

UNEARNED SUFFERING

1

NO WORDS COULD BE UTTERED THAT WOULD lift the shackles of grief that had descended upon his tender heart. It was a warm spring day in 1955, the kind of Alabama day that made the magnolias bloom with ease. But for young Dobbs, this was the coldest day of the year, of even his young life for that matter. For all around him, the chilling breezes of hatred and bitterness were blowing. And all about, the church people sat sweating as the tears rolled quietly down their faces. Standing on the outside of pews, behind the pews, and at every point in between, were ushers struggling uselessly to comfort grief-stricken children, students, and relatives. The pastor tried to give meaning to the suffering they were experiencing and help them find an answer to the questions they were asking. Young Dobbs wondered if this would always be the cross that his people had to bear. He wondered if God intended to do anything about murders such as this one. Dobbs wondered about the God that directed Moses to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, across the Red Sea and on through the wilderness, the God that gave his prophet the authority to stop the waters of the Jordan, crumble the walls of Jericho, and be victorious over their enemies, the God who gave the land of Canaan into their hands: was that the same God they worshipped and prayed to on Sunday? It wasn't the first time he had wondered these thoughts, but in the aftermath of this death, he had to have some answers. It wasn't that he doubted the faith of Christianity, but things were so bad, and white people so mean,

BOBBY J. SMITH

that he felt that God had to do something. His very commitment to his religion demanded it.

Lost in his reverie, as ease for his pain, he concluded his wondering with the desire to know if the white folks that had allowed this tragedy to occur, even the ones that were responsible for it, called upon the same God. If so, how could He allow some of his children to be so inhumane to others of his children?

No death had ever affected him like this one. Bernice Gayden was beloved to him-like a second mother.

Although he had known her all of his life, he had come under her spell in the spring of 1948. When he was eight, she had begun to teach him piano and voice lessons. Since that time, music had become an integral part of who he was, and Bernice Gayden was the person most responsible.

Four years later, he was a student in her seventh grade English class. It was there that she had nurtured his love for reading and tutored him in the art of writing and pushed him to sharpen his oratory. She challenged her students to attain the highest heights possible. She made them feel that no limitations or barriers, even the barriers of segregation and racism could bar them entry into the doors of success. Only their lack of preparation, commitment, and determination could be the cause of their failure.

The mere death of someone so dear to him would have been difficult enough to accept, but knowing that hers was the result of the kind of violent hatred that was increasing all around him made Dobbs all the more hurt and dejected. Her death was a part of the victimization that had swept like a wildfire all across the South since the United States Supreme Court had handed down the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declaring segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The news of this decision had not

UNEARNED SUFFERING

changed much in Dobbs' mind, because the thought of the white folks actually allowing their children to go to school with them never really occurred to him. The Negro schools were in many ways inferior to white schools, but the thought of interfering with the cocoon-like environment of his own school was an uninteresting possibility at best.

Although it had been hush hush talk, he knew about the newspaper found in Mrs. Gayden's car. Next to an article about the hated *Brown* decision, was a message scrawled along the edges of the newspaper: "No nigger will ever teach in the white schools of Alabama. You niggers run and tell that to them nigger loving son of a bitches on the Supreme Court."

THURSDAY, MAY 17, 1955 seemed to be just another humid spring day. It was the day however, that would plunge Negroes in Linden County, Alabama into the abyss of racial despair. While most folks in the area took light of the day or perhaps didn't notice it's historic significance; two angry whites found their own cruel way to celebrate the first anniversary of the *Brown* decision.

As soon as the sound of the 53' Chevy pick up truck faded away, Uncle Will peered out from behind the bushes that covered the path that led to the creek way down below. Wilbert Parson had been sitting on the banks of Silver Creek for most of his eighty-odd years. The old man was born during the height of the Reconstruction era, and no one had remembered to record the exact year of his birth. Since the whites of Linden County were trying desperately to retain political control in an era of black political domination in some areas around them, nobody seemed to care about the necessity of keeping proper vital records of Ne-

