

# Moments in a Southern Town

## 'THIS LITTLE LIGHT ...'

Peter de Lissovoy

Two hours after the President put his name to the civil rights bill last July, Nathaniel "Spray-man" Beech pulled open the wood-and-glass front door of the Holiday Inn restaurant in Albany, Ga., and dashed, like musical chairs, to the very first

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table he saw. In a near corner, a plump, brown-suited woman popped a white hand to her full mouth, but let escape: "Oh my soul and body!" To the right, a child pointed, and its mother slapped the tiny hand and whispered urgently. Spray-man tucked a shirt wrinkle into his black, high-pegged trousers, removed his shades, studied a water glass.

In the split moment that the door stood open, Phyllis Martin, a SNCC

field worker from New York, had slipped in before him. Her skin is soft mahogany, her hair natural, a silver-black bowl about her head. She stood, dark-eyed, staring around the dining room, and I came up, after Spray-man, and stood next to her. When the wax-smiling head waitress approached, Phyllis raised her eyes a little and pointed sternly, and the waitress obediently led the way to a central table. After a mo-

ment Spray-man summoned up his long limbs, rose, breathing deep and joined us; and by the time we had ordered he was holding down a nervous grin.

But when his steak arrived, Spray-man could hardly eat it. "Jus' ain' hungry," he apologized, more to the meat than anything else. He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief, and leaned over to explain: "What it is, I was expectin' everything but this. I was expectin' this waitress to say, 'Would y'all min' fallin' back out that door you jus' come in at?' The niceness got my appetite, I guess."

At this time, Spray-man was operating a shoeshine stand—among other things, for to "spray" is to hustle—in the entrance way of the Beehive Bar in Albany's Harlem. In his few years, he has seen a great deal of this country and taken his meals from many tables; yet here was one at which he had never expected to sit—nor ever wanted to. The white man could walk as he pleased on his side of town, but let him watch his step in Harlem: that was the geography of Spray-man's pride. And yet, improvised from a harsh reality though his was, pride hates all boundaries, and I was hardly surprised when he told me he wanted to come along when we tried out the new law. If he was supposed to have a right, he would enjoy it—once anyway. In the car, he was full of cracks; and then, in front of the restaurant, I felt him grow tense. A sense of Southern realities deeper than his pride told him he would have to fight, go to jail perhaps, and he was ready.

But the waitress was icily gracious all during the meal. Such was the strength of the President's signa-



ture. Nobody sat at the tables directly adjacent to ours, but nobody got up and left. Everybody stared or took pains to avoid staring. Nearest to us, a family of five giggled and glanced as if galloping through some marvelous adventure.

"Reminds me of up North," said Phyllis.

"What—the stares?" I suggested. "Yeah . . . and the music." From some hidden orifice, the tensionless, sexless music that you hear in airplanes before take-off was falling like gray rain. We decided that the next thing would be to integrate the sounds of places.

Spray-man gave up on his steak about halfway through. When Phyllis finished, the waitress descended upon her plates like a cheery vulture, hurrying us. Abruptly, we were weary. "You 'bout ready?" Phyllis asked. I scraped up a little more and we rose. Spray-man left the waitress an exorbitant tip.

All heads turned to watch us leave. Several white men followed us from the foyer into the parking lot. I started the motor and we rolled out into the street. Spray-man looked out the window. "Well . . ." he started; and then again, "Well . . ." Phyllis turned to him. "What's the matter? Doesn't progress make you happy?"

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At about 2 in the morning, Sunday, July 12, Bo Riggins, manager and part-owner of the Cabin in the Pines, tapped me on the shoulder and nodded toward the door. The "Pines" is a bar and dance hall, a key club, a motel, and a restaurant all strung out beneath some scraggly Georgia pine on a lonely road just south of the Albany city limits. With some white money behind it and Bo Riggins fully at the mercy of the Dougherty County police,

who are a good deal more rabid than the very rabid city cops, the night-spot had formerly been "black only." When the civil rights bill became law, I took a certain pleasure in seeing it integrated.

But, following me outside this night, Riggins was a frightened man. Sure, he conceded to me, though I had said nothing, there was the new law; but since when had *law* meant anything around here? Somebody might not know who I was. I might get cut, or shot, and where would he be then? He didn't have anything against me personally—nor my color—but he had to think of his business. Couldn't I understand? He paused; but before I could respond, he blurted, "Ah! Here the police now."

Sure enough, a county patrol car had rolled up, and two uniformed men were sauntering over.

"This boy causin' any disturbance?"

"No suh, but I'm scared they be some trouble. It's late. . . ."

"You want him off yo premises?"

