

Whataboutery

by Kevin Hunter

Two men were at the scene. It was night, and dark out with only the street lights and the large lights at the roof of the Church beaming out into the blackness. To be in the light one had to be under those Church lights. And that is where the crowd was. One could see the blaring red and blue lights of cop cars, and listen!, out there, coming closer and closer, was the loud wailing sound of an ambulance speeding its way towards the Church. Look closer, get through the crowd of gasping black faces, and stand before the yellow police line, and one could see a woman on the Church steps, seemingly being consoled by a police officer, crying, shaking, bawling. What was she wearing? A large brown coat, fur-rimmed, and torn at certain places. One of her shoes was off. One of her black gloves was gone.

There were broken glasses by her side, on the dirty steps. Her hair was a mess. One might wonder what had happened—if it weren't so cold out, in Brooklyn. It was near winter, and from above, the scene looked like this--no, the scene looked like nothing special. It looked like all the scenes around the city. In Manhattan, there was a scene like this happening at that moment. In New Jersey, there was one too. In Virginia, there were hundreds. This scene was nothing special. But one would not know that after looking upon the faces of those gathered people. One would think that, that body under the tarp was related to them all; like they had their minds warped and thought that, that dead white girl was their joint-adopted daughter, who they would have to bury the following weekend.

"You ever seen something like this?" said Nick.

"Not in person," said Bradford. They were both at the front of the crowd, now, leaning up against the yellow taping. "It's a lot different, in person."

"Isn't it," said Nick.

"And right in front of the Church, too," said Bradford. "What a nightmare."

"You know what happened?"

"I'm sorry?" There was much sniffing and idle chatter going on in the crowd.

"What happened?" said Nick. "To the girl? Under the tarp?"

"Just got here, like you buddy," said Bradford.

"Oh, right," said Nick. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go on right ahead."

Nick pulled out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He puffed a large cloud of smoke and watched it disappear into the air.

"How much do you think she weighs?" he said.

"Excuse me?" said Bradford.

"There was a guy who tried measuring people after they died. He wanted to see how much a person's soul weighed."

"Oh, really," said Bradford.

"He said they weighed 21 grams. That's what he concluded. That the soul weighs 21 grams."

"Interesting."

"It is," said Nick. "I read a book once. My wife gave it to me. It was about some war, I-don't-know which-one, but this guy went on, and on, for pages, talking about the way the bodies looked and how the air smelled, and all that divine stuff."

"Really," said Bradford. Nick took a puff from his cigarette and leaned more over the yellow tape, squinting his eyes at the corpse, seemingly trying to see it better. There were more police there now, and some detectives had come and were asking certain people questions about what had happened, or what they had seen. One man in the crowd had seen it all happen, but he did not get asked anything, and did not volunteer his services. He had seen the woman, walking through the Church parking lot with her briefcase

on her shoulders. A moderately sized group of black boys were walking past her. One of them separated from the pack, and struck her across the head. It was a massive punch because it knocked her off her feet, and she fell like limp pasta. She fell and hit her head on the pavement and began to bleed. Then a black woman who had seen it, jumped up and tried to confront the boys but they hit her as well, knocking off her shoes with the force of the blow. One of the boys had her hand, and her glove tore off. The glasses she was wearing landed on the floor and broke. The boys began to run, and ran passed the man; and one of them looked him right in the eye.

"Yeah," said Nick.

"That's all pointless, you know." said Bradford.

"What is?"

"All those pages. All that description. You don't need it."

"Really, and how would you know?"

"I used to write, when I was in college." said Bradford.

"Ever got published?"

"No," said Bradford.

He continued, "But I don't think you need all of that for a scene like this." The woman on the steps was now being taken up and away. She was limping. There was blood running down her leg.

"This is a fucking mess. That's all it is."

"Its all a fucking mess," said Nick.

"All of it," said Bradford. He was coming from his home somewhere farther down on 98th street. He had decided to go out and buy another journal because he had been hearing all the news about all that in Syria and the Philippines and felt that, having been to those places and knowing some of those people, he could write about it. It was only that, on his way he decided that writing on his laptop would be a lot easier, and he could maybe submit what he wrote to some literary journal somewhere if he made it good enough. He had said all of this to his father, on the phone, who had sat silently on the other line, drinking and watching re-runs of Jeopardy.

Bradford continued, "21 grams?"

Sometime later, "I wonder how he figured that one."

Then later, "I wonder where he got that from."

Then finally, "what difference would it make anyway? She's still lying there. She's still covered in tarp. She'd still just be dead."

Nick shook his head in agreement, shrugged and took another puff from his cigarette.

"What's there to write about, nowadays anyway. How do you write about something like this, and not want to throw up after you put the pen down?"

He puffed his cigarette some more, "maybe that's why they write the way they do," he said.

Bradford thought to himself. He wondered about 21 grams, dead girls, writing, and whether that was really why they wrote that way they did.

