

Masquerade III

by J. Mykell Collinz

Rosemary walked into her editor's office and said:

"I can't substantiate the government report on this guy, Johnny Gee."

The editor looked up from his desk, and replied:

"It's not your job to question the authorities in these matters, Rosy. Just go with what they gave you."

She started to leave, hesitated, and said:

"According to the report, he's a homegrown terror suspect but I haven't been able to find anything, no family, no friends, no schools, no jobs, nothing to verify his existence."

The editor sat back in his chair, and said:

"Homegrown? His parents are illegals, Rosy. Don't waste your time on those people. Write the story and move on to something else."

She included a paragraph in her article on the history of government misinformation concerning homegrown terror plots but the editor deleted that paragraph in the final layout.

After working all day at the computer in her office on the twenty second floor, Rosemary felt refreshed walking through the downtown pedestrian plaza in late afternoon sunlight. She sat by the fountain and attempted to compose her thoughts, resisting the impulse to panic as she realized how a few powerful news sources were controlling the flow of information. If her newspaper no longer checked its sources, she concluded, she would investigate independently on her own time and collect data for the book she had been planning to write.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a male voice, saying:

"Hey baby, you want to smoke some crack?"

A tall, attractive young man stood beside her. Intrigued, she decided to engage him. With a frozen stare, she said:

"You can't do that here."

He sat on the fountain's edge, raised a glass pipe to his lips, and said:

"Why not?"

Then, after lighting the pipe and filling his lungs with smoke, he held it up for her to take.

She waved the pipe away with her hand, and said:

"No, I'm actually looking for information. Maybe you could help me."

With smoke still coming from his mouth, he said:

"What kind of information?"

"I'm an independent investigative journalist."

"Independently investigating what?"

"I'm not quite sure yet."

"Here, take a hit of this. It will help you with that, I guarantee it."

Again, Rosemary waved the pipe away as she spoke, saying:

"What do you know about a character in the news named Johnny Gee?"

The young man turned sideways, and said:

"Johnny Gee? You must be crazy, girl. Let me tell you something. Johnny Gee will come after you."

"Why? What does he do?"

"What does he do? You don't really want to know. Here, take a hit of this and chill."

Rosemary pulled the straps of her handbag over her shoulder and stood to leave, saying:

"I should have known better than to try and talk to a crack head."

"Come on now, baby girl, don't you go getting angry on me. Sit back down here. Let me tell you something. Gee ain't his real name. It starts with a gee-sound. Polish, maybe Russian. But he's of mixed race. Along with European blood, he's got Mexican Indian and African blood. Here's the irony. He don't look nothing like a white European man but he thinks like one. So, wherever he goes, he almost never fits in, is never completely accepted, is always an outsider. It's karmic."

"How do you know all this about him, whatever your name is?"

"Byron's the name. How do I know? We grew up in the same neighborhood, just the other side of the expressway there. He's older than me but, everybody who works the streets has a story to tell about Johnny Gee. He's a bad dude."

"I haven't been able to find anybody except you."

"Hey, I found you, actually. I knew who you was when I came over here. Seen your picture in the paper before. Read some of your articles, too. Does that surprise you?"

"Yes, it does surprise me. And it makes me wonder why you settle for sitting around here smoking crack all day when you're obviously intelligent enough to be doing something better with your life."

"I am doing something better. Ain't I talking to you? Helping you out with your independent investigation? Anyway, a few years ago, right after his release from prison, Johnny Gee got involved with organized crime. I lost track of him after that. I hear stories but I don't know what's true anymore. The cops say he's a terrorist. I don't buy that. Some people think he's a government snitch. Either way, they're setting him up for a fall."

"Your description of Johnny Gee as being multiracial could have been surmised from looking at the picture of him circulating in the media. I need hard facts. Take me to the neighborhood where you two grew up."

"That place has changed. It's always been low class but, now it's gone from bad to worse. And we ain't going to find him there, anyway, so what's the point?"

"The point is, you're all I have, except for some questionable government reports. Don't get me wrong, Byron, but I'd feel a lot better if we could go there and talk to some other people who can verify your statements."

"People over there are afraid to talk, Rosy. About Johnny Gee or anything else. They don't trust the police, the government, the national guard, and especially, they don't trust the news media. Besides, how smart is it to be going around asking questions about Johnny Gee when the cops, the feds, and an organized crime gang

are out looking for him? You do not want that mess coming down on your pretty little head. Don't become part of the story, yourself."

"But that's what a good investigative reporter does, Byron, they become part the story in the process of exposing it. That's how reputations are made."

"Yeah, if you live long enough to make a reputation. For anything other than stupidity. Just chill, let it come to you."

"I can't wait for a story to come to me. I'll approach it from a different perspective. Profile the neighborhood. Not even mention Johnny Gee directly. I can research its history, its myths, and its legends. If any church congregations have survived, I can start with them. They keep records."

