

Mrs. Unabomber

When I lived near Woodstock, my 80 something year old neighbor, Willard, had a number of mistaken beliefs he learned by spending too much time on the Internet. And by reading far-out magazines at Mr. Leary's tiny store that sat close to the road in the small clump of houses forming our little hamlet. The storekeeper placed the more lurid and crazier publications on the top shelf of the wide rack, where he intended them to be out of the reach of children and old men. But Willard, only five feet in height, would climb up on the pile of local newspapers on the bottom shelf to reach such titles as *Earth In Ruins* and *Is Your Wife From Another Galaxy?* Although Willard's opinions on the universe were often suspect, perhaps closer to reality was his belief that the small round globs in those little Tapioca pudding snacks for kids were synthetic.

"I've read on the Internet the fake tapioca molecule is only one atom different from the floor polish made by the same company," he told me. "I hear kids are licking the gym floor at school."

"Your genes are only one molecule different from a monkey, Willard," I replied. "And you do like bananas ... maybe more than gym floors."

"Never tasted a gym floor, come to think of it," he said. "What time does school let out?"

"Did you get an invitation to Mrs. Unemba's party?" I asked the old fellow, hoping to change the topic.

"I'm not going to no party for a cat!" he said.

"She's a neighbor, Willard, and a widow," I replied. "This is important to her."

"Mrs. Unabomber is a terrorist," said Willard.

"Now that's just silly," I said.

"No, it isn't," he said. "She mailed a get well card to the Missus and the writing matched the photograph of hand writing that ran in the newspapers back when the Unabomber was blowing people up. I'm thinking Ted Kaczynski was framed."

"That's not much evidence to go on," I said.

"She had the ability and she had motive," he said.

"You think she knows how to make a bomb?"

"Those bombs were very low tech," said Willard, "exactly what an old woman would make."

I sighed. "Out of what? Cookie dough? Besides, what's her motive?"

"Religious conviction," he said with a straight face. "She's a heathen."

"I hear she's a very religious woman, Willard."

"Oh yeah? Look at how she's always arguing with Father McCarthy."

Father McCarthy commanded the nearby Catholic Church, an old brick and plaster pile we called St. John the Bazaar for its constant round of money raising fairs and carnival galas. The parish often received checks written to "John the Bizarre" and that sent the priest's blood pressure into the stratosphere. McCarthy was an old grump and incidentally a woman-hater who was known to have remarked off the cuff that if God had invented a third sex, the women of his parish would have been sorely neglected.

Trying to steer Willard on the narrow path of sanity and good taste, I told him I thought he'd been lying awake too often listening to those overnight shows on the radio.

And I suggested he could be more sociable when he wanted to. He needed to come down off his high horse, or in his case the big tractor that he'd painted red, white and blue and drove around the neighborhood handing out Tea Party tracts.

He thought a moment and then said, "Well, maybe it would be a good idea for me to investigate Mrs. Unabomber."

His use of the word *investigate* reminded me of the cards he printed up the year before on the little printing press in his basement.

"Willard," I said, "don't give Mrs. Unemba the FBI card. There's no Special Agent named Roy Orbison."

I talked Willard into coming with me to Mrs. Unemba's. I wanted to ask if she needed any help setting up for the party. "We're retired," I said, to Willard. "What else do we have to do? You don't have to eat the cookies if she offers any."

Mrs. Unemba, a very tall black-skinned woman, welcomed us into her living room. She may have been old, but she had the build of a pro linebacker, although hidden in her many-colored Mu Mu style floor length dress.

"It is so nice of you to visit, Mr. David," she boomed in her sing-song Caribbean accent. "And you've brought along your kick in the side, Mr. Patriot."

"Name's Willard," he mumbled.

"Mr. Wil-LARD. I've heard you are making our neighborhood safe for Democracy," she said. "With your tractor, no?"

“We thought we’d ask if we could help with the party,” I told her.

