

REMEMBERING JOHN MILTON

“OK, great joke. Now let me go.”

“Sure we will. Count on it.”

He was fighting not to overreact, not to get angry, not to get scared. The vital thing was to figure out where he was, who these guys were, what they were after.

“Is there something you want?”

“There’s something we want, we’ll take it.”

Stop asking questions, begging, hoping you can pry something out of them. Keep quiet and think. Think what?

“You know I got lots of money. Just saying.”

Silence. That was worse.

Keep your goddamned mouth shut! There’s a chance they might get antagonized. Unless it’s a joke, which of course it is. Concentrate on that. Who are these guys? How many. Seems like two distinctly different voices have answered him, maybe just one. Maybe three.

Count to one hundred backwards, breath deep, put your feet flat on the floor. Think of happy things. You’re pitching for the Atlanta Braves. You’re fucking the head cheerleader. You’re accepting the nomination of the Republican Party for President of these United States.

Trouble is, the darkness kept pressing in, making it impossible even to fantasize. He couldn’t tell if his eyes were open or closed. How could that be? He tried to force his eyelids up and down. How could he not be able to do that, tell if it was happening?

My jesus christ they’ve cut off my eyelids. I was passed out a while. Could have done anything they wanted to me. But I’d feel pain if they’d cut off my eyelids. And I didn’t feel pain, felt very good. Never more alive. But maybe that’s the adrenaline. Doesn’t rule out cutting them off.

That couldn't be, not reasonably, but how else could he explain the darkness.

Once he'd been in a special room for physics classes at college where they did experiments requiring precise measurements of light. They said it was very nearly perfectly dark in there, absolute pitch black.

Once he'd been at Mammoth Cave National Park—or maybe it's a state park. He was there with his mother, trying to give her a break after his Dad's death. They'd gone really deep into the cave, the tour group had, and the tour guides turned off all the lights. First they told everyone to hang onto the person next to him, since it was startling, what was about to happen. Then they turned off the lights and told you to put your hand in front of your face and try to see that hand, holding it as close as you wanted. That was pretty scary, even grabbing onto Mother all the while. They said it gave new meaning to not being able to see your hand in front of you face. They said that was perfect blackness.

Wonder if they both were. Neither time seemed as dark as it was now.

His hands were tied behind him, hard and tight. He had worried most about them at first. It hurt a lot, both locally, at his wrists, and in his shoulders and neck. They'd drawn his arms back too far. Every time the car or whatever he was in—must be a car—hit a little jolt, it felt as if his shoulders might dislocate. He could feel the bone straining in the socket, or that's what it seemed. He thought hard about the structure of the shoulder, the ball and socket arrangement; then he realized it was the hip he had pictured all this time. The shoulder was probably somewhat different.

Now he could only recall the pain in his shoulder if he thought about it. It was the blindfold that was far worse.

He tried to listen for background noises. That was a good thing to do. Later they'd be sure to ask him if he heard distinctive sounds that would help them piece together where he was so they could come rescue him. A factory letting out, a gunnery range, cows, big trucks, bells. All he could hear was his own breathing. He tried to quiet that down and did. Funny how much control

you have over that process and how noisy it usually is. A whole roomful of people must make a real racket just letting air in and out. We're used to it, don't even pay attention to it, just ambient noise.

He couldn't hear anything but what must be the car engine, and that was just a steady hum. He knew they all were in some kind of vehicle, though, as it now and then swayed a little. Not much. Remarkable suspension system, which suggested a very expensive car or even a limo. Now you're getting somewhere! A limo. He tried pushing back on his spine and sore shoulders, using his feet to exert a little pressure toward the rear. Not much, as he didn't want his captors to figure out what he was doing. His feet were bound together at the ankles, also painfully, at least painfully when he tried to use them to leverage himself against the seat.

But he did so, stealthily, and found only a soft, probably contoured pressure resisting his push. Very comfortable, doubtless a luxury car or a limo. The evidence was piling up for a limo. Now he was getting somewhere. Just trust to your thinking. Stay calm.

So, Item #1—a luxury limo. That meant the people snatching him were men of wealth. Was he all that sure they were men? This was no time for hasty assumptions. He could get a long ways if he stayed cool and thought clearly, he knew that. So, were they men? The one or two speaking—possibly three—were certainly men or possibly women disguising their voices. He had read that you can get quite sophisticated voice-altering equipment, so it could be that these were, wholly or in part, women, with such devices attached.

