

THE NIGHT THEY BURNED MS. DIXIE'S PLACE

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I remember the night they burned Ms. Dixie's place. The newspapers reported it was an incendiary, but the only hot thing that night was Ms. Dixie.

Folks who aren't from around these parts chalk it up to being another story from the Civil Rights era. Not as moving as those four little girls killed in the church that got bombed over on Sixteenth Street or as scary as when they blew out the walls of Reverend Shuttlesworth's house. There weren't any men in hoods slinking around that night, and Bull Connor and those dogs the Yankees saw on TV were all sleeping in their respective beds.

What started everything was her belief that she was entitled to run her business the way she wanted. There aren't too many left in this world who heard her that night.

For me, it was the first time I met Dixie Davis. She gave me a nickel. I was nine years old and always looking for a way to make a penny or a nickel. As an extra job, my mom cleaned rooms at one of Ms. Dixie's places at night. Ms. Dixie insisted, unlike that motel on First Avenue, that beds be changed anytime a room got a new customer. Most nights, my mom left me with my grandmother, but when Nana couldn't watch me, Mom would take me along and tell me to sit quietly in the kitchen until she was done working.

I was lying in the corner, on the linoleum floor, trying to catch a bit of any summer breeze that might come through the screen door, when Dixie came into the kitchen. From where I lay, I had to crane my neck up to see where a red, yellow, and green bandana that matched her muumuu dress covered a shade of pink hair that I'd never seen on a woman before. She had her back to me as she ran water in the sink and washed her hands. Then, she grabbed a glass from the drainboard and filled it with water

from the tap before sitting down at the wooden kitchen table. She took a long sip, put her glass down on the table, glanced at the clock on the wall across from her, and rested her head on her hands.

I didn't think she'd notice me cuz I was laying on the floor behind her, so I jumped a mile when she said: "What you staring at, boy?" When I didn't reply, she turned and fixed her eyes on me. I jumped to my feet, but I still didn't say anything. "Cat got your tongue, boy?"

"No, ma'am. Just don't have nothin' to say."

She laughed. "That's not a bad way to be. Wish more men knew how to keep their mouths shut when they don't have anything to say. Come here, boy."

I did what I was told. Stood there and let her look me up and down. She didn't have to tell me who she was. I knew from the way she carried herself and seemed to own the room and everything in it, including me, that she was Mama's boss, Ms. Dixie. "You Maisie's boy?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, but then I was worried my being there was going to get Mama into trouble. "Nana couldn't watch me tonight. I promised not to get in the way."

"Oh, you won't. I can assure you of that. How old are you, boy?"

"Nine." She raised her eyebrow. I noticed that even though her makeup was on pretty heavy, I could see wrinkles in her forehead. "Mama says I'm small for my size, but I'm strong and . . ." I stopped talking, thinking Mama wouldn't want me going on and on with her boss.

"And, what?"

"And, I'm a pretty good reader." I stood up a little straighter and stuck my chest out.

She smiled. Then, she reached across the table for a book I hadn't noticed was there. "Think you can read me a few pages from this book?"

I took the book from her, and for a moment our fingers touched; I felt a shock tingle up my arm. "Static electricity," she said. I nodded and looked down at the book I now was holding. It was a Bible.

"Do you have a favorite part?" I asked.

"Read me the part where the marker is." I started reading the portion she'd marked, the one that talks about a woman of worth. She stopped me after a few lines and took the Bible back from me. For a minute, she looked real sad and then she laughed again, but this time it sounded forced to me. She slipped a hand into her pocket and brought out a leather change purse that she rummaged in until she found the coin she wanted. "Here's a nickel for your reading."

I pocketed it before she changed her mind. Ms. Dixie laughed again. This time it sounded real. "You keep reading and you'll be able to earn a lot more nickels."

"Did you earn this one reading the Bible?"

"Not quite."

I don't know if I made a face or what, but Ms. Dixie grabbed my shoulder

and pulled me square in front of her. My face was so close to hers that I could see little beads of sweat on her forehead. I stood there trying not to flinch from the pressure of her fingers pushing into my skin. Instead, I concentrated on the soft scent of her lilac toilet water. She was about to say something else, but my mother came rushing into the kitchen.

Mama stopped short, just beyond the stove. Her hair was disheveled and she couldn't seem to leave the edge of her apron alone as her eyes jumped from Ms. Dixie's hands to me and back to Ms. Dixie's face. "I'm sorry. I didn't have anyone to leave him with tonight." Mama wiped her hands on her apron. I hadn't noticed before how chapped they were.

