

ONE-ARMED MAN SITTING ON THE REFRIGERATOR

May 23, 1977

Winstonville, Mississippi

I told Terry to turn left at the end of the soy bean patch. It's hard to call it "the end" since the Mississippi senator's land went on for 3000 hectares, but that's where my map said Winstonville was. It had taken us many hours to even find a map that had all the 'towns' of the Delta on it. Well, they weren't really 'towns' since there was usually no local government, and sometimes no running water or electricity. But regardless of whether you call it a 'town' or a 'village' [we don't have villages in America—that's for the *Third World*] or a human settlement, we had promised ourselves and our colleagues and the state of Mississippi to hold a Town Meeting in each community. Today, Winstonville, was about to be encouraged to hold one.

Terry turned left. He as a mustached (Mississippi boys didn't wear them, immediately making him an 'outsider'), Texas boy, and when the situation asked for it, he pulled out the longest Texas drawl you ever heard. This was especially necessary to cover up my recently-moved-to-Texas-from-California-Chicago-Singapore-drawl. And as we passed down the road I knew we would need all the southern identity we could get. The last 'whitees' that came down here were the freedom fighters with Martin Luther King 16 years before. Since then they had gotten the vote and the right to go to school [though they were officially called 'attendance centers'].

Terry pulled up beside an old black woman walking down the road, saying, "sorry to bother you, Ma'am, but who's in charge 'round here?" She looked at us in an uninterested manner and said, "Mr. Watkins. Better go 'round the corner next to the garbage dump." "Thanks, Ma'am."

We surveyed the community as we drove. Probably 200 people, all black. Some houses have electricity. Some have water pumps outside, others, indoors. There's the church. Most houses are two or three rooms. Poor and dusty. No school, no stores, no paved streets. Of the hundreds of towns I'd visited in the last three years in Texas, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Louisiana, this is the poorest I'd ever seen. "Mostly shotguns," Terry said, referring to the style of house that was just two rooms with a front door and a back door—meaning you could shoot a gun straight through the house. We were clearly in the poorest state in the US and Winstonville seemed to be at the bottom of that bottom.

Just then we spotted the garbage dump, guessing that the house to the right must be Mr. Watkins'. Just to make sure Terry leaned his head out the window to a man sitting on a turned over refrigerator. Pointing to the nearby house, he said, "that's where Mr. Watkins lives?" "I'm Watkins," he replied.

Watkins was about 50. Greyish hair. Black, very black skin. One arm ended above the elbow. I felt we had disturbed a man in deep contemplation. He was just sitting there on the refrigerator in the dump in Winstonville, Mississippi. After introductions and stating our

purpose, he invited us to his home next door. His wife greeted us and immediately served ice tea, a great welcome after the dusty ride. "Rains slow this year. Crops are weak. Looks bad." "Yea, we've seen the same all over the Delta," Terry said in his very-Texas voice. I kept quiet. No matter what, I never looked southern. I was too strong looking to be a 'southern belle' and besides no white southern lady would ever enter a black man's house unless she was giving his wife a turkey basket on Christmas. As they talked I glanced around the house. It was perfect. Maybe five rooms. Just a couple of years old. Nicely painted. Mainly cute knick-knacks. No dust. Comfortable sofa with white embroidered doilies. I thought, "I never learned how to make those." As in every home I'd been to in Mississippi, on the walls were tapestries of Martin Luther King and John Kennedy, side-by-side. On the other wall hung a poster with The Lord's Prayer.

I relaxed. This was a real home. Perhaps noticing my approval, he said, "I built it myself, with a little help from my son." I was stunned! There I was trying to imagine how this one-armed man had sawed nailed, poured cement, and shingled his house with only his one arm; how they saved their money; how they had designed the structure and found the materials. Then my mind skipped to other realities that marked their life from mine and perhaps made them the better for it—the lynchings, the burnings, the beatings, the stories of enslavement told by their parents or grandparents. "Where had they got the courage to 'keep moving on?'" I asked myself.

I was silenced even further. I looked at the Watkins like you look at survivors of a war. I felt a little shame in thinking that the problems of my life had been burdensome. Somehow at that moment I received courage from these people. But that was just the beginning.

Ten days later we returned for the Town Meeting that Mr. and Mrs. Watkins had organized. About 130 people turned out at the church, the only place in town to meet. It was hot. The men wore suits, the women wore white dresses and hats. We started with a chicken barbecue and then moved inside for singing. Mr. Watkins asked the pastor to say a prayer. Then we started. It was a day to talk about the community history, its problems and how the community could pull together to make it a better place. At the end of the day one team had written a song which they all sang at the close of the event:

In the nineteen hundreds
Trains pulled into our town
Bringing goods and supplies
To the many worried souls
The train kept rolling
Until it brought success
To both the young and the old

Lord, we want a clean town
From beer cans and drink bottles
Lord, we need a doctor in our town
Lord, help us people to support our black leaders
Lord, bless us with the things we need the most

Lord, help us with the town going places.

Terry and I turned left out of Winstonville at the end of the day, knowing that it was cared for by the Watkins. The people had received new hope that they could make their community a better place themselves. I realized again that leadership comes from the ground, when one rises to the occasion, without excuses; when, without comparisons, one builds from nothing out of the resources at hand. No complaints. They just do what they have to do.