

Easter of 1963 came in mid-April, at the height of the Mississippi spring. In Boston the arrival of spring was a very dramatic thing following the long winter months; in Mississippi spring was the most gentle season. Spring took over the landscape with a slow assurance, born of the confidence that the Sun ruled this land, that there had never been any doubt about the struggle against the frost. The first yellow flowers of daffodils came in January; then, in a slow movement for weeks and weeks, new colors appeared and faded into more colors until the pastel green of the new leaves on the trees finally turned the dark green of their permanent summer color, as the bright green of the grass turned dull under the steady sun.

Easter Sunday in New England had meant that the altar of Grace Methodist Church in Cambridge was surrounded with banks of Easter Lilies — as an almost sympathetic magic ritual to guarantee that one day, many weeks away, the spring flowers would return despite the snow still covering the earth of Massachusetts. In Mississippi the flowers on the Easter altars were a minor reflection of the visible abundance of the earth . . . Perhaps the Christian faith is more necessary in a harsh northern climate? . . . But, then, Palestine had its Passover festival in the spring, surely a sign of victory of life over death, a celebration with a history much older than Moses in Egypt . . . and Palestine had the confident sun of Mississippi . . . but Palestine had the rocky earth of New England . . . In Mississippi the gentle spring and the terrible summer must have convinced the men who lived here that change was of little significance . . . that struggle against the ways of life was as senseless as struggle against the sun. But the turmoil of the past two years, the presence of the Movement in Mississippi — even Mississippi — had released a new spirit in the land. In some Black churches the Easter prayer was for a new birth of Freedom.

The beauty of the Tougaloo campus was full. The gnarled vine of the wisteria sent a shower of lavender from the carved eaves of the "Mansion" all the way to the ground. Waxy buds of the Magnolia were visible . . . But the Magnolia, the "official" Mississippi tree, is an evergreen, its huge leaves still so green in midwinter that they are used in Christmas garlands . . . Despite its immense white blooms, spring never seemed vital to the Magnolia tree. In the woods beyond the

chapel were more evergreens, pines and cedars, that also never showed much seasonal change — until disease or lightning struck and the evergreen became a ragged red-brown skeleton. One thing was more unchanging than the evergreens — the Spanish Moss, the Hanging Moss, its lifeless-deathless gray tentacled mass drooping in a heavy way from some ancient branch, or fluttering in an almost weightless way with some breath of warm air. Nevertheless Mississippi did have one sure sign of Easter. The first of the trees of the wood to flower, even before there were many green buds on the great trees, was the tiny dogwood — with its white blossoms in the shape of the Cross and a tiny spot of blood from the wounds of the nails at the broken edge of each petal, the very tree (so Mississippi's children, Black and white were told) whose wood the Romans used to make the Cross.

As life was being strengthened in the earth my father was losing his own struggle for life. On the Sunday after Easter he died. (Jeannette and I had made some short visits to Memphis

during the winter. There was very little conversation for any of us when we visited my parents. *They and my younger brother had been in Memphis only a little over two years.* His first heart attack had come two days after we told my parents we were moving to Tougaloo College. *All that winter* despite their fear and protest, Jeannette and I knew my father had little strength. *left*

after Easter there was another heart attack. My father was returned to the hospital, to be kept alive by the machinery of an intensive care unit. We rushed up to Memphis and waited. We could only see my father for brief moments during the day. After several days at the hospital I decided

I had to return to Mississippi for one afternoon. Tougaloo College was having a ceremonial affair — to officially install Dr. Dan Beittel as President (two years late) and to install me as the college chaplain. I returned to the campus for the program because I did not want to offend anyone at

Tougaloo. (I knew that many students and teachers were just not sure that they wanted any Mississippi white person on their campus — even one with a Movement "record." On a Black campus this kind of academic festival was much more important than on a white campus. Not to be present, even with the most legitimate of reasons, would say to someone — or to many people — that their new chaplain, the white one, the Mississippi white one, did not really respect

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My father's

or appreciate their traditions. My father's doctors told me that his condition, unchanged in several days, was unpredictable. So I drove back.) My father died while I was at Tougaloo. Jeannette had stayed in Memphis and was with my mother at his bedside when death came.

I returned to Memphis and made the funeral arrangements. My friend from Corinth, the Rev. Sam Tomlinson, came over and gave me great help. After the services in Memphis we went to Vicksburg for the final services and burial. Here I saw the fullness of the hate that had been nurtured in Mississippi for so many years. Now it was not just a matter of people not being free to do good; now the hate-fear (and guilt?) had overcome the good that was in many people. Some were not even free to be decent. As I saw the power of evil finally destroying even the things that were good about Southern life — the personal relationships, the manners, the grace — I knew again that our choice to work in the Freedom Movement was the struggle for Life. It was the right choice; but the pain, the suffering, the cost were more than expected. The evil was more than expected. I could understand neither. Hope and the future contained no logic — only faith.

