

AWAKE

WE'RE NOT SO DIVIDED

RODGER
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This is a work of fiction. For the purpose of the story, quotations from historical figures are included, along with very real historical events, institutions, agencies, and public offices. Except for the author, the characters are all based on real people.

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HOW I MET MELODY

THE PROTEST IN the park across from the governor's mansion had been rowdy and noisy, just what the organizers hoped for. The signs protesting the recent Supreme Court decision on abortion was supposed to be the focus, but small groups advertising grievances on dozens of issues carried signs and chanted slogans. As a writer, I had watched from the sidelines looking for people, real people and taking notes. These groups were even better than airports for studying humans, looking for interesting examples, models that someday might be developed into fictional characters in a novel. I'd just started to outline a political thriller, one where competing factions were forced to work together when they realized the very doctrine that allowed disagreement was at risk.

I'd also hoped that at least a few of the politicians in attendance would reach into their exploration of the constitution and address what I believed was the elephant in the room. You know, kind of a realistic starting point for the planned book. But all I heard was platitudes.

I'd taken the time to ready the Dobbs decision and to then

haul out my trusty pocket copy of the Constitution. While the Supreme Court decision was being blasted for outlawing abortion, what I'd read was that the decision really dealt with a different issue. But after years of observing American politics, I'd accepted that while a large block of the country saw all politics as local, there was also a block that demanded the Federal Government solve every problem. The court argued that the legislative branches of government were the correct place to solve social ills and desires, that is if individuals could not solve them themselves. Their decision was that the court had no constitutional role in what a woman could or could not do with a pregnancy unless it was to adjudicate a law passed by some legislative body. Of course, the half-dozen politicians in attendance didn't see the decision that way. Each had taken their ten minutes to blast conservative senators for approving the justices who had just upended what the court viewed as an unconstitutional decision a half century ago. Still, a couple of the most vocal politicians might be good characters.

But my observations were irrelevant to what I had just witnessed. And that wasn't why I was there. As the rally broke up, I closed my notebook and decided that 4:30 on a Saturday was the perfect time to review my notes over a cold beer, preferably a local pilsner or lager as my aging stomach objected from time to time to my favorite IPA. I settled into a large corner booth at a pub across from the park, taking my favored chair with my back to the corner and three empty chairs across from me. Back against the wall just like Wild Bill Hickok except for his last poker game. Normally, as the only patron I would have chosen a seat at the bar, but the place was empty, and I needed some room to spread out notes on possible characters.



Six women carried their signs back to the parking lot two blocks from the Capital building.

“Well, that went well,” offered a greying woman dressed in jeans and a college sweatshirt as she tossed her sign into the back of her Volvo. “The faculty meeting on Wednesday was all about how we overturn this ridiculous decision. Thanks to all of you for your efforts.” Four other women added their signs before the college professor slammed the hatch on her car.

“How do you think that went? She asked of a late twentyish woman just dropping her leather bag into the passenger seat of her Subaru. “I mean, you’re a reporter, Melody, what are you going to write?”

Melody stepped away from her open driver’s door, turning toward the voice. She recognized the professor, Dr. Becka, as one of her former mentors, one who had really helped shape her thinking. Brushing a loose strand of light tan hair from her face she couldn’t help but smile. “That rally will be my top story tomorrow. You all did a great job of organizing. How you feel about this anti-woman decision came booming through. It helped to have folks from ‘Black Lives Matter’ and the ‘Equity Justice Project’ supporting you. The system needs a reboot.”

“But did we move the needle? If the legislature attempts to push through anti-abortion legislation, can we build enough opposition to stop it until we can get Congress to pass national legislation?”

Melody absently-mindedly leaned against the fender of her yellow hatchback before catching herself. She’d forgotten how dirty her car was after her backcountry trip with two friends the day before. She slapped at what she knew was a layer of dust on her dark brown sweater and black jeans. “I don’t know,” she answered. “We had an editorial meeting last week. My editor is a strong progressive, but also a pragmatist. He asked us to start looking for some feedback from the other side. One of his favorite themes is

that it isn't very interesting to write about people in an echo chamber. You can't move the needle if you are only talking to people who believe what you already believe."

The five women around the Volvo all stopped what they were doing and stared.

The professor shook her head. "There is no justification for greed and hate. If I wanted to listen to the opposition, I would turn on Fox News." She pressed a button on her key fob, locking her car. "I need a glass of wine. Anyone want to join me?"

