

The Recruiter

So I'll just lay it out as plain as my poor old brain can recollect after all these years. Not that my memory's any less vivid than it ever was, but the real nightmare gets mixed up now and then with the misshapen images that haunt my sleep. Don't get me wrong, though, I know my way well enough through this riotous dreamscape. I'll tell my remembering of it straight and true.

The central and undeniable fact is the murder of that black recruiter. It was just as things were starting to heat up in every sense of the word, nationally and planetarily, at the commencement of those great conflagrations that were about to bring our precarious and fractured Union to its knees once again, close to a century and three quarters after the first of America's civil wars when Abe Lincoln was supposed to of freed the slaves for once and all. It was then that the good soldier trusted to bring his black wife and their children to live with him here in this backwoods community of mine, this almost lily-white county where he quickly lost his own life.

The mom and dad were both good-looking, the cute-as-buttons children like yea high to a grasshopper. I knew he'd brought them because we saw when they did their moving in – me and my cousin Rose, that is, Yolanda and Rosie who were joined at the hips since forever, me with my lopsided fro and cafe-latte complexion, Rose with her fair freckled skin and red bangs – together we saw the

movers unloading all their stuff into the old farmhouse across the way from my Scots-Irish grandma's house, the only grandma I ever knew.

Some would say *backwards* community instead of *backwoods*, and I can't deny there was more than a smidgen of truth to it still, but at least we weren't all ignorant and intolerant bigots. What happened to this one man seemed to of woke up some folks, too, though it wasn't enough to stop the reckoning that was circling down on us. And there's always those few that were wide awake to start with. Like, for one, Mr. Rodriguez, the only person of color on the whole frickin' faculty and maybe the only dyed-in-the-wool liberal, my grandma said – or progressive, as even then in their politically neutered state they liked to call themselves, said my red-eyed Kennedy-Democrat grandma; or maybe even socialist, or democratic-socialist, or radical-nonviolent revolutionist, though didn't nobody hardly say those words anymore without a real careful glance over both shoulders.

Mr. R mostly taught Spanish, but they also gave him a class or two of junior-high English, and it's there I learned Martin Luther King's speech about that dream he had of little black kids holding hands with little white kids in harmony and shit. We learned it because he made us watch it twice, once before and once after taking it apart and practically memorizing the whole thing like it was written down on paper, and then get up and give our own *orations*, he called them, all the while using *pathos* and *logos* and *ethos* just like all his ancient heroes. He called it

a class on the good lost art of rhetoric, he said, the kind makes for good citizens and constructive civic speech and action but that sadly we didn't practice anymore in a meaningful way. And that was his big thing and, little punks that we were, we didn't care to know squat about it, but he drilled it into our heads anyhow.

And later, in co-conspirator Ms. Kochenheimer's Accelerated English 11, we would be back at it again. She had us reading a speech by some dead Roman orator name of Cicero. Or Sissy-Row-Your-Boat-to-Shore like some of us preferred, Lord knows he was no barrel of monkeys. While good old William Shakespeare, on the other hand, long as you had one of those simpler and moderner texts like I preferred to read on my own, now there's a guy could spin a tale!

I was a freshman, anyhow – a good half century ago, now that you've sat me down here to talk – when what I'm fixin' to tell you occurred. Like I said, I was living across the road from where the protagonist of this story and his wife and kids moved in. And this protagonist dude, like I said, this black man with his wife and kids all lined up and pretty, was an Army recruiter that'd been out to the school quite a lot schmoozing around in hallways and classrooms and in the cafeteria and trying to recruit juniors and seniors during their lunch, and plant seeds with the younger ones.

He'd made it out to football games, too, and volleyball and basketball, and even attended a track meet and wandered down to the shot-put area where he

talked to one big lug of a senior who'd been charming him off his feet since football season, and talking the talk about maybe joining up so he could go shoot ragheads in Syria or Lebanon or rebel Palestine, in Turkistan or Pakistan or Iran, now as the national resistance was about finished being crushed and the tanks back off the streets, our loudest dissidents in their graves or their cages and the build-up over yonder picking up speed again – with full conscription of men and women, from eighteen to thirty years of age, beginning to be entertained in that farce of a Congress.

