

Death and the Angry Black Man

Roland was an angry black man. And, not just angry, the man was furious. He ranged Broadway between 82nd and 84th Street, where he made it a habit of accosting white people. He'd shout at them, "Hey, help me out? You, give me some money?" He ignored the reasonable bourgeois conventions that encouraged people to keep their distance. He was literally in your face. This was at a time in the City when such encounters were not uncommon and when the American Civil Liberties Union fought heroically for the right of insane people to live on the street. Which also meant their right to harass people, to piss and shit on the sidewalk, and basically degenerate to the point that they ceased to resemble human beings at all.

Roland was an exceptionally handsome man with a strong-featured face, the color and quality of sable. He had an athletic built and could have been a model for Robert Mapplethorpe or even Ralph Lauren, except it was his bad luck never to meet either man. My neighbors and I crossed the street to avoid him.

However, one day as I turned the corner, I walked into Roland terrorizing an ancient couple. I went to their aid and said to him, "Why are you yelling at these people?" He was surprised and left them alone and turned to me saying, "Are you going to give me some money?" I told him no, and he said, "Then get the fuck away from me before I hurt you." For whatever reason, instead of getting the fuck away, I held my ground, "I don't understand. If you want people to give you money, why do you yell at them? Why do you terrorize them?" To my surprise he answered, "Because I don't like having to ask for it."

And that's how my friendship with Roland began.

For a year or so I'd buy us sandwiches at Zabars. We'd sit in the center meridian and discuss films made by Sam Peckinpah and Akira Kurosawa. We both thought *The Wild Bunch* was an elegiac masterpiece and its poetic depiction of violence neither exploitive nor sensationalistic. We both thought *The Seven Samurai* magnificent. Roland had wept when Kikuchiyo (Toshiro Mifune) was killed. He wept even when he described the scene.

Roland was an educated man. A thoughtful and articulate man. He had a degree from Brooklyn College. An ex-wife. A daughter at the University of Texas, whom he hadn't spoken to since he was paroled in 1995.

His was an old story: Roland had been a successful drug dealer, marijuana, then cocaine. He started using his own stuff. He became an addict. He then became a thief. He was arrested for armed robbery. He served his time and was released. He stored his clothes with distant relatives; slept in flophouses when he had the money and, on the street, when he didn't.

The street would kill him; but it took its time, which allowed me to watch him die. When the weather was brutal, he'd stop at my building, and I'd get a nervous call from the doorman. I'd come down and give him \$20 to get a room. One particularly stormy night, after midnight, he asked to come up and I told the doorman it was ok. The doorman asked me, in deference to my neighbors, to come down and bring him up. Roland was drenched. He was also sick with that harsh street cough. He had long ago lost his sable sheen and was now a scuffed brown. I made him a cup of coffee. He asked if he could stay the night.

As it happened, I had just begun to see Charlotte and she was waiting for me in the bedroom. I told him no. I told him no, twenty times. He finished a second cup of coffee while I went and got him a heavy sweater and an umbrella. As I walked him out, I also gave him \$20 to get a room.

The next time I saw Roland was at Saint Luke's. In his own room, in the new wing. He now weighed next to nothing. He was a gray man, and like Mercutio, soon to be a grave man. Like Mercutio, he laughed at his predicament. But he wasn't happy.

Roland had stomach cancer, and it wasn't going away.

One day, Roland called. "I'm bored." He also found fault in the hospital's menu. "Not much better than prison food," he told me. He then asked if, when he was released, he could live with me. "It won't cost you a cent; in fact, you'll make out like John Gotti."

He explained that once he was released the state would pay his rent and expenses. "I'll sign it all over to you, and you'll live rent free."

I told him no. I told him no. I told him I'd think about it.

He called me the next day. "Did you think about it?"

“No.”

“Well think about it.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“We’re friends, right?”

“We’re friends.”

“Then think about it. Are you coming to see me today?”

I told him I would, and he said, “Do me a favor. When you come up, bring me a Big Mac, a pack of Kool Menthol and the POST.”

“You want cigarettes? “

“I’m bored to death, man, and don’t forget the POST. And make it two Big Macs.”

A few hours later, I went to see Roland with two Big Macs, and a pack of Kools wrapped in the POST. When I got to the room, he had shrunken to the point I almost didn’t see him. I helped him up from his bed and watched him limp into the bathroom dragging his IV stand with him. He smoked a couple of cigarettes behind the closed door.

I asked him if they would mind that he was smoking.

“I’m one fierce nigger? They’re not going to say anything. “Mind,” he sniggered. “Man, I’m dying. All they want is for me to vacate the room.”

I left and promised to return the next day with a Big Mac and an apple pie.

A week later, Roland called to say they were moving him to a hospice in the Bronx. “I told you, man. I told you I was dying.” This is it. You’ll come and see me. I think he was crying.

A few days later, I went to L.A. on business, and when I returned home there was no message from Roland. I got caught up in things and another week passed. Another week. Finally, I called the number and asked to speak to Mr. Roland Green.

“Oh, Mr. Green,” the nurse answered. “Mr. Green is no longer with us.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m a friend of his and was wondering if you could tell me how I can get in touch with him. “

She replied, “Mr. Greene, he’s no longer with us.

“Yes, I heard you. He’s no longer with you, but could you tell me...”

She cut me off. “I’m sorry sir, the man is dead. Mr. Green is dead. He died last week.”