

*A Beginning to the End of Silence*

*(fragments of stories untold)*

*May 31, 1921*

*Night*

*Cushing (50 miles southwest of Tulsa)*

A white girl-child kneels beside the open window. She is not yet school age but she knows her letters, her numbers. Her bedroom is all white: white linens, white curtains, white counterpane. Outside, the sky is dark. The crickets chirr. The katydids whine. In the distance another motor roars to life. Headlights approach at high speed, pass her house, disappear east, toward Tulsa. This is the fourth time in the last quarter-hour.

Come away from there, Edna, her mother says. The girl hears the sharpness in her mother's voice.

Where is Father? the girl asks.

Hush. Never mind. Go to sleep.

The girl lies awake in her bed, counting. Seven. Eight. Nine. Twelve. Fifteen. All through the night, headlights and motors. Sometimes men's voices. Her father is gone. Her mother is frightened.

Days from now she will know something terrible happened this night, but not what, or where.

Years from now she will have forgotten the flashes of headlights, the sounds of motors, men's excited voices.

Decades from now, because of renewed whispers, she will remember again.

*June 1, 1921*

*Evening*

*Greenwood (across the Frisco tracks from Tulsa)*

This white girl is slim as a broom straw, her hair colored the same, her features sharp. Her name is Vashti. Her age is 13. She sits beside her father in the wagon. He has brought her to see the aftermath of Little Africa burning. Slowly the old dray pulls the flatbed through smoldering ruins. In the air, black smoke lingers.

All around her is a blurred moonscape, she cannot recognize anything, though these streets should be familiar: her family has lived at the edge of Greenwood all her young years. Her father drives toward the river. Now, from the smoke and ashes, shapes emerge, other wagons, flatbed trucks, white men in hats and thick work gloves. Across the river, the sun is sinking. On the near bank, a large bonfire. On the ground, another blackened ruin: this one is man-shaped. Faceless, featureless. Legs spread. Elbows bent. Hands cocked at an angle, reaching for heaven. Vashti knows they are hands but they look like paddles. They have no fingers.

In unison strong hands in leather work gloves lift the charred man-shape, toss it onto the fire with the rest. The fire dies down a little, until someone sloshes on more kerosene. The smell is unlike anything Vashti has ever smelled before. Burning flesh and coal oil, rank woodsmoke, raw gasoline.

She will live a long, hardscrabble life. She'll seldom talk about what she saw and heard on that wagon ride through Greenwood. Just once, to her grandson's young wife, five decades later, in a small white frame house on North Elgin. Vashti will describe the ride in her father's wagon, the smoldering ruins, the bonfire on the riverbank, the bodies stacked like cordwood. She won't describe the smell because it is not a thing describable. But the smell is the one memory she'll never, in the long years of her life, forget.

*June 3, 1921*

*Afternoon*

*Vinita (57 miles northeast of Tulsa)*

The little girl stands on the back porch with her mother. Her hair is long and bright and curly; she wears a pink ribbon tied at the top of her head in a pert bow. She follows her mother's gaze west along

the glinting rails, toward Tulsa.

Here comes another bunch, her mother says.

The girl squints. Yes, she sees them now, emerging into sunlight from the nest of post oaks shadowing the rails: a brown-skinned woman and three children coming along the tracks in their nightclothes. They walk slowly, unevenly, limping. The woman's stride is broken by the odd distance between crossties, the young children try to match her step for step.

The white girl's mother goes down off the porch and walks to the end of the yard, then across the field to the railbed of crushed stone and cinders. She waits till the family draws close enough, then gestures to them to come; she turns and walks back to the house.

Some of the refugee families come and eat. Others keep walking. This black woman trusts the needs of her children more than she distrusts the white woman, and she brings her three little ones to stand in the yard. They are all younger than the girl, like stairsteps, one, two, three; their faces, legs, nightgowns are streaked with slashes of ashes and soot.

The girl's mother gives each a cold split biscuit wrapped around a slab of salt pork. She gives the woman an uncapped Mason jar filled with well water. It's fifty miles to the state line, she tells her, as if the woman has asked. That'll be nearly as far as you've walked already.

The girl's mother's voice is flat, neutral; it shows no sign of weariness, fear, remorse, or disgust.

It will sound the same later that night, after supper, after their family Bible readings, as she talks to the girl's father. What else could we do, John? I don't know what else a body could have done.

Long years later, when the girl, an old woman now, tells the story, she will tell how her mother fed the black women and children fleeing the devastation in Tulsa; how the refugees kept coming and coming, walking the railroad tracks in their nightclothes, for days

upon days. She will tell of her mother's pity, her efforts, how it broke her mother's heart to see them.

It will not occur to her to tell what it did not occur to her mother to do: bring the people inside her own home to clothe them and feed them, bind up their wounds. Put them in her own car and drive them to the border, or to one of the black towns in Oklahoma not so far away: to Tullahassee, or Summit, or Redbird, or Taft.