

THE FOOTSTEPS ON THE porch woke Ed. While listening to the footsteps, he heard the rain. Ed thought (and would wonder later about the order of his thinking, why anybody would think that way), *It's raining*, followed by, *There's somebody on my porch*.

Ed slid out of bed and tiptoed into the foyer to the nearest window, where he peeked through the gap behind the curtain. A man had his face pressed against the glass of Ed's bedroom window. Had it not been for the pulled shade, the man would have been looking at Ed's wife, who, Ed hoped, was still asleep. Ed felt his heart lunge and try to run away; he was glad it was tied down.

The man turned and walked back up the porch toward the front of the house. He made no attempt to be quiet, which unnerved Ed; his boots clunked ominously against the floor boards. Ed followed the man from window to window, to the front door, where he peeked out from behind the shade. The man wore camouflage pants and a thin nylon jacket with racing stripes down the sleeves. His hair was long and matted, his beard unkempt. He looked like the kind of guy who would ask Ed for a dollar at the neighborhood convenience store. Ed never gave money to the men at the convenience store. He and his wife gave money to organized charities. The guys at the convenience store just pissed him off. Ed hated the calculation contained in their asking, the manipulative quality of it, the way they counted on his feeling so guilty about having an extra dollar that he would give them one. *Wino*, Ed thought while they were asking. *Junkie*. *Get*

a job. Ed had always considered himself a liberal Democrat, but sometimes his secret thoughts about the guys at the convenience store made him feel like a Republican — which made him hate them more.

The man stood at the top of Ed's steps — proprietarily, Ed thought — and stared out into the rain. His breath billowed and dissipated in the light from the street. After a moment the man turned toward the house and without fanfare lay down in front of the door. By twisting his head awkwardly to the side and closing one eye, Ed could see the man where he lay. The man wrapped his arms around himself and pulled his legs up close to his body. The porch floor was wet almost up to the door.

Ed watched the man for a minute or two before realizing that he, Ed, had grown cold. Ed remembered that he was naked and looked down at himself as if to verify that fact. He tiptoed back into the bedroom, hastily put on his robe and slippers, and tiptoed back to the door, stopping at the thermostat to turn up the heat. (They always turned it down before they went to bed.) The man still lay in front of the door, coiled, Ed thought, like a snake.

Ed gingerly sat down on the church pew beside the door to think about things. The church pew had been his wife's idea. Apparently, there was some kind of law in Nashville that said if you lived in a Victorian house, you had to have a church pew in your foyer. Ed's wife said it was a good place to put on boots. Ed didn't have any boots. Nor, so far as he knew, did his wife. But the church pew was prov-



JIM HSIEH

The Book of Ed

A short story by TONY EARLEY

ing to be a good place to sit in the middle of the night while thinking about the man curled up on your porch. *Man on the porch*, Ed thought. *Man on the porch*. The man was obviously homeless, and was looking for a place to get out of the rain. But he had also tried to look in Ed's

bedroom window, which, to Ed's mind, elevated him from simple homeless guy looking for a dry place to sleep to something more sinister. Peeping Tom looking for a dry place to sleep. Burglar looking for a dry place to sleep. Rapist.

Bastard, thought Ed.

Ed had a shotgun (once a year he went quail hunting with his father-in-law) but didn't think he could dig it out of the back of his closet without waking up his wife. Besides, he didn't know, offhand, where the shells were. (He thought his wife, who disapproved of having a gun in the house, secretly moved them around.) Still, part of Ed liked the thought of accosting the man on the porch with a shotgun. (*Hey, what's the big idea, looking in my window like that? Get out of here. Don't make me tell you again.*) He imagined pumping a shell into the chamber, an unmistakably serious sound, as the man scrambled down the stairs.)

But Ed also knew that the part of himself that liked the thought of getting after the man with a gun wasn't among the brightest parts of his personality, and was the part his wife cared for least, the part that was every so often prone to mild bouts of road rage, to the occa-

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tains that “African-American leaders, using a script from the 1960s, persist in a style of racial protest that is detrimental to the interests not only of blacks but the nation as a whole.”

Last fall at Delaware State University, she made her case to the black student body. The discussion quickly became emotional, as young people wrestled with their anger over slavery and segregation and prejudice. For some, Swain became a lightning rod for their rage.

“You are poison!” one male student shouted. “You hate your own people.”

Swain, at first glance, seems an unlikely target for that kind of venom. She speaks in a soft, steady voice—a handsome woman, now 48, with a round, pretty face and dark, gentle eyes. There was a time, she says, when the criticism bothered her. A decade ago, she wrote her first book, an award-winning study of Congress entitled *Black Faces, Black Interests*. In it she argued against creation of additional black districts in the House of Representatives—a policy that had the unintended effect of creating other districts that were nearly all white, where officials were indifferent to the needs of black people. She was deeply shaken at first when black leaders criticized her position.

