

Katro Storm
**Will it Grow in
Sharon?**



FIVE STORIES

The Klan

My mother often told me how tough her father and her Uncle Brat were.

The word was out that the Klan was coming. This was not the first time. Most folks didn't have phones so it was word of mouth. Someone might walk five miles to let you know this is what is going on. There was no calling for help and no-one to call anyway because chances were the police were in the Klan.

You can legally defend your land and family. My father and Uncle Brat were waiting on both sides of the road with a bunch of guns and lots of ammo when the Klan arrived. I don't know if they were wearing hoods.

My grandfather didn't play. If he was shooting at you he was shooting at you, not up in the air. They didn't waste anything, anything. Ammunition, food ... everything mattered. It scared the Klan off but they came back several times over the years.

It was about land. If you had things down there they called you uppity. My grandfather was a prideful man. He had land and was taking care of his family. He hired people, predominantly relatives so he didn't have to pay them much. He worked his way up and found a way. Whatever it was he could make it happen. If he needed a new tractor he found a way. Ninety acres. He worked his way up and bought it.

If you are walking down the road in Whiteville and you are Black, you know to be aware because it is not unusual to be harassed by someone in a car - run off the road, shot at, have a bottle thrown at you or get spit on. Everyone down there has a gun. Everyone. People lived off the land.

Five years ago at my cousin's 50th birthday party on his land, he had a huge bonfire. I was there. Pickup trucks, seven or eight of them, came driving across the fields flying Confederate flags. Everyone went to the trunks of their cars and got their guns and the pickup trucks left. It's come out of the shadows.

Snow Day at Yale

My mother got married at 15 because that was the only way you got out of the house. My father was around 18, also from North Carolina but from further south. When I was little she worked for Winchester Rifle in New Haven and she also cleaned houses and took care of disabled children at the same time. She had three jobs at once. She made breakfast for everybody and when you got up it was in the oven waiting for you. She was a strong person, inside and out.

Both of my parents played important roles. One was more of a Christian, one was more of a sinner. My mother went to church three to four times a week, my father didn't. My mother was more about the essentials, like making your bed, going to school, washing up. My father was more about the extra activities, sports, baseball, having fun. When he would go out with his friends sometimes he would take me along as his designated driver. I remember driving him home in the yellow Cadillac. He always had a yellow Cadillac. I didn't have my license yet. I was eleven.

He was proud of me though. I was a really good pitcher and so was the son of his friend. When we played each other in little league, they came to the game and I saw money changing hands. They were betting on the game. The other team won on an error but my father always bragged, "Nobody is better than my son." He was all about building your self-esteem and not letting anyone walk over you. My father always said to always look everyone straight in the eye.

My father was a janitor at Yale in the law school. He had all the keys. He always wore a suit jacket over his custodian shirt like he had an office job and he wore shiny shoes. On snow days he would take me with him so he could do his job and he'd get paper and a pencil from the lady at the post office. He'd put me in front of one of the stained glass windows that had judicial scenes with judges in white wigs and leave me to draw. The students would walk by and they would be really impressed with my drawings and they would ask to buy them. It made me feel good because I knew there was a vending machine nearby and I could take their dollar bills and buy potato chips. I think this is all connected. It was the first time outside of my home I got recognition for drawing.

My father was proud and he used to brag about me all the time. All the time he bragged about my drawing and everywhere we went it was part of what he said.

Cropping Tobacco

My siblings had been going down to North Carolina to work the tobacco crop for years. They were accustomed to it. They would come home with stories and new clothes and money so I decided I was old enough and wanted to do it, too. I was a city kid. I had started playing basketball then and there was a pair of sneakers I wanted to buy for myself, Pumas.

My father always drove us to North Carolina in the yellow Cadillac. Sometimes it was a full car, four of us in the back, two in the front. Sometimes my father and his brother would race driving down, at times running out of gas because they wouldn't stop to fill up. My grandfather only rode a horse or drove a tractor around because the roads were red clay mud. The Cadillac would get stuck and the tractor would pull it out. You have a different skill set down there. Your car, your tractor breaks? Your electricity goes out? You know how to fix everything.