That was our antagonist, as a matter of fact, that big-talking football and field-and-track star, and that's what he said: *ragheads*.

I heard it from Rose who was there and hearing the whole conversation. And who of us hadn't heard Mr. Antagonist Boy throw the N-word around while jostling our way through the senior hallway, where he used to hold forth with his fellow rednecks? I was trying to get through there one morning, for example, when he saw me and said *Talkin' 'bout ...* and just left that word hanging there like a lynching rope off a ten-foot-high tree branch.

I was a country girl, too, but I didn't like being called a redneck since, for one thing, I associated that word with Confederate flags they all still wore on their T-shirts and on their ratty old cars and pickups. And for another I was a mixed-race kid with part African American, part Native American father I'd never seen and white mother in prison for dealing in opioids and meth, so with Mr. R and a

smattering of Latino kids I was one of only half a dozen people of color in the whole frickin' building. As for the raghead thing, why it bothered me so much, since the first occupations before I was even thought of but that Mr. R showed us some clips of the year before with the extracurricular film club, after he'd shown us a contraband copy of *Dr. Strangelove* from way back in the Sixties and then all the fresh fighting, us and our European allies with Israel in a decades-long regional wildfire that no one had the guts to call what it was: frickin' World War III, if you'd asked me (it was Mr. R who got me thinking along those lines, in film club when he was preaching to his choir of oddballs and contrarians and misfits, that Mexicans and what precious little was left of our so-called illegals and refugees hither and yon had their own perspectives and struggles and fears as valid as ours, and were no less human), what got me, anyhow, like my teacher said, was why didn't we tally up Arab people's deaths like we did our own? Like it didn't matter that for their brown skin and their religion, their bubbling crude or whatever else the hell it was we had against them, they were dying every day by hundreds and thousands beneath our predator drones and our bombs and missiles?

And yet, otherwise, except for our teacher's cautious hints and a few unexplained "disappearances" of outspoken dissidents, the uncivil war taking place almost at our county's borders – heavily filtered and narrated on our mobile devices, computers, and big-screen TV's in the practiced, placid objectivity of corporate journalists – seemed to hardly faze us.

But enough of that backstory and shit, let's get down already to the main mystery of this narration, to where Mr. Protagonist Man *got* himself to when he didn't come home one evening.

Did that make someone else the protagonist if he weren't to turn up alive? And if not him, who else? Surely not me, Yolanda Ann Gilmore, though there was no one more caught up in this mess than *that* girl!

As it was, the recruiter didn't tell anyone exactly where he was going, but there's a good chance it was out into the boonies about a thousand county-road miles from where I lived, where at least we had a general store and asphalt and not just endless woods all around with barely a rut to drive on. Mr. Gonna-Shoot-Me-Some-Ragheads was telling him, telling the recruiter, that is, to come on out to his neck of the woods if he really wanted and go ahead, talk to his momma and daddy and granddaddy, and there was a mess of uncles and a'nts, cousins and sisters and brothers out there, too, some of the boys bigger than him and already graduated or dropped out. And so when Mr. Recruiter Man's wife was down to the general store and the school and near everywhere asking frantic-like if anybody knew where he'd got to, Rose and me started to worry he might of actually went out there. Nobody knew, well almost no one, I reckon, but rumors were flying fast and frenzied and some of them centered on Antagonist Boy and his family or neighbors out there in the middle of nowhere and with certain racist Klan-like propensities that had got themselves noted by folks visiting those parts

and that himself and his people surely didn't have their hands too clean in those affairs.

Rose, who was a sophomore and attended second lunch, said she heard from some metal-head type during the days right after the recruiter went missing that he, that is the metal head, had taken our recruiter in his confidence and told him he mightn't want to make that trip, inasmuch as people of color wandering out those parts on innocent sightseeing adventures had related some real hair-raising tales when they got back to the county seat safe and sound but majorly spooked. Said he heard one of those stories himself, sitting down one evening in some greasy local eatery, and it about gave *him* the heebie-jeebies.

