

Harriet Tubman
1820-1913
United States (b. Maryland)
Abolitionist

An Excerpt from the Forthcoming Novel:

Real Time
Re-Righting History: From the Bible to Hollywood.

Tuesday, October 26, 2004: Free Speech.

Forty years ago, the University of California in Berkeley refused to reinstate eight student members of the fledgling Free Speech Movement, calling them "non-students and Communists." This led to a series of sit-ins and protest marches—non-violent and otherwise—against the University's ban on political activism.

In retrospect, it's easy to see how "anti-establishment" confrontations like this one laid the groundwork for the anti-war movement later in the decade. But the main political action in 1964 wasn't about war...it was about civil rights.

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When I need a nap, any place will do. I can lie down on a bench, office floor, tilted-back car seat, friendly neighborhood couch, or even under a bush and doze off for a half hour, regardless of background noise or distractions. So on this warm October day, as my wife starts roaming the streets of Berkeley in search of idiosyncratic art and artifacts, I roam its famous University in search of cushy campus green.

After a little detour through a grove of redwoods, I find myself at the West Gate where, in December of 1964, Joan Baez and thousands of “non-students and communists” unfurled a banner that read “Free Speech” right in the face of UC Berkeley’s Regents who were meeting in University Hall across the street.

For a borderline 60’s radical like myself, this is hallowed ground. So I spend a few minutes in silent solidarity before sitting on a bench for some pre-nap reading. I’m alone except for a couple of kids making out on the low circular wall and a handful of students reading on the grass.

A couple of pages later, I notice a guy standing in front of me. He’s two shades past mocha, sort of average height, and a bit stocky. His clothes are ragged but clean. Maybe homeless, maybe not. But his most noticeable feature is a shy, impish grin, which he uses to silently ask for permission to join me. He takes *my* shy, impish grin for a “yes.”

I try an opening gambit. “So, what are we up to today?”

“Oh...” he sighs, “it’s hard being black.” A flash of a twinkle in his eye.

Hmmm. That’s a better opening gambit than mine. I counter with an honest response: “I wouldn’t know...how *could* I know?”

He seems to appreciate the move. “That’s good. That’s good. Most people would say, ‘I know.’”

“Really?” I reply. “I’m Jewish. I guess if I had been living in a different time...different place...I might think I knew what it’s like to be black.”

“Hey,” he says, “is it true that the Jewish peoples...if someone passes away you’re supposed to be buried the next day?”

“No. Not one day,” I explain, wondering how he made the leap from racial persecution to ritual burial, “But definitely within three. Of course most people do that anyway.”

“What time you got, sir?”

He’s either ADHD or trying to make me feel like I am. So, after telling him the time, I switch back to the original topic: “So this being black thing isn’t working for you, huh?”

“Unfortunately, it’s not,” he answers with that aw-shucks grin.

“I’d think people would be pretty color-blind here in Berkeley.”

He brushes off my comment. “Well I’m from Jackson, Mississippi,” he explains. (Although since we aren’t in Jackson, Mississippi, I’m not sure what that explains.)

He switches direction. “Look. I’m supposed to be at the DMV today.”

“To get a license or something?” I respond affably.

He nods his head as he considers this deep philosophical question, “You see, I passed the interview on Friday. About working for the UPS.” He shifts on the bench and speaks straight ahead as if confessing to some unseen God: “See, I’m a recovering heroin addict.”

“Oh, cool,” I respond automatically. I was prepared to say, “Oh, cool,” no matter. But perhaps I should have made an exception in this case. “Good thing you got a job...at least a possibility,” I add.

“Well, yeah,” he continues. “God blessed me with a job. \$14 an hour working for Jarvis Ice Cream. Five years ago. South side of San Francisco. Then I got friends with a dealer and started doing heroin.”

Now I’m a little concerned. And confused. Concerned that God has entered the picture and may be on my new friend’s side. Confused what the UPS job has to do with one he had five years ago. So I stall: “How long you been clean?”

“Got five years coming up on the 19th of January.”

“Wow,” I say sincerely.

“And I passed the interview Friday...be a truck driver with the UPS.”

“Would that just be a seasonal job for Christmas?”

“No, I could keep it...it’d be steady. \$11.27 an hour...but I’m scared, man...”

