

FOUR and a Half DAYS in ATLANTA'S JAILS

Gloria Wade Bishop

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ON MONDAY, January 27, at approximately 5 p.m., in Atlanta, Georgia, the city "too busy to hate," I was arrested for taking part in a peaceful demonstration at Leb's Restaurant. Two years ago this popular restaurant refused to serve Harry Belafonte, who had been given the key to the city. Like Belafonte and his group, Atlanta Negroes sought service at Leb's, and when turned away, began a peaceful protest against the restaurant's discriminatory policies. Approximately fifty of us, white and Negro, picketed the block in which Leb's is located, and in line with the city ordinance on picketing, we moved continuously and spaced ourselves thirty-six inches apart. So peaceful was the demonstration that two white parents dared join the picket line with their two daughters, Julia, eight, and Giah, twelve. As the picket line passed the front of Leb's for the fourth time, I heard the screams of a young child. When I turned around, I saw eight-year-old Julia and her mother step into a paddy wagon. I was watching this arrest in disbelief when Captain Brooks of the Atlanta Police Department pulled me by the coat sleeve and asked in a very hoarse voice, "Are you with this group?" When I answered in the affirmative, he said to waiting Negro patrolmen, "Take her to the wagon." And so it went, until all demonstrators had been arrested and were en route to the city jail.

Negroes and whites were placed in the same paddy wagons, but not in the same cells. As soon as we reached the city jail, Negro female demonstrators were placed in one section of the second-

floor detention ward and whites in another. The usual procedure in the case of arrests is to book criminals at the first-floor desk and then confine them to cells. This procedure was not followed in our case. Upon arrival at the city jail, we were taken immediately to cellblocks without being asked who we were, without being fingerprinted, and without being told why we had been arrested. Not until we had spent three hours in the cellblock were we asked our names, ages, and addresses. When two Negro patrolmen came into the cell to secure this information, the matron on duty said, "In all my twenty-seven years at this jail, I have never known people to be booked in a cell." Negro police arrested and booked us because the city accepted an editorial suggestion in the *Atlanta Constitution*. The editorial advised that Negro police be used to handle civil rights demonstrators, apparently because the editors believed chances of police brutality would be lessened if Negroes handled Negroes and white sympathizers.

The cellblock in which we were confined was composed of two sections: a front eating area of two benches and four solitary-confinement cells, and a back sleeping area of sixty-two beds. The beds were covered with bug-infested mattresses and filthy blue sheets. In the sleeping area were four seatless, unclean, and tissueless toilets. Tissue is issued only when the prisoner requests it from the matron, who must then go to a supply room, secure the tissue, and bring it to the cellblock.

Meals in the jail corresponded to the physical

conditions of the cells. For breakfast we were given strips of salty, shriveled-up, greasy, fried fatback; for lunch, overcooked, unseasoned, souplike beans, and for dinner the same beans. Most of us found the food inedible, but we accepted our share and gave it to other cellmates.

Cellmates who were not demonstrators were mostly drunks or lesbians, many of whom came into the cell without shoes and wearing torn and badly soiled clothes. Most disturbing to us was not the swearing drunks and the strong odor of cheap wines, but the flirting lesbians who fondled some of the teen-agers. One night we saw two highly intoxicated women make love on a back bunk, and numerous times we were told by one lesbian or another, "I'm gonna git you tonight." Such a threat was almost carried out when one of the lesbians pulled a teen-age girl from a top bunk in an attempt to make love to her. Complaints were made against the lesbians, but the jailer made no effort to separate them from the young girls.

