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A Rue With a View
By Clancy Kelly

My mother never actually came right out and said I was the center of the universe, but she certainly did nothing to discourage the idea. When I was an infant, and later a small child, she would bring me outside our home to spend the night under the heavens. We would lie in the yard on a thick comforter or an unzipped and flattened sleeping bag and stare straight up, losing ourselves in the difficult task of not counting the stars, which jutted toward us like fiery Braille off a black sheet. I remember the warm swirling air that would charge at us through the grass and flip up the edges of our blanket, and the occasional raven or bet which would flit across the sky. If we lifted our heads we could see the portable Hibachi—all things that day. I introduced myself and began to explain that while Liesl certainly was interesting, she and I were a couple, and I would appreciate it if he would stop annoying her. He looked puzzled for a moment, as if perhaps he was feeling toward me the way I'd felt toward seniors when I was younger.

I approached him in the hallway after the last class that day. I introduced myself and began to explain that while Liesl certainly was interesting, she and I were a couple, and I would appreciate it if he would stop annoying her. He looked puzzled for a moment, as if perhaps he was feeling toward me the way I'd felt toward seniors when I was younger.

One day Liesl told me that a boy in her grade, William, was bothering her, constantly telling her she was pretty and asking her to be his girlfriend. I told Liesl he probably meant to be complementary. She said she didn't care, that she had told him about us and he just laughed, asking her what I was going to do about it. I said I would talk to him. I thought maybe I could relate to this to William, that perhaps he was feeling toward me the way I'd felt toward seniors when I was younger.

I was washed out to the parking lot on a wave of sudden friends and well-wishers, who jostled one another while loudly assuring me that I was tougher and could "take" this kid. I was trying to understand what they were talking about (was I now obliged to fight?) when one word found its way out of the din and to my ears: Nigger. I broke from the crowd and began walking alone through the parking lot toward home. Ripples from the stone cold word "nigger" reverberated back and forth across my mind.

He was dark; his skin was definitely darker than mine. As we stood across from each other in the hall, I had noticed several things about him: his green dungarees; his tight black tee shirt; a belt too long that looped around itself; the faint smell of cocoa butter mixed with pomade. I remembered wondering whether he always stood so straight or was he perhaps recalling some good advice on confrontation he was given once. I even had the title of a story I had recently read flash through my mind, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" by Flannery O'Connor. Yes, I'd noticed the color of his skin, but I hadn't seen it. What I had seen were his eyes bright and moist, eager points set within the darkness of his face.
Don't misunderstand me. I was by no means innocent of racism. I felt blacks were often too loud, too aggressive, even funny smelling, all racist generalizations that I would later see as such. Perhaps the most damning testament to my racism was my habit lumping blacks together as them or they, as if unique individuals could be neatly grouped on the strength of one single trait, skin color, a trait that in actuality varies greatly among those we call black. However, I truly like my African-American classmates. I had many laughs with Stretchin' Gretchen Bookman, who was constantly telling me, “Clancy, your ass is crazy.” I felt close to Ron Angle, the fastest man in school, and Eric Harkins, nicknamed “The Football Team” because, even though we didn’t have a team, if we did we all agreed Eric would have been it.

The next day, the word was out that I was going to fight William following sixth period. I did not start this rumor, but I may as well have because I did nothing to stop it. I went to fifth period lunch with Andy, Larry, Frank, and Ed, the guys I usually hung out with in school. We crashed into Frank’s mother’s light blue Datsun hatchback and drove off campus to get some fast food. As we ate, all my buddies could talk about was this “nigger” and how I was going to kill him. They spoke at length about how tired they were of all these “niggers” bussing over from the south side of Utica to go to our school in the north. They said William was especially arrogant, and Andy, who was a senior taking tenth grade math, said that in class he had insisted to the teacher on being called William. I don’t think these guys knew who Maya Angelou was, and probably none of us had ever read about Margaret, but I doubt it would have helped anyway.

We pulled back into the parking lot about ten minutes before the period ended and started smoking a joint. The talk about William now took on a more sinister air. Ed proposed that after I hit him, they should all jump on him. I was about to object when there was a knock on the car. It was Ron Angle. We rolled down the window and everyone said hi to Ron, passing him the joint and chatting, being as friendly with him as we always were. Interestingly, nobody was using the word “nigger” now. He asked if the rumor that I was going to fight William was true. Ed said it was, and added that they were going to get in a few shots themselves. Ron laughed knowingly, and smiled right at me. I said that they weren’t going to have anyone to hit, because I would take care of William, but to my ears I sounded weak and unconvincing.

