

*SHOW OF HANDS**

CHARLES LAMAR PHILLIPS

They locked the doors every morning and kept us out till eight o'clock. Neighborhood kids got there whenever they wanted but those who rode buses had no choice. They stood around out front starting about seven, seven-fifteen while the crowd swelled with the new arrival of each bus and with the rest of us drifting in from homes close by. We all bitched about the wait but the standing and milling had its okay side as a half-ass social hour for boys to strut and shout and girls to preen and gossip. By the time the doors opened, our competitive natures usually got the better of us, and we pressed together and jammed into the building. The cool hung out a while longer on the lawn, barely making homeroom at eight-thirty. But Integration Day was different.

She was very dark and very small and she came on a mustard yellow bus all by herself (except for a squad of soldiers). Her family lived out on the base, an army bunch that traveled with the missiles, and that's one reason my father backed the plan though he had to break openly—these days I suspect for the first time—with my grandmother, his mother-in-law. Daddy didn't work with the girl's father but he worked with Negro servicemen all the time in his job supplying NASA from the Army Material Command. They went to the same offices each day, he said, ate in the same cafeterias, drove Buicks and Studebakers just like he did. Hell, they even worshipped the same damn Baptist God, so why shouldn't their children go to the same damn school? In Huntsville, Alabama, in 1963, that qualified him as a race traitor, which he in his anger and his rage said he was certainly no damn sir not.

I respect and revere my daddy but I should point out that even as a stupid kid I knew that blacks only worked in the same offices and ate in the same cafeterias as whites when they were on Redstone Arsenal grounds in the shadow of NASA. Anywhere else in Huntsville, anywhere under the jurisdiction of George Wallace's government rather than John Kennedy's, they clearly did not share our space. They went through different doors. They drank from different water fountains. They peed in different toilets. They sat in the back of the bus and up in the balcony at the movie house. And as for worshipping the same God, well sure, but they did it in different churches. And there were a lot of white Christians I heard on Sundays threatening to walk out and form their own congregation if the hotshot

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preacher Daddy and his crew had hired started letting black Christians join their fellowship.

“The day some nigger walks down that aisle to shake Brother Ray’s hand,” the dark-haired, good-looking Jeb Shaddocks told my mother (who was obviously sweet on him), “is the day me and Sue and the boys walk out that door.”

As it turned out the black folks of Huntsville’s Negro neighborhoods weren’t all that eager to travel out to the West End and swamp the membership rolls of Highland Baptist. This despite Highland’s handsome and huge new church atop a hill overlooking Jordan Lane and Wheeler Avenue down where it was formed half a dozen years before in an old car-auction building. My father and a few friends, unhappy with the self-promoting evangelical preacher who ran Westside Baptist, started the thing. That’s how Baptist churches spread, when one group would fission like some anxious new amoeba from an unstable old protozoa. Those upstarts who ripped away from the aging congregation always imagined it had grown spiritually rotten for any of a host of reasons. Been that way in America from the very beginning, Daddy said, with the Puritans in New England and the Episcopalians in Virginia settling the country squabble by squabble.

Before Daddy’s band of schismatics found the car-auction building, the church held a few preliminary Wednesday night prayer meetings and Sunday services in our living room while mother played her wild and wooly versions of “The Old Rugged Cross” and “Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb” on her baby grand. So I understood my father’s snort when mother told him what Jeb Shaddocks said. I, too, felt the man was jumped-up white trash. He even looked a little like Elvis Presley (whom my mother was also crazy about). He was indeed so ignorant that the idea one day he might have to cut colored hair in his barber shop made him, well, sick to his stupid damn stomach. Or so Daddy said.

Huntsville—a space-program boomtown—was to be the first city in Alabama to integrate its school system because, according to my grandmother, the State figured the place was so full of Yankees what difference did it make? There had been talk of trouble all summer long, and you could feel the tension around you though I’m not sure how closely I followed events except to listen to Granny praise George Wallace for his courageous stand in the doorway of the University of Alabama in June. To my eyes it was pretty much a bust. Wallace just stood there with that mean-faced scowl of his; the government men told him in their stagy way to step aside; he stepped aside in a manner equally stagy. Damn, they were just acting for the T. V. cameras. None of it seemed genuine to a fourteen-year-old under the emotionally minimalist spell of James Bond in *Dr. No*.

