

White Butterfly

“The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell it in a plain way...”

John Ruskin

I

The white butterfly came to rest directly in front of him, landing softly on the steel railing of the suspension bridge a few feet away. Its small wings fluttered lightly in the breeze high above the strong river below, and its head turned in the direction of the man, looking more curious than worried about the circumstances it had stumbled upon.

Seeing a butterfly had always filled the man with pleasure. As a young boy, he sometimes chased after them on the way home from school, but refused to capture them because he feared doing so would knock the dust off their wings; a friend always killed the white ones, pretending they were Klansmen.

II

“Mr. Wheatley,” she called out, knocking on his door several times. “Can I speak with you, it’s Sophie Filand.”

“Hello,” he said, pushing open the screen door and walking out onto the front porch to greet her. “What brings you out here tonight?”

“I’d like to talk to you about a couple of things, if you have a moment.”

“Are you alone?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

In 1950, Dallas County, Texas, was like many other places in the Deep South, and the idea of a young white woman visiting with a black man - regardless of the reasons -

still had the potential for unforeseen consequences. He knew that, when he decided to let the conversation run its course.

John Hope Wheatley was a lean, but imposing figure at six foot three inches tall and 190 pounds. He had powerful shoulders, delicate hands and sharp, dark eyes that combined to make him a determine-looking man. He had returned home to Dallas County recently to practice law after being away for almost ten years; first serving his country on the battlefields of Europe during World War II, then using his GI Bill of Rights to attend Columbia University in New York City, where he received degrees in English and Law. There too, he experienced more civil freedoms than he had known in his life, and learned about ideas and possibilities he hoped would shape the future of America. John Hope Wheatley wanted to plant some of those ideas and ideals in the fields back home, a place where black attorneys were scarce; far more so than the Jim Crow laws most people he knew encountered every day.

From the moment he reached the decision to go back home, John Hope Wheatley knew he faced long odds practicing law in Southern courts. He also recognized he would be a stranger in the place where he was born and raised, especially to upper class whites. Educated and experienced, he prepared to be disliked and have his ambition questioned.

“Why in the world would I want to do this?” he whispered. “It’s absolutely crazy.”

The question he posed came a few days prior to his departure, during a solitary walk through Central Park one afternoon. It signaled the need to argue each side of the coin one final time, a need that reflected both an obsessive and serious nature.

John Hope Wheatley had made his way in New York and recognized the merits of continuing to build a life there. He figured if the reasons to leave were based strictly on

practicality, the choice to stay put was an easy one. But convictions and place have powers of their own and he could not rid himself of the nagging obligation that resonated in his soul. At the heart of the matter rested an uneven peace that demanded his attention, one he could not farm out to anyone else. He also knew his arrival in Dallas County would create immediate controversy, regardless of his manner or effort, and he understood things might get rough; he realized those in power held strong convictions too.

Some friends and colleagues suggested that he might make the situation worse rather than better, but ultimately he believed truth mattered, and that it was irreconcilable for a person to be able to die in defense of their country and not be permitted to cast a ballot. His faith that principles of this manner would eventually triumph had nothing to do with geography.

“The question becomes, how can I not go?” he said

His father still worked for an hourly wage at the mattress and carpet factory on Baker Street, just as he had done for the past forty years. His mother – a former nurse and midwife that had delivered babies in both black and white homes – now took in washing and ironing from the folks across town. Together, they had created a good home, one of respect and dignity; and one too that encouraged education as a way to a better life. It was the type of hunger that had driven him back in the direction of Dallas County – a fate whose wind had blown him North, then home. Despite being a son of the South, he never had understood or accepted the injustice that lived and breathed so freely there.

“You’re Florence’s son, the lawyer from New York City, right?” she asked, waiting for his mother to retrieve the fresh laundry from inside the house.

“That’s right,” he said. “And you are?”

“Sophie, Sophie Filand.”

“Pleasure to meet you Sophie Filand - my name is John Hope Wheatley,” he said, extending his hand.

“Likewise,” she said, her handshake firm and self-assured.

