

THE WIDOW WINSLOW

The car bounced when I hit a washout, the smooth, dried mud interrupted by a rivulet of chunky stone left after the last downpour. The headlights flickered and went out. There was no moon yet and it was totally dark this far out in the country. I braked to a stop and killed the engine.

I wished now I had taken the train. My secondhand 1929 Ford Model A coupe was now ten years old and showing its age. I got out and sat on the running board considering what I should do.

After a couple of minutes, I heard a woman scream and a chill ran down my spine. Or was it a Screech Owl? Then I heard a woman yell, on the other side of the car; in the distance. I felt my way around the car and scrambled up the bank beside the road. The moon was rising, and across a field, I could just discern a house in silhouette with light showing from two windows on the first floor.

I started making my way across the field, stumbling now and then in the dim light. I could hear a woman, her voice seemed weak; perhaps she was frail.

“I don’t want ...”

A man’s voice, strident, “I must tell you ...,” the rest not discernable.

“Don’t ever dare ... please leave ... don’t come back.”

I moved more slowly. I didn’t want to get involved in a domestic dispute.

A smaller light, perhaps a candle, appeared in one of the windows and then disappeared. It reappeared on the second floor.

THE WIDOW WINSLOW

She emphasized each word, “If you come back, I’ll tell Randolph. I want you to leave me alone.”

He shouted, “Tell Randolph? Damn, Randolph and you!”

There was the crack of breaking glass; the room with the bright light got brighter, and I could see flames. The flames quickly spread to the second floor.

The man ran out of the house and an ancient pickup rattled away from the house.

I raced towards the house, tripping over a water trough and hitting my head on the pump. I was stunned and lay still for several minutes. Finally, I stood up, groggy, blood running down my face. I wiped it away as I staggered towards the house. The heat was intense; I could only watch in horror.

I never saw her again. If she screamed, the roar of the fire masked it. Tears came to my eyes; I felt a pang of guilt. Perhaps if I had appeared, the man would have left quietly.

I pumped some water into a bucket, washed my hands and face, and sat on the thick end of the water trough that was a hollowed log, probably a century old.

A bell clanged in the distance and then grew nearer. I could hear car horns blowing, and after a few minutes, a fire engine, bell clanging, arrived, followed shortly by several cars and pickups.

Men clambered out of the vehicles, drug hoses off the fire truck, and soon had water spraying on the door. It had no effect; it was too late. I could hear men shouting and could distinguish a word or two.

THE WIDOW WINSLOW

“living alone ...”

“The Widow ...”

“Oh Lord, help her ...”

“a Saint gone to her reward ...”

I walked towards the house and directly to a big man who seemed to be in charge. He jumped back, startled, as I approached.

He demanded, “Where’s the Widow Winslow?”

“The woman told a man to leave. He smashed a lantern. The fire started, and he left in his truck.”

“You ain’t from around here, are you?”

“No, I was just passing through. My car broke down. I came for help.”

“Where’s the widow?”

“If she was the woman in the house, she was upstairs.”

“She’s still in there?”

“I never saw her after he started the fire; it spread quickly, and by the time I reached the house, it was too hot to get near.”

A tall muscular man, in jeans and a leather jacket, stepped towards me.

“Who was this man you’re talking about?”

THE WIDOW WINSLOW

“I don’t know. I don’t know anyone here.”

He beckoned for me to follow him, turned on his heel, and walked back into the darkness. I obediently followed. He stood with his back to the fire; the blaze lighted my face.

“Tell me what happened,” he said. He had his fists clenched, and I sensed he was irate and struggling to contain his emotions.

I related my tale, my feelings of horror. The man listened. When I finished, he growled, “What’s your name?”

I told him, and then he fired questions at me staccato.

“Why did you set the fire? Did you attack her when you found her alone? Did she make that gash on your forehead? What did she hit you with?” He would have gone on, but I interrupted him.

“No, no, none of that. I told you. I tripped over the water trough and hit my head on the pump. I never got near the woman.”

He pulled a badge out of his shirt pocket, “I’m Sheriff Padgett. You’re under arrest for suspicion of murder and arson.”

“Sheriff, you’ve got it wrong. I was looking for help. I would have rescued her if it hadn’t been too hot to get near the house.”

The Sheriff handcuffed me tightly, as he asked, “Where’s your car?”

“Out on the road, it’s a ‘29 Ford coupe.”

THE WIDOW WINSLOW

The Sheriff yelled to the crowd that had gathered close enough to hear him grilling me.

“Couple of you, go on down and find this guy’s car. Get it to the Ford garage in town. Wayne, can you give me a hand with this guy?”

A man came and led me away to a new 1939 Ford 4 door Deluxe with a combo police light and siren on the left fender and a shield with “Sheriff” inside it, stenciled on the front door. He opened the back door, pushed me inside, and then closed the door and stayed next to the car.

I heard men mumbling, and as they approached, I could discern low voices discussing my fate, interspersed with cursing, until finally the discussion turned into a strident uproar.

“Ain’t no reason to try him; he killed the Widow. Let’s lynch the son of a bitch!”

“I’ll be right back. I’ve got a good rope in my pickup, pick out a tree.”

“Elvira Winslow was a fine lady. Kindest person I ever knewed. I’d rather use my shovel on that bastard, rather than a rope.”

“Hanging’s too good. Let’s just toss him in the hot coals. He killed the Widow; he’s on his way to hell anyway.”

That brought cheers and even some laughter. I shivered and hoped the Sheriff could protect me from the crowd. The man standing by the car finally yelled.

“You ain’t doing nothing to him lessen the Sheriff says you can, and I doubt he’ll go along with you despite what he done to Elvira. He’s a lawman and will follow the law, not his gut. Now move along afore he gets over here and shoots one of y’all.”

