

Bear

It was easy for Caleb to find her car in the parking lot. He'd followed her, and then lost her in traffic at the entrance to Tops Market. But her car was easy enough to find, license plate *Vermont House 17* with the state seal *Freedom and Unity* on the blue and white Mini Cooper. He parked his pickup two rows over, grabbed a shopping cart, and pretended to be heading for the market. Then he dumped dog poop on the hood of her car and stuck a typed note under the windshield wiper.

Amanda sensed something was wrong as she wheeled her groceries toward the car. It was her usual weekend shopping, though Henry did it when she was away. There was dog poop on the hood of her car and a piece of paper under the windshield wiper:

GET OUT OF THE HOUSE

BLACK BITCH

White Power

Luckily their six-year-old son Ripton wasn't with her.

She'd been in the Vermont House of Representatives two terms, representing Welford. Running unopposed in the Democratic primary for a third term, her chances were good. A Southerner, she was one of two Black representatives in the House, four in the whole legislature—three Democrats and one Republican. Amanda had been pleasantly surprised how well she'd done in her two elections, and that she was actually listened to in her House committees, Transportation and Education. Amanda Washington was considered a rising power in the legislature. Now articles rarely said "Black legislator," but focused on issues and bills. She'd learned about pavement, education funding and underfunded pensions.

Caleb Watkins had been following Representative Amanda Washington for months, knew where she lived, where she walked, when she made the two-hour drive to Montpelier, and where she stayed when she was in the capital. He knew where her husband, Henry Lopez-Allen worked, and where their son Ripton went to school. Watkins posted frequent messages, some about Amanda, from Aryan Nations, Volksfront, Proud Boys and the NRA on Facebook and Twitter. He also had Amanda's mother's phone number in Virginia, and knew the location of the cabin she owned with Henry and Amanda in the woods outside Welford.

Amanda was shaking, sweating and crying. She looked around. At first she wanted to call 911, but it was hot and she needed to get to get home with the ice cream, meat and fish. She texted Henry: "racist note and dog shit on car."

"Mandy get out of there," he texted right back.

She wiped the dog crap off as best she good with paper towels from the car, tossed it in a trash bin and doused her hands with sanitizer. She almost threw the groceries in the car, snatched the note from the windshield and drove the four blocks home to Maple Street, pulse racing.

Henry Lopez-Allen and Amanda Washington had met at University of Virginia when they were undergrads. He was a minority amongst minorities. At first, she though he might be Syrian or Lebanese, but she found out in African Lit discussion that he was Mexican-African-Bermudan. "I'm as much of a mutt as you get," he joked over drinks on one of their first dates. He was fit from rugby, jogging and hiking Virginia's trails. When they hiked on the Blue Ridge, she knew he could have gone twice as fast, but he was patient, respecting her pace, and pausing to listen to bird songs. He read her a poem. They were a couple after that hike.

Amanda stayed for law school, and Henry for his MFA. Now with his teaching job at Welford College, hers at Vermont Law School half the year and legislature the other half, they

felt secure. Whether she was teaching Civil Rights Law or Roads and Rights of Way, Amanda felt comfortable, like she'd made it. Henry was happy teaching poetry and the short story as he worked on his second book.

Henry had already called 911 by the time she pulled in the driveway. "Are you okay hon? Better leave the note where it is."

They unloaded groceries until the Welford Police arrived. The cop was young, white, nervous and seemed unsure of himself. "Why did you leave the scene? Where is the dog poop? Where is the note?" It seemed like the officer was questioning her. Amanda tried not to act angry.

"I am a state rep with a legislative license plate. This was clearly intimidation."

"What's your registration number?" He was standing two feet from the license plate.

"17—one-seven." She pointed at her license plate.

Amanda photographed the note before the officer took it.

"We'll get back to you." The officer left. Their neighbor Larry watched from his porch.

"Should we call the news?"

"Mandy, I think we should let it lie for today and pick up Ripton." Their son was just down the street at his friend Garcia's. "The news media will find out soon enough."

"Henry, what do we tell Ripton?"

"I think we should get away to the cabin, Mandy."

Caleb Watkins had been fired two months earlier from Welford Metal Works, after he'd called a co-worker a "brown bitch." The owners found out he'd lied in his resume, saying he'd graduated from Vermont Tech. Actually, he'd not graduated, after being dismissed from U.S. History for "...making repeated loud, disruptive, racially insensitive comments in class." He'd also been

dismissed from Calculus II for calling the professor, who'd been born of Indian Hindu parents in New Hampshire, a "Muslim slut" and yelling in her face so loudly that security had to be called to her office. Though he was a skilled mechanical technician, he was more trouble than Metal Works wanted. Two DUI convictions didn't help; under his latest he couldn't possess weapons or drive. Rather than make a big deal, the owners didn't fight his unemployment claim. They found a graduate of a New York technical college to take his place as manufacturing supervisor. Now Caleb was saying on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram that:

"I got fired so they could hire a black bitch."