Did it matter anyhow? Was he wasting his time, his valuable time very likely, pursuing an irrelevant point? He thought about it. Was he wasting his time figuring out if they were men or women? Not at all! For instance, if it seemed wise at some point to attempt an escape, the best way to do that would be to attack the scrotum, with knee or foot or club or fist. Assuming they were men. He knew that from karate classes. He hadn't taken such classes, but they were everywhere in movies and television; and besides, it made sense. But if they were women, what then?

Maybe it just didn't matter: women were sensitive there too, surely, and would double over in pain just like men and give him the time he needed to get away. Not that he had ever so struck a woman. He had never, ever hit a woman, not ever; nobody could say that against him.

And why worry about wasting valuable time anyhow. Imagining that his time was limited: that was a way to panic. It wasn't a pleasant thought, but what if he was in this for the long haul? Days and days, even months. How long had they held onto Patty Hearst anyhow? That was different, but you read all the time things like "Bank of America Heir Kidnapping Enters Third Month."

Of course he wasn't an heir to anything he knew of, but that probably didn't matter in terms of the logic of time and the need to narrow the field of possibilities. He liked the way that sounded: narrowing the field of possibilities.

If only it weren't so dark. But it was, so there was no point in dwelling on it. It was so dark, though, it seemed like it smelled dark. But anyhow.

What else could he establish, within a reasonable range? Maybe he had hit the limit of what he could deduce from the immediate physical circumstances, so how about—motive?

Crucial to any crime, and this certainly was a crime, is motive. That's what all the crime dramas say, or maybe it's the courtroom dramas: weapon, opportunity, and motive. The weapon here is the car, sort of, and the chloroform. The opportunity was provided by me--taking my evening walk, which I did every single night, regular as clockwork, at ten. That's certainly a bad habit, that sort of regularity. Look where it landed me! Have to introduce more of the haphazard into my routines. Here's a question for you: if it's haphazard, can it be a routine?

But what about motive?

He couldn't think of any, none at all. But then the triple-whammy of weapon, opportunity, motive only applied if it were a crime. All along, he'd let himself think it WAS a crime, purposefully dealing with the darkest possibilities in order to prepare himself for the most demanding situation.

Just then the car swerved or something and he leaned slightly to the left, righted himself immediately but thought he may have made contact with something or someone. Couldn't be sure, but why not be polite? Nothing to lose.

“Sorry,” he said, in a conciliatory, good-natured voice.

No answer.

Jesus Christ. There are people here with him, aren't there? Don't be stupid; of course there are: how else would this expensive limo be shifting back and forth? You think nobody's driving?

So, with no real weapon and no motive, there was only opportunity making this whole adventure seem like a crime. Opportunity alone did not a crime make. That's nonsense. But opportunity by itself could sure lead to a prank!

That kind of thinking could be dangerous, if it amounted to no more than wishful thinking, but he had, after all, entertained fully and in detail the most horrifying possibility. He wasn't evading. And it wasn't like he was shifting to the harmless. It was certainly true that pranks themselves so often go wrong. You read about it all the time. High spirits lead to injury and even worse. Especially if alcohol is involved. Had he smelled alcohol? He could only remember being grabbed and finding it hard to breathe. And there was a smell involved—kind of the smell of sort of like rubbing alcohol, only sweet, unpleasant sweet. That could be important. He tried to remember more, but that had all happened so fast.

If these guys were drunk, he'd be able to smell it inside this luxury limo. Could he? That was the idea: keep compensating for this wretched darkness by testing his other senses, not just his hearing. Couldn't smell anything much else, though, a faint smell of maybe polish, a new car smell? But there was more, an acrid under-odor he realized soon was likely his own sweaty smell, his B.O. No alcohol, though. That was a very positive signal, unless, of course, his pranksters were sitting up in front, behind a glass partition, as in the really

posh limos. True, they had spoken to him a while back, but maybe they had caused the partition to be closed, once they had fooled with him a little, figured it'd jerk him around more if they were silent. That'd explain a lot.

