

# A Southern Story

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“The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.”

Hannah Arendt

Here is a story my grandmother told me: one night in early October 1926, my grandfather went out late, and he didn't come home until nearly dawn. Because going out on errands in the middle of the night was not something he usually did, my grandmother waited up for him in the front room of their house in Aiken, South Carolina. She might have sat in the same high-backed wing chair in front of the fireplace where I so often saw her as a child, sipping coffee from a white china cup with a thin gold rim. Rosa was her name – short for Rosamond. Her tastes were elegant. The cup and saucer rested on a marble-topped table; an Oriental carpet covered the floor; upstairs on her dressing table was a hairbrush her husband had given her, with her initials elaborately engraved on the heavy silver back. As she waited, she might have crocheted red, blue, and yellow squares for one of the afghans she was always making. She might have read a book. Or maybe she just watched the fire, adding a pine log when it dozed, listening as more cars than usual hummed by on Hayne Avenue, the hard-packed dirt street in front of the house.

I wonder what she told herself about where he'd gone that night? I wonder how much she knew? Probably only as much as couldn't be kept from her. The ideal Southern woman of that time was delicate, modest, gentle, and shielding her from ugliness was a man's sworn duty. But only

the blind and deaf, or the dead, could have missed hearing about the trial that had been going on in the courthouse for the past three days. The *re-trial*, actually, because the three black people in the dock had been tried and found guilty and sentenced once before in the same courthouse to which they had now been returned, and it was the insult of the re-trial that had the town seething. Over a year before this night, on a hot morning in April 1925, the county sheriff Henry Howard and three deputies – none of them in uniform – had gone on a raid to the house of a black family of suspected bootleggers named Lowman, and the sheriff had ended up shot dead in the yard. In the melee that followed, the mother of the family, Annie Lowman, swung an axe at a deputy and was shot in the head and killed and other family members had been wounded as well. “After while I heard someone shoot,” Rosa Lowman had testified. “And I looked around and I said ‘death is nothing but death,’ then I got my baby and jumped over the wire fence.”

In the first trial, Sam Lowman, the father of the family, had been sentenced to two years of hard labor for two bottles of whiskey found buried behind a shed in the yard, days after the raid. Other members of the family had been acquitted, but Demmond Lowman, his sister Bertha, and their fourteen year old cousin Clarence were convicted of the sheriff’s murder. Clarence and Demmond were sentenced to die in the electric chair, and Bertha was sent to prison for life, and that would have been the end of it, except for a Columbia lawyer named N. J. Frederick, one of the few black lawyers in the state, editor of an African-American newspaper, *The Palmetto Leader*, who filed appeals with the state Supreme Court that resulted in the Lowmans being sent back to Aiken for a second trial. Late in the afternoon of October 7, 1926, the judge dismissed the guilty verdict against Demmond Lowman. Within the hour, he was arrested again and put back in the jail, charged with assault and battery. That night a mob took the Lowmans out of the jail, drove them a few miles north of town, and shot them to death at point blank range in front of a crowd that included what the newspaper stories called *prominent local businessmen*, my grandfather, possibly, among them. Or maybe he was one of the mob that stormed the jail, those men in what the papers called “false faces” who dragged the Lowmans from their cells and shoved them into cars and took them to their deaths. It’s no good pretending that I can’t imagine that possibility, or that his motives are entirely a mystery to me. Or the

helpless terror the Lowmans must have felt when they heard the mob coming up the stairs at the jail.