And another thing. I for damn sure liked the race music I got out of Birmingham on my aunt Frieda's transistor (which my mother's hip little sister let me play when I was visiting my grandmother in Anniston), better than I did the cornpone country crap Mother listened to on the radio up in Huntsville. *Sometimes, when Mother wasn't around (in other words, almost never), I'd sneak a turn to the local race-music station WEUP ("We up, is you?" the deejays shouted out). I did, however, agree with her when it came to Elvis. He was good, though something about his cheap, pretty-boy looks made me unhappy in a way the loony Little Richard never did, despite the fact that today I see clearly how Elvis modeled himself on Little Richard—just like Little Richard has always claimed.*

But what was I saying? Oh, yeah, the point is this: Despite having to listen most of the time to hillbilly music and despite years of racist indoctrination by my grandmother and the religious and political *officialdom of the state of Alabama, I liked black people okay. Don't ask me how it happened. It wasn't as if I ever met any black people, except for Maude our nanny and skinny Flora our maid who also did the ironing. Daddy occasionally had to take Flora home and deal with her abusive husband/boyfriend (my father always said "husband" and my mother always corrected "boyfriend"). Thus, theoretically I knew Negroes were a violence-prone people even in their everyday life and not just in extraordinary circumstances we saw during the five o'clock news. But I never felt the kind of danger back then around blacks personally that I felt around the kids from Boogertown.*

Boogertown was a white slum near the railroad tracks between the West End of Huntsville and the Centre Theater. (That's right, "Centre" not "Center" and "Theater" not "Theatre.") In other words, Boogertown lay between me and the movies on Saturday morning, unless I could talk my parents into dropping me off downtown and thus avoid the whole shabby area. I even knew some of the kids from Boogertown. I had in fact for a time been Pretty Good Friends with one of them, a boy named Tommy Lewellen.

We'd traveled together for a few weeks after school a while back, traded some comics, smoked a couple of the cigarettes he stole from his father. *Tommy was tall, very tall to a runt like me, and loose-jointed but not goofy looking like some crackers. And though he had the lank blond hair and the washed-out pallor, his clothes were new and he joked around all the time and he was as smart as any of the doofuses I hung out with back then. I wouldn't really have noticed he was a Boogertown boy—since for one thing we never went over to his house and for another he always seemed to have plenty of comic books to trade (turns out he used to pilfer them, but what the hell did I know)—if the first day he came home with*

me he had not been so wiped out by the size of our house and the quality of the furnishings in my room.

“Gad dang,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

“Gad dang.”

“C’mon, what?”

“I didn’t know you was rich.”

You’d have to know where Tommy came from to understand that. Because we certainly were not rich. Not even comfortably well off. Just getting by, just getting by, as my daddy would say. But the neighborhood where Tommy lived had five rows of unpainted houses with dilapidated porches that fronted unpaved streets next to a railroad track. Back then, those were the kind of houses we sometimes saw along the U.S. highways out in the country somewhere, only those we called shacks and we assumed black folks lived in them. In the city, we called them slums, and the poor whites my mother looked down her nose at but was secretly fascinated by were as likely to inhabit them as black people.

But I never really thought about Tommy actually *living* in Boogertown—I mean he was taller than I was and pretty smart like I said and he traded his early *Action Comics* for my collection of *Mad Magazines* (I had developed night terrors about Alfred E. Neuman staring at me with his shit-eating grin from the cover of every issue no matter where I hid the things, under my bed, in the closet, outside my room altogether)—until that day.

“Naw,” I said. “Daddy’s just a Twelve.”

“A twelve what?”

“Nothing what. A Twelve, you know, a G.S. Twelve.”

