

*The Evil of Silence*  
*from [Caste](#), by Isabel Wilkerson*

*The ash rose from the crematorium into the air, carried by karma and breeze, and settled onto the front steps and geranium beds of the townspeople living outside the gates of death at Sachsenhausen, north of Berlin. The ash coated the swing sets and paddling pools in the backyards of the townspeople.*

*There was no denying the slaughter and torment on the other side of the barbed wire. The fruit of evil fell upon villagers like snow dust. They were covered in evil, and some were good parents and capable spouses, and yet they did nothing to stop the evil, which had now grown too big for one person to stop, and thus no one person was complicit, and yet everyone was complicit. It had grown bigger than them because they had allowed it to grow bigger than them, and now it was raining down onto their gingerbread cottages and their lives of pristine conformity.*

*The dissident theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the millions who suffered and perished behind the electrified walls of a Nazi concentration camp, tortured and kept in solitary confinement. Could the townspeople hear the prayers of the innocents? “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil,” Bonhoeffer once said of bystanders. “God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”*

*The villagers were not all Nazis, in fact, many Germans were not Nazis. But they followed the Nazi leaders on the radio, waited to hear the latest from Hitler and Goebbels, the Nazis having seized the advantage of this new technology, the chance to reach Germans live and direct in their homes anytime they chose, an intravenous drip to the mind. The people had ingested the lies of an inherent Untermenschen, that these prisoners—Jews, Sinti, homosexuals, opponents of the Reich—were not humans like themselves, and thus the townspeople swept the ash from their steps and carried on with their days. Mothers pulled their children inside when the wind kicked up, hurried them along, to keep them from being covered in the ash of fellow human beings.*

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*In the middle of Main Street in a southern American town, there stood a majestic old tree, an elm or an oak or a sycamore, that had been planted before modern roads were paved. It held a sacred place in the hearts of the townspeople, though it was an altogether inconvenient location for a shade tree. It blocked traffic, coming and going, and motorists were forced to curve around it to get through town. It was the potential cause of many accidents, given that motorists could not always see past it or know for sure who had the right of way.*

*And yet it could not be cut down. It was the local lynching tree, and it was performing its duty to “perpetually and eternally” remind the black townspeople of who among them had last been hanged from its limbs and who could be next. The tree was awaiting its appointed hour, and the white*

*townspeople were willing to risk inconvenience, injury, and death, even to themselves, to keep the tree and the subordinate caste in their places. The tree bore silent witness to black citizens of their eternal lot, and in so doing, it whispered reassurances to the dominant caste of theirs.*

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*The townspeople of the East Texas village of Leesburg hammered a buggy axle into the ground to serve as a stake. Then they chained nineteen-year-old Wylie McNeely to it. They collected the kindling they would use for the fire at the base of his feet, despite his protestations of innocence in connection to the white girl they said he had assaulted. Five hundred people gathered that fall in 1921 to see Wylie McNeely burn to death in front of them. But first, the leaders of the lynching had to settle a matter of importance. The leaders drew lots to see who would get which piece of McNeely's body after they had burned him alive, figure out the body parts "which they regarded as the choicest souvenir." This they did in front of the young man facing his final seconds on this earth, there chained up and left to hear of the disposition of his fingers and ears to the men who had kidnapped him outside of the law. The leaders debated this in front of the five hundred people who had come to watch him die and who were impatient for the festivities to begin. After the men had decided and after all was settled, they lit the match.*

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*The little girls appear to be in grade school, in light cotton dresses with a sailor's collar and their hair cut in precise pageboys just below their ears. In the picture the two younger girls seem to be fidgeting in shadow, close to the women in the group, who were perhaps their mothers or aunts. The girl you notice first, though, looks to be about ten years old, positioned at the front of the group of grown-ups and children, her eyes alert and riveted. A man is at her side, crisp in his tailored white pants, white shirt, and white Panama hat, as if headed to cocktail hour at a boating party, his arms folded, face at rest, unperturbed, vaguely bored.*

*It is July 19, 1935. They are all standing at the base of a tree in the pine woods of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Above them hangs the limp body of Rubin Stacy, his overalls torn and bloodied, riddled with bullets, his hands cuffed in front of him, head snapped from the lynching rope, killed for frightening a white woman. The girl in the front is looking up at the dead black man with wonderment rather than horror, a smile of excitement on her face as if show ponies had just galloped past her at the circus. The fascination on her young face set against the gruesome nature of the gathering was captured by a photographer and is among the most widely circulated of all lynching photographs of twentieth-century America.*

