

Patriot Act

I knew the fight wasn't over when my wife said those three words at the border: Native North American. I really hoped we could smooth out the hostility Virginia was feeling about our neighbor and our former cat before we came back across to the U.S. side. It was always much harder to get back into the United States than it was to get into Canada in the first place. The Canadian border guard looked at me in the passenger's seat, and when I answered "United States" he proceeded to ask my purpose for entering the country, knowing my wife didn't have to answer. I told him we were just going over for Chinese food. Everyone who grows up in border towns like Niagara Falls learns to add "just" to our destinations whenever we crossed over, attempting to minimize any misinterpretations of serious intent.

I have even heard people say "just the dentist," as dentistry, for whatever reason, was a lot cheaper in Canada. You can't help feeling guilty of some criminal act when an armed officer demands your ID and asks whatever question comes to mind. Virginia is a lot darker than I am, and we were asked once, when we were first married, what the relationship between us was, as if there were something inherently wrong with people of varying pigment traveling together. Now she usually just says United States, like I do, whenever we go across. The kids inherited the politics of their grandmother so they always claim their Indian status, forgetting I am the one who can be dragged

in and questioned and asked to empty my pockets and that the car can be searched because I'm riding in it. They forget that the Jay Treaty doesn't apply to me, that unlike them, I am not free to cross the borders because my tribe formally doesn't recognize the United States and Canada as separate places. Or maybe they have never forgotten and they want me not to forget either. Since they've grown up and moved to their grandmother's reservation land, I never let them ride with us over the border. They can be who they are in their own cars.

It should have occurred to me that Virginia would pull the "Native North American" routine at the border when I suggested the Jade Garden. I wanted her to forget the phone call this morning and everything attendant with it. I was just thankful for no Caller-ID on the phone she picked up. She frowned into it and said it was for me, which is almost never the case. Nobody calls me, not from the garage, not from the bowling league, no one. When she's traveling on the powwow circuit with her mother, the phone doesn't ring at all, except for her checking in every few days. I asked her who it was and she said the voice sounded familiar but that she couldn't quite place it.

I spoke and could hear breathing, anticipation, but no words. "Hello?" I said again and was about to hang up when Celeste spoke.

"Lucky Penny is dying," she said after identifying herself. It sounded like secret code from a bad James Bond movie. I expected a young Sean Connery, in a Speedo, with two young bikini-clad women rubbing his hairy belly, to step up and offer the counter phrase, something like "The black dog swims in the moonlight," but naturally, he didn't.

"Um, okay, thanks," I said.

"I just wanted you to know," she said.

"I appreciate it," I said. Then she said goodbye and hung up. I placed the phone back in its cradle and Virginia asked what that had been about. "I'm not sure," I said, hoping she might forget the phone had even rung. "Have you made the coffee yet?"

"Who was that?" she repeated. It was an exact reproduction of the exchange after a call I'd gotten three years earlier. We went to the Jade Garden after that fight, too. It was our make-up restaurant, after all. She probably knew and was just waiting for me to confirm.

* * *

Virginia and Celeste had never been great friends, but they'd been okay neighbors, even what you might call friendly for a few years. The first year we were here, Celeste had sent over Christmas cookies with her twin granddaughters who lived with her. Those cookies were amazing, the puffy kind with the thick electric-colored frosting, candy eyes on the snow men, trees covered with ornaments and garland, almost too beautiful to eat, but their beauty only slowed us down. We ate them just the same. When the twins reached first communion, we went next door to the party, the only non-family members there.

The problems began when Gordon asked Virginia what she was doing to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, a couple of Januaries later, only he didn't call it Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Gordon claimed in

pride, that he'd moved into his wife's childhood home when they married and that the street had remained pretty white his entire time there. Our houses are on the river, five miles from the famous falls. We couldn't believe our good fortune when we found the place, a casualty of a different marriage's failings, though the house would need some work to make it what we wanted. We decided that we were never leaving, and it was clear that Celeste and Gordon would be our neighbors forever.

