

The Glorious Leader of The Murder of Cameron County

The people groaned when Max entered the room. The folding chairs scraped the gym floor as the people turned to each other forming threads of disgruntled chatter and gossip.

Funny people. Such funny, beautiful people. I didn't read the room like Max did. Most ill-informed narrators (like myself) would've described a scene of genuinely distraught people. Boy, was I thankful to have access to Max's thoughts.

"Welcome, Max. Do we need to go over the ground rules again," asked a trim, graying man with a full head of hair and healthy blue veins popping out of his forearms. He was the leader standing behind his flimsy podium. Plywood. Is that all The Murder of Cameron County could afford? Times are tough everywhere—even for rich, liberal bird enthusiasts. I'll never understand why they choose to wear threadbare T-shirts. It's like they fetishize poverty.

"I don't know? Am I going to be allowed to speak at some point? Lots of big, big ideas." Max tilted his ample frame forward to the soles of his feet like a sprinter waiting for the starting pistol.

"Yes, if they're thoughts about local crows."

"Yes, lots of big ideas. Oh, hello, Jo. What a beautiful lady, isn't she?" Jo clasped Max's wiry, red-freckled arm. She smiled sympathetically at his compliment. Her blue, misty eyes flashed a gleam of amusement, but you could tell it was a put-on. I hate when people show you what they think you want to see. Max didn't notice her deception.

"I'm glad you have big ideas about crows, Max."

"Me too. Been thinking. Big thoughts. You know how they function in roosts? Well, so should we. And take back what's ours. Like communism. Or Napoleon."

"That's good, dear. But let's wait until Conrad is done."

Conrad, Conrad. What a name. Powerful. Sounds like comrade. Makes me think military.

Brothers in arms. God, why name people Max?

“What do you think, Max,” asked Conrad from his cheap podium of prominence as if it was Max’s decision to make.

Max. You hear the way he says that? Max. Bid deal. I didn’t get to choose my name. Not my fault.

“What do you think, Max?” Jo nodded vigorously at him as if trying to will a yes out of him.

“Okay. But I am sitting because of her, not him. Beautiful Jo. Special lady, am I right?” Max sat down when nobody responded.

“The temperature is due to be unseasonably cool soon. Some people think that our roosts will fly to Mexico to seek warmer weather. This isn’t necessarily true. Many local roosts, like the Tamaulipas, are mostly resident and will have to figure out ways to endure the cold.”

Max was bored and so was I. Who cares how they migrate? Last week, Conrad taught us how crows sometimes fight in great battles to settle their final roosts. Some of these formidable roosts have been known to murder lambs in Australia. This led to Max thinking about Napoleon and Stalin and great leaders of men forging a path towards victory.

What was that victory? Max seemed to have a better grasp of what it was, but I still can’t name it. I just know there are people living better lives than me. I go to the dog tracks and see them in the sky boxes closer to heaven. I can’t stand it. Life is full of security guards checking for wristbands at the elevators. I live okay; I have freezer steaks for dinner and watch out-of-market football on premium cable. But I still can’t stand it. I sit on my porch on heavy, sticky-air

evenings trying to think about who is preventing me from sitting in those box seats with the champagne waitresses sashaying around in plaid skirts. I do okay, but where is my opportunity at excess? I can't just throw away money on Skippy Pete, lose, and say, "No skin off my toosh."

There are people with better lives. An opposing side has to be preventing me from ascending into that private box in the sky. I'll never understand why this bunch dresses in threadbare T-shirts.

Napoleon didn't ride in at the beginning of the revolution. No, Ol' Nappy had to bide his time too. Besides, I want to win with people that like me. I think people like me. I think they really do. Jo, she is always nice. Not Conrad. Must be my name he hates. What a silly name. Max. No power. Just the ex and the ax, but then it goes all puppy dog on you when you add the em. I am a winner. This is not a winning name.

Max stopped thinking for a second. Jo's sun spotted fingers were scrawling a map of local roosts in a notebook with a wiry spine that looked like imitation rust. Why is this a good look for liberals?

