

THE SENTENCE WAS UNANIMOUS; you can say it was determined even before the Crime was committed. The grocery store owner was furious, not because of the theft itself, but because he had failed to witness it first hand. His clients always kept him so busy, and he was only a human, one mind, one pair of eyes and one pair of ears; and most of the times they were simply inadequate, especially at his own age (70-something). This is why he often relied on his loyal and honorable customers, who would make sure that their transactions were conducted honestly at all times. That day, two of these customers stepped up to point out the man responsible for this aberration; Mrs. Daniels, a petite, pathetic old lady, whose state of mind was faulty, to the point which she was gradually becoming a popular joke among the locals; and, of course, Mr. Schmitt the clerk, a supporter of justice and an ardent believer of white supremacy. They both claimed to have seen the shady man make some very suspicious moves, wondering around the store, staring at the products in the shelves and, sometimes, even reaching out for them (!). Isaac Brown's condemning feature, however, was a rather obvious one: his skin color.

The store owner was characterized by a fundamental distrust towards African-Americans. He had realized it, with the help of his parents and his friends, and he developed a fear over the years for the black skin. He wouldn't be able to understand its true cause, not even at his life's end; however, he gave into it unconsciously and, at times, with ease and eagerness. After all, he had an excellent sense of humor and the best jokes demanded this of him... The tolerable limit of black people in his store was three; after that, he would adopt a defensive attitude and he would go up, and down, and around the counter and hover over the phone, in case the police would be necessary. He would always make a mistake, when charging the goods they bought, and it would often go – not unnoticed – uncommented... And someone would seldom complain, and then the loyal customers would once again step up to defend the white-man's honor.

Certainly, the prevalent expression on all white faces present during the arrest was that of relief. It didn't come as a surprise to many that Isaac was held responsible for the theft. The question to everyone was simply for whom he had stolen it. Isaac may have been poor since his birth, but he was rich in terms of emotions and compassion. Everyone in the African-American community would turn to him in their time of need, and he would help in any way he could, and his sentiment of solidarity would get him in all kinds of trouble. However, this was the first time he had broken the law, to which he always stuck and encouraged his friends to obey. Could he have been one more self-contradicting being? For all his enemies, this was a unique opportunity; they had to get rid of him, the sooner the better!

He was immediately taken to the police station and was put behind bars, to wait for his sentence to be finalized. A couple of officers were sympathetic towards him, pointing out every now and then that this was the only possible conclusion for someone like him; yet, the vast majority of them were highly judgmental and thank God there were bars between them and the imprisoned. The only one truly kind to him – of course, off the record – would check upon him once in a while, since he was concerned with his colleagues' behavior. He was also the one to show the imprisoned man's wife the way to his cell, which barely qualified as a cell in comparison to a pig sty – the room being reserved and preserved that way for such special cases. Leaving the couple alone – after all, what could that woman possibly do (?) -, he was smart enough to call out to him, "Ten minutes, boy, that's all ye got!", causing a nervous giggle to the others around him.

The wife was solemn, a profound sadness had taken over her, and no thought of hers or any of her husband's words could comfort her; she knew that these would be the last moments they would spend together. They wouldn't let her touch him and would

occasionally shout to her, “Watch yer moves, stupid bitch! Ye know we can see ye, so why d’ ye keep tryin’?”. The husband would then waste some moments apologizing to her for their manners and for his inability to protect her from their... comments. And she wanted to touch his face, and tell him that it was ok, that she had gotten used to it to the point she thought her tolerance was innate.

The couple discussed mostly in a low voice and with an exchange of glances, almost imperceptible to the officers. It infuriated them that they couldn’t understand that language, it made them feel idiotic, this impenetrability of the other language. The officers would demand from those beings to speak louder and clearer, but either way they couldn’t decode the meanings.

Before leaving, the wife had learnt everything that had occurred and had led her husband to this place. He had been in that store, only to buy some basics for some friends who were starving, since they had been let go for the common reason; he had planned to apologize to her later for spending some of the money they had managed to save up. As he was wandering in the store, searching for a particular brand, as instructed, he saw those kids running and laughing; yet, one had accidentally bumped into him, before running out of the store. When he was done and as he was marching towards the store’s exit, someone shouted: “Thief! Thief! Get him!”. He had little time to react before two bulky men near him literally jumped at him and immobilized him. They searched his pockets, where they found a handful of candy, which it was assumed he had stolen for his kids. One of the customers said that this black must have been out of his mind, stealing candy – a luxury – at the same he should have just been thankful for simply breathing among whites.

His wife had reached the same conclusion as he had. That boy, the one who had bumped into her husband, was the one to blame. And she had to find him, before it was too late. A confession may be enough to save her man... Word had already spread in the town that a special event would take place that night, and that her husband would ‘shine just like the star he really is’.

Her first stop was the grocery store - someone must have seen those kids, they may be white but not invisible - and all she desperately needed was a name. The store owner, at the sight of her, thought to himself, perhaps too loud, if she wanted anything her husband didn’t have a chance to steal. Talking to him was pretty much a waste of time, since he was too cynical to be taken seriously. Yes, he had indeed seen some children running in his store; and yes, he had yelled at them and made them go away. However, what was her business with them, did she wished her husband to break into their houses too? At any given chance, he would humiliate her, his voice being colored with every condescending tone imaginable.

