

Capitol Hill in Black and White

Part one of a three part series on the revelations of the former maitre 'd of the Senate dining room. Reprinted by permission of Dodd-Mead & Company, Inc., from "Capitol Hill in Black and White," by Robert Parker and Richard Rashke, copyright 1986.

Mr. Yawn was the most powerful white man in Magnolia, forty miles north of Houston, and in all of Montgomery County as well. Besides my daddy, Mr. Yawn worked forty other sharecroppers, each tilling seventy-five acres. For the seed and tools he gave us, he kept two-thirds of the cash crop. And besides the land we worked for him, Mr. Yawn owned a huge cattle ranch and a sugarcane plantation along the Brazos River to the west, where the soil was black and fertile, unlike ours. He even had his own sugar mill, and in the winter months I used to lead the mules that turned the cane grinder.

Mr. Yawn was also the Grand Dragon of the Montgomery County Ku Klux Klan. I used to think the Klan was fascinating when I was little. A friend and I had heard about their secret meetings in the woods not far from my house. We used to slither on our bellies to the edge of the clearing where they met and, wide-eyed, watch the burning crosses and white-hooded forms glowing pink and orange in the firelight. We didn't understand what they were so excited about, but as two Negro boys at the edge of the white man's mysterious world, we figured they'd be plenty sore if they caught us spying on them.

It didn't take me long to lose my fascination with the Klan. One night a posse of white robes carrying torches stopped at our house and shouted for my daddy to come out. I could almost smell his fear. I watched through the open door, and I can well imagine my mouth was hanging down to my belt. The horses were pawing the ground and prancing nervously, the flickering flames were casting shadows around the yard, and a mean voice was shouting from inside a white hood, "Nigger, you see so and so? We're looking for him. He killed a white man up in Conroe." My daddy said, "No, suh," nice and polite, and the posse thundered off to the next Negro home. I didn't know yet what that encounter in the night was all about, but I was sure it had nothing to do with a Sunday picnic.

My real introduction to the Klan was in every way the brutal experience it was meant to be. One morning, a truck came down the dirt road next to our house raising a cloud of dust. Two white men sat in the cab and one of them was shouting through a bullhorn, "Take a good look at this, niggers, and don't ever forget it." Tied by his feet with a long rope dragging in the dirt was a boy I had known. He had been tarred, feathered, and lynched for allegedly casting a lustful glance at a white girl. My mother tried to hide the hideous scene from me, but before she could get me into the house, I had seen and heard everything the white folks wanted me to. From that moment on, I lost all my fascination with the Klan, and it was no longer a mystery to me.

"Where you been, nigger?" Mr. Yawn demanded of my daddy as he leaned over Prince to peer down at us.

"Back yonder, suh," my father said.

"What you been doing?"

"We be cuttin' wood."

"Then why you going down this road with an empty wagon? Why don't you niggers think for once in your life? You could have loaded it with wood and then unloaded it at my house or yours, and not waste all that time. Turn that wagon around, you dumb nigger, and go back and fill it up."

"Yes, suh," my father said, and he seemed older and more bent when he said it. I hated Mr. Yawn more than I feared him when he talked to my father like that, and I was always disappointed when my daddy never spoke up to defend himself. I couldn't understand, with the great wisdom of an eleven-year-old, why he didn't just tell the white man that we had been cutting wood all day and were too tired to load and unload the wagon one more time. I thought my father was playing coward, and I didn't like it one bit.

Mr. Yawn looked at Rebecca, huddled close to me against the evening chill, dressed in a cotton shift and sweater. She was a quiet, obedient girl with wide, bright eyes, and she was such a hard worker that my daddy used to bring her to the fields to help us instead of our mother.

"Gal," Mr. Yawn told her, "you get off that wagon and sit here and talk to me."

My father spoke up quickly. "Us needs her."

"I want her to stay here with me, nigger," Mr. Yawn shouted.

Rebecca climbed off the wagon, and I could see she was scared. Why would this white man want to talk to her? What did she have to say? I was frightened too, because I feared something bad was going to happen. I waited for my daddy to order Rebecca back onto the wagon, but he didn't say a word. He must have sensed that I was about to do something foolish, for I heard him threaten under his breath, "You stay put, boy!"

My father turned the wagon around and headed back to the woodpile. I looked at his face, hoping to meet his eyes. I could see the muscles in his jaw working hard, but he kept his eyes down as if he were watching for potholes in the road. Every now and then, he pulled a red handkerchief from his hip pocket, pretending to blow his nose. But I could see him dabbing his eyes.

I didn't break the silence because I was afraid my father would hit me. He was a strict, religious man who stood for no sass from his sons. But I was more angry at him than I had ever been at anyone. If he had stood up to Mr. Yawn, I reasoned, the most the white man would have done would have been to yell at him or maybe hit him a few times with that snake of a whip curled around his saddlehorn. That would have been a small price to pay to protect his own daughter. I was just too young to understand. I couldn't read the helplessness in my father's face as I can now, the humiliation in his bent shoulders as he tapped the mules with the reins trying to

make them hurry, or the anger boiling in his stomach like a sulphur spring. I couldn't see beyond my own boyish rage, and I didn't understand, as he did, what it meant to be a Negro in east Texas.

Forgetting how tired I was, I pitched split oak and pine logs faster than I had ever done before, until sweat dripped from my face and my arms ached, and when the wagon was full we drove as fast as Jack and Nelly could drag us back to the lonely spot in the road where we had left Rebecca. The wagon groaned under the weight. It seemed to be crawling to the crack of the whip and the "giddy up" that echoed in my ears.

I saw her from a distance, sitting still at the side of the road hugging her sweater, and I had to stop myself from leaping off the wagon and running to her. When my daddy finally halted the wagon, she climbed aboard but didn't say a word. "What's wrong?" I asked. My sister and I were very close. "What happened? Why you crying?"