BOBBY J. SMITH

groes. Even if Uncle Will's birth had been one of the lucky ones that got recorded, it would have been destroyed in the fire that the Klan had started inside the courthouse protesting the election of a Negro circuit clerk. This event occurred in 1867, one or two years after his birth. Uncle Will though, had placed his birth at May 17, 1866. So if he knew little else on this hot and muggy Thursday, he knew it was his birthday. And he could think of no better way to celebrate than to sit in his favorite fishing spot. He had risen that morning with the sun and set out on the half-mile walk to the creek. Girl, his wife for all of fifty-three years had fussed and complained the whole time as she fixed his breakfast, lunch, and supper knowing that he would not return before sundown. She complained that he was too old to be walking a half-mile through the woods, much less sitting out there all day alone. Uncle Will knew she was right, after all they had over fifty grandchildren, two grandsons within hollering distance, but he wanted to be alone on this birthday. It might be his last, eighty-nine by his counting was pretty old.

Uncle Will had seen a lot in all those years, but what he saw beyond the peaceful waters of the creek on top of the old bridge, his eyes were not ready for. He had witnessed lynchings before, but they were all men. In fact, he had seen his own daddy hanged for placing his name on the ballot for the state legislature. He remembered it like it was yesterday. The year was 1878, and Rutherford B. Hayes was in the White House, having gotten there on the strength of his promise to ignore the murder and terror that white folks were preparing to use to retake the South, politically and economically. Wilbert Parson hadn't understood all of the in-depth ramifications of his father's death at the time, but he did know the anguish and pain of seeing his father being dragged down

UNEARNED SUFFERING

to the courthouse. And he remembered how they brutally placed the rope around his neck and led him on his own horse under the old tree on the south side of the courthouse that could only be seen inside of the courthouse from the circuit clerk's office. Although he was a young boy at the time of his father's death, as the years unfolded, he came to appreciate more and more the sacrifice that his father had made.

Uncle Will's mind was crowded with all these boyhood memories of tragedy and despair. Because once again he was caught in the same situation as when his father was lynched. Here he was standing behind the bushes, watching an innocent black woman being assaulted and shot, and he was her only source of possible protection. Yet he felt helpless to respond, just as it was all those years ago when it happened to his father.

Bernice Gayden lay face down in the mud that accumulated on the old bridge from the early spring rains. He walked hurriedly over to her to see if there were any signs of life. As he turned her body over, he immediately noticed that her eyes were closed, which was unusual if a person was dead. Uncle Will knew this because of the years that he had spent picking up bodies for Dexter & Sons Funeral Home. He knew that it was a chance that she might have enough life left in her for her to live if he could only get help. He felt for a pulse, which he slightly detected. Drenched in the emotions of fear and anger he thought about the only person he knew who would know what to do about this situation-Stephen Dexter. Stephen would be able to handle this problem if anybody could. He felt comfortable with him because he had worked with the Dexter family for almost fifteen years doing odd jobs around the funeral home and going on death calls to pick up bodies and taking them out to the church for the funeral.

BOBBY J. SMITH

But all of that had ended nearly sixteen years ago when he had gotten too old to drive. Now all he did was supervise the making of hog sausage and sugar cane cookings. Uncle Will looked nervously at Bernice Gayden's blood soaked body and then at her 1954 Chevrolet Bel Air. He didn't feel at all comfortable with the prospect of driving this car six miles, but he knew it was the only answer if he hoped to save her life.

Then there was the matter of what to do with Bernice. At his age he stood little chance of lifting her into the car alone. So he gingerly pulled her to the north end of the bridge and carefully tucked her body away in the bushes. He felt that it was necessary to take this extra precaution although this road was lightly traveled. There was in his mind the other awful possibility that the three men may return. One of them had mentioned that they ought to throw her over the bridge so that no one would find her for a while.

Confident that the men wouldn't find Bernice even if they did return, Uncle Will emptied the contents of his fishing bucket and returned to the creek and caught some water to put in the radiator. It took a while, but he eventually got the car started and then headed very cautiously down the road to Stephen Dexter's place.

As he pulled into the sprawling Dexter estate, he was worried that Stephen Dexter wouldn't be there. He was completely unaware of the impending baccalaureate service, so he couldn't have known that Stephen was only here because he had forgotten to bring some items he planned to present at the service that night.

Startled, but relieved, to see Stephen Dexter pulling into the yard behind him, Uncle Will got out of the car to go over and meet Stephen as he exited his car.