I realized then Tommy had no idea what a G.S. Twelve was, and I couldn’t help myself. I knew I was doing it but I embarrassed him by explaining that it was my daddy’s civil service ranking in the merit system, which dictated—that’s the word I used, dictated—how much money he made.

“Well, my daddy’s a twelver, too,” he said. He began to laugh hysterically at my genuinely puzzled expression. “A two-six pack a day man,” he said. Then he got up abruptly. “Give me um.” He pointed at the *Mads*. “I gotta go. Gotta git home. Throw out the empties.” And he laughed again and left.

Yeah, we were friends for a while, but that was a long time—long time—before Integration Day.

We all knew it was coming of course. Hard to miss it with the evening news—the watching of which my father made mandatory—on every damn channel devoting just about all their time to the story even though the

networks had upped the programs from fifteen to thirty minutes a year or so ago (in order to fill the air with more Commie propaganda my grandmother said). Westlawn was the last of the four schools in Huntsville scheduled for desegregation, so we got to see all the goings on in the weeks before at Butler and Central and Huntsville High (they did one a week), where white kids with long slicked-back hair, white shirts open at the collar, and neatly pressed blue jeans rolled at the bottom got together in groups with red-faced older white men and shouted nasty things at black kids trying to get off busses with their impeccably dressed parents. When *the shouting had no effect, sooner or later the white boys threw something*, or broke through the line of police who were reluctantly holding them back, and rushed the black people, screaming at them and swinging at them and smacking them and kicking them when they fell. My grandmother saw all this even on her television down in Anniston, where black folks she said had the good sense to not so much as think about integrating (not yet, Granny, not yet) and tried to do an end run round my daddy.

“Lamar,” she said on the telephone, or so I imagined. “Don’t you think the best thing is just keep them kids home out of that mess up there?”

“There’s not going to be any mess at Westlawn,” I heard Daddy respond. “It’s mostly NASA kids and the school knows there better be no trouble if they want to keep the space program feeding them federal funds.”

Daddy was right about that, too. Every year all us government brats had to fill out blue forms, and all the other kids white forms to keep the federal financing straight. But it wouldn’t have mattered. Far as my father was concerned, we were going to be at school on Integration Day regardless. And that’s where Miss Faison comes in, and not just because she was the one handing out the federal financial aid forms that year.

I don’t really know what to say about Miss Faison, or if I can capture for you the *frisson she set off in my soul simply by being there every morning when they finally opened those doors for us*. Thinking back it seems to me she looked a lot like Janet Leigh in *Psycho* but that may be because I had been fantasizing about her naked body under the spray of some steamy shower for almost as long as I could remember thinking anything at all. I’d had a class with her way back in third grade, when she taught me multiplication (and to this day I associate math with, um, sex thanks to the breathy way she asked a poor helpless kid about six times nine or twelve times eleven). And now I had her again as my Algebra teacher and in homeroom.

She looked *nothing like a tart*, and probably if I saw her today dressed as she was then, I’d think she was a conservatively if impeccably clothed woman. But back then the key word in that sentence was woman. All I ever

saw of her attire were the stockings on her legs that led to garters that occasionally poked out from deliciously draped skirts no matter how demurely she deposed herself about the room or the little white flashes of flesh where her frilly bra sometime peeked out of her blouse when she bent over to help me, the certified genius of the class, with this or that formula and I could smell the tangerine tartness of her body in the still fetid air of an Alabama classroom in September.

So I wanted to please Miss Faison, I wanted to please her bad. And not just her. That year for the first time I was noticing somebody else, a girl my age, a girl in our home room, in exactly the way I had been noticing Miss Faison it seemed for years now. I suppose it would be more precise to say that I was noticing not Wendy Wilson herself so much as Wendy Wilson's boobs. She did not have breasts the last time I looked back early in the summer before she left for her grandparents in Florida. But come September there they were pressing up against her no-frill, button-down blouses, heaving up a little with every breath she took as we talked longer and longer each morning out front waiting for the school day to start.

