

The Beginning of Violence

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Nashville, 1960

The wind shot through you that day like fate or some might say like the will of God. No matter what you did, it got you. It weaseled under the buttons of your coat, pulled off your scarf. You couldn't fight against it though you could stay indoors, but once you came out, you had to face the wind and find your way.

It was the day before Valentine's, and snow was falling in thick wet flakes, had been since early morning and threatened to keep on all afternoon. As I said, it was not a day to be outside, but I was. I was downtown on the arcade doing last minute shopping for a sorority party that night. We'd been decorating all morning, but we'd run out of crepe paper and balloons; and Janie, the food chairman, was afraid she'd run out of paper plates and cups so I said I'd go downtown and pick up everything.

I went to Woolworth's. At the Grand Ole Opry counter I bought a red plastic guitar set inside a big red plastic heart for the centerpiece on the officer's table. I was an officer. I was treasurer of the Kappa Alpha Thetas at Vanderbilt University.

I didn't feel like turning right around and going back into the cold so I stopped at the lunch counter for coffee and a grilled cheese sandwich. I was sitting there eating and reading "When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd" for English class when a blast of air swept across my back. When

I turned to see who was holding the door open, I saw dozens of Negroes coming into the store. They moved straight down the aisles then disappeared among the cheap jewelry and face powders and school supplies.

I turned back around and finished my sandwich and Whitman's poem. I was about to pay and leave when three Negroes sat down at the counter, one of them next to me. They all held brown paper bags with purchases they'd made. The girl beside me smiled, showing a curve of white teeth and asking more than most people thought she had a right to ask. I looked over my shoulder and saw thirty or forty more Negroes lining up to sit at the counter.

It took me a minute to understand what was happening. I'd grown up in Arkansas and Tennessee, and in nineteen years I'd never eaten beside a Negro. I'd never sat next to one on a bus or gone to the same bathroom. Things were changing in the South, but these were facts I'd lived with. Once in high school in Little Rock I'd signed a petition favoring integration, and that had almost gotten me thrown out of cheerleading. Some people thought anyone for the Negro was a Communist. I wasn't a Communist; I just thought the Negro should have a chance. And yet even feeling that way, I wasn't prepared to have the order of things put to question right where I was sitting.

The girl kept smiling. She had a soft mouth and big, dark eyes. Her hair was straightened, and she wore it like mine, in a pageboy with bangs. She was taller than me, and under her coat she looked strong. When she saw my poetry book on the counter, she reached into her pocket and took out a copy of the same book. I couldn't help but feel she'd just drawn her gun. I glanced away. My eyes fell on her hands; they were the color of dry soil, large and muscular and deeply lined like an old woman's.

I glanced at her friend next to her, but her friend's eyes were flat and hard, and her mouth looked set to tell me her mind. It was this girl who got me moving again. I'd been about to pay and leave when they'd sat down. My purse was open on the counter, and I went on counting out the change. I closed my wallet and purse; I gathered my bags, stood and left. The act of leaving wasn't a decision so much as a resumption of the way I was already going.

Not till I was outside in the blowing snow, moving towards the bus did I think about what I'd done, not till I was getting on the bus did I hear

the words of the waitress: "I'm sorry, we don't serve coloreds here." All the way back to Vanderbilt, and as I walked on campus through what by now was a small scale blizzard, I kept thinking about those words. At the party that night, dancing under the crepe paper streamers we'd draped from the ceiling to make a tent, I could still hear the words and see the face of the girl.

The next morning I read about what had happened at Woolworth's on page ten of the *Nashville Tennessean*. Without knowing it, I'd been in the middle of Nashville's first sit-in. I decided to write my own version of what I'd seen, and I turned it into the college paper. The paper ran the story under the headline: "At the Counter: A Student's View." The editor asked me to write on what happened next though no one knew what was going to happen next, but the editor thought something would. He told me I should stress the Vanderbilt angle. I wasn't sure what the Vanderbilt angle was, but that's the way I got involved. Before the year was over, I'd witnessed more than a dozen sit-ins.