The evening before my father's funeral the family gathered at Fisher's Funeral Home. I had been to this place so many times. All the family funerals ^{since 1950} were held here. ^{before that funerals were held} in the past it was always aunts and uncles. Now it was my father. The building was an antebellum home with quiet victorian furnishings inside — and a massive, almost mournful, oak tree outside. Everything was very familiar — except the people. I knew them, had known them all my life — and they all knew me. I had changed — but they had changed even more. The relatives seemed the same as always ^{My Aunt + Marie M. did had ever seen this e last few days with in Memphis at the hosp: vigil.} but the family friends and neighbors often showed the ravages of the shock, the defeats, the fear and hatred of the civil rights turmoil in the state for the past few years. To my amazement there were people who snubbed me, absolutely refused to speak to me. Standing in front of my father's bier there were a few who spoke to everyone in the family and would then give me a cold stare, the hate-look, and pointedly refuse to shake my hand. Some even made comments, suggesting that I should go back north or similar thoughts. One lady, whom I had always known as the essence of gentility and graciousness, expressed her sympathy to my brother, gave my mother

a sympathetic embrace, spoke to my aunts — then walked up to me and said, quietly and firmly, with proper dignity: "I think what you are doing at that nigger college is terrible." Nothing else to me. Then she spoke to my Aunt Nell, "Aren't the flowers just lovely, especially those Easter lilies. . . ." I just stared at the blanket of white lilies covering the coffin. Most people, of course, were proper. But nothing had impressed me like these few good people, now ruled by their hate — and at such a moment, for hate to surface was tragic. And it was frightening.

That night a storm blew into the city from out over the great bend in the river. It would have been a thrilling sight for me had I been a child. My grandparents' home, from where I had watched so many river scenes, had been torn down. My two aunts who had been the last of the family living there had moved to a smaller, modern house. Jeannette and I stayed that night with old family friends, the Puryears, ^{in Aunt Eric's R.E.H.} in their house which was on the line of hills above the river. Before dawn we could hear the distant thunder, the steady movement towards us, and finally the wind and the rain. It was an odd kind of storm. It came with the violence of the summer thunderstorm; but the winds died away, the lightning and thunder ceased, and the rain became a gray, steady, ceaseless thing, like December's ^{blackness.}

The funeral service was in Crawford Street Methodist Church, our family church, the church that taught me Sunday School lessons. In the yard of the church was the grave of a famous circuit rider. It was one of the oldest churches in the state. A former minister and family friend, a man who had first led me down the road of service in the Church to my present path, far from anything he could understand, led the funeral services. This was Brother Tom Prewitt. I was grateful to him for coming back to Vicksburg for this — and for all he had meant to me in my youth. The rain still fell as we left the church and drove through the old streets of Vicksburg, down the same way I had passed on so many other funerals. A short distance beyond the church was Mercy Hospital (used by the Confederates in the War); the City Hall (where my uncles helped manage the civic affairs for generations); the Corps of Engineers Building, where my father worked on the great plans to make man supreme over the river, to control the flood waters

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of the Mississippi. Soon we were at the Old Court House, its many columns and clock tower still crowning a hill that made it visible far out on the curves of the river — and a perfect target for the union gunboats; in later years a Black sheriff was hurled to his death from the balcony — and many years later my Grandfather had his offices there in his term as sheriff; now it was a museum where I had worked as a teenager, guiding tourists through the rooms of Southern memorabilia. We drove on — now the old streets were paved with bricks. On one side was a monument showing a fallen tree; the (1839) inscription showed it as being given “. . . by a grateful citizenry in honor of Dr. Bodley, murdered by the gamblers. . . .” Beyond the old city was “Graveyard Road” and the gates to Cedarlawn Cemetery. This place, surely one of the most beautiful cemeteries in the land, was a necropolis built on even ^{steeper} ~~more~~ hills than the city of Vicksburg. Our journey passed through the Confederate grave sites, placed here rather than with the Union dead in the National Cemetery. Now the rains had paused. The Tucker family plot was at one of the highest points in the cemetery; the bluffs beyond these graves reached up to the Confederate trenches on the old battlefield. Here we buried my father. Nearby were the graves of my mother’s parents. My grandmother, born during the Reconstruction, and a dear memory of my childhood; and my grandfather, born in the days of the Old South, to a slave-holding family, dead several years before my birth — but in some ways a dominant influence on my life as everyone in the family still talked of his character, his deeds, his life; his distinguished face hung as a portrait in all the relatives’ homes. My mother’s family were those who had always ruled the South. My father’s family was the yeoman line in the South. His parents had come to the funeral from their home in the northwest corner of Louisiana, near Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. My grandfather and my grandmother both had the tall, gray, gaunt look of the sturdy people of Appalachia. They knew the struggles of those who never quite find all the riches of the promised land. My father had been born in Oklahoma. But his father was not one of those who got the good land. The family moved back and forth between this last frontier and the early frontier of West Virginia and Ohio. They finally settled in Oil City, Louisiana, to do the hard labor of the

oil fields. As I stood there supporting my grandmother I realized that she looked so much like Jeannette's grandmother that they could be sisters. (Both our families represented the South and America. Strong people, good people — but never so free to do good — hardly the ruling capitalist class of America, but certainly WASPS. These people had made America; they had come from Britain and settled the coast lands, the mountains, and, always, the frontiers. They — and their slaves — had produced much of the wealth that built New England industry and American capitalism. Their problems, their failures, their racism was a visible thing — but they shared this blame and responsibility with all America. If these white Southerners — and their Black neighbor-cousins — could ever overcome their past and their present, with grace, the South might yet be the most favorable place for reconciliation to begin and spread through all America.) As we drove down the hills from the cemetery the rains began again slowly.

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