

johnson's war

I doubt I would remember Johnson now, more than a decade later, were it not for the war. I sit before my computer screen and bring up foreign images, news written in languages far more blunt than English. All of it devastating. My bones ache with arthritis, perhaps something more.

Which war? Well, the war du jour as I sit here in the semi-darkened room staring at the remote brilliance of bombs falling; that's Iraq II. And from my storehouse of grief, back to memory, drifts my student Johnson, who apparently fought in no war at all. No, he was a policeman, or functionary of some sort. Well, what do they call those officials who guard the traffic in and out of airports, my mind is not as retentive as it once was – a customs officer, is what he was. Or so he told us in the classroom. Or rather, I told him, since the new words were always difficult to articulate.

I watched Johnson's face intently for twenty weeks. When one teaches a language, as I was teaching English to Johnson, one comes to learn every line around the narrow brown eyes, every imperfection in the mottled skin. His mouth was most often downturned with a grimace of panic; it was rare for him to smile. He had immigrated from Hong Kong, a short man still sturdy, wearing the name Johnson. I admit I don't know if that was his first name or his last. Truly, I taught so many helpless, dependent fledgling Americans, they came and went in a confusion of sounds. Only their faces, their eyes in particular, became personal for me. Because by their eyes I

understood anger, confusion and grief.

Johnson was a good student. But he had lived in the US some years by that time. Yes, like many immigrants, years might pass before one was obliged to actively learn English. It seems scandalous to me still, although it happens to dozens. You see, first they get a job within their own communities, Chinese or Vietnamese or what have you. Years go by, until finally that job is lost or the uncle dies or the business is sold or perhaps even the economy shakes them off like a dog does fleas. Whatever. There they stand, non-English speaking and obliged to find work. Johnson had worked as a hotel doorman.

This hotel job obliged him to understand enough English to summon taxis and bellboys, and as I say, he was bright enough. I sat opposite him surrounded by the Chinese and Vietnamese women, the luckless ones like him. Five years or fifteen or twenty. The US government was paying me to stuff enough English into their heads so that when their unemployment ran out, as it would in twenty-six weeks, they could qualify for other jobs. But by then I had been teaching for forty years, and nothing surprised me.

Or should I say, I lived subject to the rules of the US government for sixty years and no stupidity of our government surprised me. English for an Asian in twenty-six weeks, indeed. Fortunately, all in this class knew the Roman alphabet, and several had drivers licenses and several could read the headlines. Not the same several, I don't mean, but all, all had some tiny skill.

To build on, you see. Well, that was my job, you know, and I was always dedicated to doing whatever necessary. With each new class I threw myself anew into the role of aging mother.

For the Asians, age gave me respect as well as attention. problems never arose in Asian classes, although the women chattered, repetitive and animated as birds. Johnson sat like a beige colored crow among them.

Naturally, I myself understand no language but English. I spoke to them cheerfully, and with careful enunciation. I smiled, I laughed, I applauded, and I distributed among the students some small gifts. I loved them equally, or so I thought. Or so I claimed, as a mother will

claim.

The women reciprocated with homemade pastries, some square white edibles of rice I recall, sticky, bland and only faintly sweet. Once or twice Nga brought sandy cookies she had baked. She would offer them, and each person accepted just her single one, so that we shared. We all shared fruit juice and I served a "tea". Johnson enjoyed these teas, but he was deeply distressed each time I broke protocol by giving the students a gift, when it was clearly the student's place to honor his teacher. I brought candies, or sometimes a bag of store cookies. It was protocol that counted with Johnson, and he opposed those paltry sweets rewarded in exchange for irregular verbs learned correctly. Perhaps he recalled proper teachers who brought a bamboo stick to tea? As teachers did, those Asian students agreed, in their youth.

But tea was the opportunity for unrestricted conversation. No, I never met Princess Diana. But I was not surprised at the query coming from Johnson rather than from one of the women. These were hotel workers, you see, not debutants. They cleaned rooms and changed the bed sheets after wealthy tourists slept on them one night. Johnson was an outside man, wearing a sharp hotel uniform and presenting a good face. Perhaps he had encountered princesses, or at least movie stars, handed them their bags, supported an elbow over the icy streets. The hotel could not put a black man in that position, doorman; we lived in a racially sensitive city, after all. And few Latinos carry that military uprightness Johnson never surrendered. So Johnson held the position for many years, feeling professional, I suppose. Perhaps one uniform was much like another? After all, the Queen, and the Governor, and the medal. But I learned more of that later.