Well, by that afternoon there were Army people out at the school asking lots of questions, plus National Guard from the nearest base and, by next morning, more Army from Lord knows where and all sorts of military vehicles combing the school environs, copters in the air flying real low over national forest lands and every bit of earth, wooded or clear, within this and the next county up and over. And even some plainclothes federal agents from Homeland Security, FBI, maybe even CIA, everywhere you go you couldn't miss some trace of them. Local law enforcement, I heard, had been told to keep their ears to the ground, their eyes open, and report anything suspicious, but otherwise to stay out of the way.

It was about a week later me and Rose almost got ourselves beat up or raped or killed or maybe all three when at the start of study hall we grabbed a restroom

pass and walked around the wrong corner at the wrong time as our familiar redneck and possible antagonist, after several days absent, was whispering something real confidential-like to one of his buddies, and we barely heard something like *out back the house a couple mile* when all a sudden they both seen us and everything fell dead quiet. They pushed us inside the girls-room entrance, one of them grabbed me and the other one Rose, they slammed us both into the braces between the open metal doors of a couple stalls, the one who'd got me with his body pressed against mine like a lover gone psycho, like some reverse White Othello against his Dark Desdemona, his aroused *sword* not too short of inside me and him breathing foul breath into my mouth and nostrils.

He leaned into me, anyhow, put one hand on my breast and squeezed, then his other hand pushed into my throat so I couldn't breathe. Rose's captor, I learned later when we mustered the courage to speak of it to each other, had both hands around her neck and slowly lifted her from the floor. The one who'd got me, our chief antagonist and potential rapist-murderer of previous mention, this choking sweating slobbering piece of chicken shit said between his teeth, one grunt at a time, sword-like exclamation points like bookends holding up both sides of his every utterance, he said one *effing* word out of me, or even look like we're either one *effing* thinking about it, and we're both *effing* meat for *effing* buzzards. But only after serving for a few seconds as meat for the satisfaction of someone else than those vulture lusts, I have to believe.

We didn't hear nothing, we coughed, won't breathe a word, we softly sobbed once they'd loosened their strangleholds enough so we could verbalize our terror, our bodies all a-tremble like dry stalks of corn in an August windstorm. Then, before letting me go the rest of the way, my attacker smirked like some mad Klansman behind cone-shaped white hat and mask and hateful do-him-the-honor-of-attending-his-lynching-party gown and, while the other one landed two or three swift sucker punches to Rose's gut, took both my nipples between thumb and finger and twisted inward till it felt like he was gonna rip them off, muttering *That's my pretty little brown-skinned girl* – only he used that other word – and landed a wet tongue all the way up my face. So when they'd turned us loose and disappeared and we could hear their voices fading and laughing their way down the hall, we rushed into one of those stalls and, both of us already begun wetting ourselves, Rose all the more for those wallops to the gut, we took turns at finishing peeing in the same toilet, then to take away the smell and the slobber and the throbbing we flushed away the piss and dabbed and caressed at ourselves with toilet paper and clean toilet water over and over again, then pulled up our pants and for the longest time just held onto each other in that same stall, its door closed and latched, while long scarcely-audible sobs wrenched their way out from our deepest inner regions.

Some girl who happened in there during the next passing period ran to a teacher and hauled her over to our hiding place, this teacher lady then begging us

out so we could go down to her classroom and talk in private (it just so happened to be her prep period). We opened the door and slunk out but immediately we said no, we don't want to talk, but then she noted bruises on our arms and necks and asked if we're having some boyfriend trouble; no, we told her, and that girl still standing off to one side looking like she might bust out crying herself we told no, we can take care of ourselves, thank you very much. So that then out in the hall, the girl just standing back by that entranceway all somber-like, Teacher Lady still pressing, I finally croaked in my pathetic piercing drawl to just leave us the *fuck* alone. And then everyone and her cousin droop-mouthed and staring and we looked at each other and turned and took off crying to Rose's own redneck car, with no rebel flag or other shit like that but redneck all the same in a not-so-bad country sort of way, and we squealed those frickin' tires and got the hell out of dodge.

