

Richmond Burning

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When I met her she was wearing on the lapel of her vest, where a carnation or a political button might go in election years, a two-inch image of Jupiter. This was a Halloween party but the button and vest were her only costume, unless you count the chicory-blue eyes and purple leotard she had on beneath the vest.

"What's with Jupiter," I asked the woman whose name I had not yet learned.

"Abundance," she said. "Jupiter signifies abundance."

"I could use some of that," I told her. Her blue eyes were abundance enough for me. She told me she was studying astrology. Shortly after that, a couple of beers beneath our belts, we went back to my apartment, the upstairs of a small story-and-a-half on the East Side, to walk my dog around the block and get to know each other better, to set our costumes aside.

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The couple leaving the Richmond airport looked from a distance like many at this time of year, dressed for Christmas vacation, a casual but slightly dressy air that signifies dinner with family and, a day later, an hour spent opening presents beside a well-lit tree. She wore an alpaca scarf which lay lightly on her leather coat, and he an overcoat that looked as though it could have come off one of the Confederate statues on Monument Avenue. Which is to say it appeared an even shade of gray, the sparse colored threads of the Harris tweed blending into the gray warp and weft.

After picking up their rental car, they drove from the airport, by the old Confederate fortifications (only a few cannon and mounds of earth remaining from the fifty-mile dike which, for nearly four years, held back the Yankee tide)—and headed on the empty expressway to their hotel downtown, on the south side of Capitol Square. This being Christmas eve, all the politicians had gone back to their wives and families, leaving their mistresses for the more tedious distractions of home: wrapping Christmas presents, trimming the tree, attending the seasonal caroling at the local school or church. Hence there were suites available at a heavily-discounted rate, less than the usual cost of a single room, which the husband appreciated, his wife having expensive and not-often-satisfied tastes. The trade-off was this: for the cost of a single room facing the Capitol, you could have a suite of back rooms with no view at all.

It was the only hotel that he had ever been in where—instead of a mini-bar stocking those tiny bottles of booze that airlines sell their passengers—the bottom drawer of the customary hotel dresser was filled with an assortment of pints and half-pints of whiskey. Here he saw an eminent example of traditional Virginia smoky-room politics, played out over a deck of cards.

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I was struggling that year with the project that would, in the not-too-distant future, earn me a doctorate in English literature—and I spent most days in the rare book reading room of the University library, paging through brittle copies of literary magazines dating from the early years of Modernism. Reading these publications was like entering a time machine: complete with advertisements for Mason & Hamlin

Pianos, “the most beautiful piano tone the world has ever known.”

In the late afternoon I’d leave the library, return to my sorrowful dog in my upstairs apartment, and then after dinner she of the purple leotard would show up with a bottle of wine, climb the back stairs of the house and knock on my door. Looking back on these moments from the perspective of a couple of decades, I realize that I was lucky indeed. I will spare myself the pain of voyeuristically reliving the sweet details, from a time so long gone, and leave the erotica to the reader’s imagination.

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A short time later darkness had fallen and the couple left the hotel and walked across the street to their rental car parked alongside the Capitol Square, which was enclosed by a dark iron fence. Inside was the massive form of Jefferson’s Capitol, façade lit by spotlights, surrounded by oaks whose fallen leaves lay in the gutter by the car. The temperature was around freezing and there were spots of ice among the leaves. In normal times there wouldn’t have been a parking place for blocks around, but this night in late December all was quiet as the husband opened the passenger door for his wife. A woman who considered herself the better sort of Southern gentry, she appreciated being treated in the fashion she felt appropriate to her station in life, and she stepped gingerly across the fallen oak leaves.

It was, given the empty streets, a shorter drive than usual to her mother’s house just across the line in Henrico County. It is a peculiarity of Virginia that certain “independent” cities lie like separate islands within their surrounding counties. Thus there were no sheriffs patrolling the city streets and it was unusual,

in certain neighborhoods, to see a traffic cop at all. Apparently the police had their hands full elsewhere, Richmond being one hub of a bustling trade in which drugs from New York City were brought south and exchanged for firearms where gun laws were lax.

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We shared our stories with each other. Shortly after college, she'd left for California. Her family, parents and brothers, were all drinkers. The last time she came home she had ended up in a corner of the living-room with both her parents kicking her. It was many years before she'd returned, and she arrived shortly before the Halloween party. She planned to spend the winter living in a friend's apartment, studying astrology with a guy who had a slot on a local radio show.

She told me she had fallen in love with her voice instructor in college—who was, as I recall, already married—and had become pregnant with his child. She dropped out for two semesters and moved away, and he never learned that she gave birth to a baby girl. She had put their child up for adoption.

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Later, he would look back at that dinner as the opening scene in the final act of his marriage. His mother-in-law was there, and her sister – both now in their late seventies – and the neighbor from across the street, some twenty-five years younger, who drove the van when they all went on excursions to Charlottesville. Dinner was pork roast, sweet potatoes, and a tossed salad, nothing fancy as the main event was still a day away. There was a single candle on the centerpiece of Christmas holly and ivy, and the tree in the corner of the room sparkled with tiny

lights and glittering foil. They talked about the weather in Wisconsin. “I miss the summers here,” his wife said, “when you lie in bed at night and your body’s covered by a thin layer of sweat.” He remembered cicadas and honeysuckle, and the slightest breeze through the willow oak out back.

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Like all such things this couldn’t last, and didn’t. By January we had burned each other out and she left for California. The winter in Wisconsin and the memories of her home above the Russian River had sent her westward once again.

