
Thoughts and Prayers

The starlings that hung in the crisp autumn air rising above the Upstate New York town, and the crows that had already appropriated the cross pieces on the telephone poles, had already sensed that's the bustle of activities taking place in the streets below would likely render leftovers for them to scavenge. For the present there was too much activity and they would have to bide their time above the fray.

The flashing lights of police cars and the emergency response vehicles, and the broadcast towers from media trucks had become familiar warnings, even to people in small towns that were usually off the national media radar. As were the blaring sirens and shouts, and even screams, from the confused assembly of people in the late morning overcast light. Only the leftovers mattered to the anxious avians.

At ground level the ribbons of yellow crime scene tape fluttered in the light breeze and were mostly ignored by reporters and the cameramen still arriving for the imminent press conference. The hastily assembled public address system squawked and screeched with feedback as Sheriff Cavanaugh stood straight in his starched white and militarily creased shirt with four golden stars on each epaulet, checking his notes in front of the microphone. Two burly deputies were behind his left shoulder and the Mayor and Pastor Thorne of the local African American Baptist church were on his right flank. The tech support guy from Palatine High School finally got the PA system to settle down.

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“Good morning everyone . . . Well I guess good morning is not really an appropriate greeting given the reason that we are all here. This has been a terrible morning.”

Jerry Cavanaugh, still sporting his US Marine Corps buzz cut and his slightly blurry USMC symbol and *Semper Fi* tattoos on his forearms, affected the reluctant demeanor of someone who preferred not to be doing a press conference. But in fact, although he admitted it only to himself, he rather enjoyed this little stage to display his military bearing and his civil authority. Whatever it was, it was all sort of an act, a performance, as most every elected public official had come to appreciate. In fact, these performances were getting to be rather commonplace.

“At 9:18 this morning a shooter came onto the campus of Palatine High and entered the classroom building by the east door. He was armed with an AR15 and five clips of ammunition. He was also carrying a loaded .38 revolver and a bayonet. He shot and killed campus security officer, Mr. Bouscaren, who was stationed outside the main entrance of the building.”

Bouscaren, aged 53, and a former Air Force B-52 flight engineer, had been wearing a Kevlar vest, but was shot once in the neck and once in the head. A large coffee mug and a glazed donut were found under his body. His Glock 9mm pistol was still in its holster.

The Sheriff did not mention these details. “According to statements we have been taking, the shooter then entered the building and began firing his weapon at any target and yelling something in a foreign language. The shooter forced his way into three classrooms and one office, firing at random according to witnesses. Four students, one teacher and one staff member were killed and thirteen students injured. There might be three more students who were lightly-injured and managed to escape the building. We are still assembling this information. Names of the victims are being withheld at this time.

“The shooter is dead and we are establishing his identification as we speak. I know that you must have many questions, as do we at this point. Please be patient and there will be another conference in about an hour, at which Mayor Vreeland will speak.”

Karen Gagan-Kemp of FOX News 5, who had forced her way to the front of the media scrum, immediately shouted, “Sheriff Conklin, how many?”

The Sheriff, who was familiar with the attractive, impeccably-coiffed local evening news anchor, cocked his head and pursed his lips in frustration. “Later, Karen,” he said, leaning back toward the mic “your patience will be appreciated.”

“Just one question,” she insisted. The other reporters let her take the lead.

Cavanaugh ignored her. “Reverend Thorne of Redeemer Baptist Church has asked to lead us in a prayer for now. Thank you.”

Gagan-Kemp glared at the Sheriff, and pushed her way back through the scrum before the very large clergyman could get the mic adjusted to his height. Thorne, six-foot-five in height and near 300-pounds wrapped in an expensive black suit and a bright maroon silk shirt beneath a starched clerical collar, loomed like a Protestant church unto himself, as imposing as an Old Testament prophet. Ironically, he did not possess a prophet’s stentorian voice, but a squeaky high-tone that made one wonder if it was coming from elsewhere.