Over the last couple weeks before graduation we were careful to wear scarves and long-sleeved men's shirts when we did come to school and not go anywhere outside of passing periods, and then always in groups, but still they managed to keep running into us and lick their chops and leer at us in some sort of goddamn frickin' follow-up warning, like we could of ever forgot the first. And then through the summer we slept over at each other's house most nights and lay in the same bed drifting fitfully to sleep, in the meantime whispering to get the courage to tell or else stick with our fear and convince ourselves we didn't have no choice

but to keep the secret. Or maybe mail an anonymous note? And then cut and dye our hair and get big-ass sunglasses and rapper-style stocking caps and baggy pants? And get as far away as we could from this lousy place? Or instead, maybe just kill ourselves – Londie Ann and Rose – in a suicide pact like some despairing Thelma and Louise, driving over some frickin' buzzard's roost or other after eluding our tormentors just long enough to beat them to that fatal cliff? Or, less likely, attack the bastards in their wilderness lair. Like a pair of crazed Furies with axes or scimitars and send them to a well-deserved and bloody Hell before they even know what's hit them.

As time passed, anyhow, and we were back in school and the number of resources unleashed for that old manhunt were mostly dried up, we took a sudden determination to come clean and tell what we knew even if it did mean our torture and death, at least we wouldn't keep dying those thousand cowardly deaths the British Bard's un-cautious Caesar warned against. But maybe it wouldn't mean all that after all, our tormentors by now fled the building and to us long gone, or at least so we could hope since we knew they were still at large in this county and might could still find us and finish up what they'd promised. But before we ended up scaring ourselves out of it again I wrote a note with both our names on it and that we might know something about the missing officer, and right away slipped it into the hand of one of the recruiters still roaming the halls, a female veteran just

back from one of those countries Mr. R said we've blown halfway to Hades and where an IED almost ended her life.

By now the handsome black wife and pretty black children were gone for good, I reckoned off in some less backwoods and benighted locale where they could be with their families and be all sorrowful together. In our next passing period, anyhow, the soldier slipped her own note into Rose's hand and we read it and ripped it up and headed to our separate classes where after five minutes or so we got the nod from our teachers who'd been discreetly contacted by administrative email. And we slipped out and both ended up one after the other in the same room where the principal and his assistant and a pair of soldiers awaited us with assurances that they'd protect us.

The military, we figured, were the ones most likely able to pay that promise more than lip service, but we kept that opinion to ourselves, afterwards ducking into separate restrooms and wandering the hallways a while before waltzing back to class. Each one's tracks sufficiently cold and our hearts beating only at just a few degrees above their normal relaxed-time paces instead of twice or three times, like before.

The rest I know and can tell only from what I heard through the local mill of fact and rumor and what a couple of unauthorized Internet sites put up, temporarily flying under the corporate-government censors' radar, official media being *eerily silent*, I overheard Mr. R observing one day the previous school year,

dripping with an innuendo and irony that I took my time mulling over. Anyhow, those variously rogue facts and rumors were either confirmed or corrected or dodged later by that same lady soldier before she deployed again to Middle Eastern Hell.

If I was Shakespeare's frickin' daughter or something, I could maybe fill out the story and imagine the scene of the murder and cover-up and all the rest, and pepper it with witty dialogue and an air of timeless tragedy, and make it stick with an underlying wisdom so people would be remembering it three or four centuries down the road, if our species even makes it that long. But I'm not. And I can't. I'll have to just tell it as best I can.

But what mattered, Rose kept assuring me, was what we did to make sure of those bastards' being captured and punished, though the punishment we didn't know how or when, or whether assisted in their homicidal plot by Turkish Caliphate or stateless Muslim terrorists or Mexican drug lords like some folks said, or by the resurrected Aryan Goddamn Nation or all of the above, or none. What best might of happened, anyhow, and I couldn't help feel sick to my stomach about certain parts of it – like maybe the cure's somehow worse than the disease? – what seems to of happened is after sitting for a while and re-gathering military resources and making careful plans and studying topographical maps and maybe Google Earth, a military elite first hiked up into the furthest reaches of our national forest lands in a constant autumn drizzle and found the muddy pond, *out*