Who was this man, my grandfather, who might have gone out that night to witness or take part in three murders? His name was George Aimar Durban. I can't imagine that he *wanted* to be going, but what do I know about him, really? I have a few photographs, some dates easily worked back from. If he was fifty-five when he died in 1943, he would have been thirty-eight in 1926. His photographic portrait shows a big man in a double-breasted suit, sitting in a chair with his legs crossed, a cigarette held loosely between two fingers, a pose that looks both relaxed and commanding. His light hair is combed straight back from a wide forehead. He has strong lips and bold features, determined eyes behind rimless glasses. He looks like a manly man, maybe a little vain and haughty. There are a few photographs of him at the beach, one picture of his grave, heaped with flowers. Beyond that, all I have are stories, and fewer of those every year. I can't imagine him going out to witness or take part in murder because none of the stories I've heard allows for that possibility. But stories can only be trusted to be stories. They have a way of untangling a person, cleaning him up and filling in the blanks, in order to make him into the person that everyone swears he was. The person he has become in the sixty three years since he died. The young man without a family who came to Aiken from Augusta, Georgia, and got himself a job at the Farmer's and Merchant's Bank. Walking to work one morning, he passed Dr. Wyman's house, where the town's first black Ford was parked on the street out front, and saw my grandmother in the yard. Maybe she was cutting flowers or walking in the garden in the cool of the morning. Or maybe she was just sitting on a bench, being the pretty daughter of the one of the town's leading citizens.

Whatever she was doing, he was stunned by the sight of her. At work, he told another clerk that he'd seen the girl he was going to marry. "Man, you're crazy," his friend answered. "That's Dr. Wyman's daughter."

But she did marry him. Their engagement was announced in the paper, then something went wrong and they eloped. I like this part of their story, that they ran away to marry for love. No doubt, her parents had taken him in through a set of special southern senses beyond taste, touch, sight, hearing or smell, and found him less than they wanted for their daughter. The sound of these senses at work is a hum that sharpens like the warning

sound a beehive shifts into when the lid is lifted. It is the sound of parsing and sifting and ranking, the sound of the south. Not the low-rent, cracker, hook-wormed, toothless, linthead, Pappy Yokum south, either. South Carolina. The old slaveholding hive where the white south's honey is still made and stored and guarded. The place where until a few years ago, the Confederate flag flew high above the state capitol building and did not come down without a fight, and then only retreated to a shorter flagpole in front of the capitol, just behind the Confederate monument. Where the descendants of the signers of the Ordinance of Secession still meet for dinner every year at the SC Historical Society in Charleston. Where John McCain's presidential chances were undermined by a whispering campaign within his own party that hinted that his adopted black daughter might be his own child.

My grandfather would have heard that hum and understood what it meant. He would have known that he was not good enough for Dr. Wyman's daughter, that he would have to work hard and climb high to be worthy of her and her family, to make a place for himself in his wife's hometown. So he left the bank and opened his own business a few doors down Laurens Street, and had his name painted in gilt letters across the glass of the front door. His own business, housed in a long, narrow slot of an office that smelled of heating oil, paste wax and carbon paper. Up front, there was a dark wooden counter and a swinging wooden gate that opened into the back office where dark wooden desks and dark green file cabinets lined the walls. Out of this office he sold houses and land and insurance for the Fireman's Fund and Lincoln Life. Promotional pictures printed on cardboard to look like paintings in gilt frames hung on the walls. The face of Lincoln that had seen the Civil War. A sooty fireman carrying a small blonde girl out of a burning building. In her eyes, the innocent certainty of rescue. Over his desk, he kept a print of the battle of Waterloo, for his own reasons.

Here, he also kept the books for the Tennis Club and the Polo Club and did the other work of a special agent to a group of rich Northerners who came to Aiken every spring. W. R. Grace, Goodyear, Whitney, Mellon, names straight off the NY social register. They traveled from New York and Chicago in private Pullman cars hitched to the southbound trains. Other cars carried their polo ponies, their gray and chestnut hunters, the Welsh ponies that pulled carts full of children through the woods. They

lived on Easy Street and Whiskey Road, in houses named Joye Cottage and Mon Repos that looked like English country estates, with servants' wings and laundry houses, bidets in every bathroom, and hundred-piece sets of china stacked in the butler's pantry off the kitchen. There were greenhouses on the grounds and brick stables with raked gravel courtyards and mounting blocks and grooms to hold the horses. My grandfather and later my father managed several of these estates. They supervised the grounds crews and the crews of black women who cleaned the houses before the families arrived, then cleaned them again after they left.

