The Burning Cross

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A story about racism in the American south in the 1960's.

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Brownsville, Mississippi

September 10th, 1964

The small town of Brownsville was a small outpost of civilization in one of the more remote and unpopulated regions of Mississippi, a hamlet surrounded by a few farms and fields as well as dense and almost impenetrable wilderness. The town itself was old, most of the buildings along main street predated the century so there was a rustic if not dilapidated appearance to the town. Along main street, which was not paved, where a few small shops and town hall.

During a noon during one of those days where the relentless heat of summer gave way to the more bearable cool of autumn, two young brothers walked along main street as beat up old pickup trucks and rundown cars rolled past on the street kicking up dust. As the white townsfolk walk past the two black brothers, they seem to take no notice of the young men.

The older brother, a tall young man who was almost twenty, was lean and dressed in overalls, white shirt as well as thick glasses. He had very dark skin like his father and had a shaven head. His name was Isiah T. Washington and he looked down at his younger brother and spoke.

â We better not doddle in town, pop will get mighty mad if we are not back to help him with the choirs in an hour or so.â

The younger brother was Ben, in his mid teens and dressed in dirty jeans and a black t-shirt with some rips in it. His skin was like his mother's, not as dark as his brother's and he had messy uncombed hair. He looked up at Isiah and smiled.

â We won't take long,â then Ben suddenly changed the subject and said, â but Isiah, everything is going to change soon. I can feel it.â

Isiah laughed briefly. â Things never change in Mississippi, I know that and you know that. Things will be like it is now forever.â

Ben talked as he walked beside his brother. â I've been hearing about those folks from up North, coming down here and making it so we soon can sit at the counter with the white folk at the restaurant. Soon we'll use the same drinking fountains, go to the same schools. Everything is going to change.â

Isiah sighed and replied, â the north might as well be on the other side of the world. This is the south and the white folk are never going to treat us like they do each other. You have to accept that Ben and not be so damn naive. Those northerners, the freedom riders, a bunch of them got beat up pretty bad when they came to the south; even the police where knocking there heads in.â

Ben shrugged and smiled. â Things will change, I promise.â

Isiah looked at his brother. â Pop doesn't like you talking about this change thing, white folk in this town get mighty upset about that sort thing, he just does not want you to get in trouble with the good old boys around here.â

Then Ben noticed a white woman, a girl in her early twenties in a faded blue dress and with long curly blond hair, walking towards them. When she passed the two brothers, Ben stopped and smiled. He then asked, â nice day aren't we having pretty miss?â

Isiah stopped walking and looked at his brother in shock as the woman briefly smiled and then walked on. Ben watched her walk away when Isiah, sounding concerned, grabbed Ben's arm and raised his voice.

â What the hell are you doing Ben!â

Ben seemed puzzled and asked, â what is the problem Isiah?â

â You know god damn well white folks don't like it when we talk to the their women,â Isiah loudly replied.

â I just said hello, what's the harm.â

Isiah looked around and realized that a group of three white men, all dressed in casual clothing and all with a burly appearance, was looking at them from across the street.

Isiah then quickly walked away still clutching his brother's arm and pulling him along. The older brother said, â we have to tell pop, I pray you just didn't get our whole family into a heap trouble you young idiot.â

The three men said nothing as they watched the two brothers walk away.

One, a slightly obese man who was balding named Frank, spat some of the tobacco he was chewing onto the sidewalk then said, â ever since Martin Luther Coon came around, the niggers are getting mighty uppity.â

Another man, well built with neatly combed dark hair, named Wally replied, â now the niggers think they can talk to our women like their equals.â

Frank smiled then said, â get some boys together, tonight we have to put a nigger in his place.â

Then the three men all laughed deeply.

Dusk on the outskirts of Brownsville.

On the edge of a dense forest was the farm of the Washington family. In a small fenced in area was an old mule which wandered about its pen lazily. A decrepit, poorly constructed small barn was nearby. The family lived within a small house, a one story home which was rundown a on its front a screen door.

The whole family was in the living room, a small space with only a couch and recliner as well as an old radio on a table in the corner; a window was to one side of the room and outside the night began to get dark. On a rack on the wall where several hunting rifles.

The two brothers mother, Sarah, stood beside her husband and seemed both concerned and worried. She, almost 45, had lighter skin like her son Ben and had on a old green dress and apron; her dark hair was long

and her eyes seemed weary and tired.

The two brothers sat on the couch and listened to their father as his sons looked at the ground.

Peter Washington was almost fifty and had the rugged appearance of a man who had spent a lifetime doing hard physical labor. He had on beige pants and white shirt rolled up at the sleeves; his arms where folded across his chest as he spoke in a stern voice.

