Did Her Not: Rain by a Mile-Wide River, with Thunder

by J E Boles

My Ma, she used to talk about the big old river during thunder storms, and how it looked, and all, before I came up here to Oregon State from Portland. She had come from Tennessee to Portland, and right away, she gets a job in sweeping up, down at the hospital.

I can see her now, standing by the front room window in our house in Portland when it rained, that old and ragged robe she used to wear before she went to work each day be hanging loose and wide. She worked so hard to keep me going to high school and get me into college. She talked to me a lot. She named me Sergeant for my future life, she said. So I was Sergeant Washington. So I was always bound to beat up people in high school because of it. And Washington looks good on football jerseys here at OSU.

"In a thunder storm back home, 'twas like the Lord tipped up that old river on its hind legs, so it fell down as if from heaven, Lord God thundering so loud behind it." The rain was streaking down the window.

"Here, you don't get thunder near as much," she said. And seeing long legs through the skirt of that red robe, my eyes, my face was burning, so I left the room.

My Ma was big on church back home in Portland. And when I was in high school, we went to church all Sundays at the New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. And she had all those church people in prayer for me. And sometimes I went up there, down the river, from Corvallis, on that big old Greyhound bus, to go to church with her. I loved to see those ladies in their big wide hats, and sisters talking to each other, tall hat feathers moving in a breeze. The church was the big place for all those hats.

I got a football scholarship to OSU upriver eighty-five miles upriver south of Portland. That little town of Corvallis was white as white could be. Even the rain was whiter, softer. I meant to work and study hard, but I got into being friends with Eddie, and all that kind of stuff, it floated away. He was into partying, and girls, and football. He was from LA, and he knew how to party. And get women. One of those women was Martha. She was big, and she had bad skin, and she wanted love. Anybody could see that on her. Eddie gave it to her about two weeks, but mostly he took it from her.

They said all over campus she pulled the train for all the blacks on the football team that night. So, later, it changed up to rape, naturally enough, and Pittsburgh wouldn't sign me on account of this small discipline problem. That's what they said. It was all hushed up, but everyone knew all about it, so they claimed.

Except we did not do her. We would have, except old Eddie did not allow enough after-game time, and girls came in when she was screaming for us to kill the light so nobody could see her with her panty girdle pulled down. Eddie had not told her what we were planning to do, so it might have been rape, and maybe we would have had to kill her. Eddie was the only one who got some pussy that night.

This was Corvallis, Oregon State University, just before the Watts Riot. There couldn't have been more than fifty blacks in a student body of fourteen thousand. We looked like fifty small black rocks on miles of white sand beach. And most big cities in the country hadn't had their ghetto riot yet. They needed us to play sports at OSU, and that was all they wanted. I was a defensive lineman. They said I looked like a redwood tree, as tall as any skyscraper in New York, and as solid as a stone foundation. They gave me a signing bonus under the table, pretending nobody knew nothing of it.

Lyndon Johnson said we were to have a Great Society, and Dr. King was running round and registering voters, and people were getting their ass arrested for killing those three white guys working civil rights in Mississippi, and people were marching in Selma, Alabama, like it was going to matter to somebody. For a long time, white civil rights workers were more famous and heroic than black ones, unless they got their asses killed.

And what were we doing? We were playing football in Podunk and trying to stay out of the draft. She was one of the girls who loved us. We got more white pussy in those years than we ever did later, when we figured out what was up in Corvallis. We did it in the backyard, we did it under trees, and we did it in the back end of the practice field behind Weatherford Hall. One time Eddie did it with her in a ticket booth, while I watched. I was with Eddie a lot.

Years later, black women got mad, and got on the white women for taking their men. I heard about a meeting down in Eugene at University of Oregon, thirty miles farther upriver and south. Something changed around that time. Everybody decided white women were mostly trouble.

She was a prof's daughter, and she was crazy. She had been in a mental hospital. That's what they did in those days with girls who dated blacks: locked them in mental hospitals. Her name was Martha.

Just after Eddie came up from LA, he moved out of Weatherford Hall, the old red brick men's dorm. He moved into an old house on South Seventeenth, an old bungalow with a sagging porch. The football coach gave him a piece of that grass-green Astroturf for carpet. There was a brown sofa that sagged down to the floor, and a heavy old three-way floor lamp without one of those old white glass diffusers or a shade. Must have broke sometime. We put a smaller bulb in it, to cut the light down for the women.