THE WIDOW WINSLOW

They backed off a little, but I could still hear them. The Sheriff arrived, looked over at the mob, laid one big hand on top of the car, and waited for quiet.

“Men, go on home. This is 1939, not 1839, and you aren’t lynching anyone in this county.”

He and the guard got into the car, and the Sheriff drove slowly away from the glow of the still burning house into the darkness.

We arrived in a small town, and the Sheriff escorted me into a small building next to the courthouse.

“Breakfast at eight. Judge at nine. Sleep well, if you can!” The Sheriff slammed the cell door hard and shook it to make sure it was secure.

It was cold; the steel cot was hard. I worried, I didn’t sleep.

At eight sharp, a man gave me a bowl of warm oatmeal, a glass of lukewarm water, and a cup of ghastly strong hot black coffee. At eight thirty, he led me to the Courthouse next door. The Courtroom was crowded.

At precisely nine, the door behind the Judge’s bench opened, and a man in a brown uniform announced, “The Honorable Louis T. Byrd, all stand and attend. Maintain quiet about the courtroom.”

The Judge sat and looked slowly around the packed Courtroom. He spoke in a deep voice that carried well.

“You may be seated.”

THE WIDOW WINSLOW

He waited until everyone sat; there was the murmur of low whispering.

“There will be no outbursts. There will be no comments from the gallery. First one, I will clear the court.”

Silence ensued.

A man in a dark grey suit presented the case to the Judge. The Judge asked the Sheriff questions. He deliberated on the answers, and then he glared at me and spoke in a low drone.

“You will be held without bail until trial. I will appoint an attorney to represent you.”

He looked away from me and looked directly at the gawkers.

“There will be no more talk of lynching or any violence. This man will receive a fair trial and adequate punishment for his heinous crime. Understand me?”

Women looked down at their laps. Men nodded. One or two did not. The Judge glared at them, “Do you understand?”

They grudgingly nodded.

I was in my cell an hour later when a very young man in a three piece black suit approached the bars.

“The Judge has assigned me as your attorney. Not my choice, but I have to do what I can. So I’ll try. There’s not much chance of getting you off since you were caught red-handed at the scene.”

“I didn’t do anything. I was a witness.”

THE WIDOW WINSLOW

“Yes, of course you were.”

“I’m telling you the truth. Let me tell you what happened.”

I told my account of what had happened, and he smiled. He asked a few questions but seemed unconvinced by my answers.

Time went slowly. I waited. I had no one I could call for help. My two months in jail were hard, no mistreatment, but cold food and warm drink, and isolation. Knowing that I couldn’t possibly prove my innocence to a jury of twelve who had such great respect for an old widow dominated my thoughts.

Finally, the trial began the first week of December. It started to snow as I was marched to the Courthouse. There was a large horde waiting for the doors to open. Scowling men with their hats or caps pulled down, and women wrapped in shawls against the chill awaited my arrival. There were even a few older children, girls in their teens and boys even younger.

My attorney had told me it would be over quickly. “The prosecutor will present his case, and I’ll tell them how innocent you are. The jurors will take a half hour over a cup of coffee to decide you are guilty, any quicker than that wouldn’t look good. The Judge will give you the death penalty. I’ll file an appeal for you, even scum like you get all of the benefits of the law.”

Everything went just as my attorney had predicted. The jury was out exactly thirty-one minutes. The Foreman announced my guilt.

The Judge looked at me gravely and as if from habit said, “Is there anything you would like to say before I impose your sentence?”

THE WIDOW WINSLOW

My attorney had advised me to remain silent, but I figured I couldn't make things worse. I spoke loud enough for everyone in the courtroom to hear me.

"I'm innocent of any crime, but apparently that doesn't matter around here. I do want to express my sympathy to the family of Widow Winslow, it was a horrible crime, and I appreciate that you considered her a saint in her old age. However, you should all be aware that whoever really killed her is walking among you. If I hadn't happened upon the scene, you wouldn't have even known there was a killer, because she didn't live long enough to tell Randolph that the man who killed her was stalking her ..."

There was pandemonium in the gallery. The Judge pounded his gavel and the crowd became silent again, all eyes on me.

"Who did you say she might tell something?"

I replied, "Randolph."

"Do you know who Randolph is, young man?"

"No sir, I don't know anyone here. I was just passing through."

"Did you tell the Sheriff, or your attorney, about Randolph?"

I stood silent and thought for a moment and then answered, "I suppose I did, Your Honor, but I'm not sure."

The Judge addressed my attorney, "Did he ever mention Randolph to you?"

"I don't believe he did, sir."

The judge looked over at the prosecutor and the Sheriff.

THE WIDOW WINSLOW

“Gentlemen, either of you?”

He got two heads shaking as they replied, “No, sir,” in unison.

The Judge looked at me, but he spoke to the Courtroom.

“Did anyone speak to the defendant about anyone named Randolph, or about the Widow Winslow?”

There was a deathly silence. I didn’t understand what any of this meant. I guessed I had made things worse, but they could only hang me once. The judge looked around the Courtroom as he repeated his question.

“The Court vacates the Jury’s verdict. I’m entering a verdict of Not Guilty. Young man, you are free to leave.”

I slumped into the hard chair behind me, more bewildered than relieved. What did this mean? I looked over at my attorney. He sat quietly and didn’t look up.

The Sheriff approached and held out his hand. I must have taken it; he shook my hand.

“I’m sorry for what you’ve been through. You’re a lucky man; I almost let them hang you that night. I’m Randolph. The Widow Winslow was my baby sister. Her husband of six months died in a logging accident last year; she was only nineteen.”