â Ben, if I was a different man I would be tempted to give you a whooping for your foolishness today. What did I tell you about upsetting the white folk, you know they get upset when people like us talk to their women.â

Ben looked at his father and said, â what is wrong with saying hello to somebody?â

Peter frowned and told him, â nothing if we lived any where else but the south, lived some place where a man's worth was decided by his character and not the color of his skin. But here, the white folk who run things are never going to treat us like we are equals. Boys like you have been killed in Mississippi for stunts like the one you did today.â

Isiah said, â he made a mistake, he did not know what he was doing pop.â

Peter sighed and seem to calm down a little. â You are my sons and I love you both, that is why I have to worry about men in sheets showing up and hurting our family for angering them, angering heartless bastards capable of killing a kid as young as you Ben.â

Ben, sounding upset, said, â don't you want things to be different, don't you want us to be treated like everyone else, like we are as human as everybody else?â

Peter fell to a knee and put a hand on Ben's shoulder, â I wish you boys could live in a world where you always did not have to be afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing, but the white folks in these parts ain't ever going to let that happen. Keeping my son protected is more important to me then making things better for people like us, I just want our family to be left in peace so I can see you grow into a man.â

Sarah looked at her younger son and said, â your father is just looking out for you boys.â

Then suddenly from outside the house was the sound of a thunderous gunshot and the window shattered as pieces of glass scattered across the floor. Peter and all his family stood and turned to the window. The father ran to the window and looked out.

A wooden cross was now erected in their front yard which was ablaze and casting a soft wavering glow across the grass, the large willow tree in the front yard swayed about in a breeze lazily. Behind it where six men standing in front of a pickup truck, they all where dressed in white sheets and white hoods; the tallest one who stood in the front of the pack held a shotgun.

The hooded man in front yelled in a deep voice, â if the young nigger does not come out of that house, then you all will hang from a rope.â

Ben, almost in tears, looked at his father and weakly said,â sorry pop.â

Peter then turned to his family and frowned. â Sarah, you and the boys slip out the back door.â

Sarah, tears forming in her eyes, asked, â what about you, aren't you coming with us?â

Peter then held his wife for a moment then replied, â your my family, so it is my responsibility to make sure you all are safe. Sarah, take good care of our boys.â

Then Sarah let go of her husband then took each of her son's hands and led them towards the back door. Before the three of them left their father's sight, Ben looked at him and muttered, â sorry pop.â

Peter looked at him and the last thing he could say to his son was, â it is not your fault, and remember I always will love you boys and your mother.â

Outside, the man in the front of the pack of hooded men yelled again.

â Ten seconds niggers, don't make me any more angry then I am now.â

Another man in the pack laughed and said, â maybe we should burn down their house.â

Peter walked out from the front door and stood before the pack of hooded men, a hunting rifle in his hands; the father seemed strangely calm and serene.

The hooded man in the front raised his shotgun and yelled, â we just want your son nigger, that is it. The rest of you can just step aside.â

Peter raised the rifle and said calmly, â I'm not a nigger, I'm a man as well as a father. What if some men came to your house to murder your son, would you do anything different?â

The man in front shouted, â there ain't no way me and you are the same coon.â

Peter nodded. â Yeah, I don't threaten or kill other people's family and I don't kill children.â

As the two men aimed their guns at each other, a hooded man in the back said, â just shoot that nigger.â

Then there was silence as the two men locked eyes and aimed their weapons. Peter went to fire yet when he pulled the trigger there was only a metallic click since the rifle misfired. Peter frowned and threw his weapon to the ground.

The man at the front of the pack screamed, â let's lynch this nigger!â

Then all the other hooded men rushed Peter and wrestled him to the ground. The father watched as another of the men got a rope and threw it over a branch of the willow tree, a noose already prepared at one end of the rope. Then men put the noose around Peter's neck as several of them pulled on the other end. The father was pulled up into the air as he struggled as all the hooded men yelled and laughed.

One of them said loudly, â you had it coming coon!â

From the edge of the forest near the house, Ben and the rest of the family watched from the treeline; and all began to shed tears when they saw Peter stop struggling and became limp.

Sarah muttered, â we better go.â

Before they fled deeper into the forest, Ben looked at his father in the distance and whispered, â thanks pop, I'll never forget you.â

And the rest of the family fled into the night.

Sarah moved to a northern state with her family, though poor they lived a mostly happy life. Ben applied himself in school and went to a prestigious college to learn law, his tuition paid by his mother and older brother who worked unrewarding jobs. In his later years Ben became a prominent civil rights attorney; and for his life he spent trying to end the injustice which had taken his father away from him.

The End

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