The Best Thing About North Dakota

He wasn´t in the house ten minutes before he said it.

“The best thing about North Dakota is the cheap ammunition.”

He said it in my house in Cleveland, North Dakota, population about 130. It was 1978 or so. He wasn´t a militiaman or a supremacist of any kind. He was a black guy married to a Swedish woman. A house they were building in Southern California had been torched by people who hated them, or at least hated him.

He was thinking about whether to build again or not. Another start would be just as easy to burn down, but he didn´t want them to win. I almost knew what he meant. Like him, I was buying ammunition a few years earlier—a street fight with the clan next door in Albuquerque ended with death threats. So we shared something. That and appreciation of American Literature.

He and I were with gorgeous Nordic women. Scandinavians settled the Dakotas late,

the 1880s and 90s. It was still a frontier. The Lakota Sioux only wiped Custer in 1876. Like Scandinavia it was cold, but there was endless farmland here with thousand-year-old black soil, some of the richest in the world. They were outsiders too.

He was directed to my house by someone in town. I was a newspaper reporter, but it wasn´t that. He didn´t want or need publicity. I was kind of the resident from somewhere else, the rest of the country, an outsider like him in North Dakota. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

I had no ready answer. It was my first real job after university. Oddly, The Jamestown Sun answered one of the hundreds of blind resumes I had been sending out for years, and just by luck my girlfriend grew up only 80 miles away.

We were breaking up at the time, but both of us wanted out of Albuquerque. I couldn´t really tell him what I was doing there – trying to be an adult, a member of the safe middle class? Maybe. I bought a house for nine grand. There was a huge garden. She had a 13-year-old daughter, two dogs, a cat, and the kind of endless kindness her people exude.

I was not feeling good when the door knock came, laid up with a bad back that had festered as my relationship was falling apart. Not many black guys came to my door in Cleveland. In fact, none. So, I had to get his story. He was not uneager to tell it though tired of the details.

I think the house was going up in a cul de sac, maybe in Orange County. There weren´t outward threats – no nooses, no signs, no gunplay. But the county was one of the most conservative in California, oddly rich. A smart black guy and a beautiful blonde were too much for some people even in California in the 70s.

He and his wife were staying with her parents in Cleveland while the insurance got settled and deciding what was next.

With his story out of the way, we talked about other things. He was smart with a varied education he had pursued mostly on his own. I liked him immediately. He was one of the few people I could talk to.

We talked about how wicked and stupid people were but also how they could surprise you. He had champions on his block. A woman I called years later remembered him with compassion and regret. In Cleveland the new Methodist minister moved in behind us. When introduced, there was not a single mention or even a raised eyebrow about us not being married. Our good Seventh Day Adventist neighbors always had fresh kuchen for us when we were over for coffee.

He spotted some old college books I had. One was Volume Two of Norton´s Anthology of American Literature, a tomb at three pounds. I had been carrying it around for more than 15 years but rarely opened it anymore. It had Crane and Melville and Bierce and Twain in it. He was familiar with each of them but wanted to know more. As he thumbed through the pages we shared what we thought we knew.

He was more curious than I. After four years of Marxist history, I was in a sea of capitalists, defeated capitalists to be sure, with farms going under the gavel every week. They knew all about big money and the danger of opposing it. Many of their fathers had done it and paid.

The populist Non Partisan League won elections in the twenties here, and the Farmers Union still had a headquarters in Jamestown. But the railroads and corporate giants like Cargill and Monsanto ran things now, and everyone knew it. A farm wife who tried to start a cooperative sunflower oil plant in the area got little attention from farmers whose families had been burned before and often by the bigger boys.

His line about cheap ammunition was not quite right about North Dakota nor fully wrong. There was a bunch of vigilantes in the bigger town 10 miles to the west who wanted to run some marijuana smokers out. There was a town meeting. I covered it. They objected to what I wrote, calling me a liar basically. I objected back and reminded them someone had taped the whole thing.

Still, months later the old guy who started it all was in my town one day with his beefy son. We were at the water plant for some reason. They started calling me out, trying to top each other with insults. I wasn´t going to play and sat still for quite a while. Finally, they went far enough, and I stood up. They backed up a step and the old man tapped his front pocket where, as he let everyone know, he kept his .25 caliber pistol – a lady´s gun. They cleared out pretty quick after a few more words.

A few years after I was gone, though, a tax protester and his son gunned down a highway patrolman on the road between the towns. They finally caught up with them in Iowa, I think. There might have been another shootout.

I don´t think he rebuilt in California. I couldn´t find him again. Before he left, I gave him Volume Two of Norton´s. He was touched. He would read it and get something out of it, maybe more than I would. It contained Henry James’ *The Beast in the Jungle*, a story that hit me hard as a sophomore. Nathan Archer forever waits for his fate to show itself, to leap out like a beast in the jungle. It never does. That is his beast. I feared it was mine too.

It wasn´t an issue for my friend. Beasts of any kind, his fate, had ceased to surprise or scare him. He was more than thankful for the book. What in it did he read? *The Oxbow Incident*,

a lynching of innocent cattlemen? *Incident at Owl Creek Bridge*, a hanging that became the great and final escape? *The Devil´s Dictionary*, an encyclopedia of disgust and misanthropy? The excerpt from *Huck Finn*? I never knew, but I thought about it and about him. He was a grand example to me. Of what I am not quite sure.