



**Through
Angel's Eyes**

STEVE THEUNISSEN

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by
Steve Theunissen



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Dedication

For Shelley, Chantel and Sasha—with love.

Acknowledgments

Martin Luther King, Junior: “Loving Your Enemies,” Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (11/17/1957), quoted on pp 128–130.

James Bevel: Address at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church (5/1/1963), quoted on pp 145–148.

Martin Luther King, Junior: “I Have A Dream,” Speech at Washington, D.C. (8/28/1963), quoted on pp 280–283.

Prologue

ALABAMA 1960

I ain't never been able to figure some folks out. Like last summer, when me an' Rachel Colter went with her daddy for a trip into the big town. Why, me an' Rachel was so taken with all the sights an' noises an' colors an' all those folks. Rachel an' me said we'd be slave girls for a month a' Sundays jus' to have one a' those pretty dresses we seen on those White girls. But, I guess we shouldn'a been thinkin' like that, 'cause that's what led to the spoilin' part. An', anyway, when we told Rachel's daddy 'bout it on the way home, he said it was feelin's a' jealousy like what we had for them dresses that led some bad men to kill the Lord Jesus. I couldn't help thinkin' that if Jesus'd been a dirt-poor Black girl in Alabama, he'd sure like to have a fine white dress, jus' the same.

Anyways, after traipsin' 'round in the hot sun after Rachel's daddy while he was doin' his bidness, he took us to a candy store. Ya know, that store had candy everywhere. Why, that's all it had. Jus' candy. Not like the General Store in Harpersville, that only had two jars on the counter 'midst all the hardware an' stuff. Me and Rachel jus' wandered 'round lookin' at all the different kinds a' candy—orange ones, blue striped ones, even little animal shaped ones. Jus' as I was decidin' on what to buy with the nickel Rachel's daddy gave me, I seen this magnificent

creature come into the store. Why, she was ‘bout seventeen an’ oh-so pretty. But the thing that got me was her dress. It actually sparkled. I ain’t never seen nothin’ like it to this day.

Anyways, next thing I knew I was goin’ over to that White girl. I don’t know what made me do it. It was sorta like a magnet pulled me over. She didn’t notice me ‘cause she was with some big handsome White boy who was whisperin’ in her ear. So, I says to that White girl, “Scuse me ma’am, but that’s a real pretty dress you got on.”

Well, when that White girl turned an’ looked down at me, I thought she’d jus’ seen a rat crawlin’ ‘cross the floor. Her face curled up into a scowl an’ she said to her boyfriend, all hysterical like, “Scott, what’s that nigger doin’ in here?”

So, straight away, Scott pulled her away from me, like I might give her some disease or somethin’, an’ he kneeled down in front a’ me an’ said, all angry like, “Nigger, git your Black behind outta here before we lose our appetite!”

Well, I seen lots a’ things in big old Birmin’ham that day, but of all the sights an’ sounds an’ noises, there’s only one word that’s burnin’ in my memory—NIGGER.

Chapter ONE
ALABAMA, JANUARY 1963

“What you readin’ bout, Jimmy?”
“Just a story ‘bout a man, Angel.”

My brother Jimmy was always into readin’ lately. Seems he was gettin’ all these important ideas stirrin’ ‘round in his brain. When I told him that if he takes in much more, why, all those ideas was bound to spill outta his head, he jus’ muttered somethin’ ‘bout readers bein’ leaders an’ knowledge is power.

“What sorta power you talkin’ ‘bout, Jimmy? Everyone here ‘bouts knows that Daddy’s the most powerful man in Harpersville an’ he ain’t never read a book in his life.”

“Angel, you don’t understan’. Daddy’s a powerful strong man, that’s for sure. But there ain’t a Black man in this country who’s got any real power, any influence in their community.”

“What do ya want that sorta power for, Jimmy?”

“Cause it’s our due, Angel. We was born as free citizens a’ this country and we have the right to all the benefits a’ bein’ a free citizen.”