After spending three nights with the lesbians, the drunks, the seatless toilets, and the far-from-enticing food, six teen-agers and I were taken from the cellblock to stand trial for disorderly conduct. This charge involves boisterous and disorderly conduct in the form of drunkenness, swearing, kicking, spitting, and fighting. Civil rights attorney Howard Moore, Jr., asked of the city's witness whether we seven demonstrators had been seen committing any of these acts. The witness answered no, but added that we had been noisy and boisterous. When asked who had complained of the alleged noise, the witness answered, "No one." When asked whom, then, had the demonstrators disturbed, the witness, a police officer for the city, replied, "They disturbed me." He further testified that all demonstrators had been asked to disperse or were told that they would be arrested. In spite of the lack of evidence against us, we were found guilty of disorderly conduct. The judge fined us thirty-three dollars and sentenced us to thirty days in the stockade. Upon payment of the fine, the stockade sentence was to be suspended since this was our first offense. Our attorney objected to the fine, the sentence, and the two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar appeal bond. Objection was immediately overruled.

The thirty-three-dollar fine was not paid, however, for civil rights attorneys and leaders were negotiating with Mayor Ivan Allen for release of all demonstrators. Furthermore, to pay the fine would be to accept the judge's verdict of guilty; our innocence merited acquittal, not payment of a fine. We were afraid, therefore, that we would soon be leaving the city jail for the stockade. But our fears were allayed when we returned to the cellblock. The matron told us that prisoners were not "shipped out" to the stockade so late at night and so soon

after trial. Either she was mistaken or usual procedures again were not followed; we left the cellblock for the stockade at midnight, only hours after we had been sentenced. A guard took us to the first-floor desk, where we were fingerprinted for the first time. As we walked to the waiting paddy wagon, a desk sergeant pushed a fifteen-year-old girl and threatened to kick her because she was a "smart nigger." His action invited similar action on the part of the driver of the wagon. In a thirty-mile-an-hour speed zone he did fifty and tested his brakes at every stoplight. Each time he hit the brakes we were thrown about the wagon and he was almost overcome with laughter. The joke continued until we arrived at the stockade.

In order to reach the guard's desk we had to pass through a large kitchen where Negro women, wearing white uniforms with blue collars, were cooking over huge stoves. I saw great bins of cooked fatback, sausage, and cornbread, marked "C-F" for colored females, "W-F" for white females, and so on. This food was to be served to prisoners in the stockade and in the city jail. I could not tell whether there was any difference in the food marked "C-F" and that marked "W-F," but I did observe that a bin of sausage was marked "W-M" for white males. During my three days in the city jail, Negroes, male and female, had been given only fatback and no sausage.

As we waved to the working women who smiled expressions of support to us, the guard on duty handed us dirty white uniforms and said, "Put these on and get to work." When we protested starting work at one thirty in the morning, the guard swore and led us immediately to solitary confinement, appropriately called "the hole." Located behind the white men's dressing rooms, the hole is a small windowless, bedless room of approximately four by eight feet and approximately ten feet high. Overhead, a bright light burns constantly, making it difficult to sleep or to distinguish night from day. The feature of the hole that disturbed us most was the lack of toilet facilities; we had to use the concrete floor and had no tissue. Two of us were placed in one hole, two in another, and three in still another. The hole in which sixteen-year-old Patricia and I were confined smelled like a recently used rural outhouse. On the floor were many cigarette butts, two tobacco pouches, fallen plaster, and other trash. Large black roaches crawled around boldly.

Two hours after being in the hole, we were given our first meal: one biscuit and a cup of water. The biscuits were placed on the floor on top of the fallen plaster, cigarette butts, and dried urine.

In spite of the hardness of our bed, we managed to sleep, though only after killing a few roaches. We awoke — how much later I don't know — to the screams of one of the girls. "Diane's sick, Mrs.

Bishop," she called to the only adult in the group. "Diane's real sick. She's coughing bad." The mention of Diane's name was enough to upset us, for Diane was only twelve. We called the guards for what seemed like hours, and didn't stop calling until one finally came. The girls promised to do anything if the guard would let Diane out to see a doctor. In a heavy Southern drawl, the guard, who was about fifty years old, said, "Yawl cain't git out cause thar want be work for three weeks. So set tiaght." He left and returned later to take Diane's temperature. She didn't have a temperature; she couldn't be sick: that was his diagnosis. I yelled through a crack in the door that people can be sick without having a high temperature. The guard opened the door to my hole, stared at me hatefully, and said in an angry voice, "You ain't no doctor." Diane remained sick, and all of us remained in our misery. I should give the guard credit for one act of kindness. He placed in each hole an empty three-gallon bean can in which we could relieve ourselves. When we heard hours later that Diane was fast asleep, all of us relaxed, and we, too, slept.

