

For the Love of Freedom

by:

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“Reason is the only legislator and her decrees are irrevocable and uniform.”

“Man, when he surrenders his reason and becomes the partisan of implicit faith and passing obedience, is the most mischievous of all animals.”

“Of all the principles of justice there is none so material to the moral rectitude of mankind as this – that no man can be distinguished but by his personal merit.”

– William Godwin, from Political Justice

PROLOGUE

Maryanne was right. She always is. I shouldn't be surprised by it any longer. First of all, she said I wouldn't write this story, and I didn't. Then she said I should, and – though it took me two years – I eventually did.

Now, unfortunately, it's too late. In fact, the window of opportunity slammed shut on this story even before the governor suddenly and unexpectedly became the *late governor* from a bad heart hardly anyone knew he had. So, when you consider the universal sense of loss that washed over the Great Lake State following his death, the media-magnified public mourning, and his near-deification by means of several long-winded, emotionally charged eulogies (even if you weren't there to hear the accolades, you can, no doubt, imagine nearly every word), the timing of this book is worse than practically anything imaginable. Even worse than something Kelsey Grammer's character in *Frasier* might offer in defense of one of his inane escapades. Just way off. Period.

Consequently, I am fully expecting to be dragged through the mud for writing this account, just as I feared might happen in the first place, and therefore why I kept mum about the whole sordid set of circumstances when I could have broken the news with the sudden impact of a massive alien invasion. And there you have

my point, the symbolic side of it at least: I feel obliged to refer to this story with the telltale flair of fiction, reaching, as it were, into the realm of mythology for a simple metaphor. But, as you will discover eventually, Maryanne also suggested that I consider fictionalizing the story – you know, change the names of the characters to protect the innocent parties. I replied at the time that *there are no innocent parties*.

And now? Well, my mind has not changed on the subject of guilt or innocence, fact or fiction, though I am certainly able to see things more clearly from the distant perspective that time has afforded me, however contrary to logic that may seem. And my eyes have been opened a bit wider as well, enabling me to see some of the complex inner workings of the human condition, like the dark and twisted threads of irony that run through each of us who walk this earth, exercising “free will”. And, adding to the effect of such incongruity, almost as a gift to the publishers of the scandal rags, these contradictory threads become all the more visible when lives are laid open to public scrutiny.

Nevertheless, after having my epiphany in this regard, I found myself wondering why I ever considered concealing the truth about Colin Rierdon in the first place. Perhaps I wanted to pretend that the story did not matter enough, that the revelations I discovered were not of sufficient consequence to be thrust *center stage* where they could be examined in the spotlight of public opinion. Or maybe I was sublimely blessed with the foresight to safeguard the memory of our dearly departed governor, even though he was not yet departed at the time. (I would truly like to be able to lay claim to such rationale, but, now that Governor Rierdon *has* passed from the scene, I am plainly ignoring all the time-honored advice against speaking ill of the

dead. And, clearly, it would not help me plead my case if I added hypocrisy to my list of shortcomings.)

Still, few should be shocked by my decision to tell this story, because, were I not to publish the irrefutable evidence of wrongdoing, I would be shirking my chief duty as a journalist, that being to report all the facts fit for public consumption.

Moreover, contrary to what you may be thinking, I have not chosen to reveal this story now as a result of creeping vindictiveness. There is absolutely no vendetta that I am hereby acting out. The fact is, though I'd like to suggest otherwise, my motivation to write this book did not spring from any change of heart or personal transformation. Rather, I have simply (though slowly) come to the conclusion that all good journalists eventually reach – that the truth *must* be told, even though it is often the ugly and unvarnished truth.

So I hope you can begin to understand what is in my heart as I release this “news,” and why the mere possession of it produced a moral dilemma within my soul. And why I am now (if you'll forgive the clichés) throwing caution to the wind and putting my reputation on the line with the release of this book. But be forewarned. If you read this story, then you will most likely be left with a moral dilemma of your own. Just like me, you will eventually have to choose among several opposing options. And, by so choosing, you may ultimately decide to dislike me for what I have reported here. Or perhaps you will cling to the notion that I have spun this story out of whole cloth. But, then again, you might finally accede to my premise: that I have simply and dutifully done my job – better late than not at all.