It was Friday afternoon, and they'd planned to go to the cabin for the weekend. "I'm scared. Let's get out there now, Henry." They put the Cooper in the garage, after hosing off its hood, and loaded things into their Honda wagon. The cabin in Forest Grove was ten minutes away. Henry, Amanda and her mother Iris had bought it together from the family who'd built it 70 years ago. It had two bedrooms, a screened porch overlooking the brook, and a sleeping loft for Ripton.

Amanda, on edge, sensed something as Henry drove out the woods road, but at first thought she was being paranoid after the parking lot incident.

"Can we grill hot dogs, Mom?"

"Sure, Daddy can do it, while you and I unload stuff."

"What's wrong, Mom?"

"I just need to get away sweetie. And Grand Mamma will be here next weekend."

"What's that—Daddy, Mommy?"

On a large white pine next to their driveway was painted a red swastika. On the next pine, a noose hung from a low branch.

“Holy shit, Mandy!”

“We’d better get out!”

“Wait, what’s that?”

It was getting dark. On the cabin porch was a dead woodchuck, its belly sliced open, hanging from the rafters by a noose. Another red swastika was painted on the front screen door; paint had seeped through to the wooden inner door. Next to the door was nailed a note on poster board:

GET OUT OF THE HOUSE

BLACK BITCH

OR HANG

White Power

Little did Amanda and Henry know that Watkins had followed their Honda several times. The bill for a new Vermont black bear conservation license plate, which she’d written, had been one of her easiest to get out of committee—way easier than teacher pensions— and passed both the House and Senate unanimously. As thanks, the Secretary of Transportation got her a bear plate, number 1441, for their Honda. “Cool Mom!” Ripton had said when the license plate came, and helped Henry screw it on the car. Watkins knew that plate number and had posted photos of both their cars and license plates on a white power website, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Cell phone reception was spotty in the woods. They didn’t dare go into the cabin to use the landline. Ripton was screaming and crying in the back seat. Their nearest neighbors were a quarter mile away, the only other house on the road and their house was dark.

“Let’s get out of here, Mandy!”

Back out at the junction of their road and Route 9, Henry's cell phone worked, and he called the Vermont State Police.

"I'm scared hon, and I'm scared of the police coming." Amanda was crying.

Two Vermont State Police cruisers responded and pulled into the cabin road, lights flashing—one male and one female trooper. After the two walked around the cabin, and scanned the nearby woods, the female trooper took Amanda's information, while the male trooper photographed the swastika, nooses, note and dead woodchuck. They asked Henry and Amanda if they could take everything for evidence. First Henry photographed it all. Amanda held Ripton, whose crying had quieted. He watched the two troopers, who continually looked up the road and into the woods.

"Do you have guns?" Ripton asked.

"I'm afraid so," the female trooper said.

"Henry, we can't stay here now!" Amanda was still holding Ripton.

Caleb Watkins was south of Welford on Route 7 near the Massachusetts state line when he saw police lights. He was going 72 in a 50 zone, and had a .9mm pistol behind the passenger seat of the pickup, a gun he'd built from a kit bought on eBay.

"License and registration." The Vermont trooper returned to his cruiser and was back in less than minute. "Please step out of the vehicle." He called for backup, but the other two units on duty were miles away at a vandalism call in Forest Grove. He looked inside the truck, and saw only a can of spray paint on the passenger seat. He ticketed Watkins for DLS and speeding.

"Drive home. If I catch you on the road again, you'll be arrested."

When Amanda and Henry pulled into their driveway in Welford, they found a red swastika spray painted on a large sugar maple near the driveway, a tree about which Henry had

written a love poem to Amanda. On the front porch was a noose hung from a planter hook. On the porch floor was a note on poster board:

NIGGERS DON'T REPRESENT US
GET OUT OF THE HOUSE BITCH

And a second note, next to it a .38 caliber bullet:

NO BLACK-WHITE MARRIAGE

White Power

The two Welford police officers who responded seemed unsure what to do. Meanwhile a TV crew and a *Welford Banner* photographer, who'd heard the call on their scanners, were on the sidewalk.

"Idiot assholes got my color wrong," Henry whispered to Amanda.

"Henry, what do we do now?" Amanda was shaking.