How long ago had they spoken? Damn! That was sure to be the most important clue involved and he'd forgotten to note it. How long they were in the limo would indicate how far they'd driven, within a reasonable range. An hour was it? Two? A half hour? More than that, though when you're sitting in deep and complete blackness, like down a well, who can tell about time passing? Prisoners in solitary are said to hate worst of all the inability to tell how long they've been there, disorients them completely. And they at least are not in utter darkness; even in medieval dungeons, the darkness couldn't have been even close to this.

So, back to motive. He had been connected with some mock kidnappings when he was in college, deeply involved in his fraternity and their hazings and counter-hazings. His pledge class had several times, twice at least, captured actives and driven them way out, once out clear over to the Pennsylvania turnpike, and released them with no money and, in the second case, no pants either. Of course, nothing like that was going on here but maybe he could learn from it. Why had he and his frat pledges chosen kidnapping as the best prank, the best way to get back at their tormentors? In his day, before hazings and hell weeks had been cleaned up, the torments had been quite real, from being forced to drink raw egg and soy sauce cocktails to being beaten on the ass with thick paddles. The hell week antics had been pretty brutal: one prank involved somehow forcing the exhausted pledges to pee on one another. How was that? By squirting warm water down their legs so they thought others were peeing on them, since, oh yeah, they were blindfolded at the time.

Kidnapping answered to all that brutality somehow, paid it back, though he couldn't quite think how. For one thing, it reversed the odds: usually there were about 45 actives and 15 pledges, a 3-1 advantage, something like that;

the kidnapping let them reverse the ratio and make it even more in their favor: five or six pledges kidnapping a senior and putting him at their mercy. Their mercy! Ha!

But they all found their way back easily enough, these actives, laughing and showing a lot of tolerance for what was no more than an inconvenience to them. Even the guy without pants had gotten a ride with a trucker, then an understanding motorist, and was back within an hour or two of his captors. He'd be tolerant and good-natured too about all this, never admitting that he had suffered some real pain and was, hell let's face it, scared almost out of his wits there for a short time.

But the idea of motive still hung there in the air as the big question mark. Why would a group of his friends do this? He'd eliminated the idea of crime, but even a prank had behind it some plan. Somebody had to say, "Let's do this"; and somebody else would say, "Why?"

That was the rock-bottom truth. Reduced to this fundamental level of analysis, motive was still the key.

The problem was that he didn't have any friends. Of course that wasn't true. He had lots of friends, including some he'd been close to ever since those fraternity days. And before that even, friends from high school and from childhood. And from work and church and his club and the gym.

Which of them would do this?

He couldn't think of a group, a collection, getting together to plot such a thing, and plotting it would surely take. It wouldn't just happen. This was way too elaborate a scheme, with the drugging and the long limo ride—probably renting a limo even. None of his friends would own them, none of them being funeral directors.

His failure to attract the friendship of morticians struck him as very funny: what a hole in his social life! How could he have lived so long and not befriended the best friends of the dead? It seemed so funny he couldn't help it: he let out with a short snort that turned into a chuckle that turned into an all-out and long-term laughing spell, not a laughing fit. He wasn't out of control, just heartily amused.

“Sorry,” he said, when he regained control of himself.

Nobody responded. Again.

Forcing himself to be serious, he returned to the motive issue and to the darkness. If it were not a group of undertakers and other poker buddies, gym buddies, work buddies, lifetime-friend buddies, golfing buddies, who could it be? It couldn't be those sorts of buddies, after all. Couldn't be. Couldn't be a prank. Nobody cared that much about him. Nobody would play a trick on him, even a minor one. Nobody ever had. And the reason was obvious: you had to think about somebody in order to want to trick them. You might think warm thoughts or hateful thoughts, but the person-about-to-be-tricked had to be connected to some sort of thinking, something going on inside you. For him, there was no such person, much less a group.

He gasped as this realization hit him. It wasn't anything short of a crime going on here, couldn't be. No trick was involved. No trick must mean a serious crime. OK, that's what it is. Face it now and get yourself prepared!

So, who could hate him? Or, put it another way, who would profit from this kidnapping? What had he done to deserve such a thing as this? The brutality of it all, not even talking to him. And the darkness, the unbearable darkness.