"Uncle Will, is that you?" Stephen asked, shocked to see him

UNEARNED SUFFERING

driving, but even more dumbfounded to see the old man in Bernice's car, which by now was smoking profusely.

Looking emotionally drained, Uncle Will responded, "Yeah, Steve its me and I'm in more trouble than I've seen in a long time."

"Uncle Will why are you driving Bernice's car?"

"Stephen, Bernice has been shot."

"What?"

"That's why I'm driving her car, and that's why I came to your house to get you."

"Where is she?"

"Down by Silver Creek."

"Down by Silver Creek! What's she doing down there?"

"I'll tell you on the way."

"Uncle Will, let's go in the hearse, I better take it so we can keep her lying down while we get her to the hospital."

The two men got in Stephen's hearse and he sped frantically out of the driveway, shaking in horror and disbelief.

The old man went on. "I was coming up the creek bank when I heard a colored woman talking to some white men up on the bridge. When I stopped, I realized it was Bernice. At first they were gon' help her get her car running-see, it had run hot on her. So I kept coming up the path and was getting ready to speak when all the trouble started."

"What caused the trouble Uncle Will?"

"The trouble started when the boy that was wit' um saw a magazine that was in Bernice's car and wanted to look at it."

"A magazine? How did that lead to this happening?"

"See, Bernice told him to take the magazine outta the car atta he asked for it. So when he got the magazine out, a newspaper fell

BOBBY J. SMITH

out too. And it musta had sumpin in it 'bout that court thang in Washington what says our younguns is gon' have to go to school wit' they younguns 'cause that's what he went to cutting up about."

"Then what happened, Uncle Will?"

"Den dey started talking real mean to Bernice, 'bout how she wan't gon' teach dey younguns and all. Den 'fore you knowed anythang one um shot her, fired two times, one in the stomach and one in the back."

"Is she still living, Uncle Will?"

"She was when I left. Po' thang done lost so much blood, it would be a miracle if she's still hanging on."

"Uncle Will, did they see you?"

"Naw, Stephen, dey ain't seed me 'cause I was hiding behind them bushes right yonder," Uncle Will said pointing toward the place where he witnessed the shooting as they approached the old bridge. Stop right here at the edge of the bridge, Stephen. I pulled Bernice down here under these bushes just in case dey 'cided to come back."

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AS STEPHEN DEXTER turned onto old Highway 231, for a split second, he contemplated turning left onto Morganfield Road which would lead him into Marshall and on to the Linden County Hospital. But he knew that would be a waste of time because they had never been able to get the hospital in Linden County to treat Negroes. Stephen decided instead to head toward Pleasantdale, to the Denham County Hospital. It was well equipped to handle Bernice's injuries and had enforced an open admissions policy toward Negroes until recently. The Chief of Staff at Denham

UNEARNED SUFFERING

County Hospital had been successful in opening his hospital up to Negroes but had run into some problems lately because of it. But that was Stephen's only option if he was going to save Bernice's life. He decided to go to the office of Dr. Melbourne Carruthers, a friend of his that practiced medicine in Pricedale, which was between Marshall and Pleasantdale, and get him to accompany him to the hospital.

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DENHAM COUNTY HOSPITAL was a fairly new structure and was the most advanced medical facility in a five county area. But more importantly, it had an unusually tolerant policy concerning the treatment of Negro patients. In order to attain the certification requirements to operate medical specialties desired by the board of directors, the county had to hire a chief of staff that was competent to administer such a facility. As it turned out, the applicant most qualified was a physician on staff with Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, Dr. Rodney Stinson.

Dr. Stinson brought with him to Denham County a mixture of competence and pragmatism, which resulted in the type of emergency care that was remarkable for a hospital of its size. Dr. Stinson had worked hard in his three-year tenure to open the doors of his hospital to anyone that was in need of medical care. But old attitudes and traditions were hard to change, and the residents of Denham County were no more tolerant of their hospital treating Negroes than the State of Alabama had been to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

They had been a tumultuous and taxing three years for Dr. Stinson. Since his arrival, he had waged an uphill battle to upgrade healthcare in Denham County and all of the State of Ala-

BOBBY J. SMITH

bama. In the last session of the state legislature, he had received a fatal blow to his hopes and efforts to see the veil of segregation lifted from the face of healthcare. But more importantly, Dr. Stinson's latest lobbying efforts and administrative decisions had cost him his job at Denham County Hospital. Just a week earlier at an emergency board meeting, the board had accepted his resignation. The meeting was prompted by the suspension of one of Stinson's staff physicians, whose behavior resulted in the disturbing death of a pregnant sixteen-year-old Negro girl. The Negro midwife informed the attending physician that the baby was in a breech position. The girl was improperly sent home with the advice from the physician that the midwife would have no trouble with the birth if she knew what she was doing. The mother and child died.

