

The Luxury of Mundane Things or Between the Devil and Peace

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*This is my response to, and perspective on, the events leading up to and surrounding
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From where I am, on the eighth floor, on one of the highest points in Manhattan, the view is gritty and ugly, natural and wild: Highbridge Park is a fringe along Edgecombe Avenue offering, in the right season, a thicket of green that counterbalances the concrete gray of Harlem.

Shining through my apartment in the morning, the new day pulls itself up through the glow that is as old as time, that renews itself each hour as Sol moves westward. I spend much of my time in this pleasant space. The floors and moldings of old oak have been here for a hundred years and will outlast me and any worries I try to ignore by pondering the patterns in the wood grain or the crossbeams in the ceilings. I've painted the walls yellow and lavender, magenta and rust. Tapestries patch worked from antique Indian bridal clothing hang on the living room wall. One has slivers of mirror stitched into it and when the sun hits at a certain angle, the glass shines like jagged diamonds, reflecting in some of the other mirrors that hang about the room. My furnishings are old, as in the chair I dragged off of the street and had upholstered in leather; functional as in the blonde wooden cabinet that my friend Carmen designed for me; pretty as in the antique sofa covered in raw silk; and comfortable too. An infuser burns oil of ginger or sage, sandalwood or lemon. Translucent shades hang at the windows, which offer a view

east, across the Harlem River, of the House that Ruth built. Amidst soot-darkened apartment buildings that have seen their better days sits Yankee Stadium. Running alongside of it is the Major Deegan Expressway--one of the many roads in this nation named for wars and warriors, battalions and platoons. Some of those buildings surrounding the stadium are home to veterans of conflagrations as old as World War II, Korea, Vietnam. As recent as the Gulf War, Iraq.

During baseball season I can tell when the home team is winning because the sound of Frank Sinatra's voice blaring over the loudspeakers, "It's up to you, New York, New York!" and the cheering of the crowd moves across the river, rising up through my windows. In many an October, the stadium becomes the site of a coronation: The Yankees become baseball kings (yet again), and are an American dynasty, their followers say.

This is the stadium where a year after 9/11, someone in Washington, D.C. thought it was a good idea to fly two F-117 Stealths over the game, right past my windows, which began rattling as though they would shatter. I reached the living room in just enough time to see the jets cutting across the sky, their engines sounding like rage, two balls of fire burning out of their tails. What must it be like for one of those machines to drop a bomb on you? How does the heart beat, knowing that missiles whistling and booming will bring about death and chaos, and there is nowhere to hide?

My friend Carmen is elegant, fastidious. When I first met her, she was attired in classic finery, carrying an Italian leather pocketbook to match her Italian leather pumps, and a burgundy-and-gray floral needlepoint satchel.

"Carmen, what's that thing hanging out of your bag?" I asked, pointing to a tapered plastic tube.

"Oh, that, honey?" she said, smiling, her pink pearl lipstick glistening.

"That's my caulking gun." As I stepped toward her to get a better look into the bag, she pulled the caulker out, holding it in her manicured hand, finger on the trigger, to make sure I saw the whole thing.

Other things in her bag that day were a hammer, a tape measure, wire cutters, screwdrivers, shims, a drill and a few doorknobs, nails, screws. A visual artist by gift and training, a carpenter by necessity, Carmen can build a loft bed, lay ceramic tile, and spackle with the same poise as when she cooks rice and beans, and *bacalao*.

Carmen knows terror. She's Puerto Rican, and knows that the U.S. hasn't been kind to her people. Sixty years of bombs detonated on Vieques by the Navy to test their accuracy. Fifteen minutes of machine gunfire in 1937's Ponce Massacre, killing the unarmed who were marching peacefully for the island's independence. History mixed with the pride her mother gave her created in Carmen an irrepressible nationalism. Clarity, mixed with the love she feels for humanity, created in her the idea that vengeance is not justice.

After the U.S. dropped the first bombs on Afghanistan, I asked Carmen if she supported what the government was doing.