“My brothers and sisters in Christ,” Thorne presumptuously began, “we implore our blessed Savior to receive the souls of those lost to us today in this senseless and Satanic act of murder, into his welcoming embrace.” Beads of sweat were already forming on his forehead beneath Thorne’s processed and pomaded hair. “Lord Jesus, we take comfort in that your sacrifice on that Roman cross has redeemed those who have taken you into their hearts.”

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Off to the side, nearly blotted out from the view of the television cameras by the mountainous Thorne, Pastor Carson “Pearly” Gaites, of the Lutheran-affiliated Congregation of the Risen Savior leaned uncomfortably on his single crutch. Out of professional courtesy, if not Christian charity, Thorne might have allowed Gaites to precede him, but theirs was not a relationship of apostolic fraternity, but of competitors for the limited souls in Palatine and its hinterland. Someone aware of their rivalry mumbled that Gaites was waiting his turn for those who did not want to end up in “Black heaven.” Gaites, was a “specialist” in preaching about heaven because he had a near death experience and said he was actually in paradise for over an hour while EMT staff were cutting him out of his crunched automobile and “brought him back” to life because Jesus had more work for him to do.” His congregation’s enrollment surged for a while, but tapered off after his reference to the heaven he experienced as being a place free of “Jigaboo music.”

Gagan-Kemp reached the FOX 5 remote truck and her assistant. “Pastor blowhard will be going on for a while. He seems in usual funeral oration form. Listen, somebody said that there was a civilian involved in stopping the shooter. Right now, there’s no information coming out of the Sheriff, so see if you can find out if there’s anything in the usual sources of communication. I think there have been some family members of victims that have been notified, but the police are keeping press away from them for present. I need to find someplace to take care of what that double latte and bran muffin is doing to me. I don’t want to be following the nationals once they get here.”

Those listening to Reverend Thorne drone on with his recitation of scriptural references thinned to a couple dozen, mostly Black, Jesus-praising devotees. But the general scene began to thicken with the arrival of more concerned parents

and friends as well as the usual snooping onlookers. There were scattered shouts of jubilation and tears of joy as parents discovered their children were unharmed. There were hugs and those looking for someone to hug, names called out, and seemingly everyone else on a cell phone. Stand-ups from a half-dozen television stations were being set up, trying not to be in each other's shot.

In the middle of a cluster of Sheriff's Department vehicles, their flashing colored emergency lights generating an almost carnival midway atmosphere, a young man is being interviewed by Cavanaugh and a couple of plainclothes officers, alerting Gagan-Kemp's reporter's nose that something significant or newsworthy might be involved. Thinking it might be one of the students who had information she made her way over, but was intercepted by a Sheriff deputy.

"Sorry ma'am, no press at the moment." He knew who she was, the most popular local evening news anchor. The cops referred to her as "Lady Blah-Blah."

"Can you just tell me who the young man is that the Sheriff is talking to?" she asked, using her best girlish 'wouldn't you like to fuck me' look that actually got her the news anchor job and might get her a move on up to the network. KGK, as she had come to be known, started out as the "weather girl," a good spot to show off the Barbie Doll figure. But it bugged her that her anchor job got her called what the British termed a "news reader." She had the itch to be, or at least be seen to be, a real journalist, a reporter with credentials earned right where history was happening, and where she could be the author of its "first chapter." Like those BBC women reporters in the Middle East, or Paris, or Beijing; then maybe graduating to *60 Minutes*, or a Pulitzer for a book, somebody that everybody would raise a glass to at any Foreign Correspondents Club, or be asked to keynote one of those Washington Press Corps affairs. But that re-

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quired more than perfect legs and tits, and the Chiclet smile she was giving the deputy.

“Just his name? Officer . . . Carney,” she said, reading the name plate below his shield. KGK’s breathy voice always carried a hint of moan.

“Don’t know. Just that he’s not a student. He’s a teacher.”

