

the writer
by riley lashea

Johnson McCoy was very glad when they went after the writer. Everyone was glad. The writer swore that all of the research was for a novel that he was working on, and he may have been telling the truth, but you don't study up on explosives and gaps in security these days and not anticipate consequences.

They picked him up at a bookshop, where he was signing copies of his most recent work, the one that was on top of the bestseller list before anybody figured out what the writer was really up to.

Few people turned out to see him that day. Once the media announced what had been found on the writer's hard drive, not many people were willing to get close enough to be associated with him. Those who did show up were held for a few hours and questioned, but were released with a stern warning and the understanding that the government was very disappointed in them.

The writer, himself, was surprised, and then indignant, as if he didn't know what it was he'd done wrong. They said that he rolled his eyes at the special force soldier who tried to explain his rights to him, so he deserved it when they slammed his head against the door frame before they put him in the car.

Johnson was there that day with other members of a group called the True Patriots. They had volunteered to surround the place, as part of their civic duty, to make sure the writer didn't try to escape. They carried guns from their personal collections and cheered the soldiers when they brought the writer out in handcuffs.

I saw Johnson standing in the photo printed in the Citizen's Gazette. It reminded me of another photo, old and faded, hidden somewhere up in the attic.

An era ago, Johnson was someone else, a member of a different group, a group of kids who fought for non-violent resistance. It wasn't the official name, but they referred to themselves as the Hippy Peace Lovers, and liked to think they were throwbacks to the "make love, not war" era. In the picture, my arm was around Johnson's neck and we were both smiling.

A couple of minutes after that photo was taken, some overzealous cops maced us and we spent the night in a cell with three conspirators, our eyes red and puffy, singing "We Shall Overcome" at the tops of our voices. The next morning, when the officers had nothing to charge us with and had to let us go, we laughed at their expense. Now, it's hard to imagine anyone who would risk laughing at someone with greater power or a gun.

Graduation disbanded the Hippie Peace Lovers and we went our separate ways. Johnson and I ended up sharing a town, but we rarely shared a cup of coffee.

Then things started to change.

I grew quiet. I'm not proud of it, but it's what I did. Johnson, however, he saw the error of his ways. He came to the, increasingly popular, conclusion that violence could only be fought with equal violence, and only greater violence resulted in victory. He got behind the country's leaders with everyone else, and their plans to rule with as iron a fist as necessary. He put out his flag each day to show his allegiance, and when his son and two daughters signed up for service, he was the proudest I'd ever known him to be.

The day after the arrest, there was a picture of the writer, his hands in thick bandages, tear tracks down his cheeks. They'd broken his fingers to keep him from writing another word that put us at risk. When his hands healed, the article assured us, they would break them again, as many times as necessary until the writer no longer wanted to use them. Or until he was unable to. I passed people looking at the image together on the streets, exchanging approving nods at our leaders' ability to dole out just punishment for a terrible crime. There were some allowances for the silly idealism of the young, but the writer was fifty-years-old. He should have known better.

It wasn't even a week later when the writer confessed. He took responsibility for every accused act: rebellion, treason, helping plan an attack on his fellow citizens. The picture showed him signing the confession, the guards smiling at his back. The pen was embellished to draw our attention to his hand and away from his bleeding eye. But whatever it took to force the truth out, all the citizens were sure he had coming to him. If they had to slice open his eye to free the facts, then so be it.

Johnson was chosen for a quote in the newspaper column. In only forty-two words, he praised and thanked the brave men who got the writer to be honest, and condemned the writer as the worst kind of agitator.

The writer's confession spared him the torture, but not his life. With threats and treason, there was no end but death. Anything less would put the public in danger. The government could stop the acts, but not the traitorous tendencies. And no matter how many times he said that they were only words, the public felt a lot safer knowing the writer was going to die. How could they be expected to distinguish fiction from fact?

The execution was open, as always, to the public. People lined up hours ahead of time for the best spots to watch the writer hang. Though I knew that it was wise to make an appearance at these social events, I had other plans with my family and I wanted to spend a day pretending that life was still worth living. When the

special forces showed up at my door though, it occurred to me that I should have altered my plans.

“Mr. Beville?”

“Yes.”

“You need to come with us.”

“Why?”

“You were in an organization in college...”

I nodded. Maybe I should have said something in my defense, but what could I say? They wouldn't have been there if they weren't certain, and, even if they were wrong, no one would have cared.

When the armored van I rode in made its stop at the writer's execution, I realized my choices didn't matter either. There was no way to spare myself this fate. No false argument to offer. No lie that could have attested to my innocence.

I could see them talking to Johnson through the small circular cutouts in the side of the van. Johnson clearly didn't want to give up his prime spot, but otherwise came with them quite willingly. I suspect he thought he had nothing to fear.

“...back before I understood things,” I heard him saying as they opened the door.

The soldier didn't care one way or the other. He just pushed Johnson up into the van and closed the door. He was both trained and paid to obey, whether by picking up an elite citizen from an important execution or by breaking the fingers of a man who refused to let the government bend them to their advantage.

The shock on Johnson's face when he saw me wasn't surprise that they had gotten to me too. It was disbelief that they would put an outspoken patriot like himself into confinement with a silent traitor like me.

In the days that followed, I thought a lot about Johnson. Every hit that came at me, every punishment handed down, I imagined hurt twice as bad for a man who didn't see them coming.

It's been twenty-three days since the writers execution, which came twenty-two days before my own.

Last night, they brought Johnson to my cell. His last request had been to talk to me. But, once they'd closed us up together, he didn't have anything to say. He just lay down on the floor by my cot and started crying, as if there were no words.

I guess there weren't. But I didn't need words to understand.

Until twenty-three days ago, Johnson McCoy was very glad they went after the writer.