Sophie Filand was eighteen years old. She was smart, beautiful, athletic, and the youngest daughter of Big Jim Filand – the richest and most powerful man in Dallas County; a man whose influence and interests stretched into almost every corner of the state. The Filand family had settled in the area when Texas was a Republic and their principle holdings – in land and commercial real estate, oil and gas, cotton farming and textile mills – had amassed a fortune through the years. The family political legacy had been established too. Big Jim’s father and grandfather, both former members of the state legislature, had passed their baton of conservatism forward to him, one ultimately geared toward sustaining a grip on a world in which they were familiar. It was a political philosophy that never left the room for ethical purposes, and where above all else – race and class mattered. Big Jim Filand, a tall and square-jawed man, welded that power when he believed it necessary. In Dallas County, there were storefronts, parks and playgrounds, an elementary school, a hospital and even a ferry crossing that had the family name on it.

Sophie had brownish-blond hair that fell to her shoulders, hazel eyes, a smile that lit up every room she entered, and an even brighter mind. She would graduate at the top of her class that year and planned, despite the pleas of her father, to attend an Ivy League university in the fall. She wanted to become a writer.

III

“How old are you butterfly,” John Hope Wheatley asked. “Are you on your way somewhere and resting until morning, or just being curious?”

The white butterfly had not moved from his spot on the railing since it first landed there nearly two hours ago. Although he had now assumed the role of guardian and advisor to the man before him, he held his silence – only his wings moved, as if they were pumping a steady stream of air into his small abdomen. John Hope Wheatley listened. He heard the rush of the river’s current below and crickets chirping along its tree-lined banks. A half moon hung in the sky, and men with guns milled around at each end of the bridge.

Strange, even obscure thoughts and images raced quickly through his mind that night: The big hats worn by the women attending Sunday church services, or his tenth birthday and the children’s games they played that day; he thought too about the time he made his first date, got his first base hit, and the golden jibes of friends; he thought about the joy of a summer morning – ordinary life.

“How is this possible butterfly?” he asked.

That day on the porch at his mother’s place, John Hope Wheatley and Sophie Filand spoke for about twenty minutes, maybe less.

“Don’t you miss New York City?” she asked

“Sometimes, now that you mention it,” he said. “But there is plenty to do here and who knows, I may go back one day.”

“What’s it like?”

He said, “I think it is the greatest city in the world. It’s filled with all sorts of things – people, ideas, energy, music, architecture, cafes and wide avenues. It is a place where one can toss their dreams into the air, where one can struggle and grow as a human being.

“Why do you asked?”

“I’ve been accepted to Columbia and think I’d like to go there. Daddy doesn’t want me to though – he thinks I ought to stay closer to home.”

“Your heart will tell you what to do,” John Hope Wheatley said. “Sometimes your first impression is a good companion - I believe that.”

“Did your heart tell you to come back to Dallas County?” she asked.

“Yes, yes it did.”

John Hope Wheatley sat in the middle of the wooden bridge, his legs now shackled to a cane chair; the twin bells of fear and anger rang loudly inside of his soul.

IV

John Hope Wheatley had bought the old Miller place almost immediately on his return to Dallas County. The house had plenty of room and was a bit older, but he liked the fact it sat on ten acres about six miles out of town. It was early evening and several days after their first meeting, when Sophie appeared unexpectedly at his front door.

That night she told him about a recent conversation she had overheard between her father and several other men at their home; she told him that he was the subject of that conversation and that the language used was coarse and unflattering at best, perhaps even dangerous. She told him the men believed the real reason he had returned to Dallas County was to stir people up – to get them thinking about unions, mixing with whites in schools and swimming pools, and even voting.

“I thought you ought to know,” she said.

“Do you want to sit down?” John Hope Wheatley asked.

“Okay,” she said, taking a seat on the top step of the porch.

“How do you feel about what those men were saying?” he asked.

“It scares me,” she said.

“It should,” he said.

Later, John Hope Wheatley recounted the proud moment he first saw Jackie Robinson play baseball for the Brooklyn Dodgers. He then asked Sophie if she knew of the American diplomat Ralph Bunche or the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, winners of the Nobel Peace Prize and Pulitzer Prize for Literature that year.

“Have you ever read her poetry?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“What about Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, James Baldwin or Ralph Ellison?”

“No.”