“A teacher?” she repeated.

“Yeah, but he’s gonna be a hero.”

“A hero? Why?”

“That’s the guy they are saying took down the shooter.”

“Really? I thought it was a law officer?”

“Not what I’ve heard; a civilian,” he assured her.

“Thanks,” KGK said and made her way around the perimeter until she came upon a small group of students. She approached the only one that was not on her cell phone. The girl had obviously been crying, but the reporter ignored that.

“Excuse me, miss . . .

“I can’t talk right now, I’m too . . .” the girl said.

“I understand, KGK replied. “I’m just trying to find out the name of that teacher over there talking to the Sheriff. Do you know his name?” She pointed.

“That’s Mr. Greco.”

“Mr. Greco. Do you know his first name?”

The girl turned and interrupted one of the other girls to ask if she knew.

The other girl frowned, but then said, “Marius. Or maybe Marcus.”

“Do you happen to know what he . . . ?” KGK began to ask, but one of the other girls on a phone burst into tears and they all turned to hugging one another.

KGK made her way back to their remote truck and asked her assistant to get into the school’s website and find out what she could about Mr. Marius, or Marcus Greco.

Pastor Gaites had replaced Thorne and was now droning on, relating the now boring cliched story of how he had stood before the “pearlescent gates of heaven” but was snatched back before entering by the EMT because God had more work for him to do before he would return to be reunited with those who were “called” by their creator with terrorist bullets. That interpretation of the morning’s events elicited a couple of audible groans and a wrenching sob from some bereaved family member. By the time KGK had returned from one of the Port-o-Pottys that had already been ranked at the site, the assistant met her with some information.

“Your Mr. Greco has been teaching urban anthropology here for the past year and a half. He’s from California, master’s degree from UCLA, also assistant wrestling coach, thirty-one, single. Cute, too, in a James Franco sort of way, but looks taller by the photo on the school website.”

“I’ll have to confirm that,” KGK said. But when she returned to where her subject had been involved in conversation with the Sheriff, he was gone. Maybe there will be more at the next press briefing, she thought. She headed back to the remote truck screaming her mind that Rev. Pearly Gaites to “shut the fuck up.”



Two evenings before the morning of the school shooting, at midnight, Marius Greco made a call to LA.

“Nine PM, exactly,” Chamsi answered. “How are things in...what the name of that place?”

“Palatine. Nothing very exciting happens here,” he responded. “How about there? How is she doing? Last time I called, things didn’t sound too good.”

Chamsi could sense the impatient worry in his voice. “Dr. Rong scanned her again last week and ran some other tests.

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He's not optimistic Marius, and you know how she is; she doesn't want any bullshit, just straight talk. And I can't stop her from insisting that she is a burden living at our house."

His heart sank. "What about the list?"

"There's not much hope with anything soon on that. Anyway, it's not in our hands. And there's always the possible discrimination factor," she said.

"How about you, Cham? How's school going?"

"It's a struggle, but I can't complain, particularly when I see what she is going through. At least I am learning stuff that can help matters. I can now install pick lines for her IVs when she needs them and keep check on her vitals at home."

"You're getting a little over my head here," Marius said.

"But I'm also getting some experience in the OR, which is where I want to specialize. Your mom has been great. She's always bringing stuff over. We're becoming addicted to Mexican food. She does laundry and cleans. She's a saint, Marius."

"So are you, Cham. I feel so damn helpless here." He paused. "What about those cousins? Any more trouble with them?"

"Not since my cousin, Ali, put a gun against the forehead of one of them when he came to the door about a month ago. My cousin doesn't like those guys from their school days. But it makes their sister nervous. She thinks somebody is going to get hurt, or killed."

"Maybe I should come back, Cham . . .".

"No, Marius," she interrupted. "Really, that would only inflame them more. They are never going to stop blaming Jazmeen for her brothers being in prison. At least she is safe from them. Just stay where you are for now and take care of your work. It's the best we can do for now."