Around the time we'd saved enough to pay our mortgage and afford some renovations we wanted, the baked goods exchange had dried up. When we had family over, we made sure the kids only ran around in our yard. It was a hard concept for them, so different from the fenceless reservation homes. Even though our property lines were marked only by symbolic barriers, shrubs, bird baths, daffodils, we knew where the kids were expected to stay.

Sometimes, when Virginia wasn't home, I cut some of their lawn, just the part next to our side, or snow-blew their driveway. They were in their seventies and I was trying to build up some karma points. I would be in my seventies some day and I hoped some kind neighbor might do similar things for me. A part of me had forgiven Gordon for his generation. Of course, I was not the non-white person living next door. I was her white husband.

The contractors working on our house had to cut the electricity for a bit, to bring the addition's wiring into the box, and they ran a generator to work. About the third day, a police officer showed up at

the door. You don't ever want to see the police on your doorstep. They are never bringing good news.

"Afternoon, sir," he said, with a smile. Well, at least they weren't coming to arrest me for something I had unknowingly done.

"What seems to be the problem, officer?" I heard myself saying, like a character on TV. Is that where we learn to behave from, taught the appropriate responses in prime time?

"Your neighbor, Mrs. Rigg, placed a formal complaint call about your generator. I brought the decibel meter, and you're within appropriate range for the time of day, and your permits are all in order, but . . ." he said.

"But?" The but and the pause always signal that an invitation to compromise is coming. You wonder if the Indians who sat down at the treaty tables knew the meaning of the but.

"But maybe you could just move the generator to this side of the driveway? She says her husband's tired, and she wants him to rest peacefully. They seem like a nice, elderly couple. For neighbors, you could do worse. You're within your right, but if it isn't too much trouble, why not keep the peace?" I nodded and called to our contractor. The officer touched his hat brim, nodded back and left.

While the crew moved the generator, I went next door. They weren't going to answer at first, but I kept knocking, not loud, but persistent, like a leaking faucet. Eventually Gordon answered.

"The police? You called the police on me? What kind of neighbor does that shit? Because you're tired? You wouldn't be tired during the day if you didn't have your TV blaring all night long." Anytime I

got up to take a leak in the middle of the night, our front yard looked like a river itself, cast in shifting shades of blue TV light washing over the grass and gardens all night long, accompanied by the low rumble of people talking on their TV. I couldn't imagine how anyone got any sleep in that house. "And after all the times I cut your lawn and snow blow your driveway?"

"I never asked you to do any of that," was all he said, shutting the door.

"You can be sure I won't do it again," I yelled at the closed door. I told Virginia when she got home that we weren't speaking with the neighbors anymore and she immediately replied that I was the only one who had for at least a year or so.

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The first phone call I got from Celeste, the one three years ago, had been long after we'd moved back into the renovated parts of the house, almost a year after Gordon died. What he hadn't said at the door was that he was resting when he could and staying up all night watching TV because the chemo and radiation treatments had made him so sick. We had no way of knowing. I saw it in the paper, but we didn't go to the funeral, or really do anything. After the police showed up at the door, our neighbors ceased to exist for us, so Gordon's posting on the obituary page seemed strangely anticlimactic, though I am sure that was not the case for Celeste and her family.

Virginia had answered the phone then too, as she always did, and had not recognized Celeste's voice that time, either. Why Celeste had asked for me both then and this morning, I have no idea.

"In case you're looking for Lucky Penny, she's here," Celeste said then, and didn't stop talking for almost five minutes. Virginia stared at me, her brows arched, left ear titled toward me in a pantomime of curiosity. I raised my own brows in what I hoped approximated puzzlement and shrugged my shoulders a couple of times. "It's hard to say no when she begs to come in. The twins love her, you know. My . . . my cat . . . she died toward the end of fall, and the twins just kind of adopted Lucky Penny after a bit." That was when I understood she was talking about my cat, Copperhead. "You know they've been petting her and giving her treats since you moved in. Our house is so empty without our cat and Lucky Penny fills a lot of that space. If you want her back, I'll put her out. I understand. I'll tell the girls she doesn't belong to us. I'll make them understand."