In any case, you should know going in that I am fairly well practiced at reporting on political events and public figures in Michigan, and pretty good at getting at the heart of a matter,

too – or so I've been told by some of my readers. Oh, and one other thing. If you don't already know me, or know *of* me, I'll kindly ask you to accept the notion (on faith if you must) that I really am the sweet guy you are about to meet in the pages that follow. You see this book is really *my* story and not the aforementioned myth. And above all, please don't succumb to that knee-jerk reaction – the very one you may already be on the verge of having – by assuming that I am nothing more than a soured and war-weary old newspaper journalist, defending himself and his viewpoints in the pages of a book, even though I may be exemplifying that precise stereotype with this rather long preamble. Even so, I ask you to keep this one tenet in mind as you read: Circumstances tend to change, but people pretty much don't.

ONE

Thursday, September 17

In the soft blushing twilight of a September nightfall, as one of the last glorious summer days fades away, I feel the taunting touch of the north wind, a harbinger of the cold months ahead. Stifling a shiver, I slip my hands into my pockets for warmth.

Ordinarily, this first kiss of autumn triggers the departure of my carefree summer disposition, reversing my governing mood back toward melancholy. I lament the passing of cloudless days and wispy warm breezes. I shudder over thoughts of the advancing, frost-bound season of dread. I stare headlong into winter, that disproportionate but unavoidable part of life in Michigan.

Tonight, however, as though released from decades of behavioral bondage, I feel none of these anxieties. In fact, quite uncharacteristically, I sense a sort of anticipation for all that dwells beyond the pleasant shroud of summer. There is no shrinking back, no programmed limit to my spirit's ascendancy, only a willingness to embrace what lies ahead, to continue onward in defiance of the sun's sinking circuit. Far above the cyclical thrum of the natural world I soar, untouchable and free.

Sitting on the mossy bank, staring into the Looking Glass River, I see a watery luminescence spreading eastward along the surface, evidence that the sun is blazing through a distant horizon. As the colorful water flows past, rippling joyfully as it

changes, the thought occurs to me that, like the stream, I may be changing too – no longer what I once was, perhaps not even what I genuinely believe myself to be. And so I wonder: Who really am I at this particular point in time? How can I accurately discern the underlying truth about myself? What can I do to raise the level of my own self-consciousness?

Unfortunately, my indistinct reflection on the water fails to provide a window into my soul, and I am left with the sense that my life is incomprehensible and deep.

The evening light dims to dusk, and I consider the residue of what was once a perfect September day. Reluctant to depart from this peaceful respite by the river, a place of escape I frequently enjoy, I suppress the pull of obligation and attempt to rekindle the sense of freedom and contentment that glowed within me just moments ago. Sadly, the soaring feeling is gone, irretrievably lost, and in its place, a string of unanswered questions about my secret life.

Regretfully, I foresee little likelihood of genuine understanding in matters such as these – matters of the heart and soul. And even less chance such understanding can be communicated with someone else, someone equally muddled in the normal state of human consciousness. Moreover, should I fail to disclose my true self to others, then some part of me will remain unknown, untapped, un-communicated – perhaps the key to me, perhaps even some frightful, treacherous or conniving portion. What shows on the outside may just be the manifestation of a role I play, an obtuse character I adopt to wheedle about in my search for truth, or in the discovery of others.

But, just as there is no escaping the natural world, I am equally stuck with myself, with what I have become through four-

and-a-half decades of life. Though I may choose to believe I am free to change without limits, I will remain subject to nature, relationships, an aging frame, a set of ethics and morals, a mortgage, a job. Consequently, if all people live their lives under similar constraints, *bondages* really, how can anyone ever experience true freedom? In fact, freedom may be entirely illusory. And it is therefore possible, even probable, that none of us will ever truly know what it means to be free, or succeed in becoming that which we desire most desperately to be. Tonight, though, I want to be convinced – and indeed I believe I am so persuaded – that what I am down deep, what I possess with certainty, is *life*.

The night's curtain has now almost completely descended upon me and my undulating thought life. As I fasten my parka against the creeping damp, I stare upward toward the brightening panorama of a world heretofore hidden behind a veil of light. Delicately appearing in the firmament are the celestial bodies that were there all along – just obscured from view.

A lonely frog croaks, and then I hear another. They were there as well.

I arise and begin the steep trudge back toward home where my wife and the very real part of my life await, where I am known as “Chip” Halick (Randall being my given name), a freelance journalist in his second career.