back the house a couple mile from Perp-Number-One-and-Main-Antagonist where it was thought the recruiter's car and body had been dumped. There they were, as it turned out, and once the car was hauled out of that slime and muck and the body's skeletal remains finally claimed and put in a bag and hiked back over and across and down the same hills they'd followed up, soon as that was done, the rain gradually dissipating, the sky clearing, part of the original elite party and reinforcements perched in their spot above that racist compound, guns carefully aimed on it (and here's the part our lady soldier most vehemently denied, her denial as vehemently contradicted by all variety of voices including some that might of known), Army-green jeeps and trucks blazed up the broken dirt one-lane at the blood-streaked crack of dawn, and copters converged overhead, and troops swept down and in on them with murderous blasts of fire and fury like we'd never seen in these parts, until first three or four men came out, still in their underclothes and hands in the air, my assailant out front of them according to one version, shouting until a lull in the shooting and they could be heard over the din, pleading that they (the soldiers) not hurt the women and old people and little ones, that they (the men, the maligned, the defeated) offered themselves up courageously and without aiming to murder a single soul. In that same version of the tale, I didn't know if I believed it or not, my assailant wasn't even involved in the recruiter's death but only in the disposing of evidence, since he was sure he

would be a suspect or maybe just out of chivalric intention toward whoever really did the deed, or maybe both of those motives together.

And then a woman came out carrying a child that was hit inside, where uncounted other corpses lay crumpled in pooling blood and shattered glass and splinters of wood and metal from the makeshift roof. Meanwhile all Kingdom Come's right there on top of them, rifles pointed every which way and into every crack and cranny of every feebly standing structure, the woman with the dead baby pushed down in the mud alongside her valiant men who in her defense shouted bloody murder, the loudest of them promptly silenced with a rifle butt to the head so the work of getting everybody chained and gagged and possibly hooded could be accomplished with greater efficiency. That labor done, the compound's cache of weapons was lifted up to hovering copters. Bodies in chains were scattered right and left across the ground, the living rounded up and the dead left under guard for later evacuation and cleansing of the place of killing – or field of slaughter. And while all this was going down, before those all-terrain vehicles sped away with their human cargo tossed helter-skelter on the floorboards, at some other extreme of the county Perp Number One's buddy, who in fact hadn't been near the scene of the crime on either one of those fateful days, was lifted right out of his bed and packed away for his own conspiracy of sedition and silence.

After I'd managed to piece that horrific story together, my mind lingered like a hovercraft over the befouled place right before the first evacuation, the sound of children still bawling and women raging through my splitting head, calling down vengeance from the bloody-cloaked Christian God of the Apocalypse before their bodies join the others either shot-through or beaten unconscious, still alive for the purpose of enhanced interrogation. The stench of rancid corpses, meanwhile, baby corpses and old-people corpses, inside or out no longer mattered at this roofless, blighted homestead beneath a scorching early-April sun still wet from rains that wouldn't return in more than spits or sprinkles for the devil knew how long, for a year or two or more since they brought down the curse on all of us by those unholy prayers. The reckoning that maybe all of us might of brought crashing down on ourselves, the whole cosmos disintegrating around us in a global-warming event to beat all hell while our leaders just sat in their frickin' huddles, dreaming the blood and profits they couldn't give up on, all mortal creatures' end times that still might or might not even partly be averted.

I wondered about all that as I took shelter under that mighty but fading oak, its shade seeming ever fainter as I looked out on the sloping fields behind my grandma's house, waiting for the fire that in the coming dry-hot months might descend from heaven or from that horizon of woods with its drying leaves and needles just itching for a burn. Bodies of sweating cows, laid out in some sliver of

a shadow at the edge of what was a pond, vultures spinning overhead like infernal angels of dread and death, circling demons burning bright.

The remains of that black recruiter, anyhow, absent protagonist of this unhappy tale, were taken away in a coffin draped in red-white-and-blue to his mournful widow, awaiting bravely with her grieving children whose upper lips I imagine trained and firm like the pictures I'd seen of JFK's kids all the way back in November of 1963. And who might or might never witness a day when the rains of forgiveness fall on this earth in torment and such hatreds are finally put to rest. And we become true lovers each one of the other's freedom, as Rodriguez liked to say before they hauled him off. So that Dr. King's prophecy and Mr. Lincoln's promise are at last fulfilled for black and brown and white folk and rednecks and ragheads and reformed racists and every damn last one of us in a post-racial, post-apocalyptic, post-police-state American frickin' paradise at last redeemed.