

# March

By the time Ben arrived it was packed. D's Bar, a haven for Iowa sports fans, was teeming with black and yellow. Ben pushed through the crowd toward the tall, wooden table near the center of the room where his family sat. He waved hello to his aunt, uncle, cousins, parents, and sister, and they returned the greeting with momentary surprise before turning their attention back to the game televised above the bar.

“How did you make it over here?” asked his father.

“Rode my bike,” said Ben, stuffing his messenger bag beneath his seat.

His father stopped short of a drink with the pint glass in hand. “No shit? How long did that take?”

“About forty minutes,” said Ben, wiping the sweat from his brow.

His father nodded in admiration, then took his delayed swig.

“Can I get you anything to drink, honey?” interrupted a waitress with a tray wedged under her arm.

“Ahh, I'll have a-” Ben craned his neck to see the taps but was too shortsighted to make out the labels. “A Rainier, please.”

“And another for you?” the waitress asked his father.

“Yes, thanks,” his father responded.

“Alright, I'll be right back with those,” said the waitress. “Also, the kitchen will open at noon and I'll be back around just before to place orders if y'all are interested.”

His father thanked her then asked, “What time's the *rally*?”

“Meet-up time is noon and we should take off by one,” said Ben anxiously.

“What's it for?” asked his father with his eyes on the game.

“It's a Black Friday Protest,” said Ben sheepishly. Straightening his posture, he continued, “It's put on by a group called Don't Shoot PDX and co-organized by the Portland chapter of Black Lives Matter. They want to draw attention away from the shopping and onto *the shootings* and police brutality.”

“Someone the other day was talking to me about *Scott? What was his name?*” his father asked. “*Willie?*”

“Walter Scott,” Ben nodded.

“While I don't think it's ever a good idea to run away from the police,” his father cautioned, “it's hard to argue the officer was justified once you've seen the video.”

“Yeah,” nodded Ben.

His father nodded with his bottom lip curled over, then asked, “Where is it taking place?”

“We're meeting in the park next to Lloyd Center Mall on the east side.”

“We're on the east right now, right?” his father asked.

“That's right but we're further out,” said Ben. “The mall is closer to downtown.”

“You're leavin' already?” said his cousin, draping an arm over Ben's shoulder. “Where you headed to?”

“I'll be here for a little,” consoled Ben. “I'm going to a march downtown.”

“Oh yeah? Is it some kinda hippie-rally?” his cousin teased. Without pause he continued, “I remember when the park blocks were full of people camping out for Occupy.”

“I don't think it's going to be like that,” said Ben defensively.

“I hope not,” his cousin chuckled. “By the end those guys did so much damage to the parks it ended up costing the tax payers over a million dollars to put things back as they were.”

“Yeah, but the corporate bailouts cost a lot more,” said Ben, indignant.

“Some of the Occupy folks were camped out in downtown Phoenix not far from my office. I'm all for exercising your right to free speech and to gather together to protest,” his father matter-of-factly stated. “There is nothing more American than voicing political views and speaking out but I have a real contention with blocking roads and damaging public or private property. Those are criminal acts. If you want your beliefs heard and respected then listen and respect others.”

Ben rolled his eyes. The conversation reminded him of the time he and his father watched *Do The Right Thing*. What started as a dialogue escalated into a heated one-hour debate over a broken window. “Where's that drink?” Ben mumbled to himself.

“Benjamin, you're leaving?” asked his sister.

“In not too long,” said Ben.

“Where you off to?” asked his cousin.

Ben cleared his throat, “A march downtown,” he said, realizing he had now referred to the event as a *march*, *rally*, and *protest*, and that a little clarification might help.

“What for?” he cousin asked.

“It's a Black Lives Matter event. They want to draw attention away from all the shopping today,” said Ben timidly. In his head he wished he could say something like, “Activists are aiming to co-opt a holiday celebrating rampant materialism and capitalist values in favor of political outrage over the system's continued refusal to indict and convict officers of the law engaging in police brutality,” but figured it was pointless.

