

8. Cambridge, Massachusetts May, 1980

A. The Delusion of Juan Rodriguez

Tim Randolph's legs have been damaged from birth. He is also physically weak and abnormally small; to move about he needs crutches and leg braces to move about. In the period in the 80's when I came to know him, Tim was studying civil engineering at Harvard's engineering school. Despite his handicap he was determined to support his wife and two children; his fierce, perhaps unrealistic demand for independence could be frightening at times. He only decided to become an engineer when he became convinced (wisely or unwisely) that, combined with his medical costs and the limitations of his handicaps, whatever he might earn as a painter or graphic artist would not be sufficient.

About a month after I'd met him, he invited me have dinner at his apartment in Somerville and meet the rest of his family.

Around 4 PM on an afternoon in May, 1980, we waited for a bus at the intersection of Kirkland and Oxford Streets. Though not at the geographic center of the Harvard campus, this might be considered its barycenter, or center of gravity, the the confluence of Harvard school of architecture, the post-Victorian neo-medieval Saunders Memorial Auditorium , the unapologetically medieval Busch-Reisinger Museum,

and the “surrealism-a-la-Fritz Lang” Science Center designed by the Bauhaus émigré José Luis Sert.

The bus trailed along Kirkland Street as far as Inman Square a neighborhood holding a concentration of Portuguese immigrants, then turned left into Somerville. The township of Somerville wraps about Cambridge like a swaddling cloth, large enough to contain Tufts University to the northeast, and rugged industrial slums adjacent within walking distance of the Cambridge city hall.

Trainyards lay open to the skies, less than a block away from Tim’s apartment building. Just the day before they’d been the site of a major eco-disaster. The collision of a tank car with a diesel engine had ruptured its outer steel membrane, thereby releasing thousands of gallons of phosphorus trichloride into the atmosphere. The entire neighborhood had had to be evacuated. Once in contact with the atmosphere the liquid vaporizes instantly. The chemical reaction with water produces hydrochloric acid, with potentially toxic, even lethal effects to flesh and eyes. His wife and children had gone to stay with her family; Tim was returning home after thirty hours of exile.

We got off the bus and crossed the street. To reach Tim's building we needed to walk some distance along a winding incline; one could imagine it leading to the ramparts of a castle.

We were not unnoticed as we started adventurously on our way.

The man approaching us was drunk; given the way he was gyrating about the sidewalk in the odd, random fashion that he'd adopted, it was unlikely that he would be otherwise. He wore a tan overcoat against the chilly wind, with the top of his head swaddled in a knitted green cap. He was robust; in contrast to the two of us, he could handle himself well in any brawl. Once he began talking to us we could identify him as Afro/Puerto Rican; age about 50.

Despite the evidences of befuddlement, there was an urgency in his manner of accosting us. On the other hand, he may just have wanted someone to talk to. There was no ceremoniousness in the way he opened up to us:

"... This here whitey just told me he could pays me what he feels like, 'cause I's a black man..." - he cut off my response - "Cool it, man! ...he didn't say it just like that, natch'rally...but you knows how you mother-fucken whiteys talk..... "

Clearly conversation was going to be difficult. The point was not lost on me that, in exposing himself immediately afterwards to the injustices of yet two more mother-fucken whiteys, he deserved credit for courage, at least:

“I learns how to kill people in Korea.”

Two frail, timorous intellectuals, Randolph and Lisker, plodded their way in silence up the steep path, goaded by their strange companion. In response to his most recent observation, I tried to explain to him how students throughout history have always had a tendency to resent training which cannot later be applied to gainful employment. However he'd already wandered into other pastures:

“Hey! You wanna to know somethin' about my wife? Let me tell you something about her: When I was away, in Korea, outta her sight, like? Man! she was the biggest god-damned whore in the whole world! But I don't blame her none. 'Cause before I leaves her, before they sends me over there to kill people, I fucked her into bad health!

