Arkansas Incident, 1924

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Abstract

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The night air, heavy now that dew covered the grass, pressed into the house without moving the curtains. Myriads of mosquitoes droned hungrily against the screen, and cicadas shrilled from the tall cottonwoods in the back yard. Otherwise there was no sound. A population oppressed by heat can make no sound.

Like actors on a stage, we sat waiting for the sigh of pine needles in the grove or the slightest ripple of coolness. Dad’s paper crackled as his head jerked toward his chest for a second’s slumber.

Suddenly out of the night a woman screamed, wordless, terror stricken. Faintly we heard rawhide whistling as it curved back and cracking against bare flesh.

We sat stupefied. It was Mother who finally moved.

“Clarence, that’s Lucy. Jim’s beating her again!”

Dad raised his paper. Although his eyes had the cold, slate color of anger he replied evenly, “Yes, must be,” and resumed his reading.

“Clarence! Are you going to sit there and let that shiftless, no-count nigger kill her? Listen!”

There was a different quality to the sound of the lash now; the screams had subsided into moans like those of a wounded animal.

Dad crumpled his paper. “Reckon there’s no use. Jim’s insane in his tempers. I’d hate to see him strung for the life of a white man.”

Only the mosquitoes hummed. We sat, again motionless, again waiting. Time and thought ceased. The throbbing of my pulse was the only motion in this hot pressure of night.

Then we heard the crunch of footsteps on the gravel and a heavy, dragging tread upon the porch. Jim stepped into the light, his dark skin glistening with streaming sweat.

“Even’, folks. Lucy done sent me down to ask if y’awl got any turpentine. Clumsy ol’ fool done cut herse’f with de butcher knife.”
Mother folded her lips together firmly, rose, and left the room.  
“Come in, Jim.” Dad’s voice was colorless and dry. 
Jim stepped inside the door, shiftily lowering his eyes, and stood twisting a streaked hat between his fingers.  
Dad glanced at his paper. “Oh, Jim, do you know which of the niggers has been beating his wife recently?” 
The negro shrank in his clothing as he whined a negative. 
“Hm, that’s good. Guess the Klan won’t be working in our neighborhood then.” 
Jim’s face turned a greenish ashen color, and his dark eyes rolled upward in their sockets. With one silent movement, he crouched against the wall as if he were trapped. 
“De white ones?” 
“Yep, guess they got the cotton scales all rigged up to swing some mean cuss off the platform. Don’t know as if I’d attempt to stop them.” 
Mother came into the room and handed Jim a bottle of turpentine. As he took it he straightened slightly and shifted his eyes. 
“Guess dey won’t find no welts cross our women’s backs. Won’t have no trouble with none of us.” 
He shuffled backwards to the door, still shrinking and whining. 
“Goodnight, Jim. Don’t let Lucy get dirt into that cut.” 
“Naw suh!” His footsteps on the gravel were hesitant, carefully spaced, ready to run. 
A breeze puffed through the curtains, rounding them in the damp heavy air.