had taught in the Vicksburg city schools for almost fifty years and was one of the most loved and respected persons in the town. She was to retire in one more year. School board officials contacted this uncle and told him that if my aunt visited me in the hospital this would mean the school board would have to fire her from her teaching position and her retirement pay would be jeopardized.

My grandfather, J. W. Tucker, had been the chairman of that same school board and

sheriff of Warren County many years earlier. His father, Captain Thomas Tucker, was a Confederate veteran who fought in Virginia where a cousin was killed by the Yankees at Manassas, Bull Run. And their great grandfather fought the British in the American Revolution with Carleton's Raiders in the South Carolina swamps. In the past twenty years my aunt's family had provided civic leadership in the community, with relatives holding major city and county public offices. As a child I took such family roles for granted, as the things good responsible citizens do for their communities. As a child I was also thrilled to live directly across the street from the Sheriff, my Uncle Johnnie Williamson and his wife, Aunt Lucy, and my cousins. My Uncle Dee (Arthur Lee) was County Tax Assessor; when he died his widow, my Aunt Nell, took over the job for a while in the 1950s. I believed that what I was doing in the sixties, working with the Civil Rights Movement, was a proper way of continuing family tradition of service and citizenship.

The people who threatened my school teacher aunt belonged to the educated leadership of the community, the moderate element, those solid, respectable citizens who run every small town in America. These people, including my family, were always kind to Negroes and hostile to the extremists of the klan and even the Citizens' Council and John Birch variety. (My grandfather as Sheriff had once saved the life of a black woman by standing up to the KKK.) Now good middle class people were threatening other good middle class people. Not only had these people known my family, especially my school teacher aunt, for many years, but they had known me all my life. The tragedy of the breakdown of morality and decency in white Mississippi is as clearly revealed in this situation as any big event in the state's modern history. The good people were so afraid that they had to

threaten another good person, a person who agreed with them, a person who shared none of my new beliefs, and that person was made to feel miserable as she wrestled with the simple decision of visiting a seriously injured nephew in a hospital. She was not able to be decent, to be good, to do what she knew was right. She sent a "get-well" card to the hospital.

This was the problem of the South, from Jamestown in 1619 to Vicksburg in 1963. Because of the monster we had created, in Slavery and in Segregation, in the denial of the humanity of the black people, our needs for economic security, emotional security, political security, and our "Bible-Belt" faith all worked together to guarantee that the white Southerner was always in chains of our own making. The most tragic slavery in the world is that of the good man or woman who is not free to be good.

The good news that we can be freed from that bondage must come from outside that society. The blow that shatters those bonds must come from outside that society. In the South it was once seemed necessary for foreign troops to march, and burn, and kill... that the slaves might make the first steps towards freedom. But by the 1960s new bonds of prejudice, poverty, and segregation had been forged. The Jackson Movement to break the bonds of segregation had been a great effort by native black Mississippians led by a great and good man, one of them, Medgar Evers. For many reasons the Jackson Movement had failed. Now all decent men and women should have known that Mississippi, white or black, could not save itself. Help would again have to come from outside. It is strange that we did not always know this in the South for it was the Southern religion, in white and black churches, that proclaimed the necessity of God sending His Only Son into the world to redeem the people from the bondage of sin.