

## A Most Unfortunate Son

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*[Oh, the jailer, he went wild over me,*

*And he locked me up and threw away the key;*

*It seems to be the rage, so they keep me in a cage,*

*They go wild, simply wild, over me.] T-Bone Slim 1920*

[Based on horrific real circumstances.]

It all ended up in ruins. My poor family enduring a harsh range of emotions: ongoing bouts of grief, shock due to irreplaceable loss, raging anger that dared not be expressed in public, and anxiety as to what tomorrow may bring.

The day started promising enough. I had breakfast with my wife and children. We all laughed at the silly and now innocent things that each of us was saying. Then did the usual morning activities and soon it was time to head to work at the lumber company. As I did six days a week. Thirty-five years earlier, my family was plantation slaves, serving at the will of our "loving" owner and overseer. Now we give our services freely and willingly to the labor market.

The whole event happened sometime during the early evening. I was cheerfully thinking that soon I would be heading home to my adoring family. But that was not meant to be. A group of deputies had entered the workplace and surrounded me. Without given a chance to speak, they accused me of attacking and brutalizing a local woman whose husband had a fine standing in the small community. A woman of a different color. Without another choice, I willingly allowed them to place shackles on me and take me off to the courthouse.

Once there, the judge started by calling me names like fiend and devil. It was clear that I would not get a fair shake with this man. I knew from prior cases that I could seek a circuit court trial and delay things for three months. Hopefully, emotions may die down then and I could get a fair trial. The judge agreed reluctantly and soon I was moved back to my tiny cell. And that was my involuntary home for two weeks. Until my circumstances changed that one hellish night.

I was roused out of a most uncomfortable slumber. This was after periods of constantly waking up and briefly falling back to sleep. Then I awoke to an angry crowd of white males vilifying and cursing at me. I am guessing that there were thirty to sixty of these "most proper citizens". Now their "leader" spoke out. "This is the wild animal that attacked Mrs. Reuss. Then returned to work as if nothing had happened. Now he thinks that he can hide out here for a few months making a mockery of our justice process. Time for us to be the angel of justice instead. Let's string him up, boys. Mr. Jailer, time to serve righteousness honorably by opening the cell with this foul being and getting out of the way. Or shall we

do the same to you as well?" As one could predict, the deputy got a sudden case of cold feet and supplied the keys.

I was pulled out of my cell. My hands were so tightly tied that they lost all sense of feeling. A third rope was placed around my chest. It became hard to breathe at all. I was blindfolded and gagged. Then I was pushed and dragged into what I knew now would be my final moments. Soon we all stopped and the blindfold and gag were roughly removed. I was under the large limbs of the tall "Fairness Tree" near the Court House where all "obviously guilty" types were rapidly hung. Those final moments were a series of blurs. Jeering faces illuminated by makeshift torches. The tying of the improvised gallows around the tree branches. The noose being lowered and placed around my neck ever so securely. Then the kicking out of the portable stump under me. I became an involuntary marionette ever so briefly grabbing at the rope around my neck and kicking my legs. Choking for what seemed to be an eternity. I cannot breathe. My lungs are on fire. Then lifelessness.

Those purveyors of "real justice" left my dead frame twirling slowly in the breeze for a day and a half. This would be a wakeup call for others that may think of doing similar misdeeds to "their good women." During that first day, my wife and older children came by. They wailed at seeing the result of such a hideous act. One was so shocked, that she died instantly. My poor wife now had two deaths to deal with. She managed the best she could by raising the children alone. The cost was very high for her – a premature death from all the unexpected stress.

In time, the town forgot conveniently about their only lynching and moved on to the "modern" age. But others still carried a burden in secret. Mrs. Reuss had been in a loveless marriage and was bored beyond tears. To feel something and to pass the time, she had been carrying on a very passionate affair with a younger man. On that very day of my arrest, she had broken up with her lover.

After all, she had her role in the community of loving wife to a prominent husband to maintain. The former emotional partner did not take it very well. He threw punches towards her still beautiful face. And never stopped until his rage subsided. On seeing his bloody handiwork, he fled and left the small city for parts unknown. When her husband saw this, he asked who did this to her. She mentioned quickly my name to cast suspicion away from herself. Her husband swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. And the rest is already known to you. It was said that in her final moments, she kept saying "forgive me", "Lord have mercy", and my name. Her husband, daughters, maids, and doctors did not know why. They thought that she was delirious. Instead, she was coming to terms with causing an innocent man to die and having her soul spend eternity in the unfriendly flames of Hell.

But my family and racial community did not forget. In time, they became educators, lawyers, and politicians who began transitioning the town to equality and fairness. On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my death, a small plaque was placed by the location of my death describing what happened. In time, the state and city passed resolutions saying that my death was a mistake and asking for forgiveness. But none of those "enlightened actions" can give back my life or the suffering and financial hardship that my family had to endure. Or remove the fact that no one was ever jailed for my hanging. I hope the people of your age are a lot smarter than the ones that lived in mine. And cause a lot less suffering to innocent beings just wishing to live a long and contented life. Instead of becoming your most unfortunate sons and daughters.

“Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.