At the end of the term Johnson invited me to lunch with and him his wife. Lunch with Johnson and Joyce. I was unwilling, but could find no graceful way to refuse. If classes were competitive, I might have declined by claiming a teacher cannot consort with one student out of class. But that's ridiculous, you know.

Nobody received grades, and every occasion was an opportunity to improve their English. I could really think of no excuse. Although I wished not to lunch with him. Even at that moment I wished not to have much to do with Johnson.

Of course you ask why not. And I am hard put to you tell what I felt at that time. I can say I did not care for his desperation. After class he would practice his English for a final ten minutes before permitting me to leave the building, following me as I cleaned the table and helping me as I rubbed off the whiteboard. Then we would stack the chairs for the cleaning crew. During these moments Johnson told about his old mother, left behind in Hong Kong.

The British were packing up. Communist takeover was imminent.

Little by little, as I buttoned my coat and walked toward the elevator, each evening Johnson revealed some other stress. His pride jostled with his worry. In his need he hardly knew what to confide. Until finally I understood that the British Governor had bestowed on him a medal in honor of his years of service at the Customs Office. The Queen might have done so herself, were she in Hong Kong at the time. And, Johnson told me, he loved his wife. His wife is superior to him in education and breeding. He was fortunate to have married her, and often he found himself striving to provide her some extra luxury during their life together in Hong Kong. Joyce would never return to Hong Kong because now her children and grandchildren belong in the US. Would he? He shook his head, not meeting my eyes.

But what job could he find now, a more than middle-aged man? He worried the buttons on his shirt, and then worried the zipper of the jacket he pulled on over it. It was a cold winter, dark when we left the school, and I did not linger on the sidewalk. I supposed Johnson had a car, or perhaps no, no, he took the subway and then a bus. Or maybe a train? I can't remember, but why should I? I walked home every night at a brisk pace, breathing the crisp air and glad to stride away from Johnson, glad to put my evening class and Johnson further behind me at each step on the lit street.

During the final week of class I learned that Johnson's brother had some dubious occupation. I wondered if it were smuggling, given their familiarity with customs procedures, but I didn't ask and Johnson didn't volunteer. The brother was in Canada. What kind of job his brother could give him without losing face? Johnson's face, that was. Johnson's pride.

His mother was living in a five thousand-a-month home. Johnson and his brother in Canada and the third son who lives in Australia send her money.

Johnson came to the US with \$500,000 in cash in a suitcase. With half the cash he bought a house for himself and Joyce and their children in a suburb of Boston. Buying a house with American dollar bills. For the first few months he couldn't find his way home through the streets, all so similar with their similar lawns, and the street signs written in English. But finally they were very happy. Johnson bought a car, and Joyce learned to drive. The children grew, although they frightened Johnson with their reckless American ways. Now Johnson has lost his job at the hotel.

Our luncheon was in a Chinese restaurant, naturally. It was owned by a relative or friend, I wasn't sure, and was located downtown in Chinatown. They were waiting for me at the entrance when I appeared, and I was not late. We climbed narrow carpeted stairs to the big room above, and were seated with ceremony by the waiter Johnson signaled. Joyce said nothing that I recall. She was a middle-aged woman, dressed in a black dress deadly for her tan skin, and wearing high-heeled black shoes. Her hair absorbed the light, a flat black. I suppose her role was to appear cultivated? One hardly knows. Really, I hardly knew what I myself was doing there, let alone poor Joyce. I am an aging woman, and outside of the necessary animation during class, I don't care to squander energy being sociable.

Johnson proceeded by showing he knew how to speak to the waiter, how to obtain what he wanted us to have, without asking but placing almost forcefully, almost emphatically, in front of us on the linen tablecloth the small dishes with his selection of treats. Joyce sat quietly waiting for me, the teacher, to take the first shrimp dumpling.

