

## How They Do

*by Jack R. Johnson*

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All Reggie wanted was cold water and three more hours of sleep, but then he heard: “*Get your black ass up.*” Just rude. Vanessa threw a purple and gold t-shirt at him. He squinted through his left eye, feigned sleep.

“Now!”

“Tired, honey.” He wanted to ask how she had gotten into his apartment, but then remembered that he had given her a key.

“Reggie, come on, you got bike patrol this morning. Don’t you remember?” Reggie did remember, but didn’t really want to think about it. Vanessa had this mother thing going on and she would not relent. They had been friends through high school and even college, and then one night, after far too many drinks, they ended up together for the evening. Bad idea; it was as though they had gotten married after only one date.

He should have ghosted her, but when George Floyd was killed, they started going to protests together. One night, he and Vanessa strolled down to the Jeb Stuart Memorial and they saw a trumpeter on the monument’s plinth, playing Taps; it was oddly moving, even beautiful. “Like a promise that wasn’t kept,” whispered

Vanessa, “this should have happened one hundred and fifty years ago.”

Another day, he saw Vanessa standing toe to toe with a white woman who was screaming awful things at her, telling her she was trash and just a low life looter and such, but Vanessa did not flinch. She stood her ground, and replied in a surprisingly calm voice that she was there because it was the right thing to do. That was the evening Reggie gave her his keys, just so she'd have a safe place he had said, but he had meant more.

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Vanessa drove her Subaru while Reggie rode his bicycle. By the time he made it to Monument and Allen, the Trump caravan had started to arrive. Reggie pulled up alongside Jay Taylor who was standing on the corner with an angry looking AR-15 slung over his right shoulder, dressed entirely in black. Black sunglasses and a black face mask made him anonymous, but Reggie knew exactly who it was. Jay was the security lead; his partner, Melinda, wore camis and carried an equally intimidating AR-15 on the other side of the circle. They'd been through a lot together already that summer; cops pelting them with pepper spray and rubber bullets. Tear gas fired at them in the middle of a talk on the Lee monument's history. Worries about a lone neo-Confederate threatening to take a few of them out. Reggie had come to appreciate their security, such as it was. He preferred a less militant look, but Jay's

brother had nearly lost an eye to a rubber bullet, so he understood the black garb as a kind bravado defense. He asked Jay where the bike crew had gone.

“Circling,” with a raised eyebrow and nod, Jay pointed down Monument Avenue, trailing the tail end of the Trump caravan. Reggie started pedaling up the avenue when he heard the sound of someone speaking over a bullhorn behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a man in a bright red MAGA hat standing in the back of a pickup, nearly opposite MDP circle. In his right hand, he raised a Confederate flag.

Jay and Reggie just stared at the guy. He was a weird caricature out of *Cool Hand Luke*, maybe. His scrawny neck and gristle of beard and high cheekbones were equal parts pathetic and defiant. Yet, Reggie considered, this skinny-ass dude was going to threaten them with that shameful flag, on their own ground? On the very space that they had suffered to make safe? There was almost no thought at all. Reflexively, Reggie spun his bike around. A sweet little BMX, he could swivel it on a dime. He began peddling furiously, keeping his eye on the man with the bullhorn and flag.

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Al Nash kept the dark secret of his hair loss hidden under his favorite blue canvas Navy cap, and pulled it even lower as he told his son, Troy Nash, about

Robert E. Lee. How the general held a special place in the heart of all Southerners for his valiant service in the Civil War. Troy had heard the stories before, but his father seemed to imbue them with a singular reverence now that his statue was under attack. At thirteen, riding by his father in the convoy, Troy thought it was like entering a war zone, almost like enemy territory. His mother didn't want him or Beth Anne to go because that's what she thought of it, too. But Troy's father said it would be fine. He showed her his 9mm pistol and said that he would be protecting them and not to worry. Their children wouldn't even leave the car.

“Still, don't you think it's dangerous?” she asked, “and that? How does that help?” She nodded toward the pistol. Troy knew his mother hated the pistol. His father called it a “Glock” and yelled at her when she referred to it as his “gun.” So she just said ‘that’ ...meaning the Glock. Once, during a drunken argument, his father had pulled the Glock out and waved it around, and she took all of them and left their home for three days. They stayed with their grandparents. When they finally returned, it was the only time Troy had ever seen his father cry. He had apologized. “I wouldn't have fired. I would never have fired it, Marissa. I'll never do anything like that again.” The moment stuck with Troy. What his father said was true, too; until it happened again.

