Garrison Keillor

The beauty of ordinariness

A summer Sunday in an old Midwest river town, walking down the avenue under the elms past yards burgeoning with vinous and hedy things and multicolored flowerage, the industry of each homeowner shown in the beauty of it all. The children of these homeowners may be telling their therapists harrowing tales of emotional deprivation suffered in this very home, and yet back in April and May, weekends were devoted to making this front yard splendiferous, and that is worth something. Much can be forgiven of those who make beautiful things.

I am on my way home from church, where I tried to forgive myself, which is a good reason to go. And then this morning it was about John the Baptist, imprisoned by Herod though he knew John to be a godly man and was a fan of his preaching, but John would not marry for his brother’s wife, now Herod asked for John’s head on a platter, and — volial — there it was, the bloody head of a godly man, dipping on the dance floor, and Herod was most terrible about it. A tale of cruelty that somehow brought Dick Cheney to mind and the secret CIA program that he kept secret from Congress, in defiance of law and tradition, and also the late Robert McNamara, who was, by his own admission, a war criminal, having helped engineer the fire-bombing of Tokyo on March 10, 1945, that incinerated one hundred thousand souls in one blazing evening, a military attack on civilians, its purpose purely carnage. The Japanese committed their own atrocities on the Chinese and Koreans, the British destroyed Dresden, the Germans carried out the Holocaust, and so it goes. The heart of man is merciless.

All the more reason to savour this peaceful street and its lawns and driveways, kids bikes leaning against the house, the listless cat on the porch, the sheer beauty of it all. The ambitions of our society are met on this street, peace, prosperity, a bed of petunias, a porch, a pitcher of tropical punch. There are men who would destroy this street and other men would defend us against them. Those opposing men may have more in common with each other than with the people living on this street or the people in whose names it would be destroyed.

Here on this street, we have less interest in war crimes and criminals than, say, in a forlorn romance between a president and an intern, or the machinations of Richard Nixon. Those are good stories, like the beheading of John, whereas the slaughter of 100,000 is a statistic. You wish people got angry about cruelty and not many do.

E.g., the man on the freeway last Friday offended because I merged in front of him, who pulled up alongside me and lowered his window and screamed, his face contorted with rage. He followed me up the exit ramp and pulled alongside and yelled some more, red-faced, finger in the air.

I wish I could spare some rage for Dick Cheney, but off he went and maybe I felt mortified for being an idiot and hoped that nobody he knew was watching, and maybe his tantrum purged him of anger, so that when he pulled up in his driveway on this quiet street and his children ran out to greet him, he felt an even more extreragant love for them. I can imagine this. When my green Volvo with the Al Franken bumper sticker swerved into the gap ahead of him, it was the final insult in a long chain and he was enraged and for a minute, maybe two or three, he sincerely wanted to shoot me and put my head on a platter, but he didn’t. He cruised on, pentent, and spoke gently to his children. He kissed his wife tenderly. He changed out of his suit and tie and picked up a hoe and went out to cultivate around the flower beds along the front sidewalk and water the juniper bushes.

Thank you, sir, for your uplifting yard. It is magnificent. Your moment of public ugliness is forgiven. Go and screech no more.

(Garrison Keillor is the author of "?I Love Sonnets," published by Common Good Books.)

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