"No, I don't. Nothing will bring anybody back."

Carmen knows loss. She survived 9/11, but her godchild died in the North Tower. On that day, running through torrents of cinder and smoke, Carmen ran down Cortlandt Street, the ash covering her. It was in her ears, her eyes, her mouth, her nose. And as she walked the six miles northward to home, she could have been carrying her goddaughter's smile in the dust that lay upon her. For many months, Carmen, who is ordinarily erect and stoic, could not stop her legs from trembling when she sat down.

"What must it be like to have bombs falling around you all the time, Carmen? Can you imagine living in a country where that happens all the time? That's the way people get shell-shocked."

"I've thought about it," she says, and looks like she doesn't want to talk about war anymore.

I sit there waiting for her to speak, which she does eventually, saying, "You know what you need to do with that table kiddo?" and before I answer, she says, "That wood needs a good cleaning."

I get my rag and dust the masks hanging in my foyer: the ones I brought back from Senegal; and when I get to the one Jeffrey brought me from Australia, I think of what happened to him as he was leaving Tel Aviv. Jeffrey is a musician. A percussionist, specifically, and when he feels like it, he sings.

He was going through customs at Ben Gurion Airport, and handed over his well-stamped United States passport to the clerk. He has played all over the world with famous jazz people.

"This is not you," the clerk said, evidently hating the stranger he was, judging by her glare.

"Yes, it is, ma'am," Jeffrey responded.

(I asked him, as he recounted the story, *Did you look different? No, not to me*, he said. *I mean, did you have hair or something?* I asked. *No, I was bald in the picture too.*)

"This is not you," the clerk repeated.

"It's me, ma'am. It's me. Look, it's me. I'm a musician. Please. All I want to do is get home to my wife and children."

And with that, the clerk tore the passport in half. Jeffrey came close to losing his mannerly decorum, and reared his head, forming his mouth to say something foul. The next thing he knew, he was on the floor, in handcuffs, his arms twisted behind his back, looking alternately into the rusty barrel of an Uzi and the eyes of its owner.

"Sir, all I want to do is get home to see my wife and children."

The police took him into an interrogation room.

"No, I am not a drug dealer. I'm a musician."

They finally let him go. I wanted to report the state of Israel to the United States State Department on Jeffrey's behalf, but what would that have done anyway?

"Do you know what those Israelis have to go through over there, Karen?" Jeffrey said to me, and it was not a question, either. It was a most emphatic statement.

Can there ever be a balance between having to choose sides and being horrified, sometimes, by what your side has chosen? What is the alternative to resisting occupation and encroachment, and the bombs strapped to bodies? When I was an African, when the Arabs and the Europeans came to enslave me, would I have wanted to kill them, or talk

them out of capturing me? When I am an African now, what is it that I expect my oppressors to suffer? The tirades that I lambaste them with? Certainly, I want them to hear me, but if they do not, then should I shut up, cower and hide, or stand up, meeting their violence against me with violence that I mete out? What is the balance?

In the morning, in the space of my kitchen that is painted daybreak orange, the kettle whistles and I make tea with milk and sugar. I cover my toast with orange marmalade from France, and sit at the table, upon a rattan Queen Anne-style chair upholstered with mudcloth imported from Ghana. The radio is on and the images that I tried not to see when I signed onto the Internet to check my e-mail and my checking account balance are being described in detail, and I shudder. I want to be ignorant. I want to be engaged in my immediate concerns about food, clothing, and shelter, so I turn off the radio, as if that action will make the world go away. This is not what I've taught my sons to do. I've asked that they respond to the noise the world makes in places that lie outside of their everyday lives. They don't.

Siyaka is going away to camp. He tells me repeatedly that he needs gear. Chenzira will be a senior in college. He'll need extra money to stock his kitchen in the little apartment he shares with his classmates. I chastise them for being apolitical and uninvolved in struggles for or against anything. But then I reconsider: What mother wants to set up her children to be tortured, jailed for trying to recreate the world in their heads in the outside world? This is what activists and revolutionaries do--seeing an idyllic peace; expecting the world to see the same.