“I don’t understan’, Jimmy. Your books are makin’ you sound like a school teacher or somethin’.”

“Well it’s like this, see. When you was born, it’s like you was invited to a meal. There’s this table spread out with all this beautiful food—chicken, turkey, roast taters, green beans an’ the like. But when you turn up to take your place at the table, ya

find that your place has already been taken an' the folks kick you under the table an' tell ya to beg for your food."

"Why they do that?"

"Because we don't look like they do."

"You mean 'cause we're niggers, don't ya?"

Jimmy stopped readin' his book, placed it on the table an' looked at me for the first time since I walked into his room. I could tell he was thinkin' hard 'bout how to answer me.

"Angel," he began, "what you are is a beautiful, smart girl. Now there are a lot a' people out there who have a disease called prejudice, an' they want you to think that you're a no-account nigger who'll never amount to nothin'. But, girl, don't you ever believe that—not ever. You hear me?"

"Yes, Jimmy. But do ya reckon those folks will always have that disease?"

"Some folks will, Angel. But many of them have it 'cause it's always been there. It's part a' the system. Now, that system can be changed, but the change has to come from us."

"How though?"

"Well, that's what I'm readin' 'bout. The most powerful weapon is to have no weapon at all. Non-violent resistance could bring this country to its knees, just like it did in India."

There he went again, with all those funny ideas. I looked over at the book on Jimmy's bedside table: *A Life of M. K. Gandhi*.

"Jimmy," I said, "those books are makin' you crazy!"

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My daddy really was the most powerful man in Harpersville. He could whip any man in town an' I knew some folks who was right scared a' my pa. My brother Jimmy wasn't one of 'em. Daddy never did go in for learnin' an' such, an' it seemed like

every idea that Jimmy was puttin' into his brain was 'specially designed to rile my pa. But whatever had gone before weren't nothin' compared to what happened the night Jimmy told the family he was helpin' some Black folks to get the vote. Daddy didn't take long to get riled.

"What'd ya jus' say, boy?" he demanded.

"Now, Daddy, jus' hear me out." Jimmy always tried that one first. He called it bein' diplomatic.

"No, son, you hear me out. Ya reckon ya know what it's all 'bout. You got some learnin', huh? Read some books, have ya?"

Daddy's temper was gettin' hotter with each word. I was gettin' scared, so I sank down in my chair an' looked down at the table, pretendin' that I wasn't there. But I couldn't escape Daddy's words.

"Well, let me tell ya some things ya ain't read about, boy. You ain't the first nigger to forget his place. Your gran'pappy, he thought he be a union man—takin' on the White bosses. Got hisself a bullet in the head, boy!" Daddy spat the words out, like they was burnin' in his mouth.

"And I'll tell ya somethin' else."

As he spoke, Daddy kicked away his chair an' stood over Jimmy. I thought Daddy was gonna hit him, an' I saw Jimmy flinch. But, instead, Daddy ripped off his own shirt. I let out a horrified moan as I stared at my beloved Daddy's upper body. Mama moved 'round the table an' cradled me in her arms.

"Have a look at your ol' man's back, boy," Daddy ordered.

Jimmy didn't say a word. At least he knew that. Anythin' he said now would be like pourin' fat on a fire. But Jimmy's eyes was busy. So was mine. Daddy had never took off his shirt in front of us before. Now we knew why. His back was a mess. It had four long black stripes 'cross it an' a whole lotta other scars criss-crossin' them. I had to look away.

“Take a good look, boy. This is what comes from your fancy ideas.”

Daddy slumped back into his chair. His powerful chest was heavin’ up an’ down, but, strangely, his anger seemed to be coolin’. “Don’t make me bury my son alongside my pa, boy.” His words was softer, more controlled. “Don’t try to be more than ya are—an Alabama nigger.”

I got a shock when I saw my Daddy’s back but what happened next was entirely unbelievable to me. As I was lookin’ upon Daddy’s face, his strong hard face, I saw a tear roll down his unshaven cheek. My Daddy was the most powerful man in Harpersville. He could whip any man in town. My Daddy didn’t cry. But I saw it with my own eyes, an’ before long, the tears was rollin’ down my face, too.