It wasn't the time to protect myself. Now if ever I had to face the worst moments, the most shameful things I could dredge up from a lifetime with no more than its small share of humiliations and mean and nasty acts. After all, what had I done? But that was avoiding the kind of hard thinking I had to do. No time to start evading or apologizing.

Maybe I HAD done more than my share of vile stuff. Besides, what in the world made the difference now? Wasn't like a contest I could win or lose on points, was it? How in God's name could I get out of this? Out of this and back to the light? I'd give anything at all for light right now. Forget anything else—just the light.

For no reason, he thought back to college again and the classes he liked least, the classes in dead literature and his most comically ghastly moments in the halls of learning, struggling with John Milton. The science fiction class

he had wanted to take was closed, and some further mix-up landed him in a nightmare of a class on seventeenth century literature, minus Shakespeare. The minus Shakespeare part was OK by him, though even that highbrow tedium would have been better than what was left when Shakespeare was subtracted. So little was left that about half the class was given over to John Milton, just to have something to read, some filler. There were several very pretty girls in the class, but they were there by choice—imagine?—and had no use for him at all, once his pretense of interest in the material collapsed.

“Dark, dark, dark amidst the blaze of noon!”

Those lines from Milton’s unbearably long poem on Samson had stuck with him and now emerged. And then there was his sonnet on Milton’s blindness, called “On My Blindness” or something like that. Thank God he couldn’t remember that. But “dark, dark, dark amidst the blaze of noon!” came at him now, evaded his defenses, and made him more terrified than he had ever been in his life, terrified way beyond the relief of tears or shouts. “Dark, dark, dark amidst the blaze of noon.” Samson at least had his blindness, which much have been a kind of consolation. Better than being robbed of light without any cause.

Who would want to do this to me and why? Not my two ex-wives or the one soon to join their ranks would care that much. They really wouldn’t. The first two didn’t even hate me, humiliating as that is to admit. They grew indifferent to me, as did my present wife. I had affairs to save face, and all three were decent enough to pretend that they cared. Have me kidnapped? What for?

Business associates? Again, the lousy truth is nobody would bother, no reason to. Same with everyone else I ever have known, same with me.

The car braked. Not roughly. Nothing about the ride had been ungentle, except the silence, I guess, which somehow seemed harsh.

I didn’t even know the car had stopped until I heard the door open and felt hands on me, easing me out and into the air. I promised myself that I would cooperate and, no matter what, remain silent. The talking I had tried

had seemed to antagonize them, and maybe I could buy back what I had lost by being quiet, making their lives easy. Maybe they were just doing their jobs—like all of us.

Not a sound, not even a grunt. I could hear only some gentle scuffling and light breathing. They didn't tug at me, even, just indicated what they wanted by gentle pressure. I tried to look under the blindfold, even thought about trying to brush my head against the car door or something to move it a little, gain some access to light. Above all, that's what I had to have. But somehow I was out of the car and walking along before I had a chance to do any of that, get that blindfold off or readjusted. Hands were touching me but with what seemed like kindness.

Then a new hand touched, less kind. It stopped my progress from front and back, edged me to the right a little, my right, then with one hand on my chest, hit me behind both knees so that I sunk to the ground. Immediately, I was thrust forward, my chest resting on something solid, not uncomfortable but a little frightening. Here I was on the ground, kneeling over something: a stool, a block of some kind, a smooth rock?

All this time, not a word. The longest interval passed. Finally, my resolve notwithstanding, I had to say something:

“Can you at least tell me why you're doing this?”

Not a sound.

“You don't have to betray anybody. Just tell me why.”

I might as well be back in the car for all the good my questions were doing me.

“Is it nighttime?”

Nothing. I thought I heard more foot scuffling. Could have been my imagination.

A long time passed, very long. So far as I could tell, I was thinking of nothing at all. What I suppose it was, was that I was shifting from one thing to another, sort of the way you do when you are going to sleep, now and

then waking up a little to wonder whether what you'd just been thinking was actual, deciding it wasn't, and then going on to some other preposterous set of images and stories.

For some reason, I started to relax. After all, had they been planning something violent, surely they'd have been violent, right? Just stands to reason. Doesn't take a genius to figure that one out.

Just then, without hearing a thing, I suddenly felt hot breath on my neck. Maybe a hand brushing it too but hard to tell. I think just the breath.

What the hell. No need to be unfriendly, so "Hi," I said or started to.