"Well, I made another deposit to your account. Use it as you see fit. At least let me help that way. Okay?"

"Okay."

“And give our girl a hug for me.”

“I will. And I’ll tell her it’s from you.”

Marius could feel his throat tightening with emotion. “Okay,” he croaked. “Next time, Cham; same night, same time?”

“Yes. Good night, Marius.”



KGK had just finished refreshing her makeup and gathering her stuff for the 4 o’clock press briefing when her assistant handed her a couple sheets of paper. “ere, I got a little further information from California,” she said. KGK stuffed them into her bag and set out for the briefing.

Sheriff Cavanaugh adjusted the mic up from Rev. Gaites’ height and cleared his throat. “I want to thank the Reverend for his thoughts and prayers as we have been gathering information about this morning’s tragic events. Since then several members of national press have arrived and I am told that the BBC and *Telemnudo* are on their way.” The Sheriff paused to look at some notes. The sun glinted off the four silver stars on the wings of his collar. “At approximately 8:47 this morning shooter entered the main classroom building by the north door. He was carrying an AK47 assault rifle and several magazines of additional ammunition. We have subsequently learned that he was also armed with a .38 revolver and a bayonet. Before entering, he shot Mr. Bouscaren, the Security Officer. Mr. Bouscaren died immediately, having received two gunshot wounds to his back and the back of the head. The perpetrator then proceeded through the halls, apparently looking for any target of opportunity. He did not seem to be seeking out any particular persons. He almost immediately shot two female students at their lockers. They had heard the shots that killed Mr. Bouscaren, but did not take them as sounds of

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gunfire. We know this because both girls survived being shot and are in the hospital, one in critical condition.”

“Thank you, Jesus,” a woman in the crowd shouted. A reporter beside KGK mumbled, “For what, the Second Amendment?”

Sheriff Cavanaugh briefly looked up from his notes with a frown. “She is in surgery as we speak,” he continued.

“And in our thoughts and prayers,” the same woman shouted.

“Please,” Coughlin said through an anger-constricted voice, “this is a press conference. You will have ample time and opportunity for . . . ah . . . ah, other expressions, later. I’ll thank you to allow me to continue without interruption. People have been waiting patiently for this information.”

“Christ, why doesn’t Mother Theresa shut up and go and light a candle at the shrine,” the reporter beside KGK grumbled again, referring to the assemblage of signs, balloons, teddy bears and candles growing at the campus gate.

KGK recognized the Boston accent and said, “People here are in shock. We should make allowances.” She realized that that really didn’t sound like her, that level of empathy.

Yeah,” he replied ambiguously. “Maybe I’ve covered too many of these. And they are all seeming to follow the same cliché script. Thoughts and prayers.” His reply was actually closer to her cynicism about these events.

Beads of sweat has begun to appear on Sheriff Cavanaugh’s forehead just below his hairline and the armpit areas of his crisply ironed shirt were also dark with perspiration. “From the sequence of events that we have been able to reconstruct, it appears that the perpetrator next encountered Mr. Parker, a mathematics teacher, who was about to enter his classroom. Mr. Parker died in the hallway from three gunshot wounds to his torso. I am told that Mr. Parker was scheduled to retire at the end of this term.” The Sheriff decided not to add that

Mr. Parker had been his math teacher when he attended this same high school. Sentimentality must not intrude upon professionalism. He continued, an image of a slumped Mr. Parker, lingering in the background of his thoughts. He noticed that Mayor Vreeland had arrived, taking a place behind him on the steps that served as a dais.

“Mrs. Ramirez, the administrative office secretary, was wounded when the perpetrator fired through the office window. The bullet missed her but she received several cuts from the flying glass. She should be released from hospital soon.”

“God bless you, Mrs. Ramirez,” someone shouted in celebration of the woman whose job often involved bad news but was nevertheless much beloved by both students and faculty. “Go Espehranza,” someone else yelled.