"Ma," Chenzira says, "revolutionaries wind up in jail or dead. And they never have any money."

I counter, "But where would we be without them?" A question so complex that it is its own answer.

When I am thinking rationally, that is when I am not attempting to ignore the dread that we all live with when there is war, I think about the sturdiness of my door. Not for fear of burglars, but for fear of the State, which may send its able representatives to ring my bell or batter my door down because I have violated some section of the Patriot Act or Patriot Act II by signing petitions or going to demonstrations, or for having on the door they seek to drag me through stickers from Amnesty International and the Free Mumia campaign. Or maybe they will break in to find out what I have on my computer. Maybe they don't even have to break in, since the machine is on the net nearly all the time. Maybe the types of books I borrow from the library will cause them to seek me out.

This fear, based on the soundness of my door, or my firewall, or my library records is unreasonable only when I go through a few rounds of thought, where I calculate the cost of more locks and locksmiths, more software, to realize that the State can snatch me off the street and drag me away if it desires, because I, along with so many others, have the temerity to say publicly that we think the United States government has paraded through the world like a band of terrorists--the murderous likes of which Al-Qaeda aspires to. There are many occurrences to pick from that will illustrate what I mean. We must ask the people of Nicaragua, South Africa, Black America if what I am saying is true about this State. The Sandinistas were elected by popular vote three times: the U.S. continued to train the Contras in three main things--sabotage, torture, murder.

Before spending twenty-seven years on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela was underground in South Africa. U.S. intelligence informed the apartheid government of his whereabouts. In America, Red Summer happened in 1919. The Black Wall Street Massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921. Fred Hampton, 1969. Amadou Diallo, 2000.

I walk up the hill to buy ingredients for dinner. The Jumel Mansion--the oldest house in Manhattan--sits high on the corner. I look up at the watch tower where George Washington commanded his troops as they fought King George's imperial attempts to keep this land something like an outpost of Buckingham Palace. I think about the marinara sauce, parmesan cheese, garlic, onions, and ground turkey that I need.

On this particular day, I get to see the stock clerk build a display of rolls and rolls of paper towels, which stands like a pyramid near the vertical expanse of cola that is stacked almost as high as the ceiling. Across from the bread section, lined up in a gorgeous array, are some of the planet's riches: piles of cilantro, stacks of sweet potatoes, celery, apples, oranges, grapes. I, however, must watch my budget and resist buying anything but the items I came for, remembering my mother's words: "No matter how bad you're doing, there's always someone doing worse."

An embargo against Iraq--before the present occupation--that lasted from Bush to Clinton to Bush caused the starvation deaths of hundreds of thousands of children there. I appraise the bounty before me, considering what it feels like to starve to death. I have been told that it is not a painful way to go. The weakness sets in and the little girl, the little boy sleeps, goes into a coma, then dies.

There are newspapers near the checkout counter, and as I attempt to avert my glance, by looking at the cover of the *TV Guide*. I cannot help but wonder how many

people have died since the war this time began. In the bank, waiting for a teller, I watch a television attached to a column. It shows a picture of lines and rows of coffins draped in Old Glory. The dead inside of them are my Chenzira's age. As much as I try to turn my eyes away from the images, I cannot avoid looking. The more I try to avoid seeing, the closer I come to the place within where a woman is crouched in a corner, rocking from rage and sadness, crying. When I feel like this I must hear either music or silence.

I enter my house and wonder if any spies have been in it. I walk through the living room, to the CD player. I let it shuffle the five disks that are in the carousel. Coming through the speakers is swing articulate enough to be a call to action: McCoy Tyner and Ron Carter propel the band forward as the chorus sings "love, love, love," through many harmonic variations and textures, through a soft whispering of the words, to an outright command: "love, love, love, love."

