

Never leaving my stool, I yanked off my suit coat and tried wiping my face with its lining. “We don’t serve niggers here, boy!” shouted the waiter. “Now git outta here!”

Then someone I could only suppose was the store manager walked up behind me and yelled, “The lunch counter is closed, nigger. All of you get out!”

None of us moved.

Taking a deep breath I sat up as straight as I could, placing my hands firmly on the white Formica counter. My burnt face felt like it was shrinking and sizzling off my cheekbones. My shirt was stinging and sticking to my chest like a horde of angry bees. And if I had let it, my heart would have probably jumped straight through my soiled shirt and rolled under the stool I was sitting on.

Some of the soup had also spilled on my thighs, but I wouldn’t dare touch them or pull at my pants leg. I refused to give my persecutors the satisfaction of seeing any more of my discomfort than possible. My waiter stepped back like a proud rooster and once again leaned on the prep area. Behind him the orange juice dispenser was stirring the pulpy liquid as it sloshed around its plastic dome. The chrome milkshake machine stood gleaming by his side, mocking me with its silence.

“Okay, that’s enough now. You boys need to move on out. Ya’ll made your point. Now move!” barked one of the officers from behind me.

Again, no one moved.

“Don’t make us do it the hard way. Move! Now!”

*“I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.”* When forty-five-year-old civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, a field representative for SNCC, spoke those words later in 1962, she voiced the sentiments of every weary civil rights foot soldier in America. Even though she had not yet spoken those words by my seminary years, they were gushing through my veins as the police officer, store manager and my obliging waiter glared at me with enough hatred to poison the air for decades.

Had it only been a few days before that I had sat on the second row at Pullen Memorial Baptist Church and listened to the inspiring words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? It seemed like a hundred years ago that he and Ella Baker, Ralph Abernathy and several other notables from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, CORE, Fellowship of Reconciliation, the National Student Association, Students for a Democratic Society and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People stood before us and inspired us by saying, “Segregation is wrong because it assumes God made a mistake.”

It was those heroes who came to Shaw’s campus on Easter weekend, April 15-17, 1960. Baker, executive secretary to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Dr. King had organized a three-day nonviolence workshop to help student protesters get ourselves organized. It was three days that propelled the course of my life.

Vernon Malone, J.C. Harris and I maneuvered our way toward the front of the Pullen Memorial Baptist Church sanctuary. It was Friday evening on the first day of the workshop—a day highly charged with protests, arrests and injuries.

“Are you sure Jeremiah is alright, Aaron?” asked fellow seminary buddy J.C. Harris. A few student protesters had gotten hurt earlier in the day and had quickly become local heroes.

“Yes. I talked with him just a while ago. He got shoved around this afternoon quite a bit, but he’s okay,” I said.

“That student from Colgate-Rochester got the brunt of it from what I hear. I think they said he got seven stitches in all,” added Vernon, another friend and Shaw Divinity School student.

“Punched right across his chin, I think. It didn’t matter that he was white and not even from here; it was just that he was protesting for our side that made that other boy so mad. I guess if someone disagrees with you, violence doesn’t know color or state lines,” I said.

“Or nationality lines. Jeremiah Walker is from Liberia,” said Vernon.

“Black is black, my friend,” I said. Finding three spots right in front on the second row, the three of us wiggled our way into the pew, making several students scoot and shuffle to make room for us. The church was just about full with students and workshop participants from twelve states and nineteen northern colleges—all primed to be inspired.

From what I remember, Ella Baker had to convince Dr. King that coming to Shaw during the sit-in demonstrations was a good idea. Once committed, Dr. King drained SCLC’s meager funds by providing eight hundred dollars to finance the conference for student sit-in leaders. Ms. Baker, in a letter signed by herself and Dr. King, promised students that they would be heard as she said, “Understanding your desire for independence, the call to conference states that although ‘adult freedom fighters’ will be present for counsel and guidance, the conference will be youth centered.” It’s funny now when I think about it because Dr. King, the most prominent adult to attend that weekend, was only thirty-one years old at the time. I was twenty-seven.

As the three of us settled in our seats, a hush came over the sanctuary as our speakers walked up on the podium. In front of us sat Ms. Baker, Dr. King, Rev. Abernathy, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth from Birmingham, Alabama and a few others. Dr. King’s face was already burrowed deep with lines.

Only five years before, Dr. King and Rev. Abernathy had put their lives on the line upholding Rosa Parks’s right to sit anywhere she wanted on a city bus. And now here they were looking back at us *kids*. We must have looked naïve and freshly plucked out of the fields. Yet they looked out over us like we mattered, like we were doing something important. My heart whirred like an engine. What would Mama say, I wondered? Of course, I hadn’t told her anything about all of this. I didn’t want her to worry, and I wasn’t sure how Daddy would take it all. My father had seemed so content with the status quo back in Willard; I couldn’t imagine that he would be pleased with me being part of such a stir in Raleigh.

Before Dr. King spoke, several speakers pumped us up like a spiritual rally. We sang several hymns and songs. “We Shall Overcome” was becoming our anthem as words were slightly changed to fit our weekend. The crowd in that church building that night fervently prayed together—reminiscent of a revival at Willard. All that was missing was Aunt Annie standing up and shouting, “Praise God! Glory Hallelujah!” then inviting us all to eat her teacakes.

Rev. Abernathy spoke right before Dr. King. I remember him saying, “The problem for the Negro is to lift the stigma of black. As long as the Negro is not free in Mississippi, he is not free in Africa, and vice-versa.”