"He ain' did nothin', but ita be bes' I think. I don' want him aroun' . . ."

My mouth full of the irony of it all, I was packed off quickly to the county jail, charged with trespassing and drunk-and-disorderly—the latter a simple frame and the former a matter of law. The chief deputy told me that he didn't know what the country was coming to, and he grew red in the face. He introduced me at the "tank" door ("Comin' up, anothe nigguh-lovuh . . ."), and I was pitched, biting my lips, into the company of a check-artist, an escapee, a dognapper, two mattress thieves, a wife-beater, a safe-cracker and assorted winos—all very white and proud of it.

The next day, in Harlem, a col-



lection was started for my bond money; but that was going to take time. A friend of mine, a Baptist deacon and old schoolmate of Bo Riggins, paid the man a call to bawl him out and ask him to drop charges: "Now the whites startin' to do right, we can't one of us keep the wrong alive." This was simplifying matters somewhat, because it was white pressure of course that made Riggins do what he had done; but he was the visible opposition. And he was obstinate. Indignation spread in the black community, and was frustrated.

But the reaction among Negroes might have been anticipated. The sentiments of the white men with whom I had to live for a week in jail were a bit more complicated. Had I been arrested while participating in the standard sort of demonstration or sit-in, their response would have been straightforward: open hostility and perhaps the convening of a kangaroo court, with a beating or jail fine as sentence. But as it was, the two initial reactions were a sneering, almost moral disapproval, as if I had been arrested for public indecency, and a simple, stark astonishment that I could have been so stupid, so lacking in imagination, as to think that I could get away with "mixin'" in south Georgia.

Jail is a place for talking, like a barbershop. In a south Georgia jail, all are friends, if not kin, and the jailbirds pass their time reminiscing, berating mutual acquaintances, and reassuring one another of their deeper innocence. There were three real talkers in the cell with me: the escapee, who had sawed through the bars with a file smuggled to him in a bag of crushed ice, only to trip over a sleeping dog a few feet from the jail; one of the mattress thieves, who claimed to have stolen all manner of valuables in his career, only to suffer the irony of being framed as a \$5 mattress-pincher; and the fat, hairy safe-cracker, who spent the time he wasn't talking trying to seduce the dognapper, a rosy-cheeked 18-year-old, who threw shoes and tobacco cans at him. Inevitably, my presence injected "race" into every day's bull session. I remember one fragment. The safe-cracker was off chasing his indignant prey; the unsuccessful escapee, the mattress thief and I were leaning on an improvised sofa at one end of the cell:

UE: *The new law . . .*

MT: *What new law?*

UE: *The nigguh law. Jesus! The civil rights law. It's gonna change some things, but mos' alla life down heah gonna go on jes' the same. . . .*

MT: *It ain' gonna change me. It ain' nothin' but anotheh civil wah gonna change me an' then they hafta shoot me 'fo I sit down t' table with one a them.*

UE [turning to me]: *You see how it is down heah? [He reached over and pinched the thief's cheek.] This heah a Southern white man. But overlook it. S'posin' it works an' we all mixed up in the hotels an' restaur'ants. So what? After a while, somebody gonna get tired a the bad feelin'—nigguhs or the white folk one—an' they'll stop comin'. This law ain't gonna mean shit along the whole run a life.*

I had to agree; after all, I was in jail because of my little bit of confidence in the new law. I didn't tell him that I wished the act had some teeth in it; I didn't tell him that I wanted federal armies to make it work, that I wanted stronger, wider legislation in the future. As a matter of fact, there were a whole lot of banners I wasn't waving. I was doing what in a black man would be called "Tomming"—and I was glad I knew how. I wasn't going to get my head broken trying to reform men that nobody—from Jesus to Johnson—could have swayed.

Later in the week, a tall, solid fellow with snakes inked up and down his arms was led in to "sober up." He never got the chance—or perhaps it was a ruse from the start. One of the deputies took a good look at his face and build and promised him a pint of whiskey if he would knock me down a few



times. But the others were not much for it; they had gotten used to me and, if they weren't about to lay hands on him in my defense, they weren't going to encourage him either. Most of the fun for him would have been in the applause, so I got off with *buying* him a pint. Liquor can always be had for a price on the Dougherty County Jail black market, though you can't be too sure of your brand. It came in a large, waxed dixie cup. He got properly loaded then, and it was necessary to lose heavily at blackjack to keep him peaceful.

In the end, most of the jailbirds came to pity me. "Boy, that ol' judge gonna hang yo' ass. This south Georgia, boy, you can't get away with things like maybe in New York. . . ." And when it came to the pinch, it was the law that was the enemy. They kidded me almost warmly when I was called out for the commitment hearing that Attorney C. B. King had arranged. "Lessen that nigguh lawyer a yours do some mighty fine talkin', we gonna see you back 'fo long. Save you a place in the game."