I would glance at those knockers of hers that I had never noticed before now and look up at her while she talked and she would smile knowingly at me. She had soon started unbuttoning her top button just to give me a better view during those mornings, and if I was quick enough and careful, I could catch a glimpse of them plump and almost complete down to the dark circle round her nipples when she bent over to pick up her books after the bell rang and the front doors of the school flew open with a bang.

In fact such concerns pretty much defined my existence by the time Integration Day arrived. In the mornings I would stand around outside talking with Wendy and saying any blame fool thing that came into my head just to keep looking at her tits, which she devised ever more daring ways to expose to my gaze. Once inside the building, I returned during homeroom and algebra to gawking at Miss Faison and fantasizing about her and the various parts of her body in various stages of undress ranging from demure to brazen. Then, since we changed teachers in those days but the same group of kids traveled together from classroom to classroom, between the two Miss Faison periods I went back big time to Wendy Wilson as we contrived somehow to sit together each class without ever admitting it.

And that's what I was doing, daydreaming about what I did not yet know was, um, sex, when Miss Faison asked for a show of hands. It was in home room, the first half of September, 1963, and I remember she was over fiddling with the blinds on the windows, which meant she sort of had to stand on tip-toes to adjust them and that lifted her skirt ever so

enticingly and stretched her blouse a little tighter over her bazooms but what was I saying? Oh yeah, she was adjusting the blinds, which was her way of wasting time while she worked up to something she wanted to say. And then, sure enough, there came the second step, and she clapped her hands together twice. Then she turned to us and said in that sultry bark of hers, "People!"

The class shut up and looked at her.

"Now, I'd guess all of you have heard the news that we are one of the schools scheduled to be integrated this year. We are going to have one Negro, a little girl whose parents live on Redstone Arsenal, attending Westlawn starting next Monday."

I heard, and everybody heard, Tommy Lewellan say *well, shit* to one of the other Boogertown boys in the back, and Miss Faison snapped, "None of that now. This is not Butler or Central or Huntsville High, and I will not tolerate that kind of behavior. Which is exactly why I want to get this out right now. It looks like the young woman who is coming on Monday—her name is Ruth, Ruth Carter—will be attending this homeroom. AND I DON'T WANT ANY TROUBLE. Not one word, not one act, nothing, I WILL NOT TOLERATE IT. So, just to avoid any discomfort or any embarrassment, I want to see a show of hands right now from anyone who refuses to sit next to her. Right now. Let me see them." And she clapped twice again.

Nobody raised a hand, and I have since come to believe that not only was Miss Faison the sexiest woman in my life up to that point (though Wendy was on the way to replacing her), she might well have been the smartest, too. Because if she had asked those of us who were willing to sit by the new girl to raise our hands, the refuseniks could have simply sat there and done nothing. But as it was, they knew they would have to disappoint her and show themselves for the redneck bigots they truly were. And nobody, at least immediately, was willing to do that.

She almost got away with it. Then there came a low rumble, a kind of giant clearing of the throat, from Tommy Lewellan, whose face was now scarlet as a Southern sunset.

"Awww hell," he said, raising his hand, half way up bent at the elbow at first, then straight above his head (I already told you he was tall and lanky didn't I?). And his was a long, skinny arm, and it hung up there like the arm on the statue of Liberty, and he wiggled the fingers at the end of it, making fun of Miss Faison and the rest of us.

"I ain't going to sit by her," he said, red-faced, smiling, and mean.

Then the rest of the Boogertown kids raised their hands, which you might have figured they would, and then so did a handful of others, including Frank Kramer, a smart German kid I liked whose father had

come to Huntsville with Werner von Braun to work on the Saturn missile program. But I noticed Wendy did not raise her hand, and she glared narrow-eyed at Frank when he joined the Boogertown boys. All in all, maybe a dozen kids, half the class, raised their hands.

Miss Faison did not say anything at first, but if you understood her as deeply as I did, you knew she was disappointed. She reached back on her desk and picked up her writing pad and ballpoint pin and carefully clicked it down and began writing the names of those whose arms remained raised.