She left that store – and that being that arbitrarily called himself human – and started heading towards Mrs. Daniels’ house. Their conversation was the utter definition of her absurd. She had to introduce herself five times before she could carry on with the rest of the questions. It was pointless, though. The old woman remembered going somewhere that morning, it was also quite possible that an incident had occurred, but that was as far as her memory could go. After that, she said that she was exhausted and that she would appreciate it if she was left alone. Besides, the black woman was standing in her porch for a while; what would the neighbors say?

The last man that could shed some light in this case, that refused to be solved, was Mr. Schmitt, the second eye-witness. The moment he saw her, he asked her to leave; her presence insulted his ‘aesthetics’. The woman explained to him how urgent it was that he spoke to her. The man replied that he didn’t want his children to be exposed to her ‘color’ and that it was a shame beyond words to spend time and energy on a black. She responded with as much politeness as she could, degrading herself to the point of asking him to make an exception.

The man answered with the most interesting choice of words, the focal point of his minor speech being the N word and its inability to stand side-to-side with the W one. On the verge of breaking to tears, she made her last attempt, but it was no more fertile than the previous ones. The man threw her out, reminding, to her, her 'inferiority by nature'; all she did was smile and walked away as composedly as she could, where she could cry to herself, cursing her husband's luck and praying for a miracle that would not come.

Tommy hadn't realized what he had done, but he would by the end of that day. When that game of dare took a rather disturbing turn, he was a couple of thoughts away from giving up. If he got caught, this would get him grounded, scratch that, his grandchildren's children grounded. If he had given up, his friends would call him a coward, and that stain would remain on him for quite some time. To his defense, his father and grandfather never thought much of blacks and expressed their opinions in front of him, at times mildly, at times as exaggerated as possible. It was his mother, however, who would make sure he felt the full weight of his action and that the punishment would be as painful as didactic.

His mother wasn't much loved by his grandfather, she had too much of that radical "social-change" trash taking over her head and she couldn't think straight. When no one would pay attention, his mother would talk to their servant, addressing her as an equal (!), and she would defend her, whenever she could; big fights would, then, follow between his mother and the two males. His grandfather would take the opposing leading role and his father would sing along, parrot-like as always. His father was filled with apathy of the dangerous kind and Tommy was certain, even at this age of ten, that his father never bothered building up a mind of his own.

Getting back at home, he found his grandfather was very much excited, after all a black was behind bars and, at sundown, he would be made to face his maker, by the laws of men, thus God's. The old man wanted his son and his grandson to join him in tonight's gathering, to remind his son his – father's – principles and to teach his grandson the natural hierarchy. Tommy walked in the kitchen to interrupt a grown-up discussion his mother was having with the servant, only to be driven away by both. As he walked away, the servant broke to tears and wondered in a low but audible voice what would happen to her brother...

Dusk had come. The grandfather put on his formal outfit, but he made no such request from the other males. He made the servant polish his shoes while he had them on and harassed her to his pleasure. After she was done, he thanked her by kicking her aside and spitting on her – what a waste of saliva... It was in the air, and he was happy to see all those people heading towards the town's square. His daughter-in-law was nowhere to be seen. What else could a man ask?

Tommy was walking close to his father. There were many people, and he wasn't tall enough to look over their figures, to see what they had all gathered here to watch. His grandfather insisted that they got as closer as they could, so that they could have a better view. Before walking further, he got a glimpse of a group of people who apparently hadn't come for the same purpose as the rest. Many blacks were among them, and could that woman be his mother? Too dark, he couldn't be sure... They walked up to the middle of the square and there they came to a halt, the crowd had formed an impregnable mass.

It was a few minutes later that they brought him. An oversized black hood was on Isaac's head and, the moment it was taken off, the flock yelled and cheered. Tommy felt like laughing at their synchronization, but he kept it inside him.

They tied him on a piece of wood and then bathed him in oil. When the fire was ignited, a cry of woe and despair came from the group at the back of the square, the cry of a

wife and a sister. What was happening? Tommy was lifted on his father's shoulders and he was stunned at the sight. Thoughts raced in his head, what had he done? The man in flames cried in agony, some people would mimic him, laughing, having the time of their lives. The air was filled with a horrible scent Tommy would never forget in his life. Wait... He had burned his finger once, playing with a candle's fire, the burnt skin smelled exactly the same, so that meant everyone there, his grandfather and father included, were wrong, Isaac is a human, somebody stop them, somebody must put out that fire... His brain had had too much; the ten-year-old collapsed, never to see the flames getting higher and higher.

He woke up, it was past midnight... A man had come to him in his dreams and had given him a kiss on his forehead. He wasn't scared; it was kind of... comforting. For minutes, he lied wide awake in his bed, until he heard the sound of the door handle. His mother walked in, dressed, with her coat on. She hugged him, told him she was leaving. He didn't want her to go, and he hugged as tightly as he could. She said she had no choice. He asked her if he could join her, and she answered he could, in a happy tone. What about dad, is he coming along? The answer was negative; she said dad wasn't ready yet, something Tom would agree to on little thought. She then asked him if he really wanted to join, because they wouldn't come back again; all he did was nod. His mother got up and brought in her suitcase, to get some clothes for him as well.

[Response to discussion after the meeting
with Dr. Theodosiadou, on African-Americans]