We had some righteous parties. Eddie brought some of his music up from LA. You could not find any black music in Corvallis. And no black radio stations, or black churches.

"It 's like living in the deep dark green and piney woods, being away from LA," he said onetime. We all laughed.

Martha said she was a Unitarian, something I never heard of before or since. I went with her one time. I felt like an October brown oak leaf fallen on snow. Their service did not look churchy to me, sitting on them folding chairs. Them people were all off into nice safe white liberal causes, far away in time and space from them. They were all whipped up over the Civil Rights Movement, and they were collecting money to send off somewhere. I guess they felt like they needed to have at least one black in their hall, on account of this. Nobody there ever went to a black church in Portland, I figured. What would all them righteous white folks do if fifty blacks showed up on Sunday, I don't know.

"Likely pee their pants," said Eddie talking at me later, back at home.

Their service did not talk about Jesus. And there was no sermon on the Bible, only 'bout them causes. Figured that's why Martha needed so much love. Them causes do not keep you warm at night. Jesus keeps you warm at night, my mother said. She meant partly that I should keep away from girls and parties. So after what we did, she cried a lot, and so did all the ladies in her prayer circle. They said we let the devil in with all those white girls who loved us.

That night was right after the big Civil War game with the college up the river in Eugene. Then thousands of alum people would come into town from all over. Alumni loved this game. We expected victory, and we won that year, so everybody coming to the house later on. the evening of game day, was up to party, party.

Eddie got himself a keg of beer somewhere, though we were all below age twenty-one. And I went up and back from Portland getting food. You can't get decent black folks' food in old Corvallis. And it rained all day and swamped the field. The stadium was crusted over with umbrellas, and we were sliding up and down the field like water bugs thrown out on land.

The two of them were dating, sort of, Eddie, Martha. That was when I watched old Eddie do her standing up in that old rotten booth behind the dorm. Eddie kissed her, reaching under her skirt and pulling down her stuff. Miss Martha tried to say she didn't want it, and she was looking over to me. Eddie did it anyway, and she put up her arms around his neck and moaned. She moaned and closed her eyes. And it was pouring rain hard all around them, rain that fell down in rivers on that old ticket booth, where I was standing by the door to watch, though nobody was going to come and catch us then, at midnight. There was no thunder then.

Her dress was red, her stuff was white, her coat was gray and open. Eddie had them jerry curls, all new that year. He was dark and I could not see him. Eddie was so black, that he was blue.

"Do you love me, Eddie?" she asked him. I wondered how she could be so foolish. Eddie said he did, and he was lying. I knew that. And we were all not twenty yet. There ain't no love for people fucking right out in the open, someone watching. Boys lie so they can get it, girls believe them so they can give it to the boys without feeling too bad.

Eddie told me I could do her then, but I said No. That would be such a crazy thing to do, some blacks guys doing her like that, in that old ticket booth. I did not even know what doing it would feel like, I was so young, and scared.

That night the house filled up with girls and football players. Loud, it was, and cigarette smoke thick. We turned the record player way up high. Eddie had some Wilson Pickett tunes. The dancing started right away. So soon the place was full of sweat and noise. And one by one the girls would go into the back bedroom with guys, and come out sweating even more 'bout half an hour after. I drank some beer, and I was buzzed.

No time at all, came midnight, then 1 a.m., and people started leaving. Later on, I saw old Eddie going 'round to some of all those football players, talking softly in their ears. And then he took Miss Martha to the back bedroom, but he came out right after, seven minutes, maybe. I was feared for Martha.

The place was almost empty when we bunched up in a group to do it. Just some guys left. We looked round to see each other's eye. And then I knew what they would do.

Eddie was the leader. Later on, the coach got that part right.

He opened up that bedroom door and all the guys went in. Old Eddie switched a gooseneck lamp on beside Miss Martha on the bed. Her dress was up, her girdle down around her knees. Her fat white skin was shining in the dark. Her eyes were looking all around, and I could see her mouth was moving. Her hands were over her pussy, and she cried out.

"What are you guys doing," she said, and I could hear her fright.

"Turn off that light," she said, and I could hear her voice be crying.

There were five guys in that room. They never stood so still before or after.

“Turn off that light,” she said again. And she sat up, and stood to pull her girdle up.

We heard some people coming in the house behind us. Our black heads were turned, and Eddie’s plan was broken. Girls who left the hour before were coming back.

The guys went out that room. I grabbed her hand and pulled her out that house and took her home. And she was crying.