"Fine," she said. "I've made note of your preference, and I'll make sure you do not sit by Ruth. In return, I expect all of you to behave, and I do not want to hear another word about this in this classroom for the rest of the year."

And then she fell silent. Finally, she took attendance and waited for the bell for First Period to ring a few minutes later. Almost as if we had planned it, Wendy and I sat watching Miss Faison as the rest of the class rushed for the door. When Tommy Lewellan passed by my desk, he leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Nigger lover."

I do not think Miss Faison could hear him from where she sat cross-legged on her desk but she was staring straight at me so I tried not to let her see how scared I was. I did not look at Tommy, I did not say a word, I did not move, and he stood back up and walked off. I just kept staring back at Miss Faison. When he had gone, Wendy leaned over and touched my face for some reason and Miss Faison turned away.

So on Monday, like I said, Ruth Carter showed up on a big yellow bus all by herself, and the rest of us who had been standing around outside talking like always all of a sudden fell silent. There were some adults among us, but not the cops and soldiers you saw at the other schools, at least not obviously so. Still, we all knew this was the moment. This was when the kids and a few of the parents who had decided to show up would start the screaming and the chanting like the crowds at Butler and Central and Huntsville High. And we knew, too, if it was going to turn violent, it would turn violent now. This was the moment for the throwing of bricks and the kicking of kids. But maybe the racists had worn themselves out by then or maybe the school system had learned how to pull this integrating thing off some better or maybe Daddy was right and all the NASA kids kept the Boogertowners and their buddies at bay, whatever, nothing happened, not a shout, not a shove, just a stunned silence.

We stood there not saying a word as the doors to the bus crinkled open and this small black girl in pigtails, wearing a white blouse and a billowy black skirt walked the length of the bus past the troops who rode with her and climbed down its steps and looked wide-eyed in fear first at

the crowd of white kids (and a few adults, teachers and parents) that parted in front of her like the Red Sea before Moses. (Not in that phony special effects reverse way it did for Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*, but in that magical way a Southern Baptist kid might have imagined when he first read *Exodus*. The way I remember it, the crowd just drew apart smoothly, its individual bodies like metal filings pulled simultaneously and suddenly into two lines by invisible magnets. An empty lane, it almost seemed, had simply appeared running right through the middle of the early morning bunch-up.) Then Ruth looked down at her bobby socks and Oxfords. Clutching books to her chest, swinging her body side to side, tears clearly running down her face, she fled along the silent corridor of white people and ran through the front doors of the school and straight into the girls' restroom.

None of us saw her in homeroom that day because she refused to come out and none of the teachers were willing to drag her from the restroom or to call her parents (whom the school had persuaded to stay home in the first place) to come get her. Eventually a delegation of the homeroom girls, led by Wendy Wilson, went in and sat with her for a while. Ultimately they coaxed her out and she went to classes, always surrounded by Wendy's girls like the state troopers guarding Bear Bryant at Alabama football games on blustery Saturdays in the fall.

And that was it. I never became friends with Ruth Carter, and we never fell in love and challenged my dad's liberal beliefs and excited my mother's secret longings and had all our parents forbid us to see each other and ran off together. I never had a yelling match with Wendy Wilson or a fistfight with Tommy Lewellen over my new girlfriend. Ruth and I never talked about how much more I liked race music than all that teenybop crap. Nothing like that happened just like nothing like we expected happened when her bus pulled up that day, nothing like what I might have said happened if I had just been making up this story.

But here's what happened instead: A few days afterward four little girls were murdered, blown up in a church down in Birmingham. And a month later President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. All to pay, so said the folks in my family, excluding my dad and me, for forcing the Ruth Carters of this world on us schoolchildren. And pretty soon after that, in December, Daddy took a job working for the Defense Department up in Washington, and we moved to Alexandria, Virginia, where the schools were already fully integrated.