Cavanaugh just ignored this outburst, not wanting to appear disrespectful to the sweet-tempered woman he remembered. “The perpetrator then proceeded down the hallway seeking targets. But by this time most of those in the building had been alerted by the gunfire and either left by the south-side door, or followed drills to secure themselves in classrooms. Unfortunately, the Chemistry Lab was not locked and three students working on early experiments were shot. Two were killed almost instantly according to another student that hid below a lab table. That student also had the presence of mind to quickly dial 911 on her cell phone, which was the first alert that the school was under attack.

“We’re not going to have much of a story if they don’t start giving us some names,” KGK grumbled.

“Standard operating procedure for these kinds of things,” the Brooklyn reporter responded. “The answer I got at one of these events, the one out in San Bernardino I think, was that the cops can’t be sure that there were not specific targets that the perpetrator was after, and so they don’t want them identified.”

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“Thanks,” KGK replied, “For saving me from looking like a complete rookie.”

“My pleasure. Maybe you can help on some local details later. Any decent bars in this burg?”

“Only indecent ones.”

They had missed a couple of sentences from Cavanaugh; his description of four other students being wounded that the shooter had discovered running down a side corridor. All were wounded. Conklin commented that the perpetrator did not seem interested in finishing off his victims, perhaps intent on finding someone in particular.

“We may never know the answer to that question,” Cavanaugh added. I want to turn things over now to Mayor Vreeland who will take things from here at this point.”

It was obvious to several of the local press that Vreeland must have made it clear to the Sheriff that he wanted to relate the juiciest part of the emerging story.

“Firstly, I want to say that my thoughts, prayers and condolences go out to the victims and families and friends who have been affected by this heinous act of terrorism. We have seen too many of these tragic events in the news, but we never expect that we will be visited by one of them in our own community. But no place is exempt in the world in which we live today, a world of globalization in which no community has secure borders against those who hate our Christian democracy.”

“There’s a first, what the hell is a Christian democracy?” mumbled the Brooklyn reporter. “Isn’t that a contradiction in terms?”

KGK quietly wondered whether there was any possibility this guy would be able to file an objective story.

“We have four dead citizens of Palatine and several in critical condition in the hospital. Our once quiet, law-abiding community has been thrust into the post-911 world because we can no longer control our national borders.”

KGK had heard Vreeland on this subject before. She had actually interviewed him when it was first mentioned that the small-town mayor might be a good Republican candidate for Governor. Polished and always well-dressed, he probably was a millionaire a few times over from his farm equipment sales and rental business, he had ticked almost all of the conservative boxes except never having served in the military. That did not prevent Vreeland from being militaristic, which he expressed through his service on the Draft Board during the Vietnam War.

“Fortunately, we still have courageous Americans willing to stand up and risk der lives for der fellow citizens,” the Mayor said with an accent still slightly flavored by his Swedish background. Some of you have already heard that it was a teacher at Palatine High who single-handedly put a stop to this terrorist attack. Were it not for this brave young man, the count of victims might have been many times higher. I can tell you that the Sheriff has informed me that the attacker still had two remaining magazines for his AK-47 assault rifle, the same type of weapon that was used by the Vietcong and the Army of North Vietnam.”

Vreeland motioned to the tall, lean, young man who have been standing down off the steps to the side, seemingly half hiding himself behind a burly sheriff’s deputy. At first, the young man made no response, perhaps not having heard or been listening to mayor. When the mayor called him by name he looked slightly startled and hesitant to come up and join him at the microphone.

KGK immediately recognized him as the young man sheriff deputies had been conversing with. She already knew that he was Marius Greco, the anthropology teacher. The Mayor then introduced him to the assembly of media locals, composed of parents, students, and the curious, saying that he would be allowed to take a few questions. Immediately there

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was a burst of shouts and cheers, cameras snapping photographs, and jostling to get closer to the front. “Way to go! Mr. Greco,” shouted somebody, and it got repeated to falling almost into a chant. Vreeland, who had remained close by at Greco’s shoulder to maintain control of the proceedings, and also insure his inclusion into photographs that were likely to go not just statewide, but national, and viral on the Internet, asked the crowd to calm down as it was not an occasion for cheering.