That was just one of numerous occasions where physicians on his staff had reacted in a callous and grossly unethical manner. The recent deaths of the mother and her infant child had been more than Dr. Stinson could swallow. He was in Montgomery when this event occurred. Upon his return, Stinson suspended the attending physician, citing his refusal to provide medical care in an emergency situation as the reason.

The news of the attending physician's actions collided with the reactions of the Negro community and produced a racial hurricane. In the midst of this storm was Rodney Stinson. Whites believed that he suspended the white staff physician to placate the Negro community. Dr. Stinson, in his mind, was merely acting professionally responsible. His actions, however, opened a withering firestorm of protest in the white community, and members of the community called for his resignation.

Three days after he suspended the attending physician, Dr.

UNEARNED SUFFERING

Stinson awoke at three a.m. to find two crosses burning in his front yard. The crosses were of two different sizes and were accompanied by notes that were nailed to his front door. The crosses were the heights of the dead Negro girl and her child. The first note read: "This cross represents Carrie Lee Mason, the unmarried Negro girl that died because she tried to have a child too soon. Are you willing to die for her memory?" The second note was much like the first one and it read: "This little cross represents the unnamed bastard child of Carrie Lee Mason. Are you willing to die for his memory, too?"

The third note read: "Go home nigger lover. We don't do things your way in Alabama. We thought you were a Southern gentleman, now we know different. If you don't quit that hot shot job at the hospital and get the hell out of Alabama, you're gonna need all that medical attention you been trying to give them niggers!"

In spite of the sudden fear that Dr. Stinson and his wife felt, Stinson was determined to follow through with the job that he had started at Denham County Hospital, at least for a little while longer.

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THE DENHAM COUNTY chapter of the White Citizens Council met the next night after the Klan had burned the crosses in Stinson's yard. They had to get a handle on the situation before it got out of hand. The Citizens Council knew that if Stinson didn't give in and leave soon, things could get pretty ugly. They wanted to prevent that if possible. They had been responsible for bringing Stinson to Pleasantdale; they would assume responsibility for his *safe* departure.

BOBBY J. SMITH

Thad Crowley had been elected the first president of the Denham County chapter of the White Citizens Council when it was organized less than a year before. Theirs was one of the leading chapters in the State of Alabama, and they had recently staged one of the most well attended rallies against the *Brown* decision in the state.

As a leader, Crowley was unmatched. For the last fourteen years he had served as the president of Pleasantdale National Bank. He had organized the bank back in 1941, and was its majority stockholder. He was a very influential citizen because it was the second largest bank in Denham County. He felt personally responsible for what was happening in their town because he had personally sought out Stinson to come to Pleasantdale and head their hospital.

When he made mistakes in business, he quickly took responsibility for them and corrected them. That's what he had come to do tonight: correct a mistake that was disturbing their community and about to stain their good name as a peaceful community.

"There isn't much to say about this situation. We made a mistake, one that I take full responsibility for because it was upon my advice that Rodney Stinson was brought to Denham County. I have been up in Montgomery today and have talked with most of the lawmakers that are as tired of Stinson as we are. Many of them have agreed to come to the board meeting tonight and state their grievances publicly which I believe will be enough, along with the things that we can do, to pressure Stinson to resign and move on."

After Crowley finished his statement, a few of the members made comments, and they voted unanimously to proceed with their plans to force Stinson out of Alabama as soon as possible.