Robbie, as I called her, said nothing, but hung her head as if she were ashamed to look me in the face, and the tears rolled quietly down her cheeks like dewdrops on a flower. My daddy didn't say anything either. What could he say to his fifteen-year-old daughter whom he had just sent to a white man to be raped?



Author: Robert Parker.

Courtesy of Fox Studio

We were silent the rest of the way home. We didn't hum "I'm So Glad I Got My Religion in Time." I didn't think God was with us, and I wasn't hungry anymore.

Ours was a peaceful home, with praying and Bible-reading and neighbors coming in for weekday religious services with my father, who could pray like no one I've ever heard. But that night my mother's eyes were filled with fire. "Why you do it?" she shouted at my father. "Why you leave her?" No matter what my father said to defend himself, it sounded so weak and sniveling to me that I can't even remember it to this day. My mother had dared to ask the questions I couldn't. And like her, I was not satisfied with the answers.

Several days later, after relentless pestering, Robbie told me that Mr. Yawn had taken his pleasure with her, not that I hadn't suspected it all along. Knowing about sex comes early when you live with as little privacy as we did, and where the walls were cardboard thin.

"What he say?" I pressed Robbie.

"He say, 'You supposed to do this, gal. You owe it. If you fight me, I'll put this whip to you, gal.'"

I cried myself to sleep many a night after Robbie told me what happened, and as the days grew into weeks and months, so did my hatred of Mr. Yawn. Robbie was never the same again. The white man had stolen her dignity and dirtied a precious corner of her self when he had taken her, at dusk, on the leaves in the woods. She couldn't look at the world anymore with the bright, childlike eyes she used to have, full of wonder and delight. The sparkle had died, and in its place, it seemed to me then, there was sadness, maybe guilt, certainly disappointment in her daddy.

We swore to get even with Mr. Yawn, Robbie and I. My vow was like a worm in my stomach that gnawed from daylight until I fell asleep at night. Sometimes it even ate into my dreams. With each passing year, I grew angrier at my father and more full of hate for our landlord. As happens when one matures, I began asking more and more questions and found fewer and fewer answers. Like every Negro boy I knew, I began to see that there were two worlds, one black and one white, and I came to accept the fact that it would always be that way. What I wanted to know was why, because it wasn't right.

Then one day in 1936, when I was fifteen years old, I found a rattlesnake in a potato sack in our shed. I tied the end of the burlap bag closed and hung it in a tree. A day or so later, my brother Richard caught a copperhead in a field and gave it to me in a box. He watched me put it into the

sack with the rattler. Although I didn't tell Richard, I knew exactly what I was going to do. Mr. Yawn's empire was so large that he used to travel it every day by car and by horse. Pulling his horse trailer, he'd drive the Chevy as close as he could to the fields he wanted to inspect. Then he'd leave the car parked by the side of the road and ride off on Prince. I made up my mind to watch for the blue car and then put the two snakes inside. If I was lucky, they would kill him. If I wasn't, Mr. Yawn would be one hell of a scared or sick white man. I talked it over with Robbie, and she agreed to be in on the plot.

My mother found out before we could plant the snakes. I'm not certain, but I think Richard told her I was collecting them in a sack. She sat me down and lectured me good. "Don't you know, boy," she said, "that the Bible says 'Thou shalt not kill?' You let those snakes be."

That night she told my father, and he came after me with a razor strap. It was the worst beating he ever gave me, and I couldn't forgive him. I was the only one who was man enough to stand up to Mr. Yawn, and it was me who was being punished. My father had the courage to beat his fifteen-year-old boy, but couldn't even speak up to the white man who had raped his own daughter. It just wasn't right.

My mother had the sense to see the bitterness growing in me, and she knew that my hatred for Mr. Yawn was spilling over onto my own father. I was heading for certain trouble if I stayed in Magnolia. At worst, I would be lynched. At best, I'd have my tongue cut out, or I'd be castrated as others had been or I'd be whipped until I was broken and crippled. So in 1936 she packed me up and sent me to live with my aunt in Wichita Falls, where I would soon meet Lyndon Baines Johnson.

My mother did the right thing, and I knew it at the time. I've never held it against her. She died at the age of thirty-eight, worn out from bearing too many children too fast with no proper medical care, and too much worry. Robbie died at the age of twenty-one. I can't be sure, but I've always felt that, along with her virginity, Mr. Yawn took her will to live. My one great regret is that she died before forgiving our father for leaving her alone that day.

For my part, I wouldn't see or forgive my father for thirty-six years. Only after I had worked in Washington for Lyndon Johnson did I come to recognize that blacks had no rights under the law in places like Magnolia, Texas—none. My daddy had done the right thing, for he had no real choice. Had he stood up to Mr. Yawn the way I had expected and hoped he would, Robbie would have been raped anyway and perhaps physically battered and beaten as well, my daddy would have been whipped and probably lynched, and our house would have been burned to the ground. My mother might have been raped for good measure, and I and my brothers might have been castrated. I finally came to realize that if all that had happened, there would not have been one single thing he could have done about it. It took me twenty-seven years to learn what my daddy had known all along.

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The presentation will include flower arranging for churches and for large spaces, as well as an internationally known artist who uses silks, satins, gold threads and jewels in his designs of altar hangings and vestments for clergy. Another exhibit will show an expert's work with fine linens, embroideries and silver. Also a knowledgeable weaver will show her expertise with the restoration of fine old fabrics.

There will be paintings, sculptures, music and singing during the tea hours from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. The tea and exhibit to be held in the parish hall at St. Philip Church.

For information, call Bernice Davis, Episcopal Churchwoman, Tea Chairman, 274-0713.

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