"No, that's fine. Thanks for letting me know," I said and hung up. I hadn't even known they'd had a cat, let alone that it had died. You know, no obituary in the paper.

"Well?" Virginia said.

"It was Celeste."

"She ask you what you're doing for Martin Luther King Day again? She having a lynching she wanted to invite you to?" Virginia said.

"She, um, she stole my cat, or something like that."

"Copperhead? And you just let her? Go get her."

"Go get her and what?" I said. The truth was that Copperhead was better off with Celeste and her grandkids. I inherited her from a cousin who had developed an allergy to cats but we never successfully integrated her into our house. Omar, the cat we already had, was territorial, harassing Copperhead all the time and she eventually grew neurotic, pulling out her own fur and pissing in the corners of rooms. We didn't discover her spraying habit until the carpet guy pulled up the old one and showed us what he called "hot spots." I had seen Copperhead marking territory outside, so I knew she'd been the culprit.

I bought her an outdoor cat house, fixed it up with an electric floor heater and a light, blankets and a pillow. Once she lived in that, and Omar no longer felt compelled to assert himself, the two of them got along fine. Her house was decently warm in the winter, but she grew lonely. I would lock Omar up and bring her in, but I'm sure Copperhead found more loving humans next door. So, I took Virginia across the border to the Jade Garden, listened to her litany of grievances against our neighbor and mourned the moving of my cat to another home.

Though she came back in the spring, summer and fall, even periodically inhabiting the house I set up for her, Copperhead clearly liked her new home better. Sometimes, I would sit on the front deck and she would lie on the porch next door. I would call to her and she would meow, purr, roll on her back, but she'd never leave her new home. She knew where she was better off and I had to agree with her.

Virginia paid her more attention once she moved next door, almost as if Copperhead had become a spy for her. She began carrying cat treats in her jacket pockets if we were sitting outside. She would call to Copperhead and reach into her pocket and shake the can a little, just enough for Copperhead to hear, but below Celeste's range. Sometimes the cat came, and sometimes she didn't.

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So when I got off the phone this morning, and told Virginia that Copperhead was dying, the conversation went exactly where I knew it would and I got up, showered, and dug into my junk drawer to see how much Canadian currency I had, hoping I wouldn't have to stop at the exchange on the way there.

"So what does she want us to do?" Virginia said when we cleared the border. "Pay for the gas chamber?"

"Nothing," I said. "She was just telling us. Figured we might want to know. You know, I could have had her back any time. Would you let her back in the house?" This was a definite conversation-ender and probably not the way to go, but sometimes you see that road full of broken glass and nail-ridden boards and you just step on the gas and hope for the best. Virginia has always had issues with the physical space of things, which she, like most, blamed on her parents.

Her childhood was filled with dread that if her mother died, she and her father would be told to leave the reservation because he was white. Virginia herself was officially enrolled, but somehow she

believed not being legally an adult would have some impact on her status. Around the time she graduated from high school, her father died suddenly, and was not allowed to be buried on the reservation. Though he'd been living with another reservation woman at the time, Virginia's mother was still married to him, at least on paper, and had him cremated, keeping him in a heavy concrete canister that she used as a doorstop in the summertime. I don't know where he went in the winters, maybe to the other woman's house.

Someone Virginia went to high school with had recently died, complicating our lives. As we were in our fifties now, she suddenly had a keen sense of our mortality. She wanted me to be cremated and have our burial instructions state that I was to be put in her casket so we could be together in the reservation cemetery. I had issue with the idea that her plan presupposed my death first. She could plan anything else she wanted but this was a little much for me, and we both knew that if she went first, they wouldn't allow me to be buried there, no matter whose ashes I carted around with me.