In my minimal experience with heroin addicts, I’ve learned that they tend to go from almost-painful truthfulness to impressively clever dissembling in a single sentence. I begin to wonder how clean he is.

“Why are you scared?” I ask. “That the job won’t work out?”

“Cause I got to be at the DMV on Telegraph at 4 pm. The 40 bus will take me right to downtown Oakland...I’m 51 years old.”

I decide to answer in kind: “Well, I gotta meet my wife at 4 pm. My legs will take me right to that Starbucks over there. I’m 52 years old.” (I think I’m so clever.)

He decides to keep riding the age train...see how far it gets him: “Plus I got a 16-year-old son and an 8-year-old son and a 4-year-old son, and we live in a basement.”

“Shit,” I reply, sympathetically. By now, I’m pretty sure he’s going to ask me to make an investment in his financial future, but the dots keep disconnecting. “Then why are you sitting here? You have to be at the DMV in an hour or so.”

He winds up for his big pitch and delivers it in one relentless run-on sentence.

“Being there’s not the problem...I mean I know you don’t know me from Adam and I’m a black man and all and there are good people in this world...you don’t owe me nothing and it’s not that you’re white or Jewish or I’m black...all black people are not bad people you know... anyway, I have to renew my license...I have a Class B license...And the license that I need is a Class D.”

I’m a little disappointed I gave him such a wide opening, but console myself with the fact that, as panhandlers go, this guy is good. “You need money to renew your license, right?”

He smiles. I smile.

“How much?”

He holds up two fingers on one hand, closes that hand, and then uses both hands to indicate seven. \$27.

“How much you got so far?” I ask. (Me, expert business consultant to the homeless.)

He digs into his left pocket, pulls three singles out, and shows them to me.

“Oh, that’s not so good,” I say in response. We both shake our heads and smile somewhat sheepishly at our now-shared problem.

I’m not, however, a total rube: “How much you got in the other pocket?”

He moves quickly to guilt me out of pursuing this question. “You know,” he begins, “a real man hates to beg. A real man has pride. And a real man feels less of a man when he can’t support his family. And there are a lot of good people in this world.”

This seems to be a key point that maybe I missed the first time.

“Absolutely,” I agree, lamely trying to postpone the inevitable. “There are a lot of good people in this world.”

He ignores the interruption: “But, you know, someday you could be as poor as I am, and then you have to look at it like this...welfare gives us \$356 a month to live on, that’s why it’s so important for me to get this job.”

“So why didn’t you save \$27 from last month’s \$356 to pay for this license?” It seems like a reasonable question, but his look makes it perfectly clear that I don’t know shit about what it’s like to be poor.

“I guess ‘cause you wouldn’t have been able to feed the boys, huh?” I add, acknowledging my ignorance.

He doesn't say anything. I don't say anything. I find myself staring at a tall building across the street with the *PowerBar* logo on it. I could use a *PowerBar* right about now. But, obviously, his boys could use a whole case.

I continue thinking about his problem like it's an everyday business dilemma. "But you get another \$356 on November 1st, right?" I see the answer in his eyes: November 1st will be too late. So I back up: "Now your boys, are they in school?"

He gives me a critical look. We're clearly OT (Off Topic). I recklessly decide to stay there: "And the mother, is she around?"

"Mother?" (How stupid could I be?) "She's at home with the baby. She's a diabetic. She goes in the hospital. That's another reason I gotta get this job today because to take care of my family she's got to eat right."

Checkmate.

Like him, I tend to have bills loose in my pocket 'cause I'm too lazy to put them back in my wallet. I reach in, prepared to give him whatever's in there—leave it up to the gods. I pull out \$12. "Well, here's a good start," I say encouragingly.

"I wish you would give me the whole amount," he says slowly, sly and seductive.

"I bet you would!" We both laugh.

"Thank you sir," he says as he slowly gets to his feet, looking back with that beguiling smile, just in case I change my mind.

"Keep going. Keep going. You'll get it," I say encouragingly.

"This money, it's going to the DMV," he assures me, walking away.

I shrug. Not my problem.

I lie down on the bench, backpack under my head, playing the conversation over in my mind while staring up at a blue sky encircled by large-although-not-giant redwoods.

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I catch a warm sweet scent before she sits down at the edge of the bench, just out of sight of my rolled-back eyes.