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I was real confused. I didn’t know why Daddy was so angry. I didn’t know why Jimmy was gettin’ so many uppity ideas. But, most of all, I didn’t understan’ why Daddy had called his own flesh an’ blood a nigger. Why, Jimmy had said it was diseased White folks who called us niggers, not our own pa! So, I did what I always did when I got confused. I went down to ol’ Miss Hattie’s place so she could sort this mess out for me. Miss Hattie knew everythin’ ‘bout everyone that ever was an’ she had a way ‘bout her that jus’ made ya understan’ things. Why, I reckon she was as wise as ol’ King Solomon hisself.

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Well, when I got into her yard, I seen her straight off. She was sittin’ in her big ol’ rockin’ chair on the front porch. When I

got closer, I called out, "Hi ya, Miss Hattie."

"Hi ya, yourself, little Angel Dunbar," she replied. "You decided to come brighten up an ol' lady's day?"

"Well, sorta," I said as I got up the steps onto the porch an' climbed onto her lap. I always felt so safe there—as if the big ol' world with its Birmin'ham towns, its nigger callin' diseased White folks an' its angry daddies all disappeared an' it was jus' me an' Miss Hattie an' her overgrown garden, forever.

"Something's troublin' ya, ain't it?" Miss Hattie could read me like a book.

"I've been all tied up like a bundle a' wool, Miss Hattie, jus' tryin' to figure out what's goin' on with Jimmy an' Daddy," I replied, glad to be lettin' it out. "They're so different. Why, ya know, Daddy called Jimmy a nigger last night."

I looked up into Miss Hattie's face then, expecting to see the look a' shock that I felt when I heard Daddy use that word. Instead, she smiled an' began strokin' my hair.

"Ya might think they're different girl," she said softly, "but your Daddy an' your brother are both the same. They're both like stallions. Your brother's like a wild stallion that won't let a bridle or a bit get near it, jus' like your pa was before he got broken in. Now he's a tamed stallion."

"I reckon Daddy was broke in with whips," I whispered.

"Why ya say that, girl?"

"Cause I seen what they did to his back."

"You're right, girl. But, ya know, that father a' yours, he was fightin' the system jus' like your brother is. Only difference is, he fought it with his fists. Your brother is fightin' with his mind. Changin' it from within, ya know?"

"Sorta, Miss Hattie, but how's Jimmy gonna change things?"

"Well, Jimmy's workin' to give people the real power that counts—the power a' the vote."

“What’s so important ‘bout the vote?”

“Well girl, there’s twenty million Black folks in the South. If we can vote, then we can get some folks in charge who’ll start makin’ things better for us.”

“So, how we get the vote, Miss Hattie?”

“Why, we gotta have the strength to jus’ march on in there an’ ask for it.”

“That sounds easy.”

“Ain’t so, girl. White man got us folks so low down we can’t even reach up to tie our boot straps.”

“What ya mean, Miss Hattie?”

“Folks is scared, girl.”

“Scared a’ what?”

“Lots a’ things—mostly change.”

†††

What was I doin’? I must’ve been crazy! But, there I was, layin’ on the back floor a’ Jimmy’s auto-car as it bumped an’ rocked its way towards Birmin’ham town. How I wished I was back on Miss Hattie’s porch, safely snuggled in her lap. But how could that be when Miss Hattie was sittin’ in the front passenger seat all dressed up in her Sunday finery. My brother Jimmy was all dolled up too, with his white pressed shirt an’ tie.

Why, when Jimmy told me he was takin’ his first voter into the city to register, I got this fool idea to hide in the back a’ his car, so I could see what all the fuss was ‘bout. So there I was, hid under an ol’ wool blanket. It was hotter than a bonfire under there, an’ before long, I could taste the sweat on my lips. When Jimmy stopped to pick up his passenger, I waited to see if I could make out who it was from the voice. Well, when I heard that wise ol’ owl’s voice, it was all I could do to stop myself from screa-

min' out, "Miss Hattie!" But I still managed to stay hid, 'cause I wanted to see what was gonna happen more than ever now.