My grandfather was no-nonsense and it was all business. People working said whatever was necessary but nothing more. No clowning, no joking, no singing. My job was to pick up the tobacco leaves that fell on the ground. My grandfather told me how important a job it was to pick up the leaves because the leaves were money, and that was my job. He was not nice to anyone. He was matter-of-fact, hard-core, no bellyaching was tolerated. Just had to get as much work done as possible before the sun went down. There were kids that were standing on moving vehicles, working quick and fast. They had been doing it their whole lives and they were barefoot. If you were on the ground like me, there were snakes. They were snake-savvy and I was snake-afraid. If it was a green snake, okay.

And that tobacco barn was hot. Tobacco stacked like shish kabobs. Everyone knew their job. It wasn't safe. Everyone had their role and everyone was surefooted. It was what I envisioned slavery to be like. You go down there and you work and it's hot and you can't do nothing but what they tell you to do ... eat, sleep, bathe when they tell you and they are not going to baby you. They had a different idea of work, no fan and no air-conditioning. The heater blew heat and they had this fire going inside the barn and they were used to it and no-one was complaining.

I became attached to a piglet. I thought I would take it home with me to be like my dog. One day it was gone. They had slaughtered it. I became a vegetarian after that. I only worked a week or two.

Winfred Rembert

I heard about this black artist in New Haven, and I knew he was in the Yale art collection. His name was Winfred Rembert. I knew of his work before I knew him. I was told he was local, from the particular area Newhallville where I was born and lived until I was seven or eight. We always went back there even though we had moved to Hamden. I was in my 40s when we finally met. Well actually I knew of him as an artist before I knew him. Somebody showed me which house was his.

One day I drove by and saw him sitting on his porch so I pulled over, rolled down the window and started talking to him. We were on the same page with art and he was really good with stories and a lot of them had to do with cotton and tobacco and racism in Georgia where he was from. That was what he did. He told stories with his work. He had learned how to tool leather in prison and that was his medium for telling the stories.

He told me stories I could identify with. I know what it feels like to pick cotton. This is how we connected because we knew about the same things. We just became buddies and I'd go and sit on his porch and talk to him. All my years in New York, I wasn't thinking about North Carolina. Winfred made me think about that life. You can hear the crickets, smell the dirt. In New York you can smell the hot trash, that's about it. Winfred had been done wrong by police a lot. They would arrest him for things he didn't do. You can't win down there. I don't even know if a good lawyer would work down there because they have their system in place .

He wasn't in the best of health and some of the stories he would tell me he would get deep on them and he would cry. Sometimes he would feel physical pain because it took him back to a place and time. He told me about being on a chain gang - could have been in the 80s or 90s. He told me how some cops hung him upside down and they beat his balls until they were bleeding. Then the pandemic came and I didn't see him and then he passed away.

At one point he was thinking he could sell a couple of paintings and move out of there but he loved it there. Then he sold a few more and his wife was like "can we get a new car now?" and they got a nice pickup truck because he was still country.

The New Neighbors

I'd never noticed that there were new neighbors in the house by the boundary of the apartment complex. I'd had a long day and was late getting back so someone had taken my normal spot closer to the apartment. So I backed into the spot by the dumpster that was at the edge of the parking lot. I backed into the spot and when I got out of the car the neighbor was standing there by his house.

He told me I was blocking his view and for me to move my car to the other side of the dumpster. He talked to me like I was someone working for him. And what view does he have? There is no view, there is a dumpster and garages. His wife was there, tried to justify it, make it a little nicer than the way he was saying it.

My mother told me always look down when you walk past a white person. She don't want no problems. My father always told me the exact opposite. In this case, it was the end of the day, and I was tired, didn't want to argue. But as I walked away, I said to myself, "Did you hear the way he talked to you. Were you paying attention?" My blood wasn't boiling at first and if he had asked me a different way I would not have had the same reaction.

But he treated me like I didn't live there. It kept festering. I could tell his wife wasn't comfortable with it the way he said it. It was just an opportunity for him to show me who was more powerful. It was eating away at me as I walked away and it kept going and going. I was on the premises of where I live and he was on his property telling me what to do where I lived. I learned later that he had just moved here from Texas and he was a retired pastor.

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