She had grown so preoccupied with this possibility that she'd recently begun having panic attacks serious enough that a couple of months ago she went and had stress tests, the treadmill, the imaging stuff, the works. Her doctor prescribed something to chill her out, but she said she needed to be this angry to survive. I didn't know what she meant but her family members were all like that; somehow politics was entrenched in everything they did. They could make taking a piss a political act. All of this came back out over the fortune cookies and as always, we had no answer. Well, I had one, but

it was never the one she wanted to hear. She would not accept that we could buy plots in a different cemetery and be together that way, but really, we're not going to know, anyway, so I had no idea why she didn't just take the Xanax and get on with living.

"So do you think she's gone yet?" Virginia said as we left the restaurant. I reached the car first and opted for the driver's seat. I hadn't asked Celeste for any details, so I didn't even know what was happening at the house next door to ours, how Celeste had decided that Copperhead or Lucky Penny was not long for this world. "Why doesn't it matter to you? No matter what, that bitch stole her. She's our cat."

"We let her go," I said. "We could have kept her, put up with her problems, but we didn't. We made a choice of which cat had to go out and we chose the one we were less attached to, and that's the truth. Look at it from her point of view. I mean, she's got a little cat brain, sure, but she was able to make some pretty good choices about her living conditions. She could have a semi-warm tiny house and some visits inside or she could live in a huge house with two little girls who loved her. Not hard to figure out. Not a lot different from the choices you made. You could still be living at your mother's place, using the outhouse, or maybe living in a trailer, maybe get a septic tank and drink bottled water, but you're not. You're here, with me, on one of the most prime pieces of land in the county. Tell me you didn't make some decisions based on comfort." We pulled up to the Immigration Booth at the New York end of the bridge.

"Purpose of your trip into Canada?" the officer said. This was a strange opening question, but sometimes they did that, to catch you off guard. One time, I was asked what hospital I was born in and was so startled, I found myself giving a wrong answer and then stammering the right one. I told him where we had gone, a common enough destination just across the border.

"Are you bringing anything back with you?" he next asked. We both shook our heads, and then I remembered that you are supposed to speak your answers and said no.

"Citizenship, sir?"

"United States," I said and waited.

"Ma'am?"

"North Am--" Virginia started and the guard interrupted her while five more guards appeared out of nowhere, as if they had been beamed in, opening her car door.

"I'm going to have to ask you to step out of the car, ma'am. You too, sir," he added, but I was definitely an afterthought, as they watched Virginia unlock her seatbelt and reach into her purse. "Ma'am, put down the purse, please."

"Listen," she said, "I am a member of the Tuscarora Nation, and by the Jay Treaty, you have no right to detain me." It was language she had memorized her entire life, been taught to practice for the eventuality of this very moment that everyone from the reservation hoped and feared they might have at some point in their lives. "I could call members of the Indian Defense League and they would take action so fast that--."

"Ma'am, please hand over the purse or we will have to remove it from your person." One of the officers had drawn a weapon. I grabbed the purse and handed it to the officer out my window and in that moment, my wife was certain that everything she'd ever been told about white people had been true after all, despite our nearly thirty years of marriage.

"What is this all about?" I asked as we sat down in a small building away from the main immigration offices where we'd been escorted by all six guards.

"Please, sir. We have to ask--is this your wife? Okay, we have to ask your wife some questions. Now, you can remain here, as long as you don't interrupt. Ma'am, are you undergoing treatment for cancer?"

"What! No! Of course not. Why would you ask such a thing?" Virginia looked to me, as if by giving her purse over, I were somehow in on this plot against her.

"Have you been to the doctor's lately?" the officer asked next.

"Why are you asking about my health? Why not his?" I had definitely become one of the conspirators, but I didn't dare speak, not wanting to be escorted out, leaving her alone.

"Ma'am?" he said, clearly waiting for her response.