The next time I saw the girl was two weeks later. In between the snow had kept falling, making it one of the worst winters in Nashville's history. During those days on the front pages of the *Tennessean*, Jack Parr¹ was battling NBC over his contract with the Tonight Show while in Washington Lyndon Johnson² battled for national civil rights legislation. A hundred miles away in Chattanooga fighting had broken out after sit-ins there. The Nashville sit-ins had stepped up but were still reported on the inside pages. So far no arrests had been made.

All week rumors had been going around that the largest sit-in ever would take place downtown Saturday. I decided to go. Jeff, my boyfriend, tried to argue me out of it then said he'd go with me, but he got sick after a fraternity party Friday night, and so I went by myself. No one at the sorority house could believe I would go, but I did.

When I got there, thousands of people were already on the arcade, and policemen lined the streets. Just after noon the first demonstrators

1. Jack Paar (1918–2004) is credited with creating the late-night television talk show. He was the host of *The Tonight Show* from 1957 until 1962.

2. Lyndon Johnson (1908–73) was vice president of the United States in 1960 when the sit-ins began. Not until after Kennedy was assassinated and Johnson moved into the presidency did he become an active advocate for civil rights legislation. He closed one of his speeches with "and we shall overcome," giving new energy to the movement.

showed up, including the girl. She was wearing the same oversized brown coat; on her head she wore a white crocheted cap. She walked with her head down, bowed against the wind. She didn't look at anyone. Most of the protesters were students, and they were glancing around at the crowds on the sidewalk. But she stared straight ahead. She was so focused that she didn't even answer her friend who spoke to her as they entered McClellan's Variety Store.

I followed them inside. The lunch area was packed with people standing about waiting to see what would happen. The girl made her way through the crowd to a seat at the counter. One by one other students took stools under the faded pictures of Salisbury steak, Irish stew, hamburger deluxe. A railing separated the eating area from the rest of the store, and the press stood behind it among hair nets and hair rollers; I took my place with the press.

A waitress approached the girl. "I'm sorry; we don't serve coloreds here," she said. "You'll have to leave."

"A cup of coffee, please," the girl answered.

"I'm sorry, we don't serve coloreds," the waitress repeated.

"A cup of coffee."

Half a dozen white teenagers stepped into the area and started cat-calling. They picked out a white demonstrator sitting near the girl. "Nigger lover! Nigger lover!" they taunted. A man with a cigar began blowing smoke into the face of the girl and the other students. Several more teenagers moved in, bumping against the protesters, trying to knock them off their stools.

The students didn't react. The girl pulled her poetry book from her pocket and opened it on the counter. She was starting to read when suddenly she let out a cry. I looked and saw a teenager squash his lighted cigarette on her back. I couldn't tell if he'd actually burned her or only ruined her coat. She jerked around. She stared straight at the boy. She met his jeer with a question which again asked more than people were willing to have asked of them. Her look must have shaken him or touched something in him because he stepped away. His friends started lighting their cigarettes and pressing them out on the backs of other students, but the boy left the store. The exchange took only a moment, but in it I saw some possibility, some viewpoint I hadn't considered before.

Before I could think about exactly what this was, however, someone shoved a white protester from his stool and began hitting him in the ribs. The man blowing cigar smoke laid a fist into the back of a black student. Other teenagers began pulling at the hair of the girls sitting at the counter. None of the demonstrators raised a hand to defend himself. I saw in the faces of many, anger and a struggle not to fight back. But in the face of the girl I saw something else.

The police finally arrived, but only after the teenagers had run away. They told the protesters they had to leave because the store management had decided to mop the floor. When they refused, the police moved in, taking hold of the students one by one and escorting them into police vans waiting outside. The girl was arrested.

I followed the rest of the day's events, including the beatings of several Negroes late in the afternoon at Woolworth's where no police were around. Members of the press, including me, watched as a white teenager pulled a Negro protester from a chair and hit him again and again in the face spreading open his nose with a fist, bloodying both their skins with the same blood and as another white pushed a Negro student down a flight of stairs, sending his arms and legs clattering against the metal. None of the experienced press stepped in to stop what was happening; instead they stood recording the incidents so I did the same. Yet inside I was trembling as if someone had hit me, and I wanted to strike back. I didn't know what to do with the violence I suddenly felt. I left the store.