“I was not ready for it,” she remembers. “It caused me to question whether I was hurting black people. I entertained the possibility of being wrong. I found it very painful.”

Now, however, she says she feels more secure, more certain of the message that the country needs to hear. In many respects, it’s a message that offends every shade of opinion. She believes, for example, that prejudice and poverty still need to be addressed, and she draws on the lessons of her own troubled past. She remembers her escape from her family of dysfunction, where her brothers and sisters all dropped out of school, and some of them drifted into drugs and petty crime. She was a teenager, working at one of her low-paying jobs, when a supervisor and one of her colleagues told her she was smart and ought to go to college. Swain believes in the need for that kind of outreach, and thus as a matter of public policy, she argues not for an end to affirmative action, but a revamping of it, making it a race-neutral policy based on need.

She thinks a majority of Americans might agree. As a part of her research, she sur-

veyed 850 people, scientifically chosen from multiple backgrounds, presenting them a hypothetical situation. An admissions officer from a state university must choose between two qualified applicants. One is an A student from a prosperous family who has impressive scores on standardized tests. The other is a B student from a low-income family who has held down a job while attending his classes. Should the university reach out to the less advantaged student—a young person who appears to show initiative and promise—or should it be guided by objective criteria, the bottom-line average of grades and test scores?

Swain discovered that a majority of Americans, regardless of their own race and the race of the students involved, wanted to reach out to the person less advantaged. They recognized the subtleties involved in admissions and didn’t want to reduce it to a matter of numbers. But the majority of those surveyed, black and white, did not support a preference based on race.

Swain sees hope for the future in that. She believes it is possible to build a consensus for attacking the problems of poverty and prejudice, and she has offered a set of proposals to that end. Among other things, she calls for an income subsidy for the working poor in order to guarantee a living wage, a larger investment in community colleges so that everybody who wants to attend one can do so, stepped-up enforcement of discrimination laws, and even a public-private partnership to assure that the working poor have access to cars and, thus, to the ability to hold down a job.

Partly because of what her scholarship tells her, and partly as an article of faith, she believes the nation could adopt that agenda. There is a strain of compassion in the American character that could be the cornerstone of consensus. But Swain can imagine the opposite possibility, and in fact her greatest fear for the country is a terrifying era of racial hostility, exploited by sophisticated white nationalists and fed by the knee-jerk militancy of black leaders. The antidote, she believes, is a national dialogue, unshackled by the norms of political correctness.

It is no longer acceptable, as Swain understands it, for the media to fly into a national frenzy when whites drag a black man to death behind a car, but to give it only sporadic atten-

tion when a black man shoots five whites in Pennsylvania and police officers discover “hate writings” in his home. At the same time, it is equally abhorrent when police in New York shoot an unarmed black man 41 times, while white suspects, even those going armed, “are treated like family members gone astray.”

Her fundamental message is that it’s time for all double standards to stop. We are all the children of God, she says, and are therefore the brothers and sisters of one another, and that is the understanding that can save us. With the publication of her book in the fall, she has presented her case with relentless rationality, and from the *New York Times* to the *Washington Times*, the national media has begun to take notice. She has found herself vilified on occasion, but she has also won her share of admiration, even from some of the people who disagree.

John Egerton, for example, is a white southern author living in Nashville. He has written extensively about the civil rights movement, and has established himself over a long career as a voice of decency and racial moderation. He still believes in affirmative action, a deliberate reaching out to people of color. Otherwise, he says, prestigious universities such as the one in his city will rapidly become even whiter than they are. But he also welcomes the views of Carol Swain, particularly her call for a national dialogue of civility and candor.

“Dr. Swain herself embodies that call,” Egerton says. “Even if you disagree with what she says, hers is an urgent warning to the country. She is not a person to be ignored.” ▼

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sional high-speed, tailgating, one-fingered wave. (His wife always said, “What if that car had stopped? What would you have done then? You’re putting us in danger.” Ed always apologized—You’re right, you’re right, I’m sorry—but deep down allowed himself to think, *I da kicked his ass.*) Another part of Ed, a smarter, more mature part, but one that he didn’t like nearly as well, suggested that he call the police. (“Hello, police? There’s a man on my porch and I’m too afraid to take care of it myself. Could you send someone over? Policewomen would be fine.”) *No, sir*, thought Ed. *We can’t*

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have that. Ed glanced at the baseball bat he kept in the umbrella stand. If things turned ugly, the bat would have to do.