"No, I'm fine. Listen, if you'll empty out that purse, you will see my enrollment card. You aren't allowed to detain me. As a member of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, under the Jay Treaty, I have free rights to cross the border any time I want." She motioned to her purse, on a scanning device in the corner.

"You're sure. You haven't had any medical tests?"

"I'm--Yes!" Virginia said suddenly, her tone changing, like her name had been called in a raffle drawing. "I had a stress test. My heart, they did a bunch of things. Didn't find anything but that I am stressed out."

"Do you have a sheet of paper they gave you when you were done?" Virginia shook her head. "Why didn't you tell us these things when we first asked you? It's not like people forget they've been to the doctor's."

"It was two months ago. Do you remember everything you did two months ago? Would you have remembered if someone asked you purposefully mysterious questions? Do you guys take training in how to be scary to those you can't legally do anything to?"

"Ma'am," the officer said, and sighed. "You might think this little red card from your purse means something," he said, tossing it on the table in front of us, "but it really doesn't. If I thought you were harboring a terrorist in your trunk, I would have you open it or I would open it. You can have your yearly treaty parades, but since September Eleventh, we live in a world full of evil-doers. Your days of crossing unobstructed are over. Do you understand?" Virginia nodded, as much as she didn't want to. She stared at the card that had meant so much to her. All of her family members carried them, and admired one another's, like strange baseball cards, in ways that I never see people showing passports off. Sometimes, they told each other stories about stopping border guards cold with their treaty rights. "Now, doctor's name? Place where the tests were performed?" Virginia told them, but her answers were softer, less edged with glass

shards. An officer who had run her purse through the scanner gave it back to her and they left us alone.

"Do you think she's still alive?" she said when they'd gone. I told her I didn't know. She said she wanted to get home and go immediately next door and take Copperhead back to our place, and once it happened, she wanted to bury the cat at the edge of her mother's yard, where the woods began.

"Okay," the first officer said, entering the room. "Your story checks out. You're free to go, but you really should get that slip of paper. It would have made your life so much easier," he said, tone entirely different.

"What was this all about?" she asked, as I nudged her to go. Immigration's good moods never lasted very long.

"We picked you up as soon as you entered the bridge, ma'am. We knew one of you was harboring radioactive material and by the time you pulled up to the booth, we knew which one of you it was. Your doctor should have warned you, and given you the proper documentation. You're still going to need it, if you plan to cross into Canada again in the next, oh, six months, to be on the safe side. Red card or not, your presence is going to raise warning flags."

"You're just lucky we didn't have tracking devices for dangerous characters when your sorry asses arrived from Europe. Evil-doers got here long before September Eleventh," she said, walking out, leaving me to trail behind.

We drove home in silence and as we pulled in the driveway, she immediately got out and headed for Celeste's door, which was opening

by the time I got out and ran over. We stepped in, Celeste saying nothing, just nodding and crying. She led us to the living room where Copperhead was on the floor, almost entirely wrapped in a baby blanket atop a pillow with plastic beneath. Gordon's old TV chair sat a foot or so away, appearing like it had not been used in a long time, almost ornamental in its array of miniature pillows and doilies. The twins were petting the cat's head and she purred for them. Thin pools of blood seeped from the pillow's bottom onto the plastic.

"I took her to the vet yesterday, and they said she has an enormous tumor, somewhere inside. They offered to put her to sleep there, but I asked them how long she might last, and they said no more than two days. I thought she should be at home, where she would be happy. Look, she's glad to see you," Celeste said, and Virginia knelt down, scratching Copperhead between the ears and the cat nuzzled up to meet Virginia's hand. "I'm glad you came, too. I thought we would bury her in the yard."

"Yes, in the yard," Virginia agreed. "There's a nice spot in the garden between the two houses, right near her old house. She should be home, some place where she can trust everything." I went out to Copperhead's house and pulled the blanket we had kept in there for her, looking at the spot my wife envisioned for the cat's grave, wondering if she would ever consider our house her home, or if she has just called it that to make her life with me an easier one.

originally published in *Stone Canoe*