Byron stood, and said:

"Good luck with your independent investigation, Rosy. Nice talking with you. Let me know what you find. I'm here most afternoons, sometimes evenings."

Rosemary lingered in the sun by the fountain to watch Byron from afar as he interacted with a group of new arrivals. She didn't actually see him selling crack to anyone, just smoking it with them. But they smoked it openly, and she wondered aloud:

"How can they be getting away with that?"

The next day, the government released a new report implicating Johnny Gee as the mastermind behind a plot to attack public transportation networks in several major cities. Surveillance videos reportedly showed him meeting with known terrorist leaders and left wing subversives. Mainstream media coverage of the story focused on security measures being taken by government agencies.

National Guard troops were moving into the city and Rosemary felt intimidated by their presence when she ventured outside her downtown office building after work. The pedestrian plaza seemed empty except for a small group of regulars, including Byron. She found a sunny spot by the fountain and waited for him to come over.

He dropped down beside her, and said:

"This is it, baby. You knew it was coming, didn't you? Johnny Gee is the new Osama bin Laden. He's probably in yonder mountains hiding in a cave."

Rosemary looked up at the mountains, and said:

"They don't even attempt to show a motive for why he would do such a thing. His parents came into this country illegally so that automatically makes him an anti-American terrorist? His fate is sealed from the beginning? He can never expect to live a normal life?"

"No, there ain't no normal life for Johnny Gee. With all that different blood running through his veins, there's bound to be a war going on inside of him, overloading his brain with conflicting impulses."

"You're not saying he could be a sociopath without a conscience, are you? So mixed up inside of himself that he could justify violent acts of terror against an innocent population?"

"Maybe he don't consider them so innocent. I remember seeing him in a fight when I was a kid. He pulverized this dude and it started over nothing. I think the guy called him a spic. Johnny Gee was not someone you messed with. If he didn't like you, he could make your life miserable."

"Can I quote you on that in my article?"

"No, don't you dare do that. They would use it to demonize him, to justify their unholy war against him."

"Unholy war?"

"Yes, unholy war. They use lies and distortions to justify attacking people, and then your newspaper will print it, whether it's true or not."

Rosemary opened her mouth to counter Byron's assertion but decided to change the subject instead, saying:

"I found a Catholic Nun who claims she might have taught Johnny Gee when he was a boy. She's retired now. I met her on the Internet. Back then, at the school where she taught, there was a boy who no one could understand what he was saying when he pronounced his

last name. And they couldn't find his parents. So they recorded his last name as Gee."

Byron laughed, and said:

"All that Catholic guilt from original sin, that's probably where his European personality comes from. But I always thought it was the cops who gave him the name."

"The Sister said he was a very bright boy. But he was shy. He had problems getting along with other children. He got into fights more than the other boys. So he stayed to himself, mostly. Then, in the seventh grade, when he was twelve or thirteen, maybe fourteen, the police came to the school and arrested him for something. She doesn't know what happened to him after that. He never returned to the school.

Byron thought for a moment, and then said:

"I remember him being the baddest dude and also the most stylish. He had the look. We all tried to imitate him. He was way out in front. And he spent a whole lot of money doing it. That's what got him busted and sent to prison. He became too flamboyant, too conspicuous."

"Flamboyant and conspicuous? What happened to the shy boy who stayed to himself?"

"That was a show he put on for the nuns. Like you said, they didn't even know he was a wanted criminal until he was arrested during class in the seventh grade. He had already learned by then how to live on several different levels at once."

"I don't mean to pry, Byron, but where did you get your education?"

"At that Catholic school, taught by them nuns. It's the only school there was."

After her article appeared in the editorial section of the Sunday newspaper questioning the charges against terror suspect Johnny Gee, Rosemary received a visit from a Department of Homeland Security agent, who said:

"I'm familiar with your writing. I've been reading you for quite awhile. This last article of yours has me wondering. Are you withholding information from us?"

Rosemary responded:

"Talk to my editor."

"I'm giving you some friendly advice. The next agents you encounter might not be as considerate. They have special methods for extracting information from unwilling informants."

Alarmed by the agent's facial expression as well as his words, Rosemary said:

"I don't know anything beyond what I've already written. And most of my information comes from the government."

"Most of your information, yes. But not all of it. You imply a further knowledge."

"That's just how I write, from a knowing perspective. It's a persona, a voice."

"May I suggest you change your voice. You're making our job more difficult. And more dangerous. Please think about that. One less maladjusted journalists, misleading the public with her misguided assumptions, would be appreciated."

"You're calling me maladjusted?"

"You undermine the security of our nation by portraying its enemies in a favorable light. Whose side are you on?"

After the agent departed, Rosemary sat at her desk, struggling to control her emotions. She wanted to scream and to physically lash out at something.

She finally calmed down and began a search for information relating to domestic terror group members arrested in connection with Johnny Gee, the master mind. The arrests she found were listed as either illegal immigrants, prior fugitives, or hippie dropouts, individuals with poorly recorded personal data, making government reports the only source of information in most cases.