"You're our ride home," replied the much younger head of a local non-profit that focused on homeless issues. "I'm in."

"Care to join us, Melody?" asked the professor. "I'm curious about how you can even consider writing about what people who just don't give a damn think. We need to find a way to either reeducate them or get them the hell out of the way."

By the time the women reached the pub, it was filling up fast.



I watched as six women, including two who I knew were organizers of the rally marched through the door, looking for an empty table. The youngest one, the girl-next-door blond was one of the people who I'd studied at the rally. I wasn't quite sure what character she might represent some day, but unlike most of the people there, she had remained quiet and from time to time seemed to be narrating the event into her phone.

I noted that the only open table was the one next to me, so I waived and pointed toward it.

"Take the extra chairs," I offered as the women crowded around an identical table to mine. I slid my notes into more of a pile, while I concentrated on filling in my recollections of a zealous red-haired, middle-aged woman with a double-sided sign; one side screamed about the fascist court and the other with three huge letters, D E

I, which I knew referred to diversity, equity, and inclusion. From the moment she'd arrived she was a blur in the crowd, in the face of anyone who would tolerate her. My planned story might need one additional character.

For the next two hours, two beers and one order of loaded tater tots, I used my imagination to fill in what I didn't know about the six people that I'd signaled out of the crowd. I liked to actually discuss my notes with those I used as character models but found that most of my subjects only wanted to talk about their feelings, not themselves.

Now, I'm a retired businessman and politically non-affiliated, a man whose politics would generally be described as somewhat libertarian. I am also a student of history and a political scientist by education. I like to write about snippets of history that just don't add up, usually some incident where what the powerful wanted went all to hell and was then covered up. I am no fan of the elites, but even less of a fan of government bungling. But as much as I tried to focus on my character studies, the tone of the women next to me and their anger at just about everything in society and their deep-seated belief that government, especially the courts could right all wrongs surprised me.

The women all drank white wine, except for the blond woman who'd ordered a beer to go with a chef's salad, the only food on the table.

I had just about decided that I needed more quiet to complete my work when a cell phone rang. The woman in the university sweatshirt answered, held a short conversation, and then stood, announcing, "If you need a ride, you need to drink up. I need to get home."

Like shorebirds, five of the women rose as one. They picked up separate checks from the table and headed for the cashier, leaving the blond woman staring, her fork of lettuce dangling.

“Let me know if I can get you any more materials for your story, Melody,” offered the professor as she dug out her credit card.

I waited a few minutes, thinking this might be an opportunity to flesh in some detail on one of my character models by actually talking to one.

“So, you are a writer?” I asked when the woman finally looked over at me. “I’m a fiction writer, but one who loves to use history and current events as the basis for what I write. I overheard someone say you are a writer as well.”

“I’m a feature reporter for both the paper and a regional magazine.” She answered. She took a minute to study the papers on my table. “What are you working on?”

I explained how I did character research, recalling how one woman at an airport, a woman so full of anguish that nobody would go near her had turned into a critical character in one of my books. “I’d like to learn more personal detail about those I think might be great characters, make them more real, but I seldom get the opportunity. When I ask, most are uncomfortable around someone who might have different opinions. We’ve retreated into silos of like-minded people.”

“I get it,” replied the woman. “My name is Melody and one of my assignments is to dig out why so many people refuse to accept that the system is rigged against most of us, especially minority groups and the poor. When I approach a lot of businesspeople and self-proclaimed conservative leaders, they just shake their head and turn away. Either that or they go on the attack.”

With six decades of life behind me, many in business before I turned to writing, I recognized an opportunity when I saw one.

“Would you like to join me? Maybe we can help each other.”

Melody emptied her beer, then picked up her salad plate and slid it onto my table. She swiveled her high bar stool to face me and smiled. “We can try,” she said, “but you need to know that I have pretty strong feelings about what is happening in America

today, and I love a good debate.” She held her empty beer glass up and signaled the waitress that she wanted another.

I used the time it took for her new beverage to arrive to digest what I'd just heard. “You know, Melody, may I call you Melody?” She nodded as she chewed a bite of salad. “You know you might have just hit on why we are both struggling.”

She nodded, encouraging me to go on, a great tool to keep people talking when they are offering something that might be important, a lawyer's tool and a good writer's tactic.