The meal continued at a very slow pace. At its conclusion, I knew nothing of Joyce, nor of her understanding of Johnson and his life. Nor did she ask questions of me.

Their daughter's first baby is due. Joyce does some art work with flowers. I ate politely, and therefore they were even more polite than I. As we sipped our cooling tea I understood little more of Johnson but that his honor was somehow satisfied, and all was in order. He paid the bill, and we left. I straggled homeward with my feet chilled in the slushy streets. I carried away only the sense that we all live in small isolation booths, like corporate offices with dividers. How is one to know another's reasons?

It was the next night, our final night of class, that Johnson sat in his chair after the other students left. He regretted the loss of his English lessons.

"They called me Mars." He was speaking of his years in the Hong Kong airport Customs Office. He had had many friends, cronies who apparently never went out socially at night without one another. Wives were never permitted.

Johnson sat at the table winding the pencil like a weaver's stick between the fingers of his left hand. Then without warning he gripped the captured fingers with his right hand and squeezed. No, not really squeezing – he was demonstrating how he could, if he cared to, bend the fingers so their bones would break. As I looked in horror, he did not meet my eyes, but explained softly how he had broken fingers many times, occasions in the dim small room where interrogations had to be completed within twenty-four hours to evade habeas corpus law for those apprehended at customs. The British officials for whom he worked so faithfully, so diligently as to be awarded the Queen's medal on his resignation, explained that British law required them to release any suspects who did not confess or had not been apprehended red-handed. This small instruction sufficed to make Johnson's interrogations expert and swift, in his expert, swift, hard grasp.

And then it was clear to me why Johnson had left Hong Kong well before the Chinese takeover, and why he entered the USA car-

rying a suitcase full of dollars, and how, indeed, he had been eased into the country without a murmur of objection.

The reach of the British, to Canada, Australia, the United States – one can only suppose such arrangements are reciprocated in some way?

But you see it's many years later, and I am retired, far from my efforts to assist last century's immigrants. Only, as I read about the partnership of Britain and the US, Johnson appears in my mind, with his contorted face of panic and worry. In every military excursion sudden immigrants transfer to friendly nations; I suppose other Johnsons will be on their way soon.

And despite my retirement I know that once again unemployment is high, and once again jobs vanish. Indeed, the hotel industry collapsed following the Twin Towers attack. But nowadays it is mainly a Latino population losing their incomes. Unlike Johnson, they fled or escaped with no documents, or suitcases, or helpful arrangements. None of these qualify for the government largesse of a language program. I myself am no longer involved. By mere chance I watched the police run into Johnson's former hotel, while a crowd on the sidewalk gawked from behind a yellow rope and wooden barricades. Later we learned those Arabs were let go, in fact they were Pakistanis and not Iraqis at all. I understand lies, confusion, as difficult as distinguishing Chinese from Vietnamese or Laotians. One must sit very close, and stare into their eyes, teaching like a mother teaches her dependent child to speak. Because we all must speak.

And then one must confront the child become adult, graduated, grown. How could I explain my feelings when my child revealed his profession is torturer? But believe me I never liked that child, I had other favorites, many talked with me quietly after classes, Johnson was nobody special.

First his job loss. His down-turned mouth and eyes, and life's difficulties... the blessing of a British arrangement to get Johnson into the US, his longing for his old buddies, how they stuck together – in fact didn't venture anyplace without mutual guardianship. All this comes back to me while I watch the images on the moni-

tor shift from soldier to soldier, offering a stream of running crowds, children weeping in terror. And as for the revelations of torture, well, one witnesses torture aplenty in all our wars, so why not in times of peace as well? There is no peace.

In my quiet retirement I lived a bad few months leading up to the Iraqi invasion. Whether for apprehension of what is to come, or some dreadful loss of my own, I found myself weeping often. Surely not for myself, for we all lose innocence with time. Perhaps for Johnson's confession, perhaps for the calamities empire entails. I am calmer now. Frequently I walk in the freshness of the morning, and since the climate permits, I spend hours admiring the birds and their learned songs while I wait for an inevitable autumn.

As for leaving Johnson, it was necessary only to check my wristwatch, stand and go, indicating he must step outside first, while I shut and locked behind me for the last time that classroom door.

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