As he set out on that October night, I imagine that my grandfather might have looked at his dark, quiet house and thought that it was a good house to be owned by the man he was trying to be – husband to Dr. Wyman's daughter, family man, provider and good citizen – an ample, shingled, two-story Victorian, with spacious rooms on both floors and a small greenhouse built onto the back, because my grandmother loved to putter with plants and flowers. Upstairs on that night, my eight year old father was sleeping, he and his older brother and younger sister. At the bottom of the deep lot, past the chicken yard and the garden, he might have seen the house of their cook Minnie and thought of how, earlier that night, he'd heard his wife and Minnie planning the next day's meals, while Minnie brushed his wife's fine, light hair. And this calm, this order, were also part of the story he was going out that night to defend. He might have been grateful to picture his wife waiting by the fire, his children safe in their beds; it might have seemed the emblem of everything he was going out to defend. I see him walking to his car, standing in the crowd in the pine grove where the Lowmans were gunned down, feeling that he was standing outside of himself, looking on as if from a distance, telling himself a story about what he was doing there that made the evil he was witnessing necessary to the defense of justice or right.

He went out late, she said, and he got home just as light was coming into the sky. He walked into the front room where she was waiting for him and he said, "Those nigras have paid for what they did." In her story, it would have been important for my grandmother to stress the justice, the higher good, to say that the Lowmans had *paid for what they did*, an eye for an eye, blood for blood, and that if it was justice that was being done or honor that was being defended that night, it was my grandfather's

duty to be there. Who knows what he really said? They had many names to sort and order the black people they lived among and around. She could have chosen, in descending order of dignity: *Negro, colored, nigra, coon, nigger*, but she said *nigra* – a mix of *Negro* and *nigger*, the fulcrum on which a black person's respectability, and therefore his life, balanced so perilously.

The fact that she used it, however, said more about our status than their's. He probably called them *niggers*; it would have been the name that came easiest to him when he reached for one to name the outrage he felt, or the distance he had to keep between himself and what had happened in that clearing in the pines, two miles out the Columbia Highway. Clarence, Demmond and Bertha Lowman, who had that night paid for what they did by dying of shotgun and pistol wounds to the temple and chest and jaw, deserved the name, but in telling the story to me, my grandmother would have needed to be more genteel, to show that *we* did not speak crudely, even of reeking violence. *Niggers* was a word used by the hard little men in overalls, tenant farmers and sharecroppers who lived one shaky rung higher up the ladder than their black doubles. It was a word used by the poor whites who worked down in Horse Creek Valley in the mills that were segregated by law, who lived in the mill towns of Langley, Bath, Clearwater, and Graniteville, who rode with the Klan when it rode.

The evidence suggests that the Klan was there the night of the Lowman murders. It happened too quickly to have been thoroughly organized and planned, but they were there. Sheriff Howard's funeral had been attended by a Klan honor guard. A month after his murder, the *Aiken Standard* carried a front page announcement: the mayor wanted everyone to know that the Klan would hold a rally in downtown Aiken in which three to four thousand Klansmen would march "in full regalia." There were stories of a fiery cross held aloft at the killing ground by the dead sheriff's daughter. Though whether those stories were true, or whether they served, as the picture of his home and family might have served my grandfather, as an emblem of the outrage and of the righteous vengeance they might have believed they were exacting that night, no one now living can tell.