This provides no consolation, because I still see the TV pictures and hear the radio newscaster's voice, urgent and angry, describing pictures that I had yet to see, from a place called Abu Ghraib. It makes no difference to me that the Arab men I feel compassion for, who are the subjects of these pictures, who are humiliated and tortured, would most likely despise me.

Some are forced to take their penises into their hands to entertain the American GIs. There is a tiny Christian soldier, holding the end of a noose attached to a naked detainee's neck. She does not have to cry rape this time; she is in control of who gets violated and how. She smiles from her depths. Her eyes twinkle. She looks pleased. She probably feels empowered: By her acts she comes as close as a woman can to raping a man, short of jamming something into his rectum, as was done to Abner Louima by

another person in a uniform; as was done to Muslim prisoners in Guantanamo and Abu-Ghraib, but by other men.

I wonder if the young Black men, who were soldiers in those places and in those pictures, felt more American as they maimed those Arab men in ways that Black people in the U.S. have been maimed both in and out of prison.

And some Americans, when confronted with the reality of what this nation does, become up in arms, shocked and awed that such an honorable group of citizens, otherwise known as the United States military, would do such things. And why would these honorable citizens chronicle their acts by photographing them to share with others?

The sharing of images is nothing new. The technology that allows for superfast, worldwide dissemination is. When the technology was a rudimentary camera and a hand-cranked printing press, someone produced postcards of lynchings, made from photos of those atrocities. The little Christian white woman smiling from her depths with glee, enraptured over a brown person's misery, is not a new occurrence: The chronicles of lynchings show smiling women holding itty-bitty babies, pointing out the charred men as though that lesson were the most important one of all.

Another picture from Iraq—not even the most gruesome—becomes commingled with the ones I keep in my racial memory. The pointed hood on the man standing on a stool reminds me of those men who rode in the American south at night, inspiring D.W. Griffith to make his seminal film on the need to protect whiteness at all costs. In the photo from Abu-Ghraib, since I thought the hood was another kind of hood, I didn't understand why it wasn't white. I thought that some soldier had adorned himself in such a get up, because he did not have sufficient white yardage to make a long robe with flared

sleeves like what the grim reaper wears, so the proud soldier fashioned any old cloth into a serviceable version of the legacy that he needed to be ever faithful to.

I was wrong. The hood and robe were not improvised Klan attire. I was right. The white soldiers remained true to their legacy, and stripped, defiled, and piled the brown bodies on top of one another, like corpses in a mass grave. Those bodies were not dead, but living, and had been fashioned into a spectacle that is the visage of the lingering and terrifying loathing that one human being can have for another. There is no need to mention an epoch, or name a religion, race, culture, or place of origin, because this loathing is the essence of all horror, regardless of who is acting horribly. There is no space in my house quiet enough for me to contemplate the complexities and to come up with a clear conclusion of what legacy the African-American soldiers in those photos were being faithful to. The shelves of books that line my hallway walls, the songs I play from my CDs, the faces of my family and friends in my photo albums are all about historicizing, analyzing, speechifying, strategizing, storifying, musicizing, poeticizing, testifying, sanctifying what it has meant to be a Black American for four hundred years. There are no references anywhere to invading other people's countries and torturing them, sometimes to death. I suppose that Black America is no longer this country's voice of morality, its litmus test as it was during all of our movements to be equal. I want to know whether those African American soldiers at Abu Ghraib remembered or ever knew that Bull Connor used dogs.

I do not want to abandon my own attempts to remain as calm as a Stepford Wife as I sit in my living room drinking chardonnay. I wish I could be comforted by the thought that the president is trying to "save" the American republic from the Arabs.

There was a time, when African American people could sit smugly at their dinner tables, watching the trouble that white folks done got themselves in by going all around the world killing up people for no reason 'cept money and what kind of reason is that? That day is over. Condoleeza Rice and Colin Powell are not like me.

