

A Journal of the Plague Year: Day 76: Specters of the Sixties

by David Ackley

But always--do not forget this, Winston--Always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing... Always at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stomping on a human face--forever.

1984, George Orwell

The specter haunting today comes from April '68 and the killing of Martin Luther King. These murders, lynchings, political assassinations at the hands of racists, civil war recidivists, cops, sheriffs, all resemble each other, the present overwriting the past once again. Fifty one years and one black president later, and it's George Floyd, pressed face to the pavement, having his life slowly choked away by a shave-headed, blue-suited white man, clinical in his murderous dispassion.

In April '68, after the shock spun into rage, and things began to burn, on a street along the UNC-G campus in Greensboro, N. C. I walked past the gutted remains of the hardware store where I'd bought light bulbs and a frying pan, through the stink of petrol, paint, and wet charred wood and the sight of fused pink fiberglass, like overcooked cotton candy. Downtown, near one of the black sections of the racial checkerboard of the city, a car dealer had been firebombed as well, and a couple of other places.

Eight years before I arrived from up north for grad school, black students from North Carolina A. and T. staged the sit-ins at the local

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Woolworth's lunch counter that over time led to the de-segregation of commercial establishments all over the south.

But there was a hard residue of resentment and resistance among the white population, not very well concealed: you couldn't rent a decent apartment in the city that wasn't advertised openly in the paper as "Whites Only." Which we did on first arriving in the fall of '66, having a two year old, little money, and not much time to look further before classes started. Not without feeling like shit for capitulating.

Our landlord was a very nice, very accomadating bigot who was happy to rent to a more or less respectable, because educated, I presumed, white couple—even if we were yankees. The people downstairs, a white waitress with a couple of wild kids and her sister, were pleasant and friendly as well.

Of course there was the incident with the guy they threw out of one of their frequent parties, who came back with a pistol and shot a hole through their front door. And the one, where an ex-boyfriend took umbrage with something said by a guy parked with the sister, on the side street just below our window and began punching him in the face, with screaming and yelling. And the time we came back from a summer vacation and found that her kids had set fire to the building's unused garage, which was pretty well gutted. Which was not so long after they'd ransacked our apartment, pilfering from the few possessions we had.

As to the garage fire, it was apparently already history by the time we got back; no-one deemed it worthy of comment or explanation. By then I'd begun to think that a black neighborhood would have been better all around, saving us some useless guilt, money for rent, and less nerve-wracking in the bargain.

Anyway, over the summer we'd come into some money, and were able to move into a nicer apartment with no restrictions, just across the golf course from the girls' dorms on the campus.

Sam Shepherd said, not long before he died, that anyone who thought the sixties were all fun couldn't have been there. There were occasions, like the arrivals of the Beatles and Stones. But then there was the other, a sort of geography comprising a large sketchy, international neighborhood, where similar things went on at once and where history, whatever that meant, was more or less present on every block, an odd inescapable presence that could pop up in the most ordinary transactions.

One of those times when everybody had to choose a side, and you had to be ready for the consequences of that in the most personal way. People wore their hair long as a political statement, and other people saw that and treated them as friend or enemy on sight. You wore or spoke your signs, with various insignia, and others read them and assumed they knew who you were and weren't entirely wrong.

For a few months that fall and winter of '67 and '68 things in our life leveled out, at least financially. We had friends and family for Thanksgiving dinner in our new apartment on South Aycock; we drank bourbon and red wine, sweating because cooking the turkey for several hours had turned the apartment into a second oven.

On sunny days, deep into the mild North Carolina fall, we could see the girl golfers hacking away at the turf on their own course across the street. I was able to get in some work on a new story that I was hoping would fall into shape in time for inclusion in my thesis, a collection due that spring. Even with the new baby, our son, born in the heat of the previous summer on July 3rd, we were handling life, sort of, juggling facts and emotions like those carried south from my mother's funeral, when we returned to the old apartment and the gutted garage that no-one seemed to notice.