The story was on local Vermont, Massachusetts and New York stations, as well as national news. By noon Saturday CNN had the story: *Black Vermont Legislator Threatened*.

Henry and Amanda slept poorly. Ripton slept in their bed. Meanwhile Amanda's state email had 16 threats from white supremacist organizations. At breakfast Amanda said:

"I'm not sure I can do this anymore."

"What part of it, Mandy?"

"I can't run again if this is how it's going to be. How are we going to bear all this?" In the downstairs bathroom she vomited her coffee and scrambled eggs.

Ripton played with a stuffed bear on the floor. "You're a dead woodchuck." He knotted a length of ribbon around its neck.

“I’m not sure I can even go to Montpelier tomorrow.” Amanda was to be a speaker at Sunday’s Black Lives Matter rally on the capitol steps. There’d been two more police shootings of young Black men in Minneapolis and Memphis.

“Mandy, the governor’s on the phone.” Henry handed it to her.

“How are you, Amanda?”

“It’s been awful—unbelievable.”

“I want to give you police protection if you come to Montpelier tomorrow.”

“Really? Okay, but what I really need is for the police to do their job here.”

“I hear you Amanda, and I’m so sorry.”

By Sunday morning there was no word on the investigation. TV crews had been back to film the house and had been out to the cabin. They’d interviewed faculty at the law school and fellow legislators.

At 9:00 a black SUV pulled into the driveway, driven by a plainclothes female trooper, a second male cop in the passenger seat. If it hadn’t been for the terror, Amanda and her family would have enjoyed being driven around like the governor. When they made a bathroom stop, the troopers bought Ripton ice cream. It was hard for Henry and Amanda to talk with Ripton in between them, and two troopers in front. The night before they’d talked until two AM. Neither wanted to give in to violent, racist intimidation; however, with Ripton, they couldn’t go on like this. Then there was the practical. Being a state rep was part of their income—they had two houses, two cars and a kid now.

It was one of the largest rallies ever in Montpelier and had been organized by BIPOC students. The two state troopers walked just behind Amanda, Henry and Ripton as they walked to

the capitol portico. When Amanda stepped forward, even before the rally began, there was a roar from the crowd, and spontaneous chants:

“No justice, no peace! Don’t give up—don’t back down!”

Several students spoke: Black American, Somalian, Syrian, Mexican, Nepalese, Abenaki and Chinese. Just before Amanda was to speak, two loud pickup trucks roared down State Street, both flapping Confederate and U.S. flags. One had a sign, “White Power,” and the other a sign “White Legislature for White People.” Two Montpelier cruisers pulled out behind the trucks. The two troopers moved closer. Amanda was shivering, despite the heat.

“I think of the Vermont Reads book last year, *The Hate U Give*. Thanks to Angie Thomas for that book. I say to you today, all of you, and especially students of color, dreamers, refugees, BIPOC, don’t back down. Don’t let hatred breed hatred. Keep the dream alive. Systemic racism does not have to be in the 21st century. I say to those who hate, intimidate and harass us, the hate you give will come around to haunt you. This is Vermont, not Mississippi, or Virginia when my parents were growing up. But we are not free of racial hatred and misogyny here. Look up the Irasburg, Vermont affair in the 1960s. Now I know how Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, Angela Davis, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer felt. Remember them! I ask you, how long must we—my family and each of you—how long must we bear the yoke of oppression? How long? We will not back down, today, tomorrow or ever. Vermont, brothers and sisters, we will not tolerate racism. Black Lives Matter!” The crowd roared for five minutes.

Tony O’Donnell, a legislator from Montpelier, had a B&B where Amanda stayed when she was in the capital, and he put them up for the night. Ripton was excited about his dog, a friendly golden retriever. Usually Amanda walked around town and up to Hubbard Park, but she was afraid to go out. Ripton was napping upstairs.

“Tony, we’re scared.”

“We’re afraid to go home,” Henry added.

“Holy shit, look at this!” Amanda had her state email open.

It read: “yore mulatto half breed bastard brat gonna die if u run again. we gonna burn your place in the woods too bitch” The email had the address of Ripton’s elementary school, his day care and their cabin.

“You have to call the state police, Mandy,” Henry said, breath rapid, hands shaking.

“I agree,” Tony said.

Amanda wept and shook. “I need to go up to Ripton.” She sat on the canopied bed, and watched him fall asleep, his breath soft. Back downstairs, she could barely eat the lasagna Tony had made for them, but drank three glasses of red wine. Henry’s eyes were red.