I decided to meet the girl. I told the newspaper editor I wanted to write a profile of a demonstrator, and he agreed. I found out her name was Cynthia Davis. She was a senior at Fisk University. When I called her, she at first refused to be interviewed, said there were better people than herself, but I convinced her she was the one I wanted to talk to. She agreed to meet me at a diner near Fisk after classes Friday.

Fisk is only a few miles from Vanderbilt, but like most everyone else, I'd never been in the neighborhood let alone seen the campus. The streets around it were quiet and lined with trees and houses. The campus itself was much smaller than Vanderbilt's and more run-down. It had one main walkway. On both sides of the walk were dorms and classrooms. I decided to go in just to look. I stayed only long enough to walk to the end of the path and back again, but in that time the world closed in around me. I

was the only white person, at least the only one I saw, and I felt everyone staring at me.

When I reached the end of the walk, I read the sign in front of a huge Victorian Gothic building. I tried to concentrate on the fact that this was the first building of the university, the first in the country built to educate Negroes, but the truth is I was thinking only about myself and the color of my skin for all at once my skin seemed alive as if it were plugged in and glowing and separate from me. For a minute I couldn't feel myself under it. To be suddenly separate from your body is scary. Everyone thinks you're your body because that's what they see only you know you're not. I've heard of people coming back after dying, saying they've watched themselves from outside, watched everyone else watching their bodies while they knew that wasn't them only they couldn't make themselves heard. I don't want to go on too much, but that's what I felt: a separation I couldn't make my way across. The space between me and my skin was like the space between me and the Negroes, and in it was a kind of panic and darkness I wanted to strike out against. For the first time I understood why separation was the beginning of violence.

I hurried back to the car I'd borrowed. I locked the doors and sat for a moment. Finally I started the engine and drove to the diner a few blocks away.

It was five o'clock, and only a handful of students were at the counter and in the booths. When I came in, they glanced up, and again I felt my skin starting to glow. Behind the counter the waitress stared at me. She had a thick ridge of brown hair and dull eyes. She was wiping the stained formica with a rag which she tossed in the sink behind her without taking her eyes off me.

At first I didn't see Cynthia in any of the tall wooden booths. From the front of the restaurant I could see only the person sitting at the edge of the booth facing forward. But then on the hook of the last booth I spotted the rough brown coat. When I approached, I expected her to recognize me as the girl she'd sat beside in Woolworth's, but instead I realized she too saw me only as the singular white person in the diner.

She was studying at the table. She wore a grey knit sweater and a white crocheted cap on her head. I'd never seen her without her coat. She was much thinner than I expected. Her shoulders were narrow and

her neck quite slender. Again I noticed her hands; they seemed disproportionately large now.

"Cynthia Davis?" I asked.

She nodded.

I sat down and moved towards the wall. Immediately I was hidden from view of the other people. "Thank you for meeting with me." She didn't answer. I glanced at her books on the table, and tried to think of what to say. "Do you study here often?"

She nodded again, watching me without speaking. She didn't seem hostile, only reserved. I'd wanted to meet her to find out where she came from and how she'd arrived at this point in her life. Yet as she stared at me without recognition, I realized I'd also come here to have her meet me and approve of me, and her failure to recognize my imperative made me falter.

I set right into the interview. I asked about her family. She was third in a family of six children from Fayette County, Tennessee. Her father was a preacher, a small plot farmer and owner of a modest dry goods store. Her mother worked the farm and raised the children. Cynthia would be the first of her family to graduate from college. At Fisk on a scholarship, she was an A-student, an English major, and she hoped to go on to law school next year.

She answered my questions without self-consciousness, and because she was at ease with herself, I began to feel more at ease. When I'd run through all the facts I wanted to know, I set my pad and pencil down. Leaning forward on the table, I fixed my eyes on the translucent lobes of her ears which supported the weight of heavy metal hoops. I stared at these as I tried to form the question I had come to pose. Finally I asked, "Why don't you fight back? The other day, when that boy burned you, why did you just sit there?"