I might be completely wrong about my grandfather of course. He might have been eager to go, caught up in the anger that had been kindled

by the friction between the white community's certainty about the Lowmans' guilt and the insult of their release, until it burst into a vengeful rage. And what if he was? What might he have been feeling then? Surely he was a man of conscience. He was a Catholic, so he couldn't have been in the Klan which limited its membership to "native-born white Protestants." But he was also a man of his time and place, touchy about insults to honor as any other southern man. Above all, he would have believed in white supremacy, a story told and re-told until it became a given, the law of the land that reflected a higher truth. The story of Africans lifted out of savagery, brought to America and civilized, and given work that was suited to their intellect and abilities, loved and cared for like children. And how the Civil War had set this population of ignorant, childlike dependents free to become a burden on the white people who had once cared for them, and how they betrayed that trust during Reconstruction until, in the language of the time, SC was "redeemed" by violence from the black reconstruction government and made a white man's country again. And would remain a white man's country by law, by habit, by custom, by violence if necessary so that a white woman could walk the streets without fear and a white man could keep his place at the head of the table. Believing that, he would also have believed that the Lowmans were less intelligent, ambitious, moral, educated, less human, finally, than white people. He must have believed that because how could you witness or participate in the execution of three human beings without first banishing them?

Since this is a story full of more questions than answers, I also wonder why my grandmother would have told me that story in the first place? You'd think you wouldn't volunteer such a story but as I remember it, she did. As she got older, she would often tell a story as though she'd been asked a question and the story was the answer. Or that she'd suddenly remembered that it was her duty to educate us; that it was important to give us, not just the facts of an event, but the right attitude toward it. Which always came back to what it meant to be South Carolinians, *old Aiken* people she called us, as good as the winter colony, *better than* the northerners sent by the DuPont company in the 1950's to work at the Savannah River Plant, making plutonium for nuclear triggers. The bomb plant, we called it. "Why do all those people want to come down here?" she used to ask. But no matter how appalling the story – she once told me

how her doctor father had asked her to teach him the blanket stitch so that he could repair the torn rectum of one of his patients – because it had happened in our family, it was good. As though who we were always justified what we'd done. The older she got, the more random these stories became, as though what might have once been whole now existed in scraps, drifting bits of stories behind which you could feel the diminishing pressure of what had once been an intact moral and historical whole.

Then of course there's the question of who I am, and how I have to bring myself more fully into this picture. Because I'm already there, the direct descendant of one man who may have witnessed these killings and of another, my grandmother's brother Dr. Hastings Wyman, the coroner's physician, who examined the Lowmans' bodies the morning after they died, and signed the report of the coroner's inquest that concluded that the Lowmans had died at the hands of persons unknown. So I'm not working blind here, even though this all happened long before I was born. Because when I was growing up in the 50's and 60's, many things were pretty much they'd way they'd been in the twenties and thirties. It was still *us* and *them*, mostly us, who told them who they were, and I soaked it up, inhaled and swallowed it like everyone else. No one really talked about it because there was no need to, and no need to argue either. You might as well have argued with the sun or the rain, my convictions were part of that same natural order, and I could not imagine another.

I can hear them now, the voices inside and outside my head. *Why do you dwell on the ugliness of the past? Why stir up that hurt again? We have moved on, Aiken is not like that now.* Black doctors live in Woodside Plantation, the best suburb; there are black members of city council, black policemen and firemen. My aunt may never forgive me for speaking this way about her father. And it's true that Aiken has changed, and I have changed, but the Lowman murders also happened. I grew up in the place where they happened, and although my grandfather may have taken part, and my great uncle definitely did, and though local, state and national newspapers reported extensively on the crime and its aftermath – three grand juries were convened and no one was ever indicted for the Lowman killings – the story has been almost entirely expunged from any official history of the town, as though it had been cut from the record with a pair of very sharp scissors. And now I want to tell it again because



I feel that it's my story now, too. Like an album I've inherited, pictures, letters, clippings glued to its pages. I study the words there, and the silences between and around them. I look at the faces of the murdered and of the honorable dead, notice the expression in the eyes, the set of a mouth. I study them all, looking for the family resemblance.