Ed was beginning to find the church pew terrifically uncomfortable, which probably explained why it had wound up in an antique store in Franklin, and then his foyer. ("Brothers and Sisters, let us be thankful for our new pews, which the Lord has made. Our old, uncomfortable pews have been banished to the Victorian foyers of Nashville, so that on them people with boots might occasionally sit.") Ed slid to the middle of the pew, lifted his feet off the floor, and slowly lay down, hoping as he did that the pew would not creak. Ed felt a draft and rearranged his robe. He propped his head on his elbow. There. That was nominally better. *Now I can think*, thought Ed. *Man on the porch. Man on the porch who looked in my bedroom window. What would Jesus do?*

This last thought startled, and then irritated, Ed, despite the fact that he identified himself as a Christian on all questionnaires and was a regular, if occasionally distracted, churchgoer. Ed simply hated those W.W.J.D. bracelets that had become so popular, the hypocrisy and pretension of the people who wore them, especially, thought Ed, the rappers. The neighborhood punk who trick-or-treated with a garbage bag, and without a costume, and whom Ed was convinced had stolen his lawnmower, wore one. What would Jesus do? Jesus wouldn't wear one of those damned bracelets, that's for sure. *Thou shalt not accessorize my name*, thought Ed.

But still, what would Jesus do? Ed decided to allow himself to think about the question for a moment. The shotgun, he had to admit, somewhat sadly, was out, as was the baseball bat. And so was calling the police. From what Ed could remember of the gospel, Jesus had never seemed to care much for the authorities. Ed secretly thought that in some of the stories he seemed to have a little bit of an attitude that way. What would Jesus do? Ed shook his head in disgust. He knew what Jesus would do. Jesus would open the door, ask the man in, draw him a hot bath, give him Ed's best clothes (including, Ed supposed, the Irish fisherman's sweater and the English corduroys), feed him bacon and eggs until the man couldn't eat another bite (OK, probably not the bacon), show him to the guest

room, make the bed with the flannel sheets that were too good even for Ed to sleep on, then jerk the down comforter off Ed's bed and give him that, too. When the man woke up, Jesus would feed him again, give him Ed's ATM card (Jesus would already know the code), Ed's complete set of Hank Williams recordings, his Walkman, fresh batteries from the kitchen drawer, and tell him to come back any time.

That's what Jesus would do. But Jesus was the Son of God. He could get away with stuff like that. Ed wasn't the Son of God. Well, maybe he was, sort of, but not really, not like that. Ed was more like one of those sheep Jesus was always talking about. He had no problem with that, being a sheep. Sheep should be held to a lower standard. Sheep didn't let wolves into the barn, or lie down with tigers, or whatever. They were just sheep. Ed closed his eyes. *No sir*, he thought, *I'm not opening that door. There ain't no door-opening in the Book of Ed.*

The Book of Ed

Then he said unto them: "A householder is awakened in the middle of a storm by a sound. The householder rises and sees a man, a stranger, staring in the window of his bedchamber. The householder stays in the shadows watching the stranger because he is afraid. The stranger moves away from the window and lies down on the householder's front porch, out of the wrath of the storm, and goes to sleep. What should the householder do? Peter?"

Peter fell to the ground and rent his garments and gnashed his teeth, for he hated parables.

"Peter?" said he. "What is thy problem?"

"I never get these right," said Peter. "They vexeth me."

"Peter," said he, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, when the wise shepherd quizzeth his sheep, he does not bet all his talents on their getting the answer right."

And Peter said, "That's another parable, isn't it?"

He said, "Stick to the point. What should the householder do?"

Peter said, "Hit him with a stick?"

He shook his head.

"Wake the servants and have them stone him?"

He shook his head.

"Call the night watchman?"

"Peter," he said. "Verily, verily, I say unto you. Thou art like a rock. The stranger is like a fish in

the sun or a sheep that has been bitten by the wolf. The householder knows him not. The householder knows what the householder knows. The householder should do what the householder should do."

"But what does that mean?" said Peter. "The householder should do what the householder should do?"

What does that mean? thought Ed. He sat up straight. The householder should do what the householder should do. That's the whole problem. The householder didn't know what to do. So much for the Book of Ed. Ed rubbed his face. He'd been to Sunday School enough. He ought to be able to get this one right. The Christian thing to do, he decided, would be to let the guy sleep on the porch because it was raining, but to keep an eye on him because he might be dangerous. There. Ed would stay on the pew and keep watch for as long as the man stayed on the porch. He would be both a Christian and a responsible male simultaneously. The man was on the porch. The baseball bat was in the umbrella stand. God was in his heaven. Ed was on the job, and all was right with the world.

The only problem was that within 10 minutes, Ed was bored out of his mind. He didn't want to sit on the pew any longer (God, it was uncomfortable) but knew better than to lie down again. He couldn't walk around because the man on the porch might hear him, and even if he made it to the kitchen, he couldn't risk turning on the light to make a sandwich. After a few more minutes, Ed decided to check on the man to make sure he was still there. He eased over to the door, leaned toward the shade, and whacked his head loudly on the door jamb. The man climbed to his feet and walked down the steps into the rain. He didn't hurry, and he didn't look back at the house. At the sidewalk, he turned right, shoved his hands into his pockets, and in a few strides walked out of Ed's sight. *Well, damn*, thought Ed. He pulled the shade all the way back and shook his head. He checked to make sure the door was locked, turned down the heat, and scuffled off bed. ▼

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