"He was bigger than me," she answered.

I frowned.

"What would it have proved?"

"That he can't get away with what he did."

She smiled. "But he can. We both know that. Fighting him wouldn't have changed anything."

"How does getting beaten up or burned change anything?"

"It doesn't." She picked up a napkin from the table. She was quiet for a moment; then she asked, "You ever taken a hound dog hunting?" I smiled, surprised by the question. "When a hound dog gets a scent, he won't let go. He doesn't care if it's raining or it's getting dark or it's time to go home to bed. You can beat him; you can pull his collar till you choke him, but if he's got the scent, he'll do everything he can to take it to the end. Our movement's like that hound dog. We got the scent, and no one can beat it out of us or burn it out of us. The only thing they can do is show their own meanness."

She began folding the napkin in her broad hands. Her expression was serious, yet the corners of her mouth turned up, almost smiling, as though she were extending tolerance not only to me but to herself. "We used to think the white man controlled our lives," she said, "only since we can't control the white man, we thought we had no control. But it doesn't matter what white people say we are; it doesn't matter what unjust laws say we have to do. We know who we are. First and foremost we are God's children, and no one can turn us into hateful, beaten-down human beings; no one has that power. Power—that's the scent. It comes from treating a man right. Once you understand that, it will change your life. Jesus Christ showed us how. Mahatma Gandhi showed the people of India they could do the same thing."

As she spoke, her curious smile remained as if she understood the difficulty of her point of view. She spoke deliberately. She wasn't carried away by her words but reasoned through to her conclusions with a logic as careful as any lawyer's. "The righteousness of our cause will win over the hearts of good men and women and eventually change a whole system," she insisted. She glanced down at the napkin which she'd shredded into a small mound of confetti. She swept the paper into the palm of her hand and dumped it in the ashtray.

"From what I've observed," I offered cautiously, "your friends aren't as free of the hate and anger as you. Perhaps you understand more."

Her shoulders straightened against the back of the booth; her face roused. "Don't try to separate us," she warned. "You can't choose among us. What I understand, we all understand."

"I don't think that's true. Your friend next to you, both times I saw her, she was angry. She wanted to strike back; I saw it in her face. You didn't. I understand what I saw in her; I don't understand what I saw in you."

"I'm angry. Anyone not angry is asleep. But we have to struggle with our own weaknesses as well as with society's."

"But if your movement depends on society having a conscience and that conscience stirring . . . well, frankly, I doubt how many good-hearted men and women you're going to find."

"Then that doubt is your weakness, isn't it?" she offered.

I looked up. She stared at me with a calm, penetrating gaze which struck at that separation I'd felt on campus, first from myself then from others. I didn't answer. Instead I began asking about her friends, again setting her apart from them. Again she held to the group, answering only in the plural. She emphasized she was committed to the *Christian* ethic of nonviolence for only as one was able to yield himself to God's goodness was he able to express his own and see goodness in others. Yet as we talked now, I felt uneasy for she'd seen something in me which I hadn't seen, yet which, when named, I knew: a doubt, a smallness of belief, a smallness of heart. I had wanted her to know me, but now I resented what she'd chosen to know. I found myself wanting to expose something in her.

We talked almost an hour as the diner started to fill with students. One by one the booths around us sounded with chatter. Cynthia was leaning closer to me so we could hear each other, her head propped between her ashen palms, her sweater pushed up above rough elbows. Finally as the interview wound down, circling around questions I'd already asked, the quick light in her eyes resumed a quieter glow and her half smile drew back into the reserved lines of a stranger's.

I wrote my article for the paper the next week. It brought me immediate attention. I didn't exactly glorify Cynthia Davis, but I set her up as an example of a generation of blacks with expectations to achieve beyond their parents and with a commitment to American ideals of equality. In writing it, I forgot for the moment my own discomfort over what she'd seen in me, and I wrote in an inflated prose that would touch the sentimental strain in a white, liberal audience. I also told the story of a girl's ambitions which would offend those of a different persuasion. In the article I mentioned only that Cynthia's family lived in Fayette County.