“Cool,” his sister nodded politely.

Not long after, Ben, finishing the last of his beer, said his good-byes.

His father extended his fist for a pound. “*Be careful*,” he warned, with apparent

trepidation.

“Will do,” Ben nodded.

“Be safe.”

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Throughout the previous year, Ben attended a handful of community discussions and panels highlighting solutions to institutional racism, police brutality, and gentrification. Incensed by repeated police shootings of unarmed black men across the country and the subsequent grand juries’ refusals to indict and prosecute the shooters, he felt morally obligated to throw what weight he could behind the already mobile organizations in Portland.

On his bike ride there, Ben passed patrol units setting a perimeter three blocks out from the mall. Taken as an indication of how the day would play out, Ben was excited. It gave credence to his somewhat superficial notion that he was participating in something *real*. Movies and books had filled his head with romantic fantasies of what the day may look like. Still, he had no desire to end up in handcuffs, and even less desire for cracked ribs and tear gas-scorched lungs.

Ben arrived an hour late to a crowd of nearly two hundred in Holladay Park, the grassy square on the south side of the Lloyd Center Mall. Assembled was a racially diverse, mostly young collection of punks, artists, and camo-clad activists, with a few aging Pete Seeger liberals among them. There were teachers, parents, college students, and union representatives present, along with organizers from the Fight for \$15 campaign. They had arranged themselves in a double file line and were preparing to depart.

Near the front, three white males from a fundamentalist church resembling the Westboro Baptists harassed protesters. They screamed, “White Lives Matter.” Whether because they were

talked down by those eager to avoid a blowup from what was surely the first of many antagonisms, or because their lack of courage prevented them from stepping into the streets with the protesters, the three men disappeared as the march took off.

Frustrated at the absence of racks in a public park, Ben locked his bike to a bench and joined the line now spilling into the street. He found Louie, his roommate, toward the back of the line.

*“Did you see those three guys?”* asked Louie with agitation.

“Yeah,” said Ben, leading them deeper into the center of the mass of protesters.

“Like, why would you come here just to get in everyone's face?” asked Louie.

“Racists,” replied Ben, uneasy. Not even a week had passed since four white supremacists opened fire on a Black Lives Matter protest in Minnesota. Who was to say that couldn't happen in Portland, a seemingly progressive city with a string of racist attacks stretching all the way up to very recent years? While those around him chanted *“Black Lives Matter”* and *“No justice, no peace, no racist police!”* he eyed the rooftops, patios, and overlooks for suspicious persons.

The march began by flooding Multnomah Street, obstructing traffic on both sides. They immediately drew attention from pedestrians, tourists, and of course those in vehicles. Some scowled, others signaled their support, most were simply curious to know what was happening. As they reached their first major intersection, a megaphone called out from the rear instructing everyone to fan out and cover the four sides of the intersection to halt traffic. Rosie, a coordinator and trans-activist, voice raspy with fiery indignation, moved to the center of the intersection.

“We will hold this intersection for four and a half minutes,” she declared. “We will

hold this intersection for four and a half minutes in remembrance of Michael Brown who was murdered by police and whose body was left to lay in the streets for four and a half hours. We will not remain silent! Today, we refuse to pay tribute to a system that prioritizes profits over human lives! We refuse to remain silent while our brothers and sisters are brutalized and shot!”

When she finished it was quiet, all but for the hum of engines. Onlookers emerged from the Red Robin across the street. Ben watched the faces of those caught in the standstill. Some craned their necks out their windows, while others took pictures with their phones. A group of white teenagers in a pickup truck amused themselves by yelling indiscriminate obscenities. Bystander more than ten feet from the intersection had to read the banners to get a sense of what was happening.

Rosie signaled the end of the four and a half minutes by calling out, “Hands up!” to which the crowd roared, “Don’t shoot!” And again and again, until all hands were raised above their heads. After, the group would move north on Grand Avenue, a one-way street five lanes wide.