"So why didn't you give him *all* the money?"

"You think I should have?" I mutter, trying to smother the adrenaline rush with sleepy disgruntlement.

“Should?” she asks. “You white folk never learn, do you?”

White folk? Huh... My consciousness has become increasingly porous of late—a place where past and present show no regard for traditional boundaries. This woman could be a local welfare agent, ancient Nubian princess, or both. All I know is that she’s black and has some serious sass. I need more clues.

“How do I know he’s really gonna use it for the license he needs?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“None of my business? Don’t I have a right to know if he was lying?”

“Oh boy, that’s a good one. \$12 and you think you own him.”

Own him? Huh... I want to sit up and look but have a rational (in my case) fear that if I do, there’ll be no one there. I decide to go for it: “Who the hell are you?”

“Use your imagination, *boy*. There’s some serious history going down here.”

History? Berkeley? Free speech? Free assembly? Civil Rights? Radical politics? Weather Underground? Own him?

“How many more clues do you need?” she asks impatiently.

My mind scrambles to come up with names of famous black women and is woefully unsuccessful. A few singers: Billy Holiday... Ella Fitzgerald. But they’re not political. Angela Davis. Yes! No, she’s still alive. When it finally comes, it’s obvious:

“Harriet?”

“About time... *boy*.” She takes a long sensual inhalation, as if fragrance itself were a luxury where she’d just come from, “Ah, such a pleasure it is to be here.”

I open my eyes and roll them as far back as possible. Traditional pictures of Harriet Tubman as an intense, light-black babushka have frozen her in late middle-age. The face I’m straining to see can’t be more than 30. Hard, a bit worn, but glowing. And that fragrance. I’m swept away. Of course, she keeps calling me “boy,” and her next words make it clear she has better things to do than flirt with me.

“You will excuse me”—each word neatly clipped—“if I do not speak with the charming, uneducated patois you might expect from a poor illiterate former slave. That was just the vernacular of the shell I was born into.

“You will also excuse me, if I ask you not to refer to me as a Negro, or a Darkie, or an African American, or a Person of Color, or the Moses of My People, or even that Goddamn Black Bitch Who Outsmarted Us Again.

"I AM AN AMERICAN," she shouts louder than any Ku Klux Klan member could shout back. I tilt my head back even further back and see luminescent brown eyes gleaming at me.

"Yes," I agree, drawing the word out as if wrapping myself in a shroud.

She pauses before continuing in her relentlessly cacophonous voice: "AND I'M HERE TO LEAD PEOPLE TO FREEDOM!" Sliding to a whisper she adds: "And folks need me today as much as they did 150 years ago. Maybe more."

I want to sit up. Look directly into those eyes. Instead, she reaches down to close mine—as if I were the dead one—and begins to brush her fingertips gently across my forehead.

I sigh inadvertently...which makes her chuckle: "You expected someone a little more grandmotherly, eh? I do hope that your lovely and *very patient* wife forgives me for being so...alluring. That was not my main intent. Although I'm sure she'll find it rather amusing," Harriet assures me, implying that sisterhood is powerful across races and generations.

"Would you like me to continue?"

I'd actually prefer to have her stroke my forehead for all eternity, but she takes my silence for the helpless agreement it is.

"Now, going back and forth across Mr. Mason & Mr. Dixon's border of pain to rescue my family, my friends, and total strangers was certainly difficult and fraught with peril.

"But at least those people knew they were slaves...and most desperately wanted to be free." She sighs gently at the reminiscence.

"I can see I won't receive that same level of cooperation from people in the so-called 'free' world today. Because they plainly are not aware of their chains..."

"Chains, you ask?"

I didn't, but that's irrelevant. "Getting up at dawn to travel in a little metal box just so you can spend the whole day in another little box? *That's* slavery. Having to look at the words on your computer before even saying hello to your children? *That's* slavery. Sitting in front of your TV for hours at a time? *That's* slavery. Thinking that the wealth in your bank account is more important than the wealth in your heart. *That's* slavery. Living with a husband or wife whom you've forgotten how to love. *That's* slavery."

A pause. Slower now. Even more precise. Every word counts. "Hating other people is the most insidious form of slavery of all."

I respond lamely, "I see what you mean."