The next week a reporter for the *Nashville Tennessean* called me to ask if the *Tennessean* could run my story as a side piece with a larger article they were doing on inter-college contact in the civil rights movement. The reporter was particularly interested in the fact that I'd gone over to Fisk

to have the interview. I agreed. It would be my first paid article. Because the audience of the *Tennessean* was statewide, the editor wanted to know exactly where Cynthia's family lived, and so I gave him the town's name just outside of Memphis, and he printed it.

I thought of calling Cynthia and telling her about the story, but I didn't. I suppose I was afraid she'd object. I was also in the middle of mid-terms. I finally did call her Sunday, the day the article appeared. I phoned that afternoon, but she wasn't in. I left a message for her to call me back and then forgot about her. For the next few days friends and people I hardly knew stopped to talk about the story. They didn't talk so much about what it said as the fact I'd had it published in the *Tennessean*. Finally on Wednesday when I hadn't heard from Cynthia, I called again, and this time a friend of hers got on the phone.

"Cynthia's not here," she said. The friend's voice was strained, but matter-of-fact. "Her father's store was bombed Sunday night. Her brother's in the hospital. I don't know when she'll be back." Her friend didn't say anything about the article. I didn't know if she or Cynthia had even seen the article. I couldn't be sure the bombing was a result of the article.

I didn't see Cynthia Davis again. I phoned her several times, but she was never there. Then school got busy. I was starting to write freelance for the *Tennessean*, and I quit calling. At one of the sit-ins that spring I saw her friend, whom I recognized from that first day at Woolworth's, and I went over to her. She answered my questions formally. She told me Cynthia had taken a leave from Fisk to help at home and in the store until her brother got out of the hospital. She told me nobody knew how long that would be or how her brother would adjust for among his injuries, his right hand had been blown off.

The Nashville sit-ins kept on through the spring. There were more arrests, more beatings of Negroes, negotiations with white business and political leaders, a cessation of arrests and sit-ins during negotiations, an economic boycott of downtown stores, a bombing of a black lawyer's home.³ But finally on May 10, less than three months after the first sit-in, an agreement was announced. Six downtown lunch counters would

3. Z. Alexander Looby's home was bombed on April 19, 1960. During the demonstrations Looby (1899-1972) was one of the attorneys who provided money and legal services for those college students who were arrested and jailed. The bombing of his home was the impetus for the first major protest walk of the movement—over four thousand people, walking silently, to the steps of city hall for a talk with Nashville mayor Ben West (1911-74), who served from 1951 to 1963.

open on an "unbiased basis." The victory was the first of many to follow in Nashville. In the annals of southern history in the early 1960s, the Nashville movement was considered a nonviolent success story. Cynthia Davis was not among the names who moved onto prominence out of that movement. To my knowledge, she never returned to Fisk.

I've thought about Cynthia Davis from time to time since then. Once the following fall on the way back to school, I drove through Memphis with the intention of going to see her, but I lost courage. To be honest, I didn't want an answer. If there was an answer. I didn't want to be told that what happened was my fault. In some ways I was sure it was; and yet in others, no matter what anyone said, I wouldn't accept the blame. I didn't know what to do with it, and I didn't see how having it helped anyone.

I changed because of what happened in small, slow ways. By the spring of my junior year, I'd dropped out of my sorority. I became wary of my own ambition. I began to regard it as a subtle, unpredictable beast which, if I was not alert, would bite with sharp teeth.

When I think about what happened now, I account it to the wind. To what happens because of all that's happened before for reasons you don't understand because you're in the middle of them and because you don't understand yourself. I don't account it to fate or the will of God or any other cosmic design. I account it to my ignorance of design. And as I said, to the wind. I let the flow take me with it because I hadn't learned to face the wind, to pick up the scent but not be blown about. Because I didn't heed dark, unexposed places in myself, I fell inside one of them and perhaps took another with me.