Ben looked behind him to the oncoming traffic that began figuring alternative routes, since Grand would surely be clogged. Already he saw cars pulling down side streets, maneuvering in whichever way they could. He empathized with those stuck in traffic. There must be folks running late to pick up their children or on their way to appointments. What did these inconveniences amount to? he asked himself. Exactly how much time was lost? Even by generous estimates he concluded that ten minutes, at most, were taken. The day before, he had missed his bus because of a conversation about a summer vacation, and the day before that he arrived late to a dinner because of a long shower. Were those in their cars any more efficient with their time? He had no way of knowing.

They moved north with traffic at their backs. It was open road, and Ben, initially reluctant to yell with the crowd, grew emboldened among them. What scared him? He knew long before the march how much easier it was to maintain a morally pure stance from the sidelines, to condemn and to denounce without having to get his hands dirty, because surely there were others willing to. How quickly he found his place, though. How at home he felt among those of like frustrations. Here he could put those frustrations to new use.

The crowd moved unabated for several blocks as Grand, veering to the left, merged with Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. The march spilled over onto the other side of the road and claimed the entirety. The last wave of southbound traffic honked, whistled, and waved in support. In it, Ben spotted his Priya in the passenger side of a pick-up driven by her co-worker, Rina. The two cheered on the crowd. A minute later his phone vibrated with a message from Priya. "Hey love, please be careful. There are SWAT units roaming the neighborhoods." And sure enough, at the following intersection he spotted a white police van, one block off with four officers in riot gear clinging to the outside. Why are they waiting? Ben wondered. Perhaps it would be too messy to confront a group of protesters on such a busy street. They will stop us when they stop us, he thought, embracing the uncertainty. He knew that, far more than the police, the march welcomed the attention.

The symbolism of taking MLK Boulevard did not go unacknowledged. There were cheers from front to back. Ben relished in the act. How long had the revolutionary's words been twisted and redacted to fit another agenda? The King he was raised with was not anti-war, nor did he want America to grapple with poverty; rather, he called for polite submission during even the most heinous of racists attacks. *King's legacy was reduced to some vague notion of peace for a colorblind America.* But the march was vindication. The hollow monument, which derived its

significance not from its legendary namesake but from its central location, its shopping outlets, and it being an accessible alternative to the freeway, would breathe new life. “*Black-lives-matter*,” they shouted. “*Black Lives Matter*.”

Not long after, the crowd moved west into a cluster of residential neighborhoods. Their chants paused only long enough for them to catch their breath. Men, women, and children enjoying the afternoon from their porches and front yards stopped to watch the procession go by. Again people peeked out of windows and pulled out their phones for pictures. One couple pulled off to the side of the road and jumped out with expensive cameras. They orbited the line while snapping pictures. “Thank you for doing this,” they said appreciatively.

Approaching a dead end, the crowd turned to move south through an area bordering an old industrial district. Not only did the street narrow, but many of the buildings to their right weren't in use. Strategically, it was clear the march would need to readjust to reach a more populated area, but another problem was about to present itself. It took Ben, at the center of the crowd, a minute to spot what lay ahead of them. Riot police had formed a blockade three streets up. The line was seven officers wide, each wearing a vest and layers of padding. They were helmeted and equipped with three-foot-long steel batons. Their van was parked in the middle of the two lane street behind them while several other officers milled about.

How absurd and overblown their preparation seemed. What did they expect to happen? Ben wondered. Organizers had explicitly stated that it was to be a peaceful march. Even the public invitation over Facebook stated that in bold. Yet there they were, staring down a force as if ready for battle.