“It'll be fine. They're all mouth, no action, you know that. We need to take our country back.” Then realizing that wasn't what she wanted to hear, Al added,

“It’s just a day trip into the city, like I said, we won’t even leave the car.”

“Be out of there before dark. And feed them so I don’t have to cook.”

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In the Sienna, Al pointed to the median in front of the Lee Monument that was crowded with people walking and riding bicycles or sitting on the plinth and chatting. “There it is, can you see it?” Ahead of them, Troy could see Jimmy Hadnot’s father waving his MAGA cap at the crowd. A few vehicles beyond him, Troy saw someone stand up in the back of one of the motorcade pickups with a bullhorn. He held a pole with a Confederate flag in one hand as he yelled through the bullhorn:

“We tried playing nice and by the rules, but you have broken them all. We have come to take our sacred monuments back. We will grow like the flame that fuels us and spread like the love that guides us. We are unstoppable, unrelenting and now ... unforgiving. Good luck to all you traitors of this country ... you’re going to need it!”

Before he could even sit back down, a man with long dreadlocks raced by on a bicycle and yanked the flag out of his hand, throwing him off balance. He fell backwards. His head dropped down and his boots flew up in one swift, clownish motion.

The bicyclist raced down Monument Avenue, dragging the flag pole behind him. Al slammed on his horn for so long that Beth Anne and Troy put their hands over their ears and shouted. He wasn't the only one. All along the motorcade people were yelling and laying on their horns. Then Al reached over and popped open the glove compartment and pulled out his Glock. Troy didn't know what his father was thinking, but Troy saw him wave the pistol out of his driver's window, like he was going to fire. Then he heard people yelling and shouting, "That fool's got a gun."

Troy heard Beth Anne screaming from the backseat, "Dad!" She sounded close to tears. Troy thought it was like a repeat of what happened when his father had waved the Glock at his mother. Beth Anne had cried then too, but neither of his parents had heard her. You couldn't really hear anything over their wailing at each other. But Troy had heard Beth Anne back then, and now her voice sounded like a raw echo.

"Dad," Troy said, trying to stay calm, yet he felt his own voice crack. He sensed a sickness in the pit of his stomach. He noticed this sometimes when his dad was yelling at them late at night. He glanced out the window watching all the people pointing at their Sienna and yelling.

"Dad," Troy tried to keep his voice from cracking, "they're yelling at you."

Before Al Nash could answer, Troy saw half a dozen black men riding up on

bicycles. They were waving their hands and yelling, “Put that away, put that down!”

“He’s the one,” Al shouted, waving his pistol at the swiftly receding bicyclist, “He’s getting physical, destroying property! Can’t you see what that...” Al paused and Troy hoped he wouldn’t use the N word, “*ass*...has done? He’s *stealing!*”

“It’s just a flag, man,” The man nearest their Sienna on the bicycle shook his head with consternation. He wore a bright Hawaiian shirt. His face was wet with perspiration and Troy could see beads of sweat glinting off his afro. He breathed heavily. His eyes were brown, wide and angry: “We’ve got children out here, too.”

Troy looked at where the man was pointing. There were children all along the base of the monument and even up on the monument itself. They climbed the pedestal and were sitting there, eating potato chips and grapes. White people and black people, he saw. Troy hadn’t really noticed it before. Adults were standing around taking photos of the children on the monument. Someone had even set up a moveable basketball hoop and there was a group of boys, probably not much older than himself, playing a pick-up game.

“I’m calling the police,” said Al Nash.

“You do that, man. Just put that pistol away.”

Al Nash didn’t move and Troy could tell his father was really angry, and didn’t want to take orders from anyone, least of all a colored man on a bicycle. He

always bragged about how he'd made sharpshooter in the Navy. But there were six of them, Troy thought. Then the black man leaned forward and pulled back his loose Hawaiian shirt so that they could see a holstered Beretta. "We've all got children here, man." He looked past Al's Navy cap with its anchor seal to Troy and then Beth Anne in the backseat. She was practically lying on the floor. She stared back up at the man, wide eyed and slack jawed. Troy could see tears streaming down her face. It was how she looked after they all left for their grandparent's home. For the second time.

No one in the motorcade got out of their cars. They just sat there watching the event unfold, waiting for Troy's father to get a move on. Without thinking, Troy reached over, touched his father's arm, "Dad," he said. His father tensed, jerked his arm away, "Don't do that!" his father shouted, "Don't you ever do that when I'm holding a weapon!"