UNEARNED SUFFERING

The following night, The Board of Directors of the Denham County Hospital held an emergency meeting to take up the complaints against Stinson. The room was filled with all of the Citizens Council members as well as several members of the Alabama legislature. The legislators were there to acknowledge and discuss complaints made against Stinson by some practicing physicians at the Denham County Hospital. It didn't take long for Stinson to realize that the cards had been stacked against him and the wisest thing he could do was to tender his resignation and move on. The group he was dealing with had the power and the will to completely ruin his medical career. The legislators were there to send a message that, if necessary, he would be brought up on professional charges which could result in the suspension or revocation of his license to practice medicine in Alabama and quite possibly elsewhere. Moreover, Stinson realized that even if the charges were not substantiated, if made public, they could have the effect of ruining his prestige as a hospital administrator, therefore, sabotaging his opportunities elsewhere. Resignation was the only prudent option, so Stinson exercised it, noting that his resignation was to become effective at 11:59 p.m. on May 17, 1955.

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STEPHEN DEXTER HAD heard about the racial trouble in Denham County. In fact, he had received a visit from Carrie Lee Mason's grandfather, who held a burial policy with Dexter & Son's Funeral Home. The very hearse he was driving had been dispatched to pick up the bodies of the young girl and her infant son. Stephen

BOBBY J. SMITH

was well aware of the potentially explosive situation he was going into. But as Dr. Carruthers had pointed out, there was no alternative that would give them a reasonable chance to save Bernice's life. The knowledge, however, that was haunting both Stephen and Dr. Carruthers was knowing that the brutal force of fate might deal them a fatal blow. Even if Stinson was still there, the open hostility of the hospital staff as well as the community might make operation on Bernice a virtual impossibility. Worse still was the fact that Stephen Dexter was known in this community as an NAACP man that had been snooping into the Mason Case.

Still, as Stephen looked at the emergency entrance of the hospital, he knew that as many Negro tax dollars as white tax dollars had gone into the building and operation of the Denham County Hospital. It was their only option, and he intended to exercise it.

"Stephen, it might be best if I go in alone and see if I can find Dr. Stinson." Reluctantly, Stephen assented, knowing that Dr. Carruthers was probably right.

"Okay Doc. But if you're not back in five minutes, I'm coming in," he said looking back at the unconscious but breathing body of Bernice Gayden. With that note of approval from Stephen, Melbourne Carruthers disappeared into the most volatile situation of his career. Nothing that he had encountered at Howard University School of Medicine or his subsequent training and practice in Atlanta had prepared him for this situation.

Uncle Will peered anxiously out of the back window of the hearse. He had been fairly quiet on the way to Pleasantdale. His mind flickered back and forth across the decades. One minute, he was standing at the base of the old oak tree-looking at his daddy's lifeless body swaying in the cruel wind of racial hatred. The next minute, he was standing at the base of the old bridge hearing the

UNEARNED SUFFERING

wicked laughter of hate-crazed men pouring beer on the bloody body of Bernice Gayden. Occasionally, he allowed himself to view the pained look on her face when she realized they were going to shoot her. He could still feel her sense of helplessness when the gun was placed up to her head the first time. His mind was filled with anger when he thought about the teasing game they played, handing the gun back and forth until she was nearly hysterical with fear and hopelessness. Intermittently, his mind bounced back and forth between these thoughts and the thoughts of them uttering sexual perversions to Bernice. He thought of the first teardrops she allowed to fall as they acted out what amounted to sexual seduction at gunpoint. Asking her if she wanted to make love to a white man before she died.

In all his years, Uncle Will had never seen firsthand that kind brutal attack on black womanhood. It eclipsed what he had witnessed at the courthouse all those years ago and he knew that whether Bernice lived or died, life for him would never be the same. If it had happened so easily to Bernice Gayden, what about his own seven daughters and two dozen or so granddaughters, most of who lived in the South where the Devil himself seemed to be walking to and fro searching for Negroes whom he could devour.

The situation was both saddening and ironic at the same time. Here were two men who had taken dozens, maybe hundreds, of trips into the rural enclaves of the South, picking up the bodies of Negro dead. In all those years, they had seen the aftermath of some hauntingly bizarre cases, yet they had learned out of necessity to remain emotionally untouched by those experiences. It seemed, though, that the wall of history had crumbled and all of the cumulative emotions of a thousand deaths came crashing in

BOBBY J. SMITH

on them with Bernice's shooting.