By an' by, we arrived into the city. I knew 'cause of all the noise from the cars an' people. But still, it seemed like we was drivin' for ages until the car finally came to a stop. After some talkin', I heard Jimmy an' Miss Hattie get out. I counted to fifty, goin' real slow, then ripped that blanket offa me. I got up on the back seat an' looked out the window. We was right in front of a real big white buildin' with a whole lotta steps out front. Above the doorway was a sign sayin' 'Jefferson County Court House'. I could jus' see Jimmy an' Miss Hattie goin' in through the doors.

In no time, I was outta that car an' racin' 'round the back a' that big ol' building. I got me up a pipe an' onto a window ledge. I looked inside an' saw a big brown desk in one corner a' the room. Behind it was a skinny lookin' ancient White man. He wore a grey suit an' had a serious look on his face. He was writin' in some important lookin' book. Next thin' I know, open goes the door an' in comes none other than my brother Jimmy an' Miss Hattie. The man looked up angrily.

"What ya want, boy!" he barked at Jimmy.

"I've brought this lady down to register," Jimmy said, all respectful like. The man turned his head in Miss Hattie's direction. An ugly grin came 'cross his face that reminded me a' that White girl in the candy store when she'd looked down at me.

"What ya want to register for, old woman?" he snapped.

Miss Hattie looked him right in the eyes an' said, "Because I am just as much a citizen a' this country as you are."

"You read?" he shot back.

"As long as it's in English," Miss Hattie answered, smilin'.

The man reached into his desk drawer an' pulled out a big sheet a paper, which he threw on the desk in front a' him.

“Go out in the hall and fill this out then,” he demanded.

Miss Hattie took the form an’ slowly left the room. When she’d closed the door behind her, the White man fixed a mean stare on Jimmy. I could feel his anger an’ I felt scared for my brother. I wanted to jump through that window an’ tell that skinny ol’ White man to have some manners an’ treat folks nicer. Instead, I pressed my nose up harder to the window an’ kept listenin’.

“Who are you to bring people down here to register, boy?”

“It’s my job.”

“Suppose you get two bullets in the head right now!”

“I got to die anyhow.”

“Suppose someone came in that door right now and shot you in the head—right now—what would you do?”

“I couldn’t do nothin’. But the whole world’d be on your doorstep tomorrow.”

“Who’ll tell ‘em?”

“The people I work for.”

“Listen, boy,” the man was actually yellin’ now. “I’ve had enough of your uppity nigger ideas. Git your Black hide outta my office an’ get back to your shanty town—where you belong!”

Jus’ then, Miss Hattie came back in an’ placed the form on the mans’ desk.

“See you on votin’ day,” she said as her an’ Jimmy left the room.

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I was back under that ol’ wool blanket. We was bumpin’ an’ rockin’ our way back to Harpersville, where we belonged. As Jimmy an’ Miss Hattie spoke ‘bout things like this bein’ a landmark day an’ how we’ll see a rush to the vote now that Miss Hattie has shown the way, all I could think ‘bout was how hot it

was under that blanket. Why, it was so hot I thought I was gonna die under there. After a while I could feel the heat chokin' me up inside, makin' it hard to even breathe. I so much wanted to kick off that blanket!

I guess that's what us Black folks is under—a big ol' blanket that's pressin' down on us, nearly suffocatin' us. Most Black folks don't even try to get it off. Some folks, like my pa, try to rip it away, but they get beat down. Others, like Jimmy, try to sorta unstitch it, but White folks try to stop them, too. I wish White folks would understand. We don't wanna throw the blanket over you. We jus' wanna get it off us, so we can breathe. That ain't askin' too much, is it?

Well, I reckon that White girl in the candy store an' that court man sure reckon it is. I suppose I'll never be able to figure some folks out.

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