*Lynchings were part carnival, part torture chamber, and attracted thousands of onlookers who collectively became accomplices to public sadism. Photographers were tipped off in advance and installed portable printing presses at the lynching sites to sell to lynchers and onlookers like*

*photographers at a prom. They made postcards out of the gelatin prints for people to send to their loved ones. People mailed postcards of the severed, half-burned head of Will James atop a pole in Cairo, Illinois, in 1907. They sent postcards of burned torsos that looked like the petrified victims of Vesuvius, only these horrors had come at the hands of human beings in modern times. Some people framed the lynching photographs with locks of the victim's hair under glass if they had been able to secure any. One spectator wrote on the back of his postcard from Waco, Texas, in 1916: "This is the Barbecue we had last night my picture is to the left with the cross over it your son Joe."*

*This was singularly American. "Even the Nazis did not stoop to selling souvenirs of Auschwitz," wrote Time magazine many years later. Lynching postcards were so common a form of communication in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America that lynching scenes "became a burgeoning subdepartment of the postcard industry. By 1908, the trade had grown so large, and the practice of sending postcards featuring the victims of mob murderers had become so repugnant, that the U.S. postmaster general banned the cards from the mails." But the new edict did not stop Americans from sharing their lynching exploits. From then on, they merely put the postcards in an envelope.*

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*In downtown Omaha, they started a bonfire and readied it for Will Brown. The newspapers had advertised the lynching in advance, and as many as fifteen thousand people gathered on the courthouse square that day in September 1919, so many people that one cannot make out the faces in the human sea in a wide shot taken from above. These thousands of dots on a gelatin print—fathers, grandfathers, uncles, nephews, brothers, teenagers—were of one mind, had fused into an organism unto itself, intent on a single mission, not only to kill but to humiliate, torture, and incinerate another human being, and, together, to breathe in the smoke of burning flesh.*

*Two days before, a white woman and her boyfriend had said that a black man had molested her when the couple were out on the town. No one alive knows what happened for sure, and there were questions even then. Resentment had been building against the influx of black southerners arriving north during the Great Migration, and Will Brown, a packinghouse worker, was the man the sheriffs arrested. There was no investigation, no due process. That day, the mob looted guns from local pawnshops and general stores and fired on the courthouse where Brown had been detained.*

*Before they could even get to him, the mob killed two of their own—a bystander and a fellow rioter—with their ragged gunshots. They set the courthouse on fire to force the sheriff to hand Brown over to them. They cut the water hoses to keep the firefighters from putting out the blaze. And when the mayor tried to appeal to the mob, the leaders put a rope around his neck, and inflicted injuries that put him in the hospital.*

*The leaders of the mob pulled Brown from the rooftop of the courthouse where the courthouse workers had escaped from the fire and where the prisoners had been taken. Then the people in the mob began*

*the task for which they had gathered. First, they stripped Will Brown, and those up front fought each other to beat him. They hoisted him, half-conscious, onto a lamppost outside the courthouse. Then they fired bullets into his dangling body, cheering as they fired, and it was from these gunshots that the coroner said Brown died. They burned his body in the bonfire they had made on the courthouse square. Then they tied the body to a police car and dragged the corpse through the streets of Omaha.*

*They cut the pieces of rope they had used to hoist him, and these they sold as keepsakes for people's display cabinets and fireplace mantels. The photographers on the scene captured the lynching from different angles and produced postcards of the men in business suits and teenagers in newsboy hats posing as if at a wedding reception, crowding into the frame above the charred torso, sparks of fire amid the ash, an image they would send to cousins and in-laws and former neighbors around the country.*

*A fourteen-year-old boy was helping his father at his printing plant across the street from the courthouse in the middle of the riot. The boy's name was Henry Fonda, and he would leave Omaha when he grew up and make a name for himself as a leading man in Hollywood.*

*That evening in 1919, against the hollers of the mob and the man hanging from a lamppost and the cinders of the bonfire, Fonda and his father locked the plant, and drove home in silence. "It was the most horrendous sight I've ever seen," he would say years later when he was an old man. The decades had not swept the ash from his memory. It was perhaps no coincidence that he would appear in many movies in which he was the moral voice calling for a life to be spared. In the 1943 film *The Ox-Bow Incident*, about vigilante violence, it is Fonda's character who warns a blood-lusting mob: "Man just naturally can't take the law into his own hands, and hang people, without hurting everybody in the world."*