The judge dismissed both charges. Bo Riggins couldn't remember anyone who had seen me "drunk and disorderly" and I had several witnesses to swear that I was neither. The judge did not seem to have heard of the civil rights law—or at least considered it irrelevant and inapplicable to the trespassing charge; but he had to dismiss it when Riggins admitted that he never actually asked me to leave, but rather just complied with the apparent wishes of the police in the matter.

It seemed to have gone amazingly smoothly. Outside, Attorney King explained why: An election was imminent. My case was virtually unknown in the white community; the newspapers had made nothing out of it. So the judge could gain nothing by sending me back to jail, and he just might catch a few black votes if he did the "nigguh lawyer" a favor. I wondered if the jailbirds would figure it out. A little later I sent them some ice cream. I was going back to the "Pines" and I didn't know but that I would be seeing them again.

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Early on a Saturday afternoon some days later, a dark, gawky boy in jeans and sport shirt was rigging a microphone and amplifier in the barren front yard of an unpainted

clapboard house in Harlem. He placed two boxes before the mike, sat upon one, lowered the silver head of the device to the level of his mouth, and then produced a guitar which he picked idly until a great, black woman in pink flowing robes and blue-cloth crown poured suddenly from the house porch and heaved down beside him. She took the guitar and commenced tuning it, hummed and tuned, hummed and tuned, until a crowd had started. And then she sang.

Her voice was weary but warm, thick but expressive, a blues voice. She sang religious songs and old ballads and songs made popular by the Movement. Her favorite, the one she repeated most often during the day and evening, was a talking blues that roved around the chorus: "Oh, there was a death in Dallas that day. . . ." It was not so much ominous or foreboding as just terribly regretful, a sighing, head-shaking exclamation of loss. Like each of her songs, the Kennedy-blues worked into a sermon, the substance of which was invariably "trust in the Lord, who giveth and taketh away, for they ain't nothin' else trustworthy" (with a few minor forays into such areas as the evil inherent in woman). Then she passed the hat.

The crowd of listeners was always large. I was in Harlem that day and stayed until nearly midnight, listening to her. At about 8 in the evening, the size of her audience reached its peak, spilling over a curbstone in one direction, backing into a gas station in another. There were sharecroppers, factory workers, housewives; dancing, scurrying children; the celebrated and gently lunatic old woman who checks the doors and windows of all the business establishments in Harlem shortly after midnight every night and reports to the cop on the beat any unusual discoveries, happy tonight, shouting, grinning; and the occasional hipster, sheepish at being in this crowd, at wanting to be there, an eye cocked for the running mate who would most surely call sarcastically, "Hey baby, got 'ligion? Go on now—get happy!" About 8:30, a late-model Chevrolet rolled to a halt at the edge of the gathering, and three young white men got out, slamming doors, and moved into the singing crowd.

One of them immediately engaged a Negro youth in nervous,

eyes-flicking conversation. The second, a tall and rake-thin fellow, with long, narrow sideburns, began, modestly, to enjoy himself, clapping and singing in perfect rhythm, his face glowing slightly. The third was drunk. For minutes, he seemed uncertain about what was happening or where he was; then, when things began to clear, he started singing and clapping too—or rather shouting hoarsely and beating his hands together at arbitrary and irregular intervals. At this display, his tall friend was shocked to the point of fright. He tried to get the drunk to the car, gave it up when he grew red and loud and stiffly resistant, and then simply moved away, attempting to dissociate himself.

For a long time, the drunken white boy was merely a tiny shallows in a great, fast river, really offensive only to the thinning few around him. Then, suddenly, as if responding to some vision or internal force, he strode violently forward and demanded the microphone from the ironically—and tolerantly—smiling lady preacher, to ask: "What y'all starin' at us fo'? We white—sho. But that ain' no reason to stare. The bill a rights done been pass'! We got a right. We gonna stay, an I'm gonna as' this kin' lady to sing *This lil' light a mine fo' the white people a Albany, G-A, who need it, God knows. . . .*"

The drunk's two friends were visibly mortified. Not at what he had said, but at his having said anything at all—at his having drawn unnecessary and additional attention to their presence. The first intensified his dialogue with the Negro youth as if to shut out the awful reality of what had just happened. In a moment, the taller, side-burned white man had seized his swaying buddy around the shoulders and bundled him, yelling and protesting,

off to their car. The talker trotted to catch up. The car roared and the tall white waved an apologetic and helpless goodbye from the driver's wheel. The drunk was slumped in the seat, whooping: "Hooray fo' the niggus! Hoo-hoo-hooray fo' the niggus!"