Soon, they were face-to-face with the police: a row of expressionless faces behind clear protective visors. The officer who spoke addressed the crowd through a large megaphone bolted



to the top of the van. *“This is the Portland Police Bureau. You are ordered to turn back,”* he called out. *“You may proceed north if you please. A route has been cleared for you.”* Ben laughed as he thought to himself, “Do they really expect the group protesting their excessive force to heed their commands? Do they expect us to follow their perfectly mapped-out route? If the day was about anything, it was confronting their institution.

With things at a standstill, Ben moved in for a closer look. Not four feet from the line, Ben looked at the expressionless faces behind the visors. These were men and women with families and loved ones, who at a moment's notice would bring down their steel batons indiscriminately upon the peaceful assembly. If Jim and the others could see me now, he sighed, what would they think? Across town, they must must be oblivious. They were eating tater tots and drinking beer in another dimension. How could he describe to them the exhilaration he felt standing in front of the officers without the burden of fear, how it was like standing next to the lion's cage with only strength in numbers acting as the iron bars keeping them separated and safe?

Some of the more cavalier protesters began hurling insults and guilt upon the officers who, for their part, remained silent. They invoked the names of Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Jamar Clark, Michael Brown, and Kendra James. *“Why are you doing this?”* they demanded, with *barely a foot between them*. *“Don't you guys have more important things to do?”* Some shouted *“fascists,”* while others offered hugs. Most of the crowd stood by with their hands in their pockets; there were limits to how radical their day would be. The moments that followed were like a broken record as neither party offered to budge. The police continued to instruct the protesters to turn north while organizers demanded that officers clear the way south. Perhaps because there was ample opportunity for

tensions to escalate, or maybe because time was needed to reorganize, the group agreed it was best to take a seat.

Ben reflected on the strangeness of sitting in the middle of the street while waiting to agree on the best way to disobey the police. He looked around for Louie, whom he separated from along the way. He looked at the faces of those he sat with and wondered what they were feeling. Were they nervous like him? Were they *excited* like him? The moment was being filmed on smart phones from every angle. The accountability the recordings would provide came as a comfort to him, though he knew they wouldn't be a full deterrent. It was only after noticing the children among them that Ben realized the police would chose violence only as a last resort.

Finally, it was decided that the march would simply circumvent the police line via the sidewalk and move east. Some were initially skittish as they passed undeterred. Ben felt a very tangible fear that the officers would pounce upon them as they shifted direction. The muscles in his back stiffened, and every fifteen seconds he looked back, without stopping, to make sure they weren't being rushed. As his and everyone else's pace quickened, calls came from the back to “tighten up” and “stay together.” It would be much harder to disrupt the march if they stayed in a cluster. The officers trailed close behind them, but not too close.

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Much to everyone's surprise, the march emerged back onto Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard unscathed and proceeded southbound toward Holladay Park and the mall. Confused, and somewhat pleased, Ben wondered why the police had gone to so much trouble to get in their way, only to allow them back onto arguably the busiest street in the city. Was the blockade a bluff? There was no time to ask questions.

Along the way they claimed two intersections, pausing for four and a half minutes at

each. When an ambulance approached during the moment of silence at the second intersection, a pathway was cleared for it to pass through. As soon as it was gone, the opening was sealed up and the silence resumed. Though they continued unmolested, the number of riot police multiplied like *wasps around a beehive*. More and more appeared as they neared the mall.

Moving east up Holladay Road, the march halted not only traffic, but the red and blue Max lines as well. The light rail was forced to wait between stops as the march passed around both sides of the train cars. Passengers watched the procession with annoyed curiosity. Ben watched them as they watched him. Their perturbed faces seemed to say, *I see what you're doing, but did you have to do it now?*

The final stretch brought them through a cluster of budget motels set up to bolster Portland's commercial tourism and accommodate the convention center a few blocks away. Guests with rooms directly facing Holladay Road came to the windows to see what all the commotion was about. By this point, Ben had reached the front of the line and was enjoying himself a great deal. His voice was as loud as anyone else's, and when he noticed those in the windows above he shouted even louder. It was one thing to disrupt the locals, but another thing to shock the tourists. After all the luxury grocery shops and four-story condos going in, it was nice to show that Portland still had an unruly side.