"Maybe you do. Maybe you don't. But even if I rescued *all* you crazy humans from the tyranny of your modern lives, most of you still would not be free."

“Because...?” I ask slowly.

“How can you be free if you are still enslaved by notions of black and white, rich and poor, smart and dumb? How can you be free if you are still provoked to anger or jealousy or meanness of spirit? How can you be free until you understand that the other is doing exactly what they need to be doing and has just as much right to do so as you do?”

This seems a little too simplistic: “You just want us to be more forgiving? Get in line.”

“Your forgiveness is usually a selfish act.”

One sentence and she’s back on top.

“Because you expect something in return,” she explains. “You don’t realize that the person you are *forgiving* has already given you the greatest gift.”

I feel a jolt before I can parse the literal meaning. I want to jump up, pace back and forth, repeat her words, try to get them straight, understand the implications, but her hand keeps insistently stroking my brow. She knows she’s opening her floodgates of wisdom and isn’t terribly concerned whether I drown or not.

“Let me explain,” she says, acknowledging my state. “Mr. Edward Brodess, into whose servitude I was born, had me working as soon as I could walk. His wife (my mistress) sent me off at age 5 to care for other children. When those babies cried, it’s me that they’d whip.”

She pauses. I hold my breath. Where’s she going?

“To him and her I am eternally grateful. Because they helped me fulfill my life’s mission. I love those people. May they forgive me for any weakness I showed in walking the path they set before me.”

She’s wondering if her masters forgive her? Oh man. Talk about revisionist history. But there’s more:

“Countless slave catchers tracked me across the countryside and caused me more trouble in a day than most of you experience in an entire lifetime. To them I am eternally grateful. Because they helped me fulfill my life’s mission. I love those men. May they forgive me for any weakness I showed in walking the path they set before me.”

“My first husband, a freed black man, refused to follow me to *true* freedom. I risked my life to come back to Maryland and get that son of a bitch to join me so we could live together again as man and wife. But he refused. He preferred his new young wife and children. And to him I am eternally grateful. Because he helped me fulfill my life’s mission. I love that man. May he forgive me for any weakness I showed in walking the path he set before me.”

She has me. I’ve spent 30 years trying to understand and experience enlightenment, love, nothing-ness, compassion, ancient wisdom, and countless other spiritual ideals; only to have this

long-dead “illiterate” woman from Maryland blow open the door to unconditional love so wide you could drive a truck filled with all the prejudices, opinions, judgments and self-righteousness on earth right through it with room to spare.

I close my eyes, as she concludes softly and kindly. “So maybe, my dear one, you can’t quite figure out what *you’re* doing here. And maybe even some of the folks you’ve met so far can’t quite figure out what *they’re* doing here. But I know what we’re doing. We’re going to risk our immortal souls to go back in history and rescue the Truth.”

Tears start rolling down my face. And continue rolling as Harriet speaks:

“Folks think this *melting pot* thing is just some pretty idea? Well, it’s high and mighty time that folks understood *in their very bones* that the only way we’re all going to be FREE is if we stir that pot with such a righteous fervor that we begin to accept and love each other for our differences instead of hating each other for them.

“Maybe those so-called founding fathers were just being philosophical when they dreamed up that *e pluribus unum* thing, but Harriet never settles for mere words. ‘Cause you and me, boy, we’re ONE. I’m not talking ‘I love you.’ I’m talking ‘I AM YOU’ I am your skin. I am your breath. I am your beating heart. I am your hopes and fears. I am your thoughts. Practice, boy, practice! This is the way through the darkness. This is the path to freedom.”

The campus bell rings 4 ‘o clock. I take a deep breath, swing my legs over the side, sit up, and turn towards her. But she’s already blended into a swarm of students—more colors than even she would have dreamed of...deep African black, soft brown Latino, flawless Asian pale, and the many shades of white—moving with the mesmerizing chaos of crowds.

I focus on one of the students. *I am you.* Another. *I am you.* Another. *I am you.*

Meeting my wife at the coffee shop. *I am you.* Riding the subway back to the city. *I am you.* At dinner that evening. *I am you.* Wherever I look. Whomever I see. *I am you.*

But before the night is over, I will have only the words. Bereft of spirit. And that’s a loss I refuse to endure. Sanity be damned.