Old Eddie thought she would shut up, but he was wrong. Miss Martha went and told the coach. I heard about it later from an office girl.

The coach was famous all around. He looked, himself, like his nickname: the pumpkin, or the Great Pumpkin, or something like that. Everybody loved him. When he got himself in trouble, drinking and driving, the jury let him off, despite the evidence. The alums loved him. He took Martha in his office, closed his door, and talked across the desk.

They talked a time, and Martha left.

“Get that Eddie in here, I want to cook his ass,” said coach to his aide. “That girl is trouble. Her mom is on the faculty.”

And four days later, Eddie gone. His house was shut up tight. I went to see him just before he left. The house was cold and dark and he was packing up his stuff in big black luggage.

“I can’t believe she did it, went and told the coach,” he said. He shook his head, and would not look at me.

“And why would he care what we did?” he said.

“This ain’t LA,” I said. “You should have known you could not do that to a white girl here.”

“But nothing happened,” Eddie said.

“You hurt her,” I said.

“She asked for it,” he said.

“No, she didn’t,” I said.

And I left him alone, and off he went by bus down to LA, I guess.

The coach talked to the other guys, and they became afraid. You bet. He talked to me, and ran his mouth until my ears were hot. I never heard so many cuss words all at once.

“You got to understand a few things,” he said. About fifty things, he said.

“You can’t be riding women like they were all free,” was first. “Girls are never free.”

“And morally, this shit will fry you down in hell,” he said.

“Or I will.

"We don't let our players act like this," he said.

"This could kill our program."

He never said a word concerning how that girl was white and we were black. But that was what he meant. And civil rights be damned.

On he went, about an hour. I sat there like a dope, for in those days we had to have that football money. And I was barely hanging on in school.

All I could see, behind him on the wall, was Ma in front of rain-streaked windows back in Portland when I told her. Coach's voice became like thunder hiding from me every other sound.

He let me stay. I could not speak my gratitude.

It was the talk of campus. The story changed as it went on, as stories always do. She pulled the train, was what they said. This meant she did it with us all, which she did not. But she was also foolish, fat, and looked like she deserved it.

"Unitarian values," said someone in our group. "What is that so-called church?"

"Causes but no morals," said another. We all understood him, sort of.

The poetry teacher giving A's to all the football players got Miss Martha in his class. No matter what she wrote, she got an F.

Her cousin was embarrassed in a store for being named the same last name as Martha. People pointed at Diane (Same Name) and laughed.

That story went around and up and down the town.

Her shame was more than she could bear, was written on her face. She looked like someone almost drowned in water running fast and deep. Or fallen down a waterfall. Or flattened down like wheat in hard rain, like in a big wild thunder storm.

I heard she started sleeping days and nights in her dorm room.

Miss Martha talked too much and afterward left school.

I don't know what the big deal was. The problem was the story got so big when almost nothing happened.

Eddie lost his place in football, and that story going round and round about him. I knew he'd never go back to school.

That story followed me upstream to OSU's archrival's campus there. And to the Pittsburgh Steelers. They wanted me, but suddenly did not. And I was deep-sixed everywhere without a chance to tell my side. That's a piece of how the whites treat blacks, at least in those days, I learned the hard way.

But I did stay in school. And got my B.S.

And went back home and got a job. But not in teaching. I was tainted.

My Ma heard all about it, from that story, and she cried a river. She had warned me not to let that kind of thing come in my life. That stupid little town upriver liked to chew on blacks and put them down. That's how I see it, so I said to Ma. It took me months

to calm her down with facts and truth. The stories run all up and down that river in this state, but not the truth.

And later on that year came Watts, the riot. I saw Eddie on the TV, yelling in a bullhorn speaker. I could not hear what he said. Last I ever heard of him.

I saw Miss Martha later on in Portland. Her head was covered with a scarf that almost hid her face. She wore a dress that hid her knees, and tied up by her neck and wrists. I stepped aside and let her pass, and she did not see me. And then I called out to her from behind.

“Miss Martha,” I said.

She turned and looked at me, and stopped. Her pain was on her face like sunburn, just as hurt as Ma looked when she heard about that night. And then I saw why girls give up on men, sometimes.

“I am so sorry,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” she said.

“You’ll be OK,” she said through lips so tight I thought they’d break.

“I’ll pray for you,” I said.

“Oh, God,” she said, her voice so hard she sounded like crack of thunder far away.

She turned her head, and she was gone.

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