Besides, he was only twenty-three. Twenty-three. Can't very well win over a roost at twenty-three. Max began to laugh. Conrad sighed at Max's majestic, baritone cackle. Conrad tried to continue, but Max looked up at him and began to laugh again.

"What is it, dear," Jo asked clasping Max's forearm.

"Oh, I was just thinking. Thinking about Napoleon and his revolution and how it would be silly to lead from the start. He was only twenty-three." He began laughing hysterically while looking around the room. *It's okay. They don't get it. Lots of people aren't going to get stuff like you do.*

“Well that’s great and all, Max. I hardly see what that has to do with...”

“I’ll tell you!” Max put Jo’s arm back in her lap and stood Napoleon-erect. “Last week, you said crows can roost in the hundreds. So many numbers. So much power working together. They’re like the best aspects of communism.” He said this last part as if it were a question waiting for people to affirm how smart he was.

“Well, that is an interesting parallel,” Conrad said laughing. “But this week we’re really just focusing on our resident roosts and how we can help them this winter.”

“Yes, but...”.

“Come on, Max. We talked about this,” Conrad said like a kindergarten teacher trying to coax a rowdy kid back into his desk.

“Yeah, sit down,” exclaimed someone in the back.

“Please, Max.” Jo reached out for his arm, but he yanked it away.

“No, no, I will not be silenced! I’m too excited. Can’t you all see? This is your chance. We can murder the lambs in the fields of Australia just like they do. We are strong in numbers. We can take back our tomorrow!”

There was a murmuring in the crowd. I think the right people would’ve been excited. Everyone just seemed confused.

“If that is all you got out of last week’s session, then I regret mentioning that anecdote. The Alfred Hitchcock perception of the roost must be buried if we are going to be effective conservationists.”

Max’s brow furrowed. He wished he had a button-up shirt so he could stick his hand inside his shirt like the generals of Napoleon’s time. “Nobody’s talking about crows anymore. I’m talking communist revolution. And I will be your Napoleon.”

“I think you’re confusing communism and authoritarianism.”

“Well, anarchy then, or something. Just like the French did it. We must burn the world before Napoleon comes.”

“Please sit down, Max. I swear, I will be your captive audience...”, the room chuckled at Conrad’s strategic pause, “...after our talk.”

Max looked reluctant to back down, but then began lowering into his chair. “You’d care if you weren’t so damn rich,” he muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“I said you’d care about the people if you weren’t so rich.”

The room laughed. “Everyone here knows I am not rich. I live in a retirement community. In a manufactured home. Why would you think I’m rich? My shirt is older than most of our grandkids.” The room roared.

They had to be rich. Max knew they were lying. They can’t hide their elitist ways. They think they talk better. Think better. Go to gyms. Look better. They’re not like me. They’re the ones that hoard wealth. I know they do. They’re not like me.

They’re just going to keep talking. Ignoring the big ideas. These aren’t my people. I’m starting to think they don’t like me. Even Jo. They have to like me. If I’m not liked, then who will care what happens to me? No, I must be liked. I can’t be in a hospital bed, all alone, nobody caring to visit or asking the doctors if they’re taking care of me right. It’s like the crows. We are safest when we sleep in the trees in the biggest numbers. They will like me. I will not be silenced.

Max stood up and kicked one of the folding chairs in front of him.

“Max, please...”

“Shut up, you old hag!” The bird people rose at Max’s insult leveled at Jo.

“Get him out of here,” shouted the man in the back.

“I am for the people! I thought you were my people!”

Conrad lunged off the stage. No poor, retired man leaps like that. The other enemy of the people grabbed Max’s thick arms and started dragging him towards the gym’s red exit sign opposite of the stage. “People do love me! You will see! I am loved by many, many people!”

“You are not welcome back,” said Conrad pulling underneath Max’s left armpit.

“You wouldn’t catch my ghost here. You’ll see, I am loved by many people.” The Murder of Cameron County shoved Max through the door frame. The metallic gym doors slammed shut. “I am loved by many people!”