To think clearly of the things I know is to be too fully in the moment. It means I must pay attention to all that is going on beyond my front door. It means I must come out of the haze that floats around me, there because I want it to attenuate my vision. It means that one thought leads me to another: I know men and women who have been tortured. They were tortured by the teachers of torture. By the people who founded a place called School of the Americas, where the fine points of physical and psychological terror are taught to the willing, the depraved to use in Latin America and elsewhere.

Through the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) that began during the 1960s to stop the fight for equality, these teachers of torture had time to study the mental makeup of my friends. Had time to surveil them, photograph them, tap their phones, cause their families to become unemployed.

The torturers chained Mark to a chair in an interrogation room with a single light bulb hanging over his head. Because they knew about Mark, the room was tropical. They thought the heat would break him, but it didn't. They thought the fact that he was sitting in his own urine would sufficiently humiliate him so he would talk to them about the Black Panthers. He did not, so he was imprisoned. He has never told me any other things they did to him, except when they would move him from one prison to the next, the torturers put him in shackles, made him lie on the floor of the van, while guards pointed a shotgun a piece at his head. He was seventeen.

The torturers left Safiyah in a the basement of a jailhouse that was infested with rodents: they knew she was pathologically fearful of rats and mice. When I asked her how she finally got out of that basement, she couldn't remember. The trauma was so profound that all she remembered was looking up through a small window at daylight. They wanted her to testify against her comrades in the Panthers, but she would not, so she found a way to sky up, and went underground, where she lived as someone else until she was caught and placed in prison.

When I suggest to Safiyah that she must write all this down, she tells me, "Nah, if I write a book, then that means I will have to relive all of the things that happened. I'm not ready to do that. I've tried."

The police handcuffed Joseph as they arrested him for unruly behavior at a demonstration, then took him around the corner, where they took their turn pummeling his face and head.

When Felipe's mother went to the stationhouse to get him after he had been arrested, she walked right past him as he sat waiting on a bench, because she did not recognize her own son. The officers did to him what the other officers did to Joseph.

I know a woman, Ramona, who survived a bomb that the state of Pennsylvania dropped on her house, destroying an entire neighborhood in the process and burning up her family

My CDs are arranged alphabetically inside the drawers that I had made especially for them. I begin to randomly, and without looking, pull five from their various slots, then I opt for silence, so I can concentrate on what might ultimately happen to all of us. A

scenario presents itself: The heavy boots of soldiers, assembling in the streets to insure that not one word is uttered to engender the remembrance of democracy, or the need for it. Then, another scenario: The heavy boots of another type of warrior, fighting for peace, assembling in the streets to willfully and rightfully demonstrate that democracy will never be a memory.

Is it foolish to remain hopeful now?

In my arrogance or naïveté, I cannot decide which, I've proclaimed, "the only people who can stop the war in Iraq are the citizens of America!" But how can this be accurate when many an American's idea of reality are television shows featuring plastic surgery, a desert island full of back-stabbing competitors, or crying young women who aspire to modeling superstardom.

The Earth is crowded with holes: The lands are full of craters that have been left by bombs. The shallow graves where the war dead have been buried are taking up too much space.

The American nation has tanks, airplanes, helicopters, automatic firearms, grenades, grenade machine guns, missiles, and video-game-like control mechanisms to deliver those missiles. To combat this onslaught, some Iraqis, in defense of themselves, dig up old landmines from a previous war to use as booby traps against the young American men, who have been dispatched to kill them, who, like my friend Jeffrey just want to go home. Other Iraqis explode their own bodies or cars.

These are not single, recent manifestations of breaches of a minimal expectation that universal respect should be accorded. These are replications of wounds amassed over time, where some of us have forgotten that we are us, or maybe some never knew.

There have been no weapons of mass destruction found anywhere in the sands of Iraq. And as much as I think that the calm and peace in my house is going to sustain me, my heart knows that my thoughts are fraudulent and dangerous.

The chorus sings, "love, love, love, love," and I put my boots on to walk in yet another anti-war demonstration, hoping that no one enters my sanctuary while I'm gone.