Right away after the move to Alexandria, when kids black and white poked fun at my brother and me for the thick accents we would lose in a year or so, I began to talk about Ruth Carter and Integration Day down

south if only to establish my I-am-no-more-a-racist-than-youbone fides. But I cleaned the story up a little, and the show of hands turned into a different kind of thing.

In the new version, those of us in the class willing to sit by Ruth became those who gave a show of hands for Miss Faison, and the one to raise his hand first in support of Integration Day was, of course, me. It seemed more dramatic that way, more elegant somehow, more to the point. Sharper. Better. Truer. Tommy Lewellen remained the villain of the tale but I became the hero, the initiator of its action. And why not? I was doing the telling, and so it was after all my story—well, mine and Ruth's.

As the civil rights struggle continued in Selma and Memphis and the mall in D.C., and came to seem the first true cause of my generation, the one that taught us how to fight against the war in Vietnam, the story itself began to affect me in strange ways. Over time, through high school and college and marriage and fatherhood, I grew ever prouder of how I stood up, as I told myself, and was counted back then, back when it mattered to the world that you were willing simply to sit in class next to a black girl. In time the story about the show of hands came to color my whole notion of myself. It defined my politics. It helped me understand the difference between what I thought was right and what I thought was wrong.

Then that, too, went awry. A few weeks ago my daughter Diana (she is not named after Diana Ross, no matter what you think) had one of those school assignments where you learn about history by looking up in newspapers and other sources events occurring during the lifetime of your own family. Diana had heard me tell the story of the show of hands and Integration Day often enough over the years, of course, so she somehow found (on the Internet maybe?) something in print about it. The article she uncovered was not the one that appeared in the *Huntsville Times*. Since there was none of the violence at Westlawn there had been at Butler and Central and Huntsville High, there was not nearly so much coverage of it in the city's newspaper as there had been of the other schools the weeks before ("No blood, no ink," my father said).

The piece Diana discovered ran in the local rag from the army base, the *Redstone Register*, for the week in question. And sure enough there are a few images of Westlawn Junior High on that very morning accompanying the penny saver's typically photo-filled coverage (I certainly don't remember any photographer being present that day). In these pictures, the crowd is spread open as Ruth Carter steps off the bus, just as I always told my daughter. Diana could see Ruth clearly, the terror in her face in one shot, her tiny body framed on both sides by a wall of taller kids with white faces in others. But my daughter was disappointed that she could not locate her father's face in the crowd. So she got a copy

made or printed out or whatever and brought it home.

It took me a while, but I finally found myself. All you can see is the side of my mug, though, sort of half turned from the camera because I am looking not at the little black girl who forms the focus of the photograph but down at Wendy Wilson's breasts, which register as a blank blob below a nearly feature-free face but for Wendy's big eyes and a small black hole where her beautiful mouth should be. When I saw it I started to laugh, but since Diana has only just turned sixteen, and I am not sure exactly where she stands on the whole question of teenage, um, sex, I couldn't really explain to her what so tickled me.

I did not tell her—and maybe I never will—how time swindles us all. Here I was, imagining I once made this grand gesture at, well, a real turning point in history. But—I reluctantly admit—I never said a word I can remember to Ruth Carter, then or later. Not once. And since I'm being totally honest with you, when I think back to those days, my memory never dwells on civil rights or the struggle for black equality or what a violent and racist period that was in our history. Instead, I remember my mom and my dad, Miss Faison and Tommy Lewellen. Most of all, I remember Wendy Wilson. And not even Wendy Wilson on Integration Day, but Wendy Wilson a few weeks later—after we learned I would soon be moving away forever—and she let me fondle those awe-inspiring breasts of hers. That's how history happens, I'd guess, not clearly, not flaunting what it means but obscured in flesh, hidden by the heat and the lust of everyday life. Because, tell the truth, it takes an act of will, and maybe of creation, for me to call up Ruth Carter's frightened dash to integrate our junior high school in Huntsville, Alabama. But the stiffened, supple prongs of Wendy Wilson's erect nipples under the desperate clasp of my hands even now spring effortlessly to mind.

END