Troy's hand shook, he looked down.

"You know how dangerous that could be?"

Troy tried to mumble something, but his mouth was dry and he couldn't find the breath to say a complete word.

"Okay," Al snapped, finally, "okay, guess we'll just let this go." He slipped the Glock back into the glove compartment in front of Troy, snapped it shut. Then

he turned to Troy, “And you leave that alone, now, you understand?” He adjusted his Navy cap again, pulling it even lower, refusing to look at the black men on the bicycles that had confronted him. “You see how they do?” he said to Troy.

That’s when the shot rang out.

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Reggie peddled furiously, gripping the handlebar and trying to hold onto the streaming Confederate flag. He heard the cries from the caravan and the shouting and jeers and didn’t think anything of it, but when heard the gun shot, he realized there was a real chance that he could die that day. He decided that he was not properly prepared for this event.

He swiveled right on Lombardy and in one smooth motion, stuffed the Confederate flag into a trash bin. He kept on pedaling until he reached a park opposite the Kuba Kuba Restaurant and stashed his bicycle under a bush and sat on a park bench beneath a magnolia tree to catch his breath. Sweat stung his eyes. He tried to relax. He breathed in the sweet scent of the magnolia blooms and tried not to think of Vanessa’s perfume.

A white woman was playing with her child on the swing set across from him. She glanced his way nervously. Reggie didn’t move, peeked through narrow slits and studied her. She carefully lifted the child from the swing set and put her in a

stroller and began to swiftly walk her way out of the park. Not turning back, moving as though Reggie did not exist at all.

Fine, then. I am ghost, thought Reggie; to you, I have always been a ghost. He wanted to laugh, but remained silent as the caravan drove Eastward on Monument, three blocks away. Soon enough he heard sirens beginning to wail. He wanted to call Vanessa to see if anyone had been hurt, but then he thought of her angry voice and decided against it. Instead, he lay there, not moving, pretending to be five years old and watching his older brother making out with his girlfriend through the cracked door of his bedroom. Free entertainment. His brother had been killed in Iraq three years ago, joined the military on the advice of his father who thought he would be safer as a hostile force in a foreign land than on the streets of his own city. As the siren wailed by him, Reggie thought that his father may have been right.

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Five minutes after the caravan passed, and the silence had settled on Reggie, Vanessa called. He looked at the number on his phone. He debated answering, could almost hear her first words: “What the fuck are you doing, Reggie Greener?”

He answered the phone, “Just don’t.”

“What?”

“I know you’re all upset and –“

“Yes, I’m all upset, what the hell were you thinking, Reggie Greener? We agreed, no confrontation. What the --?”

“I’m okay. It’s all good,” Reggie interrupted. He breathed in heavily, “Not a scratch. Now this is what I’m talking about.”

“This bothers you? I don’t care. It’s not ‘all good.’ Everyone saw you. You could have gotten killed.”

“I didn’t. I’m sorry, Vanessa, but you know, I’ve been meaning to say this...I just...”

“What?”

Reggie hesitated. Many years later he would come to realize this was the moment that both saved and doomed him.

“I just ....” He pivoted, “Just fuck them, they don’t get to bring a Confederate flag here. Not now, not anymore. Okay?” It was not what he wanted to say, not really what he had intended to say, which was something about Vanessa just backing off, and it was a weird thing to ask, like he needed permission. Maybe, in a way, he did? He took a long breath and waited.

He heard Vanessa whisper something into the phone.

“What?” He asked. He couldn’t hear her, exactly, but she sounded sweeter,

somehow, mellow. Like something had shifted.

“Okay,” she whispered, again, just a fraction of a degree louder, but it was enough for that morning, he decided. Just enough.

Reggie drew in a long breath, “I’m in that little park beside Kuba, Kuba. I’ll catch you in a little bit.”

Reggie put the phone in his pocket. He decided to rest there for another moment, relax in the fragrance of summer. Above him, he marveled at how the white magnolia blooms were all opening still, like a promise.



**Jack R. Johnson** is a monthly columnist for North of the James Magazine in Richmond, Virginia; an editor of The Alliance for Progressive Virginia blog and a contributor to Style Magazine. His published works include short stories, articles and the novel, *An Animal's Guide to Earthly Salvation*. His latest novel, *In Black and White*, is scheduled to be published by Propertius Press in 2022.