Greco appeared to be staring off into space.

A local newspaper reporter spoke up first.” Firstly, I think I can speak on behalf of all the people of the town of Palatine, thanking you for your courageous act, which I am sure has saved many lives. Can you tell us how you managed to stop the terrorist?”

Greco took a few breaths. He seemed rather diffident, but when he finally spoke it was in a rather composed, sonorous tone. “I cannot say that it was something that I intended to do. I had been locked in my classroom with nine of my students, hoping that we would not be noticed and that he—the attacker—could not manage to breach the door. When the gunfire stopped I thought that he might have moved out of our hallway and I took a chance to open the door and look there so that we might all escape from the building. When I got out there—our classroom door is near to the corner of an intersecting hallway—and I looked around the corner and immediately saw the gunman. He was right there, kneeling down, apparently trying to get a fresh magazine into his rifle. I was surprised he didn’t hear me approaching. He immediately looked up and saw me, just as I heard the magazine click into place. I had no choice; I just dove on him. In another instant he could’ve shot me at point blank range. I’m bigger, and probably stronger than him, and I used to wrestle in high school. I got on him, twisted him around and got a chokehold

around his neck. I don't know how long I choked him, but after a while he just went limp. I let go, grabbed the rifle and the deputy arrived. That's all."

There was a cacophony of questions immediately from the media scrum. Greco just stood there making no response. Vreeland stepped in and said he would select the questions to keep order. He immediately recognized KGK.

"How long did it take for the police to arrive to you, Mr. Greco?" she asked.

"I don't really know, a moment or two, maybe more. Time gets a little warped when you are in stress mode."

"And then what happened?" She followed up immediately.

"Stress also makes you a little stupid, too, I think. I should have slid that rifle down the hall and got back into my classroom with the students because a police officer saw me with the rifle and mistook me for the shooter. He fired one shot from his rifle that passed me and I threw the rifle towards him and flattened myself on the floor. He was actually beginning to put handcuffs on me, even though the shooter was unconscious right beside me all dressed up like a ninja. Maybe he thought there were two shooters. Anyway, we quickly cleared it up, but I was lucky that I didn't end up a victim of, . . . of . . . ah . . ."

"Friendly fire," somebody yelled.

"Yeah, friendly fire," Greco repeated, almost inaudibly.

"What about the perpetrator?" Another reporter yelled without waiting for recognition from the mayor. "Did you kill him?"

Greco winced. His voice dropped down noticeably. "No. I think he's okay. Well, not okay, I must have hurt him pretty good. But I did hear the paramedics say that he had a pulse. Then they took him away. So, I don't know any more about his condition."

"Were you trying to kill him?" another reporter asked.

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“I think I was just trying to keep him from killing me, and more of us, and did what I had to do to, ah, neutralize him, actually the only thing I could do.”

“Have you had any military training, Mr. Greco?”

“Army. I had a deployment in Iraq.”

Vreeland cut in front of the mic. “Okay, just a couple more questions for now. There’ll be another briefing tomorrow morning from both law enforcement and medical staff.” He did not say that the Coroner would be giving a report as well.

The reporter next to KGK asked what the name of the shooter was, but the Sheriff stepped in to say that that information was being withheld temporarily for safety and investigative purposes.

“Dumb upstate rubes,” he growled.

A woman in the back shouted out: “Mr. Greco, we are having a prayer meeting and candlelight vigil at the gate this evening. I hope you will join us in giving thanks to the Lord. Please allow us to thank you in person as well.”

Some other reporters shouted questions, but Greco made no reply, just giving an ambiguous slight nod of his head and quickly turned back toward the school building and disappeared inside. The sheriff adjourned the press conference.