‘Course she weren't no saint, but lookit man, I weren't no saint neither... DOES YOU HEAR ME? “ Waving his arms in a belligerent fashion, he shouted at us as if he wanted his words to reach the heavenly courts where ultimate justice is dispensed:

"I sends her *eight thousand dollars* from what they pays me over there...and she done spent every goddamn last penny of it! It would have been imprudent of me to remind him that the Korean War took place in the early 50's, while this was the 1980's:

"Finally they sends me home. Right? I gets off the boat, almost tear the door off our home, and I says to her: *You gimme a child! I wants you to make me a child!* And so she did, dammit: a beautiful girl-child. I raises her for two years; but *DAMN*, if her mother, that mother-fucking bitch, don'ts steal her away from me, and run off to California!

"But it turned out O.K. , later; 'Cause, a few years after that she kicks the bucket, all caus' of drinking and bein' a whore; so I gets my daughter back. *Fuck It! You Listen To Me!*

I raises her alone. All by myself! Until 4 years ago that is, when I kicks her ass outta de house and sends her to live with my sister-in-law down in Baltimore..."

A true story, a moving story, a slice of real life! Gaphically related. Would he now, having gotten this sad episode from his unhappy life off his chest, leave us alone?

"I was a PARATROOPER! ... You heard me right! I killed all kinds of people! They calls me a WARRIOR! Does you know what that means?"

His facial muscles stiff and distended with rage, his eyes flashing belligerence, the stranger and his torment blocked the road, lurching up against us with defiance, showering us with his whiskey breath. The right hand was contracted into a fist; the index finger of the other jabbed at the air like a stiletto:

"You better LISTEN to me! I don't think I'm GETTING THROUGH to you! I DON'T LIKE IT when people FUCKS with me!"

Then, just as suddenly, he stepped out of our path, his feint of violence liquefying into sheepish indolence through the same haphazard rhythm governing the sequences of all his changes. He allowed us to continue up the street, though he continued to stick close to us, unburdening his soul (at our expense) right up to the steps and railings of the building which held Tim's apartment on the second floor.

To this day I don't understand how I could have so misread him as to believe that he would now leave us in peace. But, in fact, this was the 'crowning moment' of theater, for which he'd reserved his full powers as an actor: *the scene before the door* .

"An Army instructor in Maine taught me how to snap necks."

John's hands were trembling as he reached for the keys. Once again, he changed his tune:

"You got any books to sell? You know, man, real books, nice books." At first I thought maybe he might mean pulp novels. Yet he staggered away from the railing and began babbling away about "philosophy books" and "deep books" and "nice things" and "antiques". His pronouncements moved mysteriously along paths of free association; eventually his mind became trapped in a cul-de-sac, a strange delusion from which it could not by any amount of effort be dislodged:

He was convinced that Tim owned the building we were entering. This being the case, he set himself the task of intimidating him into selling him all the wooden trim around the windows and doors. He claimed to have contacts with antique dealers who would pay him well for such things.

Over and over again Tim explained that he was not the owner of the building. Given our state of terror, his patience was exemplary. Perhaps a life of struggle with paralysis had conditioned him to deal with bouts of prolonged stress. Our newly acquired fiend demanded a slip of paper and a ball-point pen. He wrote down his name: Juan

Rodriguez. He started to add his address and telephone number; once again he appeared to forget what he was doing, and suddenly stepped aside to let us enter the building.

Suddenly he crowded us into the doorway. He insisted we invite him in and serve him a cup of coffee. He changed his mind again: now he wanted us to go back out onto the street and share a cigarette with him. He demanded that we accompany him to the nearest bar and buy him a drink. As if in preparation to swinging at us, he clenched his fists and took some potshots in our direction.

Our situation had become desperate. I dare not speculate as to what might have happened to us had not another of the building's residents come along just then. A heavysset individual in a thick coat. Superficially he did not seem to have much of a sense of humor, or perhaps he was simply not in a good mood. He lacked, perhaps, Juan's capacity for dream fantasies; he certainly had little patience for it. This was combine with a considerably more pragmatic approach to life. Together the three of us we were able to lock poor Juan Rodriguez out into the cold.

Reflecting upon the incident, I'm of the opinion that Juan Rodriguez should be given tenure at some small elite New England

college. (I tend, in general, to “dis” such places compulsively.) His teaching methods needed some polishing, and he certainly showed he ‘weren’t no saint’. All the same , Tim and I learned more from him in those critical 15 minutes than in many a week of sitting around in classrooms.

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Roy Lisker, 1980,2014