I followed her out there on my spring break—I remember flying over the snow-covered Sierras shining beneath a full moon—and for a couple of weeks we lived together in an old wine vat with a roof of sliding plexiglass panels, perched on the side of a mountain. We opened the panels to the madrona trees and redwoods, to cloudless sky. I began investigating the possibility of teaching at a local college.

One morning my lover told me it was her daughter’s birthday. She carried that sadness within her—probably one thing that so attracted me to her—and each year, on that particular day, it rose and nearly swamped her.

At the college they told me they could have their choice of any poet they wanted in the Bay area—so why would they choose me? I returned to my apartment and my little magazines, while the Wisconsin spring began in its slow way to flower the landscape. Soon I finished my degree and quit teaching altogether. And my California friend I saw only once again, a few years later, when she was back for a brief visit and we went out for breakfast. Her eyes were as blue as I remembered.

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Back in their hotel room the first thing she did, after taking off her coat and putting on some jeans, was to pour herself a drink from the half-filled pint of Maker's Mark left over from her evening cocktail.

"So where is it?" she asked him.

He had worried about it all through both airports, going through security in Madison and then again in Richmond. He always worried when he carried weed on a plane, though in those far off days before 9/11 security was a spotty affair at best. But there was always the chance a butterfly could flap its wings in Mexico and his suitcase fall off the conveyor belt and split open on the tarmac.

"I'm saving it for Christmas," he said. "Something special for Santa."

"I'm not amused," she said, and slapped him hard across the mouth. His lips stung, and he tasted blood from where her wedding ring had caught him.

"Fuck you," he told her. "You can wait till tomorrow."

She slapped him again. "I want it now." And then she closed her fist and hit him in the face.

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In the meantime the father of her child had become a public figure. The local chamber music society, which he directed, began playing a series of public concerts downtown during the summer months. Every Wednesday evening these "Concerts on the Square" would be the entertainment of choice for a certain segment of the population, with a local French restaurant providing box picnics—and people taking spouses and dates and drinking wine out on the lawn.

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It wasn't the first time she'd gotten violent: her history of abuse—adoptive father, abandonment, recovered memories—all this was trotted out in therapy as reason for the violence. On one occasion he'd been warned by the police that if he were to hit her back, he'd be arrested for abuse. But this was a suite they were in, and there was a second bedroom—so he went into the second room, closed the door and put the little hook through the loop on the doorjamb. He lay down on the bed fully dressed and tried to go to sleep. She broke the door open, the eye-bolt flying off the splintered doorjamb, and the door swept open and there she was in the room. He stood up from the bed and she threw the heavy cocktail glass at his head and it smashed against the wall and glass suddenly covered the floor beneath his naked feet. She was hitting him in the face. He pushed her away and backed out into the main room of the suite and went to the telephone.

Trying to fend her off with one hand and hold the receiver in the other, he called the front desk and told the guy his wife had flipped out and he needed another room. All the time his wife is yelling, "Where's the goddamn pot, just tell me where's the goddamn pot."

He took his suitcase from the closet and started trying to stuff his clothes in—shirts, pants, jacket—and then there was a knock at the door and a young guy stood there waiting. His wife, calming down in a hurry as she could when she wanted to, stood there telling the guy that things were really just fine and her husband was acting crazy. His wife remained behind while he dragged the suitcase down the hall to the elevator. He hadn't managed to zip the suitcase all the way up and there were pieces of clothing sticking out through the open zipper.

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One summer afternoon I flew to New York to visit my mother, who had lived alone in her apartment since my father died the year I entered grad school. That particular flight I sat by chance next to the conductor of the chamber music society, who had a score laid out on his lap for the entire trip. He was a middle-aged paunchy guy a few years older than me, by no means the handsome young man I'd imagined when my lover told me he'd been the love of her life. By way of the forced intimacy of airline flights, we introduced ourselves—he told me he was a composer, on the way to see his publisher. I toyed with the thought of mentioning our mutual acquaintance.

I imagined telling him he had a child he knew nothing about. With a few words I could change his life, and I had no idea what effect that change would have on him. The guy seemed so content, reading his score. Just who did I think I was? So as the plane touched down, and we went our separate ways, I remained silent.

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Standing in the doorway of his new room, two floors up, facing the Capitol, he asked the night clerk not to tell his wife what room he was in.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I heard her over the phone.”

“But I’m a little worried she’ll call the cops.”

“Don’t worry about that. They know me, they’ll listen to what I tell them.

And anyway, they have other things to think about tonight. There’s some guy with a gun, running around the Capitol.” And then he said, incredibly, “if you need a little smoke, I have some I could share.”

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Some years later I had begun to spend my summers up north, and only by chance did I learn one day that the conductor had been found dead of a heart attack in a parked car on a downtown street. The coroner surmised that he had suddenly felt sick, driving to his Wednesday gig, and he'd pulled over to wait for the feeling to pass..

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After the clerk had left, he went through his suitcase and found his weed, wrapped in a pair of socks. He had a single joint. It was by then well after midnight and as he lit up he told himself, *Merry Christmas*. He stood looking out at the spotlight Capitol.

He remembered the descriptions he'd read of the Capitol square the night before the Yankees arrived in April 1865. Where the hotel now stood there had been a building that housed the Confederate secret service. When the order to evacuate arrived that afternoon, they started burning all their files, right out there in the street. As darkness fell the sparks from the burning files rose into the night sky. Before they departed, the Confederate troops smashed all the barrels of liquor in the storehouses, so the mobs wouldn't get them, and lit off the stored ammunition so the Yankees wouldn't get it, and the fires spread and by midnight the whole downtown was ablaze.

All that night, refugees from the burning buildings had huddled on the Capitol square, watching as their world went up in smoke.