We have a photo of our daughter Reid from that time, a little cherub, sitting amidst a field of dandelions, golds, and green and her honey blond curls. Her earliest years blissfully unaffected by events in the great world.

Two guests at Thanksgiving, Ann's cousin Ted, and her brother, Bruce, were in the service, Bruce on pass from his AIT at Fort

Bragg, and Ted from an airbase in South Carolina. So the Vietnam war was at the table, a presence, overwritten on all our childhoods, when our fathers went off to WWII, Ann's and Bruce's father John—a WWII fighter pilot and wing commander; my father, Harry, an army sergeant, who died in a tank on maneuvers after the war ended; and Ted's father Don, a navy captain. All the wars seemed intertwined, and sometimes your family loyalties, ideology, place of origin and general acquaintance with the zeitgeist were so muddled they were impossible to keep straight.

Faces of history, past and present, at table for the celebration. Still we kept them in their place and ate, laughed and drank, and I suppose gave thanks we'd made it this far.

In the '60's there was the sense of the underlying tension winding tighter and tighter, as if we were all living on the edge, and that every action, whether a King speech, a demonstration, a peace march, a boycott would inevitably produce a brutal reaction. The two wars, Vietnam and the civil war on people of color, crossed in the person of Muhammad Ali, who spoke for many young white men as well, when he said he had no quarrel with no Viet Cong. Maybe white people have lost that sense of immanence and settled into complacency, without the threat of being drafted to fight the country's wars, and when our violent tendencies, state sanctioned, and ideologically driven are played out in distant places or on the bodies of people of some other color.

After November 23, 1963 when the potential assassins broke cover in the person of Lee Harvey Oswald, we collectively knew, as black people had known forever, that the haters and assassins were out there, waiting for their moment. If you looked deeply enough, even in the nihilist blank of Oswald's white face, you could see the lineaments, however sublimated, of America's long civil wars of class, race, wealth and ideology, in the killing of a president who had spoken on behalf of civil rights and equality.

In Memphis on April 4, 1968 Martin Luther King walked out on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel and was shot and killed by another white racist assassin, allegedly one James Earl Ray, who at

any rate was later tried, convicted and sentenced to life for the crime.

The days of rage came, a storm blowing through cities north and south, with protest, marches, rioting, and the prime weapon of rebellion, fire, lighting up the night sky. And in Greensboro, the firebombings that within days led to a dawn to dusk curfew, the proclamation that being caught with a gas can or weapon was cause for automatic arrest; and then the National Guard, cordoning off the entire downtown.

There is a lot of talk about history, and what counts as a "historic event" these days.

But to me American history is people in the streets, rage, burning buildings and "the rattle of small arms fire in the night,"-- as Robert Stone had it-- and a line of troops in those same streets, M-16's at Port Arms.

At North Carolina A & T, the predominantly black college down Spring Garden Street from where we now lived, armed black students were holed up in their dorms, exchanging gunfire across a no-man's land with white police. A white friend of ours taught there and walked between the lines to get to his classes, laughing later about wondering whether he'd get it in the back, from the cops or in the face from his students taking him for some other whitey. He dismissed praise: he was adjunct, and if he didn't show up to teach his comp students, he didn't get paid.

One unpleasant byproduct of the curfew was the closing of all the bars and liquor stores leaving us un-high and dry; our creative writing program fueled, like most, by booze and pot as much as by talent and inspiration. One local undergraduate knew the back roads, so we each donated a share to fund a run in the dark of night north across the Virginia line, where everything was still open. Charlie returned jubilantly with his bootlegged cargo, having outmaneuvered every roadblock, state cop, and local constable between Greensboro and the Virginia line like Robert Mitchum in

“Thunder Road.” I scored a fifth of George Dickel bourbon, my then drink of choice, and one of my two concessions to “going native,” the other being an inexplicable addiction to the Hillbilly tv show, “Hee-Haw,” which was so self-delightedly corny it was often hilarious.