Renewed by my moments alone, I hike with a lilting expectancy that springs, I now realize, from what is within my grasp: the auspicious confluence of personal, professional, and relational symbiosis. How many people can boast of that, I wonder? Come to think of it, I cannot imagine a thing I would change about my life, or anything I would add to improve it. Possessions that every self-respecting person works a lifetime to

achieve – the love of a faithful spouse, a satisfying and successful career, a modicum of notoriety, a sense of financial independence – all these universally elusive qualities I enjoy. By some quirk of circumstance, I, among others, have been supremely blessed.

Atop the woodsy strand, our renovated bungalow huddles with the maple and oak, windows ablaze with incandescent light. I climb along a well-worn passage, accompanied by the sound of my rhythmic footfalls and my audible breaths. Nearer to the house, my appetite is stirred by the smell of burning hickory mingled with a pleasant garlicky cooking aroma. From the brow of the hill, I see the patio door open and my friend Dan Greening emerge onto the deck.

“We were about to arrange a search party. How’s the famous political snoop?”

Dan is no doubt referring to the defining days of my journalistic career, to the spate of feature stories I wrote about the governor and his rise to the top. Contrary to Dan’s opinion, though, I did not “snoop” while collecting my material. Nonetheless, many pundits have ascribed the governor’s victory to the year-long publicity swirl that began with my story in the *Lansing Ledger* and continued unabated, ultimately lifting him from state senator, representing northern Oakland County, all the way up to the big office at Michigan and Capitol.

I reply facetiously, “Well, Dan, I feel like I finally got a firm grip on the existential dialectic. Unfortunately it turns out to be a handful of warm Jell-O.”

He laughs at this. “Maybe you’d better inform Anthony Robbins.”

“Nah, he knows more than I do about such things.” I pause to catch my breath from the hike. “Sorry I wasn’t here for your arrival, Dan, but chasing truth is a full time job, you know.”

“Chasing it? Don’t you mean defining it?”

“They are one and the same,” I reply, shaking Dan’s large hand. Stepping through the threshold into the brightly lit country kitchen, a piquant bouquet of aromatic herbs ignites a smoldering fire in my belly. “Smells fantastic in here.”

“Compliments will get you nowhere with the hired help,” Maryanne quips. “How about lighting the candles and pouring the wine?”

“I can do that. How about I cut some bread as well?”

The soulful sound of Joshua Redmond’s horn wafts in from the front room stereo, elevating the dinner mood. Maryanne has crafted a perfect setting for our evening.

“What’s your pleasure, Dan? A mellow California Chardonnay aged in new oak casks, or a spicy, fruit-scented Cabernet from the North Coast?” I’m practicing for my next career, should one become necessary. Dan, I know, prefers a hearty red wine and predictably chooses the claret.

You might describe Dan Greening as a complex individual. Having lived briefly in both Israel and India, he brings a wealth of experience to his job teaching Non-Western Civilization at Michigan State University. Tall, barrel-chested, and swarthy, with black and gray wiry hair, he could pass for a native almost anywhere in the tropics. In fact, Dan is of mixed race. His mother was a nurse from Nigeria who met his father during World War II, when the elder Greening was serving as a military doctor attached to the allied invasion force in North Africa. They were married shortly after VE day.

Like any professor worth his tenure, Dan can hold sway for hours in or out of the lecture hall. In addition, he is affable, kind, intelligent, entertaining, and a true gentleman. You could also say he has wisdom beyond his years, but for someone in mid-life (Dan is 50), you'd be misapplying the idiom. He has, nonetheless, "been around" as they say, garnering a certain *je ne sais quoi* that defines his presence and spirit. He commands a room just by being in it, but never with an over-lordly manner. Everyone likes Dan, even his students. Maryanne and I love him.

Among the many facets of Dan's multi-dimensionality are a richly textured religious background and a hobby of political stargazing. I hope to draw from this storehouse of knowledge and experience tonight as Maryanne and I prepare for a formal reception at the governor's mansion tomorrow evening. Though an enormously successful politician, Colin Rierdon, our governor in his initial year, is a difficult person to understand at gut level. For example, why he invited us to attend the unveiling of his new home remains a mystery to me. It is certainly not because Maryanne and I are big financial supporters, or pillars in the local community, or members of the local glitterati. Quite the contrary on all counts.

"Honey, would you cut regular slices please? I'm not fond of those wedgy chunks you always do." Maryanne instructs me while conveying place settings to the table.

"Anything for you dear." I saw into a new loaf of ciabatta I snagged earlier today while in town. Fortunately, the holes remain in tact no matter which way you carve the loaf.

"So you two are going to the mansion with a personal invite."

"Yeah, and he's as pumped as a fireman about it," Maryanne says.