“Maybe, we both tend to open conversations in a way to encourage debate. I know that I can be more than a little pushy about my beliefs. I'm reminded of a Robert Frost quotation, ‘People have to think, that's not to agree or disagree, that's voting.’”

“I don't know your name,” she replied.

“Rodger with more than one last name depending on whether it serves me to use my pen name or not.”

“Well, Rodger, perhaps we should try to have a discussion then, not a debate, just an exchange of ideas.”

I sorted through my notes and found my minimal observations on Melody. Sliding them across the table I opened with, “Perhaps we can start with you helping me fill in some blanks on yourself.”

Melody's face turned a bit blank, obviously uncomfortable.

“Or” I offered, “you can give me a list of subjects that might help your story. If I'm not the right one to comment, I'll bet I know someone who can.”

She relaxed. “Okay, but no talking heads or academic experts. If I wanted their opinions, I'd buy their book.”

“I'm more than a little partial to what common men believe myself,” I answered. “No matter how bad things get, in the real world, superman is not coming to the rescue. Most common men and women, when faced with crises, probably have a cape of their own in their closet.”

Melody put down her fork and sipped a bit of her Blue Moon with a slice of orange, looking over the top of her glass at me. “Why are so many people so fond of capitalism when socialism is more equitable? Why is wealth so important and for that matter, what is real wealth? Isn’t economic justice a greater responsibility? I mean, racial and economic equality never seem to get better. For that matter, how does anyone help the economy as a whole? How does one improve their personal or family financial situation? Great family wealth seems really bad for the economy. The fat cats ignore those in need.”

My response took some time and about half of my remaining beer.

“Don’t you have any pre-scripted answers?” Melody asked.

“Well, ma’am, you just challenged me to recite from memory the entire history of America’s economy, and probably the world’s.” I paused, and added, “I see why many might give you a thousand-yard stare after that opening.”

“It just isn’t fair that black family wealth is only a fraction of that of white families. Rich people pass on their wealth. That gives their kids a huge leg up over poor people. Inherited wealth is just plain wrong.”

Melody was not the quiet observer that I’d watched, and she was just winding up. “Which opens a new area we need to discuss. Why are so many of you so determined to follow a constitution written by a bunch of old white slave owners two hundred years ago? It needs to be updated to meet today’s societal changes. And the courts need to offer remedies for the racist laws based on that outdated document, they need to reinterpret it to fit today.”

“Oh.” There was no stopping this now.

She continued. “So many call America an exceptional country, but it is filled with inequality and huge gaps in social justice. We aren’t far removed from the mindset of slaves and slave owners and

workers as pawns who only create wealth for those already rich. And our system hasn't changed for 200 years. The rich people of this country only rebelled from England because the British were about to outlaw slavery."

By now I was furiously taking notes. My inclination was to cut my losses and get the hell out of there, but I'd been the one to open a dialog, and accepted her idea of a conversation. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Honest disagreement is often a good sign of progress," I replied. I paused, but she was through.

"Anything else we need to cover besides human history for the last 4,000 years?" I knew that was a little confrontational, but I was struggling to keep it to a little confrontational. I needn't have worried; Melody had run her course and didn't even hear me. I waited for her to look up.

"I was right, I am not the one to answer all of your questions. I can handle some of what you are looking for, that is if you really want answers, if I wouldn't be wasting your time. And it is going to take some time since to really address your concerns I am going to have to introduce you to three or four others with better answers than I have."

She looked at me and smiled. "My stories will run for the next six weeks, so I have the time."

"Great, let's get started on Tuesday, there is someone I want you to meet, someone who is a great hands-on expert on the economy. I'll set it up. Now, your turn. Tell me about yourself young lady."

"You know that term young lady is condescending. Next you will want to pay for my salad and hold the door for me when I leave."

"Guilty. When I grew up, those were all things a gentleman did, they were part of what my single mom called manners. But I'll try to control it while we work together. Now, tell me about Melody, your background, your education and what you like to do. Beyond your strong feelings, what makes you tick."

“Tuesday works for me.” She handed me her card. “Just call me and tell me where and when to meet you. I’ll bring you a short resume when we meet.”

I handed Melody my card which included a reference to my writing website. “I’ll call my buddy tomorrow morning and see if we can get with him on Tuesday. I’ll call you. Remember, I’m only going to ask him to discuss the economy. I’ve some other people in mind for the rest of your list, but it may take a while to set it all up.”