Ms. Dixie nodded and released my shoulders. I took a step back, out of her reach. "Did you come in here to check on your boy or do you need me for something?"

"To find you," Mama said, ignoring me. "We have a problem in the big room upstairs."

"Can't you get a few of the girls together to help send the problem on its way, so you can clean up?"

Mama shook her head. She seemed pale and a little short of breath. I stepped forward to help her sit down at the table with Ms. Dixie, but she waved me away. "It's not something I can take care of. I saw Lily go in, but she turned around and hightailed it downstairs. Figured the room was empty so I was going to slip in and tidy up, but I knocked just in case. Nobody answered so I went in with a stack of clean sheets. There was a gent still resting in the bed. I started to back out real quietly, and then I saw a red stain spreading across the blanket. I made myself look again. He'd been stabbed."

Ms. Dixie stood up and put her arm around my mother. "How do you know he was stabbed?"

"There's a knife still sticking straight out of him."

"What did you do then, Maisie?"

"I dropped my sheets and bit my tongue so I wouldn't scream. I knew I needed to find you."

Ms. Dixie's eyes opened wider. "Don't worry," Mama said, "I closed the door tight to make it seem like someone is using the big room before I started looking for you."

Mama raised her head so their eyes locked. "When I didn't see you upstairs or in the parlor, I thought you might be here. It's Mr. Johnnie, ma'am."

"Mr. Johnnie?" Ms. Dixie repeated, letting go of Mama.

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Johnnie." I was surprised. Mama didn't have to say anything else. Even I knew who Mr. Johnnie was. A bigwig at one of the banks and a friend of most of the city's politicians, Mr. Johnnie's picture was always in the newspaper.

A few months ago, I'd actually seen pictures of Ms. Dixie and Mr.

Johnnie on the same page. The article said he was spearheading an effort to clean up our city and he wanted to start with the street Ms. Dixie's house was on. I'd read the article and I didn't know what he had against her place. It always seemed to me that everyone was welcome there, but Mr. Johnnie apparently said, "If necessary, everything on the block should be burned." Ms. Dixie answered with some none too choice remarks that the paper didn't think it should print. I didn't understand the whole article, but there was no denying Mr. Johnnie and Ms. Dixie were both boiling mad. Guess they'd made up.

"Mr. Johnnie got here about seven with some of his friends. They all know he took the big room," Mama said.

"So, they'll remember where he was when he doesn't come home."

"If he's hurt, maybe his friends can help him . . ." I started to say, but Mama held her hand up and gave me that look that shuts me up. I decided to get out of their way by sitting down in the corner of the kitchen with my back to the wall.

"What are you going to do?" Mama asked.

"There isn't much I can do except work on emptying this place and then give Mr. Johnnie what he wanted on this street." Mama nodded. Ms. Dixie pushed her bandana back. When she brought her hand down, she must have noticed some dirt on it because Ms. Dixie went over to the sink and washed her hands again. She patted her hands dry on a towel and then used the same towel to dab at her face.

"Boy," she said to me, "there's some kindling and wood on the back porch out there. I want you to bring it in for me."

"Isn't it too hot for a fire?"

"It's never too hot for a roaring fire. Bring that wood into the kitchen and then you scurry on home. Your mother will be along shortly."

I shrugged and glanced at Mama. She nodded and shooed me with her hand. I hurried to do their bidding and then to get out of there while it still was light. It was the first time my mother was letting me walk home alone and even though it didn't get dark until late, I thought it would be a good idea to move before the sun went down.

Mama didn't come home until a couple of hours after me. By then it was dark, which made it easier for us to stand on our porch and see the sparks and flames coming from the direction of Ms. Dixie's house. We didn't say anything to each other, we simply watched.

A couple of days later, I saw a picture in the newspaper of the burning house and one of Ms. Dixie covered in soot from trying to help put out the fire. The article that ran with the picture said someone had thrown a firebomb through the front window. No one knew why. The police thought it was probably a nut or someone crazed by the summer heat.

The fire department was reported as saying they were called too late. The responders tried to put out the blaze, but couldn't save the house or its contents. There was no mention of Mr. Johnnie except to say that the

paper unsuccessfully tried to interview him. In the next few weeks, there were a few news stories about nobody being able to locate Mr. Johnnie, but the story faded away like him.

Mama never worked for Ms. Dixie again. She said her day job now paid well enough to keep food on our table and a roof over our heads. I believed her. Mama and Ms. Dixie are gone and Birmingham is a lot different city, but it's my home. I found my niche that night. I've been working as an arson inspector for the past twenty-five years. 🐦