One might ask why we were sharing this information with Ron, who at the very least knew William and probably felt a closer bond to him than to us in this matter. It’s because we suffered from, as James Baldwin puts it in “Stranger in the Village,” “white man’s naivete.” Like the Herrenvolk, we regarded Ron as an “exotic rarity,” namely our good, black friend, and certainly not a “nigger.” We took Ron’s knowledge of our cabal lightly because we took Ron’s existence lightly, demonstrating Baldwin’s point that “white men have for black men a reality that is far from being reciprocal.” Worst of all, I was at the center of a maelstrom and in no way understanding that I could and should prevent it.

At the end of sixth period I walked up to William, who was waiting for me in the hallway, and without saying a word punched him in the face, catching him just below the left eye. He absorbed the blow and retaliated by driving me into the locker lining the wall at my back. The roar went up as we went down in a clinch at the feet of our classmates. Ed, Andy, Frank and Larry piled onto us, pulling William off and hitting him several times as they did. Ron and Eric, who had of course been watching, jumped in swinging. By the time two teachers arrived, the combatants and much of the crowd were divided along racial lines.

William and I were taken to the principal’s office and suspended for two days. Strangely, once outside, we walked together for ten blocks to his bus stop. I explained that I never wanted to fight, and that I had let myself get talked into it. He did not attempt to ease my conscience, but he wasn’t angry and even seemed somewhat pleased with the situation. We did not shake hands or become life long buddies, but the peace between us as we parted stood in stark contrast to the turmoil that was brewing back at school.

For the next two days, Liesl had her life threatened on numerous occasions by several black girls. Every change of class became an opportunity for the students to meet, segregate, and start a war of words. It was as if the fight had provided my classmates with an excuse to dredge up every prejudicial feeling they’d ever had and fling it at the objects of their pre-judgement. When I returned, nothing felt the same. Ron would no longer talk to me, not “The Football Team,” nor any of the other black kids. I really
didn’t understand why. Sure, my stupid friends had gotten involved, but should that make it a race war? The principal was forced to hire three temporary security guards. (This was in the days before schools routinely had security guards.) There was tension in every classroom and for over a week the school was composed of two nasty, unarmed camps. Luckily, after I apologized to several different people and enough time passed, the pressure eased and the school returned to a semi-normal state. But right up until graduation, there was a heavy bitterness in the air.

It is painful for me to look back on this episode and see myself as a weak and cowardly child. In retrospect, I can somewhat understand my acquiescence as my friends spoke of “niggers” and plotted to attack William. Even though I didn’t like the word “nigger,” they had the right to say whatever they wanted. As for ganging up in William, it was easier to believe they were not going to have a chance to hit him. And even if they were, it would be easier to toe the “all for one and one for all” line than to tell my friends they couldn’t help me. I see now how horribly flawed this “logic” was, but to my teenage mind it probably made sense.

What I am most ashamed of, though, is how unaware I was of the powder keg I was igniting. I fancied myself rather enlightened in matters of race. I was well versed on the evils whites had committed against blacks, and I thought I understood their anger. Slavery and segregation were history; now we were all equal. If William and I fought, it would simply be two kids fighting. But I was wrong, and made a mistake. And when I read “Stranger in the Village,” I finally comprehended the nature of the mistake.

For you see, life the Herrenvokl, I failed to understand the anger of the black students at my school, in my city, in my country. I hadn’t a clue as to how fed up my classmates were, and I’m not sure I could ever have truly known. The were, as Baldwin writes, “the disesteemed.” Growing up in a racist society, unarticulated rage was their “daily bread.” Like those Swiss villagers, I had “never felt this rage and being unable to imagine it, quite fail[ed] to understand it.” My solipsistic world view had prevented me from being aware of the existence of this rage, let alone its dimensions in my fellow students, and my naivete nearly tore my school apart.

I’ve tried to make amends for my role in that shameful situation ever since, by ferreting out and aggressively debating stereotypes and prejudices I find in myself, and by helping others understand that we do not have to carry around the racial baggage we inherit from our culture. I do this because I believe that only be recognizing and respecting the humanity in others can we begin to realize the humanity in ourselves.