Uncle Will was a long way from a prophet and wasn't very religious, but he knew the spirits of violence and death that he could sense in the air. He mournfully eyed the body of Bernice Gayden; he could almost see the life fleeing from her. Yet, he knew that the spirit of death was coming to take more souls than Bernice had to offer. He, like Stephen was wondering what was taking Dr. Carruthers so long. He had only been gone five minutes past Stephen's time limit, but he had to come for Bernice soon because in his burdened soul he knew that all hell was breaking loose around them. Uncle Will had not seen him, but the demon of racial strife had indeed followed them to Pleasantdale and would soon possess himself a human crowd to work his witchery.

"Stephen, our prayers must be working. Dr. Stinson is still here and he's willing to provide treatment for Bernice." Pulling the hearse up to the emergency entrance, Stephen tried to find some relief in what, under the circumstances, should have been good news.

"I just hope it's not too late to save Bernice," said Stephen.

Everything swung into high gear. Two white emergency technicians hurried out to take over bringing her into the hospital and getting her ready for treatment.

Stephen and Uncle Will stood around aimlessly as they pulled the curtain and began the hurried process of attempting to save a life. Fifteen minutes passed and Stephen started looking around for a telephone knowing that by now, the whole school was anxious to find out what had happened to him and Bernice. Stephen started to insert a nickel into the pay phone but hung up when he saw the two doctors approaching. Stephen had seen that worried

UNEARNED SUFFERING

look before, and he knew things didn't look good.

"Stephen, this is Dr. Stinson." Extending his hand to shake Stephen's, Dr. Stinson began, "I won't pretend to guarantee you that we can save this lady's life. She's lost an enormous amount of blood and is severely hemorrhaging internally. The good news is that both bullets missed her vital organs, so we just might get lucky. I have here some emergency release forms that someone needs to sign. Dr. Carruthers seems to think that you are the best person. Is that true?"

"Bernice is a staff member at my school as well as a close family friend. She has no relatives here besides her husband and a young daughter. Her husband works most of the time in New York, but is working in Atlanta this week."

"Mr. Dexter, if you would be willing to sign as her employer, I would be willing to accept that for the surgery."

"Sure, Doctor, anything to get Bernice treatment." Stephen said as Dr. Stinson showed him where to sign. Stephen Dexter's signature was pretty important, especially for a Negro. It could release tens of thousands of dollars from First Tuskegee Bank where he was a stockholder and served on the board of directors. His signature had often been the difference in many a Negro getting out of jail on bail or staying in for the trial. It had been the thing that got Bernice's husband in Morehouse College when Carverdale Gayden's father had lost two consecutive cotton crops to boll weevils. But as Stephen Dexter handed the forms back to Dr. Stinson, in his mind it was the most important signature he had ever written.

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BOBBY J. SMITH

BACK AT CARVER High School, wonder had turned to worry over the absence of Bernice Gayden and the principal, Stephen Dexter. Bernice Gayden was known for her punctuality while Stephen Dexter was often late because of his heavy schedule. But whatever the case, the time now was 8:00 p.m., one hour past the time the program was scheduled to begin, and everyone knew that neither of them would hold the program up that long unless it was something beyond their control.

The accomplishments of the eighty-one graduates in the class of 1955 caused the school auditorium to fill to capacity with proud parents, family members, pastors, and citizens from all over Linden County. This year was a year of extreme thanksgiving with eighty-one graduates, fifteen more than the record year of 1945.

This year's theme was seemingly prophetic: *Remembering And Honoring Those Who Gave To Our Success*. It had been the unanimous choice of the senior class. Theirs was the last class that Bernice Gayden had taught in both elementary school and high school. She was the one more than anyone that impressed them with the notion that as high school graduates, they had the responsibility to go on to college. She often said that what they and others like them decided to do after they left the safe environment of Carver High School would determine the future of the Negro race. It was commonly known that if a student was capable and serious, Bernice Gayden would literally move mountains to see them matriculate at one of the fine Negro schools in the South. She had visited many a sharecropper's home and convinced them that they couldn't afford not to send their son or daughter to Tuskegee, Talladega, Alabama State, Alabama A&M, or even Howard, Spelman or Morehouse. She was always writing letters and calling deans and college presidents to solicit financial sup-

UNEARNED SUFFERING

port or jobs on campus for her beloved students.