Normally we drank at a beer and cheeseburger joint called The Pickwick up Spring Garden Street in walking distance from our old apartment, a gathering place for students and faculty from the program, led by our fiction teacher, Fred Chappel, a brilliant writer, and tireless partier. The bartender was a big, blonde, amiable guy named Marvin, friendly enough that Ann and I had gone in one afternoon and taken his suggestion, over a few beers, for a local dentist, a friend of his. It was a fun place, where you could let off a little steam, in laughter and the kind of intense conversation that writing students thrive on, critical putdowns of major writers, and impassioned defenses of obscure favorites.

In time the Greensboro hostilities died down, largely led by cooler heads of the white bourgeoisie, whose passion for order so they could get back to business overrode any aversion to making concessions.

Toward the end of our stay, when most of the students had headed home, I went back to the Pickwick for a farewell beer. Neither I nor—I suspected--most of the students had ever been in the bar once school was over, but I assumed I'd be recognized and at least greeted in a friendly way.

It was a long narrow, dim place, quiet, and unoccupied except for a few local drinkers at the back of the room. I sat in a booth, with a book, and looked up when Marvin came to the table, but he said nothing, just stood there waiting, and I felt a coolness that I hadn't sensed there before. There was a collective look from the men at the end of the room, but nothing was said: I got the feeling that I was out of season, all the previous bonhomie and good will withdrawn, as if our lease on the place had expired and the new tenants, who it turns out were the real tenants, had moved back in.

Marvin brought my beer, set it down without comment, I paid; he went back behind the bar, and I opened my book.

Time passed, the beer was cold, and I sank into my book, to the murmured conversation of the four or five men around the last table.

The outside door opened and a black man came in; he was shirtless, his back glistening with sweat, as if he'd been working. The voices at the end fell silent.

The man sat on a stool. As he had with me, Marvin moved in front of him and waited silently. He ordered a beer. Marvin poured it from the tap, set it down in front of him and moved down the bar.

There would have been a time, not long before, when he wouldn't have been served, would have been ordered to leave the bar. I realized that he was the first black person I ever remembered seeing in *The Pickwick*, which now seemed a whole other place than the one I'd once reveled in.

Even something so trivial as buying a beer had a whole history to it, and I could feel it in the tense silence. But in an offhand way, the man knew exactly what he was doing-- without fanfare, or witness, asserting his simple right to have a cold beer on a hot day wherever he felt like. Even in a white man's bar, in the face of the cold palpable hatred that had settled into the room like the non-existent a.c.

(Later on, a black student up north would tell me what that was like: *The people are white, the houses are white, even the mountains are white*. What it felt like to have all the powers and symbols of whiteness aligned against you, everyday...)

Before long the black man drank down his beer, threw down some change, and left. From the back of the room, conversation resumed and there was a barked laugh.

The man's empty glass stayed where it was, and when I looked at Marvin his gaze returned mine without expression. I knew that, once I left too, as I presently did, the black man's glass wouldn't be washed, but dropped directly into the garbage can behind the bar.

So that's what I recalled, confronted once again, with the murderous rage and cold hatred that underpins what we call racism, that hard, belief-driven ideology, which has yielded very little since the loss of the civil war, and expresses itself once more in the appalling image, both symbolic and fatal fact, of Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd's neck until he was dead.

The murder, and the belief that enables it, which we would like to think is geographically confined or subject to some sort of reason or persuasion or, God forbid "conversation", is as much a part of the American ideology as the alternate ideals of equality, fairness and justice.

In the sixties, Stokely Carmichael was roundly condemned for saying, "Violence is as American as cherry pie." But he was simply stating a very obvious fact, and if he'd added political murder, and state- sanctioned lynching of black men, that too would have been a fact.

Once on the Paris Metro, our petite friend, Monette, overheard a man near her spew some racist remark, and there in the crowded car dressed him down to his face until he slunk off at the next stop.

Instead of thinking we can persuade, hope or legislate racism away, maybe we should confront it head on, acknowledge its ugly existence, and fight the battle against it, inch by grudging inch, until it is driven back into its dark cave to sulk in silence, unsupported, despised and universally condemned.

Why let the French have all the fun?