“I’d say stumped would be the more appropriate descriptor. I’m baffled as to how we made the guest list, given our lack of social standing and our relative insignificance in the political world.”

“Don’t underestimate your worth Chip,” Dan says. “Especially considering the power of your pen. You are at least qualified to be a useful idiot. Besides, maybe it’s Maryanne who has the commanding persona.”

“Oh please, I’m just window dressing; let’s face it.” She places a steaming tureen of Thai soup on the farmhouse table. “Sit down and get started; I’m keeping the curry hot on the stove.”

I hand the basket of crusty bread to Dan. He, of course, reaches for the heel.

“Don’t tell anyone Dan, but we don’t use pens anymore. It’s been all word processing for fifteen years.”

“You’re kidding. Who knew?” He smiles as he dredges his bowl for a chunk of chicken.

“How’s the soup – too spicy?” Maryanne has seated herself at the end of the rectangular table. She is an appealing and engaging woman who has not lost a bit of her charm over the twenty-three years I have known her. Her multi-toned, golden hair is abundant and naturally wavy. Swept across her forehead in her usual simple style, cut just above shoulder length, it accentuates her mildly angular features. She has haunting green eyes and a clear beige complexion. No one would suspect that she has put in a full day’s work and single-handedly prepared a meal as she holds her soup spoon in midair, awaiting approval, eyes sparkling, looking radiant.

“You’ve left yourself no room for improvement, I’m afraid.” Dan is sometimes given to backhanded understatement.

“It’s outstanding – my favorite,” I add. I have many favorites, relating directly to what is being served at the time.

“It sure beats the macaroni and cheese I normally have on Thursdays,” Dan says.

“Please, Dan, you don’t really eat that stuff, do you?” Maryanne is obviously repulsed by the thought.

“The life of a single guy isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, I’m afraid.”

“Well, I see you’re doing nothing to enhance the mystique,” Maryanne says.

“He’s just fishing for sympathy. My guess is that he’d be having a burger and a beer at Harper’s, were it not for his dedication to help the needy here tonight.”

“Chip, you should not be so quick to assume. You have no concept of the lonely life I lead. What would a single professor of fifty do among crowds of coeds and young studs? My life is a constant burden of improbable circumstances.”

I cannot let this pass. “Such melodramatic cynicism. I believe you’ve missed your calling, Dan.”

“I see nobody gets a break around here, as usual.”

Red embers are popping in the kitchen fireplace, curry aromas tantalizing our appetites. As I sip from my glass of wine, I realize I’m with the two people I love most in this world – and this is living, right here and now. Nothing I do in the hurry-up world of journalistic madness, nothing in the sphere of power politics and manipulation, nothing I could fantasize for my yet-to-be-lived life can compare with this: a simple home and a meal with friends.

There was a time when the pleasant unadorned satisfaction I feel tonight eluded me. Much like truth, happiness can be illusory. Mind you, I believe I’ve always been a happy person, always

having seen the proverbial glass as half full. Nonetheless, even with excellent health, economic stability and a consistently happy marriage, a few years ago I drifted into the doldrums of mid-life. And though I have since managed a comeback, there is still the aching memory of those years, not so long ago, when pleasure could not be found in anything I did.

I believe my former discontentment stemmed from a career that gradually became unexciting and lusterless. The gloss had worn completely off the apple. My once-enviable and desirable occupation had turned rotten, like fruit left too long on the vine. I could have toughed it out, sure, choked down the bad taste in my mouth, but prolonging the experience could also have poisoned me incurably.

Now, only memories remain from my twenty years as an automotive plant engineer, memories that represent a large slice of my adult life. Like a million others, I had counted on one of Detroit's "Big Three" – specifically General Motors – to grant me the *American Dream*. And, truth be told, I was not entirely disappointed, having achieved a semblance of the good life when others did not. But even so, after being a GM gypsy for years, shuffled all over the Michigan landscape – Pontiac Central, Buick City, Clark Street/Fleetwood Assembly, Poletown – and finally settling into a staff job at Oldsmobile in Lansing, another transfer back to the Motor City would surely have been fatal. Or so I believed. So I opted out; I jumped without a parachute.

And that's how I found the cure for my mid-life ills. Perhaps it was the challenge of a new career, perhaps the involvement with people beyond the inbred automotive community. Something made the difference, and now, I couldn't be happier.

More recently, I have become convinced that I was altogether destined to be a journalist. It just took me a quarter century to

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