The next morning the state police drove them home to Welford. Ripton and Amanda slept most of the two-hour drive, but Henry was agitated, breathed heavily and couldn’t sleep. When they got home the swastika was still on the maple. The two troopers got out, walked them to the door, and then walked around the house and garage.

“Bye bye, police. Thanks for the ice cream,” Ripton said.

“Mandy, I’m feeling dizzy. Can you get me some water?” Henry slumped onto the sofa.

“Mommy, Daddy looks funny.”

Meanwhile Caleb Watkins had been busy. Volksfront, Aryan Nation and Proud Boys had posted hundreds of tweets praising “...whoever was doing this.” Amanda got another email: “that cabin gonna burn baby burn yore house too & car with #17 too bitch”

Amanda called the state police again. They had an email address that they thought may have originated with Aryan Nation, but were having a hard time finding who had set it up.

Amanda got the weekend paper off the porch. The story was there, with a picture of their house. It was the main story on Vermont Public Radio and every TV station in three states. Amanda had ten messages from news media on their home phone.

Henry started to get up, but fell back on the sofa. “Mandy, something’s not right.” Amanda took his pulse, which was erratic. She got him in her car, Ripton in the back seat, and drove to Welford Hospital, where they took him right into the ER.

Henry was pleased to have a resident physician from Grenada. She said: “It’s atrial fibrillation. Stress or dehydration can make it worse. I want to keep you overnight, keep the IV going and prescribe a beta blocker. You hike, you’re really fit, and I’m optimistic you’ll do fine.”

Amanda watched her mirrors as she drove home with Ripton. “Don’t back down,” She heard herself chanting.

Then Ripton echoed the back seat: “Don’t back down, Mommy.”

“Thanks sweetie. Today Mamma’s having a hard time just backing up the car.”

“Will the doctors give Daddy lunch?”

“They will, Ripton. The hospital has pretty good food.”

“Mommy, who was at our house and cabin?”

“I wish I knew, Ripton.”

Amanda was afraid to leave Ripton with Becca, their regular sitter. She and Ripton went back to the hospital that evening. Henry was up having dinner. Tuesday morning he was back at home. Meanwhile a Black Rutland City Council member and the state NAACP chair had received phone and email threats. After lunch, while Ripton was napping, Amanda and Henry talked.

“Henry, I can’t do this. Won’t back down won’t work anymore, when they threaten our kid and almost kill my husband.”

“I love you, and you have to make your own decision.”

“You know Henry, some NAACP members started a GoFundMe for us.

“Wow!”

“Others in Rutland are getting the same shit.”

“What will you do, Mandy?”

“Henry, this is more than I can bear. I’m not going to run again, and I might resign my house seat. I got elected to state rep, not to martyr.”

“What else?”

“Nothing else. We ain’t goin’ nowhere, sweetie. The house, the cabin, all this—you and I worked hard for them—and Mamma too.”

“We did, and I love my teaching.”

“It’s hard to hide; I stand out.”

“Cause of your license plate or your hair?”

“You still funny, honey.”

NAACP friends arranged for people to protect them 24/7, both at their home in Welford and the cabin in Forest Grove. One of them guarded the driveway to the cabin while one stayed at the house. The one near the cabin said: “Don’t you worry, honey; we’ll keep those crazy racists away. The police sure ain’t doin’ their job.”

At their cabin, after drinks and chicken on the grill, Ripton wanted to sleep in their bed.

“Are we going to be okay—Daddy, Mommy?”

Henry hugged him. “Ripton, I sure hope so.”

Amanda lay her head on Ripton's chest. "Mamma never let anything happen to you, sweetie." He fell asleep to songs of thrush and sound of flowing water.

"We could get out of this fuckin' country, you know. I'm still Bermudan and Mexican." Henry leaned into Amanda on the sofa.

"We could love, but I'm already giving up too much." Amanda took both his hands.

"They give us shit for being poor; they give us shit for having too much. When will it end?"

"Henry, I wish I knew."

The Vermont attorney general had scheduled a press conference for 9:00 Thursday morning at the Welford Town Hall. Amanda didn't attend, but instead stayed home writing a press release and letter. By 8:30 five TV crews were parked outside. Just as it was about to begin, ABC and CNN picked up the Welford police chief on their mics, saying to another officer: "I think Amanda likes the attention. They're making money off it." The Welford Police Department had a documented history of disproportionate traffic stops of people of color on the two highways through town, and there had been accusations of bias by the NAACP.

Around a hundred people had gathered outside with signs:

JUSTICE FOR AMANDA

THANK YOU, REP. WASHINGTON,

NO JUSTICE NO PEACE

BLACK LIVES MATTER

The attorney general opened the meeting. Then director of the Vermont State Police spoke: “While we don’t have enough information yet, we have several leads and will investigate this case thoroughly.”