In Holladay Park, everyone gathered in a circle for a few words from some of the march coordinators. Then Contessa Lavalle, a lead organizer of the march, spoke. "Thank you all *so, so much*, for your participation today," her voice, blown out from the afternoon, sounded tortured through the small crackling megaphone. "We will not remain silent as police continue to brutalize our communities and profits continue to trump human dignity. Instead of spending your dollars today you came out to take a stand." Contessa paused for a second to speak with another

organizer. “We said when we started the day that we would march for four and a half hours,” she continued. “Well, we still have half a hour left. What do you say we rush the mall?” With that there came a roar of applause. “Black lives matter!” she chanted, and the crowd responded, “*Black lives matter!*”

With little instruction, the group formed a double file line and spilled back into the street, heading for the south entrance of Lloyd Center Mall. Ben found Louie in the crowd as they were lining up. The two exchanged nods of mutual excitement. They entered through Macy's and within seconds caught the attention of everyone on the floor. This is so much easier, Ben thought. In an enclosed space their voices carried much further and those shopping had no choice but to listen.

A minute later they were on the main floor, capturing the attention of virtually every shopper on all three levels. Families with their children at the indoor ice-skating rink turned and watched anxiously, and teenagers at the food court on the third level looked down with curiosity as the march wound its way across the floor and up the escalators like an agitated snake. “*Hey-hey, ho-ho,*” they chanted, “*these racist cops have got to go. Hey-hey, ho-ho.*”

Ben was mostly intrigued by the families they passed by; specifically the white families, though not excluding those of color. Whether in that moment or later in the evening, those parents, for better or worse, would have to explain to their children why two hundred or so folks defied social conventions of politeness to storm a large shopping center. Perhaps their children would ask why black lives mattered. Perhaps it would provide some parents an opportunity to address race with their children, and perhaps it would force others to acknowledge it. It was too hard to say, but the unadulterated attention the mall provided gave him hope.

After twice traversing the mall top to bottom, they congregated in the center of the first

level near the ice skating rink and the bridge overlooking them from above. The four and a half hour march concluded with another four and half minutes of silence. An audience of nearly twice their size clung to the railings to observe. Local news had arrived with their lights and cameras. Those working the kiosks were now cramped with the mass of people. Here and there were shouts of “All lives matter,” among those watching. A disgruntled old man threw his trash from the second level on those below, and from an indiscernible location someone yelled, “Go back to Africa.”

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They dispersed quickly after the moments of silence, as news of impending arrests traveled rapidly down the line. Outside, people were already going their separate ways. Ben found Contessa speaking to a group in the park. They hugged and thanked one another for the day. As he unlocked his bike from the bench, his phone vibrated with a text from Jim.

“Just saw you on TV,” he said.

“Haha. Oh damn,” Ben responded.

“Yep. We all saw you. Headed to hotel now and then to Cary's sometime in near future. Hawks won!”

“Nice,” said Ben.

Louie rolled up as Ben was texting. Ben looked up and smiled. “My dad saw us on TV.”

“Really?” Louie laughed.

“Yeah, guess the news was on at the bar.”

“You should've invited them to the march,” said Louie.

Ben cringed slightly. “*I don't know.*” The irony of his apprehension to push his parents after a day of prodding strangers had not escaped him.

“Why?” Louie pressed. “They would support this.”

“I don't know,” sighed Ben. “I think it's too radical.”

“*Really?*” asked Louie. “Maybe next time.” Wiping his nose, he continued, “I guess most of your family doesn't live here but maybe there's something in Phoenix they can check out. You should look around for them.”

“*I don't know,*” repeated Ben. After the success of the day, the thought nagged at him like a tiny rock inside a cushioned sneaker.

The sunset faded as they rode home. Ben took his time washing up then put on a change of clothes. In half an hour, he would meet his family for dinner.