That's what made her tardiness a cause for great worry. By now everyone had heard about the racial killings that were occurring with increasing frequency in the South. As this group sat waiting, they were aware of the rumors that were being spread since the Supreme Court had ruled in favor of the NAACP in the *Brown* case. Still, there was no NAACP chapter in Linden County, home of one of the organization's most vocal allies, Stephen Dexter.

Perhaps most upset was Stephen's wife, Amelia Dexter. She knew better than anyone else that something bizarre was going on. Amelia couldn't imagine what had happened that made Stephen neglect to call the school to let them know what was going on. And she was wondering where Bernice could possibly fit into this strange puzzle of events.

The crowd was getting restless and many people were demanding answers about the whereabouts of Stephen and Bernice. But Amelia had no answers to give. She went into the auditorium and announced that she was waiting for her husband to call, begging the patience of everybody until she could find out what was going on. Amelia had asked her pastor, Reverend D.V. Townsend and his wife Denise to join her, Dobbs, and Clarissa in her husband's office to await word from Stephen on what was going on.

As Amelia sat there and waited, she tried to make small talk with Rev. Townsend and his wife, but her mind was far away. She was thinking about a conversation that she had with Stephen only two weeks earlier. Stephen had told her that he was concerned that the Klan and other whites were going to begin to retaliate against them because of the *Brown* decision. Then she remem-

BOBBY J. SMITH

bered what had happened just a week ago in Pleasantdale. Some local whites had gathered in front of the courthouse and burned an effigy of Earl Warren, the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, to protest the decision that he had convinced the Court to hand down. Stephen had been in Pleasantdale when it occurred and had come home and told her about it.

He had even made an announcement to all of the teachers and students at the high school, telling them that whites were so upset over this decision that everyone needed to be extra careful around whites because anything could happen. He confessed to her privately that his having been recently elected to the national board of the NAACP and Carverdale's role as part of the legal team could make their families prime targets to be terrorized by whites.

Could these things have anything to do with Stephen and Bernice's disappearance? At about 8:15 p.m., the answer to Amelia's questions came.

"Hello."

"Hello, Amelia, this is Stephen."

"Stephen, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine, Amelia. Listen to me carefully. Bernice has been shot. And I've brought her over here to the Denham County Hospital."

"Amelia interrupted, "Stephen, what did you say?"

"I said Bernice has been shot, honey."

Amelia couldn't respond like she wanted to because Dobbs and Clarissa were sitting in the office with her.

Stephen continued, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right. Stephen is she..."

"No, she's not dead, she's alive and semi-conscious, thanks to Uncle Will. He found her down by Silver Creek. Her car stopped

UNEARNED SUFFERING

on her over there and two white men shot her and left her there for dead.”

“What! Stephen, no, that can’t be true.”

“Listen, darling, the doctor is getting ready to perform emergency surgery. I want you to have Rev. Townsend to make an announcement about what’s happened and dismiss the program. I hate for everyone to find out like this, but they won’t go home without knowing what’s happened to Bernice. Then get him to bring you, Dobbs and Clarissa over to the hospital. Tell him to ask the people to please go home and do not come over to Denham County. Tell Reverend to remind them of the trouble over here lately with the Mason girl.”

There was a pause before Amelia spoke.

“Amelia, are you sure you are okay?”

“Yes, Stephen I’m, I’m all right.”

“Do you have Carverdale’s number in Atlanta?”

“Yeah, I got it. I’ll call him.”

“Amelia, I also need you to call Sheriff Kitchens and report the shooting. Tell him it occurred down at the old bridge at Silver Creek and we’ve brought her over to the Denham County Hospital. I’ll see you shortly. Amelia, I love you.”

“I love you too, Goodbye.”

Amelia’s head began to hurt when she thought about what she had just heard. She didn’t have all of the facts, but she knew that Bernice had been shot. And two white men had done it. But why had they done it? And how had it happened? And how did Stephen and Uncle Will become a part of it?

“Mama, what did daddy say?” asked Dobbs, standing up now.

“Sit down, Son.”

She paused to look at Clarrisa as she told the news. “Baby,

BOBBY J. SMITH

your mother's been shot." At first, Clarissa didn't react to the news. Then the tears began to well up in her eyes. She tried to hold them in but was soon overwhelmed with the reality of what Amelia had just told her. "Clarissa honey, she's not dead, but it's serious." Denise Townsend stepped forward to help Amelia calm Clarissa down.