When we awakened, we heard the voices of white male prisoners dressing for the chain gang. Many of them peeped into the hole and said, too jubilantly, "There's some niggers in thar." Of course, we felt duty-bound to serenade them with our freedom songs, and we emphasized one verse of "We Shall Overcome," which simply but powerfully asserts, "We're black and white together." We were sad when the men left the dressing rooms, for once again there was that painful silence, that absence of life that we so dreaded. Luckily, the silence was soon broken by a happy sound. Negro female prisoners brought our second meal, again biscuits and water, but more important, they brought themselves and good news. Two other demonstrators arrested after us sent word that we would be out soon. We cheered and sang again, this time with real gusto. But we were not out soon, and hours later our spirits were no longer high. Breathing was becoming more difficult in the stuffy room as the strong fumes of urine seemed to be inhaled but not exhaled. I tried visualizing the outside, but I could see only the arrest of eight-year-old Julia and the determined movement of the black roaches. Faulkner's novel *The Unvanquished*, which I had stashed in my bra, afforded me some entertainment, though I would have preferred reading another novelist while in a Southern jail. The teen-agers entertained themselves by telling jokes and talking seriously about overcrowded, poorly equipped, double-sessioned Negro schools in Atlanta. We talked or read, but we could not get one question out of our minds: "I wonder if anyone knows we're here?"

Someone did know we were there. At midnight

on Friday, January 31, a guard brought a Negro nurse to the holes to administer two green aspirins to each of us. We were informed at that time that we would be released from solitary as soon as we took our medicine. Proudly, we left the hole and walked again through the huge kitchen where Negro women were still working. In the Negro ward we donned white uniforms, but we were not told to work. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had paid our bonds, and we were going home very soon. We were grateful to rest our tired bodies on a bed, not concrete, and in a room not roach-infested and urine-stenched. An extremely young guard with a boyish face told us that we would be released the next morning and that, for the time being, we should wash up and sleep.

The reward of being released from the hole was the opportunity to talk to other Negro prisoners. They were embarrassingly proud of us and looked at the young girls the way a small boy looks at his favorite hero. On the pretext of using the toilet, one by one the women drifted into the ward where we were dressing. They stood around grinning and asking about the demonstrations. One lady with graying hair squeezed my hand softly, smiled, and walked back into the kitchen.

Our stay in the hole was nothing compared with the plight of other Negro women in the stockade. They work steadily on their feet for twelve hours a day, unloading trucks, cooking, scrubbing floors, washing, and ironing. From twelve to six and from six to twelve they are working like oxen, and as one lady put it, "being treated like dawgs." While Negro women work, white women sleep, lounge, or sew. The Negro nurse at the stockade told me that white women do not work; they sew aprons and sell them to the Negroes.

At two thirty in the morning, we were awakened and told to change our clothes; we were going home. We dressed quickly and walked again through the huge kitchen where Negro women were still working. When I reached the exit, I turned to the guard and said, "Where do the white women work?" Not realizing that I knew the whites did not work, Negro women in the kitchen yelled, "They don't work. Tell the folks outside the white girls don't work." The guard did not answer my question and did not refute the shouts of the women. He just quickly and angrily shut the door.

What a relief that the door was shutting us, not inside as before, but outside where the air was free from the odor of urine and the smell of too obvious inhumanity. And so, twenty-five hours after entering the stockade and four and a half days after being arrested, I was once again free — to the extent that Negroes are in this country and in this city "too busy to hate."

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