Caleb Watkins and another man in the back of the room unfurled a “White Power” banner. Watkins yelled: “Blacks don’t represent whites! Get out of the house.” He also held a sign: “Rich Bitch Nigger White Power Forever”

Three state troopers moved closer. “Keeps an eye on that prick,” one said, eyeing Watkins.

“Order, order,” the attorney general called, but he’d lost control of the meeting.

The town police chief spoke next. “There’s not more we can do without more information.”

“What do you need to really do something—a murder?” Someone in the audience yelled.

“Arrest those two!” Another person yelled.

“Police bias!” Someone in the back yelled.

The attorney general spoke next. He called the case “deplorable” and said he hoped the state police would “...investigate thoroughly.”

The room was chaos. Several people yelled at Watkins and his friend, as the state police edged them out the door, and moved between the white power pair and the BLM crowd. Others yelled at the attorney general.

That evening Amanda sent a letter to the governor, to the chair of the state Democratic Party and to the media:

“It has become impossible to do what I love—taking care of my family as well as representing my district and the State of Vermont. I was elected to state rep, not to martyrdom.

Do not let racism destroy this state and nation. This is 2022, not 1922, yet we are subjected to the same hatred as during the age of lynchings. I and everyone in this state should have the right to be elected, if the people so choose, to vote for whom we wish, to be safe in our homes, to have our children grow up safely, to walk the streets and forests of this our home, to do our jobs and to earn a living free of bigotry and misogyny. I hope for a day when there will be no more hatred. Effective immediately, I resign my seat in the Vermont House of Representatives and withdraw from the 2022 election.”

A year had passed. Henry was still creating stories and poems with his MFA students. Ripton had made several new friends in school, but his teacher said he was often agitated. Amanda had picked up two classes in environmental law and was close to tenure. They were in family counseling with a psychologist who’d grown up in Alabama, the great-great granddaughter of slaves. Before the harassment, Amanda had loved driving through the Green Mountains and river valleys. Now she often looked in her rearview mirror on the long drive up to Vermont Law School. She’d done a few speaking gigs, “...speaking out, seeking justice,” as she said. At breakfast one morning, she said to Henry, “I said I didn’t sign up for martyr, but I can’t just shut up.”

“You keep it up, girl!”

Here at their cabin, grilling salmon and drinking gin and tonics, they relaxed in their lawn chairs and watched the stream, while Ripton played with his soccer ball.

A month after Amanda resigned, Caleb Watkins had been arrested on state weapons charges and released on bail. That winter he’d been facing possible federal civil rights charges, but was never indicted. On a January evening he was driving again, license suspended, and tried

to elude the Vermont State Police. He died when his truck overturned on an icy curve just north of the Massachusetts-Vermont border.

Nobody was ever charged with a crime for the harassment of Amanda, Henry and Ripton. The Vermont Human Rights Commission issued a report that read:

Caleb Watkins and others should have been charged in these crimes. While the initial investigation and protection by The Vermont State Police was good, there was failure at the highest levels to follow through. The attorney general was negligent in his failure to prosecute. Furthermore, the Welford Police were inept, negligent and—in at least one instance—racist. Justice was not done in the racial intimidation of Representative Amanda Watkins and her family. Henry Lopez-Allen, Amanda Watkins and their son were denied their civil rights, including their rights to live in their homes, to run for elected office, to travel, to shop, to work and to attend school without, harassment, intimidation and fear of death.

White power groups went on to harass students—children of Somalian and Syrian refugee families—in Rutland and Winooski. When a Vermont Public Radio reporter finally located one of the harassers to interview, he didn't know where Syria or Somalia were. When asked by the same reporter how she felt about Watkins' death, Amanda said only: "I feel sorry for his mother." Asked about the Vermont Human Rights Commission report, Amanda paused for a moment, her eyes moist. "It's way too for me late now, but I appreciate what they said."

Dinner done, Amanda and Henry cleaned the grill. “Don’t want bears coming around,”

Henry said to Ripton.

“Mommy, Daddy, are you more afraid of bears or people?”

Henry picked him up. Amanda looked Ripton in the eyes.

“Sometimes you amaze me, kid.”

“Which Mommy?”

“Honestly, humans, but better be careful of bears. I hope there’ll be a day when you won’t have to deal with all of this, Ripton.”

They walked out the trail at twilight as robins and wood thrush sang their last chorus of the day.

“So much hatred,” Henry said softly

“Like part of me died.”

“Mandy, we’ll be okay.”

“We will.”

“We will, Mommy.”