John Hope Wheatley excused himself and went inside of his house. In a moment, he returned with a stack of books written by the people he had mentioned. He offered her the books and she accepted. He also handed her a piece of paper.

“I’d like for you to read this aloud,” he said. “Would you mind doing that?”

“No, not at all,” she said, glancing at the sheet of paper. She began:

Strange Fruit

*Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on their leaves
Blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
The scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather
For the wind to suck
For the sun to rot
For the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop*

When Sophie finished reading the poem, she looked up at John Hope Wheatley.

“This is why I came back,” he said.

They discussed other things on the porch that night – music, love, painting, sports, writing and the world beyond Dallas County. John Hope Wheatley spoke of his dream to start a weekly newspaper, a literacy program, and to teach, because he believed offering access to ideas and education would eventually produce a world of reason, tolerance, and progress. Several hours after Sophie had arrived, she returned home to find her father waiting for her.

V

“Butterfly,” he asked, “is genius a small boy chasing a butterfly up a mountain? Or is it the other way around? Which is it – do you know?” he asked, trying to remember the exact passage written by John Steinbeck.

John Hope Wheatley waited patiently. Several hours had passed and he wondered if anyone could help him or even knew he was here; he noticed the sheerness of the butterfly’s wings as light approached, but he did not see any dust.

Earlier that morning, he had been awakened by what sounded like the pounding of hooves, and before he could get to the window to see what was happening, several men

burst into his bedroom, grabbed hold of him and pulled him from his home. Outside, he noticed at least twenty-five men on horseback – all armed; a few of the men had handkerchiefs across their faces, most did not. More than a half-dozen hounds connected to their handlers by leather leashes barked, stared and moved excitedly about. Anger filled the human voices and lawlessness drove their actions as they pushed him into the cab of an old pickup truck.

“Let’s go boy,” one man said.

“What’s going on?” John Hope Wheatley asked.

“Never mind, boy,” the man said. “I think you might have gotten the wrong idea about your place over there in France and New York – some people think you’re a bit too uppity for your own good.”

“We’ll shake all you yellow eyes out of the trees,” another said.

As they drove away, John Hope Wheatley looked out of the side window. He saw a few men looting and ransacking his home. I hope they do not burn it down, he thought. Only two days had passed since Sophie Filand had paid him a visit.

When Sophie returned home that evening, her father confronted her. When she told him the truth, he flew into a rage despite efforts to explain the circumstances.

“No, it was not like that,” she said. “We just talked about things, that’s all”

“What is this?” he asked, grabbing the piece of paper from her hand.

“It’s a poem – written by a white school teacher in New York. It is just a poem Daddy.”

“It’s much more than that,” Big Jim Filand said.

VI

The sun rose slightly above the horizon and its light filtered through the leaves of the trees that stood thick and tall in the clay soil along the riverbank. From each end of the suspension bridge, a group of men slowly approached the chair where John Hope Wheatley had spent the last three hours. He felt a pair of hands on each shoulder as one man unbound his legs. Two men helped him to his feet while another placed a slightly imperfect sling around his neck. He pushed his shoulders back and stood erect.

“I have read about people’s thoughts in moments of fear,” John Hope Wheatley thought. “They mention thinking about God or family, maybe even a woman. I think of those things too. I also think about those who will find me and how sad it will be for those I leave behind; I wonder if the final look on my face will indicate I knew what happened to me – that there was no crime committed other than I somehow crossed the line of racial etiquette someone I do not even know considered unwise.”

To his left, Big Jim Filand emerged from the sea of men.

“I dare you speak with my daughter about the things you did the other night,” he said.

“Sir, we talked about ideas, books, and poetry,” John Hope Wheatley said.

“This is not worth the paper it is printed on boy,” Big Jim Filand said, stuffing the poem Sophie had read aloud into John Hope Wheatley’s shirt pocket. “Let’s get this thing done,” he said, without hesitation.

For some unknown reason John Hope Wheatley held out his hand towards the white butterfly moments prior to Big Jim Filand’s appearance. It fluttered its wings and lifted upward, landing softly in the palm. He closed the fist slightly and thought: “Should I

crush this innocent creature to death in order to soothe my anger or simply because of its color?"

Seconds later his hand opened wide and the white butterfly sailed away unharmed, free from the abuses of freedom.