



Cookie's Corner

Cookie on Cookie

February 14, 2008

I felt a rush of emotions last week while reading details about the shooting spree that erupted during a city council meeting in Missouri. There, a dissatisfied, then slain, resident unloaded two guns towards a city attorney, perhaps fatally wounding his mayor with shots to the head. While two other council members and a pair of policemen died alongside a city employee, townspeople and local journalists dived beneath folding chairs.

To think it happened in a small St. Louis suburb one local teacher likened to the mythical town of Mayberry.

I felt shock that such a violent, freakish thing would happen (and in such a public place!), as well as sorrow for the families of the injured. But there was also a strange, have-I-just-bumped-my-head sense of unreality to the whole thing, as both the shooter and I share the nickname Cookie.

As if that weren't enough, we'd both criticized our city councils in the past. Brrrr.

Of course, this all elicited a flood of email from friends and coworkers, containing the latest news quotes from witnesses. *"We heard Cookie shooting, and then we heard some shouting."* Oh dear. Delete! Another witness stated, *"I was surprised Cookie would do such a thing. He always seemed like such a nice guy!"*

This got my attention more. *Was he a nice guy? Am I a nice guy?* My cuddly dog was a founding rescued on Christmas Day, I never disturb neighbors with loud music, and I give whole dollar bills to panhandlers rather than spare change.

Lord knows I've tried to be nice, even when pushed to my limits. (I do have a sad habit of losing composure when being lectured on "civility" at public meetings by drug dealers and sanctimonious, pill popping old crows...but those are other speakers' secrets).

I don't have many secrets I can think of, actually. Though my Cookie occasionally calls a straight chat line and pretends to be a girl (*"Oh, Brad!"*), my own criminal history consists of being ticketed for nibbling Oriental Cracker Mix on a bus in 2001.

A stickler for details, I wanted to fight the ticket because it listed the illegal substance as Trail Mix. Cooler heads than mine persuaded me to simply pay the fine, which gripes me to this day. I mean, if you're going to go to the trouble of hauling someone off a bus and ticketing them on Hollywood Boulevard with a million wide-eyed tourists passing by, at least keep your side of the street clean by filling out the paperwork correctly, Mr. Policeman!

So, all things considered, the teeniest bit of identification with the tragically hot-headed Mr. Thornton stirred as I read bits of those news reports from Missouri. And they kept coming in all day! (“*Cookie, don’t do this! I’m not going to let you do this!*”) Rightly or wrongly, I, too, expect more from authorities and elected officials. Not getting my way makes me angry, as I imagine Mr. Thornton was angry.

Thankfully, it doesn’t make me as angry.

But would I ever shoot anyone? Me, who can barely watch the scene where Disney’s disturbingly thin Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger on a spindle and dies, with that eerie orchestra pounding away in the background?

I’ve talked about it. Once.

Well, not shooting, specifically. But when I was engaged in a long, drawn out, tortuous and expensive lawsuit with my city council, my therapist asked how I’d react if it didn’t win the expected result. (i.e., enforced environmental study of the 1947 building Carlton Manor). I told her, “Well, I’ve imagined a variety of reactions.” “Such as what?” she pressed, her notebook poised.

“Well,” I said, searching, “I’ve fantasized just about everything, I guess. From having no reaction at all to...uh...blowing them all up.”

(Keep in mind, please, that I received very low marks in chemistry in high school, and never took shop.)

At the end of the hour, my therapist suggested we up our meetings to twice a week until “this difficult time” had passed. We did, and everything was fine. (Well, it wasn’t all exactly “fine”. The lawsuit was often painful and frustrating, and I gained thirty pounds. But at least no one died except Carlton Manor.)

The thing is, I think ordinary people expect their hometown government to be on their side. Since the dawn of time, the rich have had staff to maneuver them through sticky situations and deliver what they want; *O.J. Simpson, anyone?*

But when Mr. and Mrs. Smith go to City Hall, they still, somehow, expect honesty and consistency. Sadly, the world being what it is, memory being what it is, and overworked government staff being what they are, Due Process (the concept that everyone should be treated the same in procedural matters) isn’t always applied. Add millions of dollars to the brew, along with personal ambitions and perceived favoritism, and a simple town meeting can become a virtual powder keg.

We had talk of violence at one city council meeting right here in West Hollywood, and it kept me away for a long time.

A city appointee yelled into the microphone that he “wanted to shove [his] rifle up the asses of everyone criticizing the council and fire it off, so they’d feel the same pain [they] were feeling.”

I don’t know if *he* was ever directed to therapy, but no one up on the dais seemed to blink. They certainly didn’t interrupt or detain him. In fact, they ended a meeting in his honor just the other night.

That weirdness aside, as I’ve slowly begun to attend city meetings again, they seem calmer to me. Maybe everyone’s tired of fighting, or maybe the city’s biggest violations have progressed to lawsuits and are being argued in the courts instead of on television. At any rate, it’s sad that people anywhere can feel so disenfranchised or defensive that they’d dream of taking up arms.

It’s equally sad that in our own little storybook town of bungalows, there has to be anything to argue about in the first place.