But already the singer had taken up where she had left off. Nobody much bothered to hear the drunk's rantings; it was a matter of discipline, a very old discipline.

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I was shooting nine-ball in a Harlem poolroom. It was dinner time, family time, on a Friday night in America, and the room was filled with people who had no better place to go. I powdered my hands and sank the winning ball in a combination with the two—and looked up to see five white hustlers appear in the doorway like apparitions out of the foggy night, combing their hair, wiping the water from their foreheads.

"Who wants to shoot?" drawled the skinniest. His voice cracked at the end, and so he repeated the question with force. It sounded beligerent, so he smiled, stupidly.

Eyes blinked. Bodies stirred. Butterball, who had been napping in the corner, rose up and stretched his bulk. He settled his red baseball cap over his eyes. "You got any money, Whitey?" When the white boy flashed a roll, I stepped back from my table. Butter' picked up a stick and called for the houseman to rack.

"What's your name, Whitey?"

For a moment, the white fellow wondered how to answer this question most forcefully, and then he simply let it out, a short nasal squeak. Butter' looked down the row of tables: "Hey, Rut! You hear that? Go on look up his daddy in the phone book, fin' out how much coin he got. I'm gonna take all



Whitey's money tonight!" He leaned back on the heels of his tennis shoes and laughed with all his weight.

"No you aint!" Rut, just as heavy as Butter' and infinitely meaner in the eyes, was heaving down the aisle. "Whitey got way more money'n you can have by y'self, big as you is." He stood before the rest of the white team. "Which one a you boys gonna put a ten down on this first game?"

On a Friday night, the poolroom is always crowded by 8. Tonight, when word got around what was happening, old men and young poured in until the house had to close its doors, so that the players might have space to shoot. It looked like the Olympic games; and, in a sense, it was.

Butter' and Whitey were a good match. They played past midnight, and, as it turned out, Butter' lost a little. On other tables, "Schoolboy" Terry and Peter "Rabbit" Harris skinned a blond-headed boy whose nickname really was "Whitey," and a laconic, bespectacled, middle-aged hustler with a beautiful if inaccurate stroke. Side bets went round and round. On the whole, the whites lost money, but not nearly as much as would be claimed the next day. When it was all over, Butter', gentleman that he is, took the crew around the corner for drinks. "How 'bout it Whitey?" he asked. "We gonna

shoot a little over your side tomorrow?"

"Sure."

"Won't be no shit?"

"Not if you bring your money."

For weeks, the game ran on—the white hustlers appearing in Harlem, black hustlers visiting the white poolrooms. "It's the new law," said Butter'. "Integration always starts over sport."

But not every small-town hustler can shoot nine-ball for \$5 and \$10 a game. Most make their little money disillusioning country boys, in from the dim lights and hacked tables of south Georgia's tinier hamlets, or the Albany workmen, tanked up and sure that they are the greatest. "Integrated pool" was only for the best, who could win, or lose big money at big matches. The best soon knew one another and were wary; the novelty wore off and the poolrooms, white and black, returned to their normal, and tedious, business.

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It is November. The man who signed a bill and integrated the poolrooms is retained in power. I wonder if Butter' voted. Or Spray-man, taking time off from shining shoes.

That first night, after the Holiday Inn, he had been confused; the experience had not had any immediate meanings. But a few hours later, outside a Negro bar in south Albany, called the Playhouse, he had

nodded at the crowded doorway: "Lookit all them Negroes, don't know nothin' bout what's happened yet."

A few minutes and a few beers later, he was checking the hand of a girl who was about to drop a dime in the juke box. He carried a chair to the center of the floor, climbed atop it, shouted the crowd silent and the dancing to a halt, and related, in a loud, laughing voice, the events over on the white side. A few applauded. Most listened politely for a minute or two, but soon conversation started again, and Spray-man was struggling against an indifferent current. He looked over at me, apologetically I felt. I waved with great emotion for him to forget it, but he had his hackles up and went on.

A young man with ironic eyes nudged me. "It's fine," he said. "Fine, if you got plenty money to eat at the Holiday Inn. Me, all I got's this one little quarter, an' I ain't expectin' nothin' soon. Tell y' frien' I'm sorry, but I gotta put it in the piccolo. I'm gonna have me 25c worth a soun', an' no history. . . ."

When the music started, Spray-man glanced around angrily. But, when it was clear he was overcome; drowned in sound, he grinned reluctantly, then wide. He shrugged, stepped across the floor to replace the chair and, in a moment was dancing.