“How nice of you,” she boomed. “You just have a seat here in the front room while I go make us coffee.”

Mrs. Unemba went to the kitchen, leaving Willard and I to sit in big overstuffed chairs surveying the room’s spiritual landscape.

Her living room was filled with just about every religious article one could imagine. Rosaries were draped over picture frames holding paintings of famous saints with bloody hearts hanging out from their chests, while little plastic statues of Mary were glued on the upswept candles of a menorah. A large gold Islamic crescent hung on the wall. Cheap religious knick knacks dotted the end tables and religious magazines were scattered over the coffee table and the small white grand piano. It looked like the Product Test Lab of a TV evangelist.

Willard reached over to the coffee table and picked up what appeared to be a 14 inch statue of a monk. He shook it, twisted off its head and smelled the contents.

“Brandy,” he said with a smile.

He took a swig, screwed the head back on and looked around the room, a museum of bad taste with good intentions.

“I can’t believe it,” he said. “God really does make junk.”

“Willard, keep your voice down,” I hissed.

“Look at that spool of wire over there,” he said, “under the picture of those guys at a bachelor party. Just right for bomb making.”

“It’s picture-hanging wire,” I replied, “and that’s the Last Supper, not a bachelor party.”

“Really?” said Willard. “What about the picture over there of the fellow doing a drug deal?”

“Willard,” I said, exasperated, “that is Rembrandt’s ‘Judas Returning The Silver.’”

Our hostess entered the room with a tray of coffee cups.

“It’s so nice to have visitors.” she trilled. “Father McCarthy comes not so often, but alas we differ on Augustine’s turn to celibacy. I tell him God is not against sex. Nor probably a little covetousness, for that matter. He gets so-o-o upset, that man.”

“McCarthy gets upset when the grass grows,” said Willard.

“So, how old is the kitty?” I asked, wondering why it wasn’t lying about the room somewhere.

“Poor Samson would have been nine years old this very next week,” she said.

“It’s dead?” asked Willard.

“Only the body,” she said. “Anointed and

buried under the tree out back with my late husband’s Smith and Wesson .38 Special -- ”

“Why did you bury the little voodoo with a gun?” asked Willard.

“ – that’s pointed upward,” said Mrs. Unemba, “so don’t go looking for it.”

I tried to change the subject, but Willard was nothing if not persistent.

“Why are you having a birthday party for a dead cat?” he asked.

Mrs. Unemba turned her huge brown eyes to Willard, then narrowed them in shrewd appraisal.

“You are such a cute little man,” she said as the smile returned to her face. “Behave yourself or you won’t get any of the lovely cookies I’m baking.”

The smell of something in the oven now wafted out of the kitchen and overpowered the incense in the living room.

Willard jumped up and spoke with the officious tone of a Special Agent from the FBI. “What’s in your cookie dough?” he demanded.

I stood abruptly between Willard and Mrs. Unabomber ... I mean, Mrs. Unemba.

“Roy – I mean Willard - is on a special diet,” I explained. “Isn’t that right, Willard? He can’t eat anything with chocolate or he might fill up and turn brown - I mean grey. Yes, grey is what I meant.”

“You poor man,” exclaimed Mrs. Unemba as she rose and brushed by me to fold her arms around Willard. A foot taller, she loudly kissed him on the top of his bald head and said, “Perhaps I can help with a potion.”

“Potion?” Willard mumbled with a quiver, as he tried to extricate himself from her bulk.

“I didn’t bury *all* of ‘the little voodoo’ out back in the yard,” she said.

“I have to go now,” said Willard, and he was halfway to the door when I looked at Mrs. Unemba, shrugged my shoulders and followed the old man out.

“Thank you for the coffee, Mrs. Una - I mean Mrs. Unemba,” I called over my shoulder as I ran after Willard down the sidewalk.

“You come back real soon,” she sang out from the top of the steps. “I’ll have the potion ready for your friend!”

Her booming laugh chased Willard and I all the way down the road.

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