Dobbs stood up again and began to pace around the room.

"Who did it, Mama? Who shot Mrs. Gayden?" His voice was choked with anger and he was on the verge of tears.

"Just calm down, Dobbs. We don't know anything yet. Let's just wait until we get to the hospital and find out more from your daddy."

Amelia didn't want to tell Dobbs that white men had shot Bernice, at least not now. Clarissa quietly wiped away the tears that had stained her face and looked at Dobbs as he went on.

"It was white men wasn't it?"

Amelia looked at Rev. Townsend and didn't know what to tell the boy.

"It was, wasn't it, Mama? White men shot Mrs. Gayden, didn't they?"

Amelia grabbed both of the children and held them tightly while trying to calm their fears about her condition. But she also knew that Dobbs had to have an answer.

Tears running down her face, Amelia placed her face next to Dobbs and told him.

"Yes, Dobbs, it was two white men that shot Bernice. But she's not dead, and she may be all right. Let's not panic before we get to the hospital and find out more about the situation."

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UNEARNED SUFFERING

A HUSHED SILENCE fell over the crowd as the ministers made their way back into the auditorium. Townsend had sent for all of the pastors and informed them of the shooting of Bernice Gayden. He went on to tell them that Mr. Dexter had requested that all of the people go home and wait on word of her condition. Townsend asked the pastors to speak with their members and try to urge them to remain calm and go home and obey the advice of the principal.

Townsend stepped forward to speak, "As I'm sure you are aware, there has been nearly an hour and a half delay in the baccalaureate service because of the absence of our principal, Mr. Stephen Dexter and the primary sponsor of tonight's program, Mrs. Bernice Gayden. I have been asked to come before you and report the unfortunate news that Mrs. Bernice Gayden has been shot."

Shouts of "No! No! No! Not Mrs. Gayden," broke the stunned silence.

Townsend went on, "She has apparently become the victim of ambush as she was driving in to the program tonight. But she's not dead. Now let's all remain calm and prayerful. I say that because our God has promised that He will be a very present help in a time of trouble, and we are still hopeful that she will survive this vicious attack. Just moments ago, Mr. Dexter phoned his office with word that he had taken her to the Denham County Hospital. As you know, it is difficult for us Negroes to receive even emergency treatment here in these Southern hospitals, and I'm sure most of you know about the recent trouble over in Denham County. But if the grace of God permits, Brother Dexter will be able to get her the treatment she needs.

"Now I realize that many of you are concerned about Mrs.

BOBBY J. SMITH

Gayden's condition and you are wondering who is responsible for this. Let me speak to the first concern. We don't have much information now about her condition other than she has suffered two gunshot wounds. Brother Dexter reported that she is still conscious and that it seems that the doctor on duty has received her into the hospital.

"Brother Dexter has asked that everybody go home and await word on her condition. I'm going to accompany Mrs. Gayden's daughter and Mrs. Dexter and her son to the hospital. I know that some of you may desire to follow, but please realize that it is a very delicate situation over there with the trouble stemming from the recent deaths of the young Mason girl and her child.

"Now on the question of the men responsible for this, I regret to inform you that it is true that two white men caused this tragedy. We don't have much info..."

Bedlam broke out inside the auditorium. Students, teachers, as well as other members of the community were shouting that something must be done tonight about this. Others prepared to leave and go and find the men.

Standing at the podium Townsend saw the crowd breaking apart and raised his hand and eventually silenced the angry crowd.

"Let me urge you to consider the consequences of any rash decisions. We are all upset and angered by this violent act. Nobody here is angrier than me. As her pastor, I, like you can attest to the value of Bernice Gayden to this community, but the Word of God consuls us to get angry but sin not. We all need to make prayer our refuge in this time of trouble and see that we are able to be of service as this situation begins to unfold in the days ahead."

Sensing that the crowd didn't need to be dismissed without the soothing balm of prayer, Townsend went on, "With the prayer-

UNEARNED SUFFERING

ful consideration of my pastoral brethren, I want to pause now and urge you to join me in prayer. Let us make a solemn appeal to the Almighty God for the life of our beloved sister.”

By the time Townsend finished praying and stepped away from the podium, he had calmed most of the Negroes, and made even the angriest ones realize that they should obey the instructions of their principal.