

New Fiction from Robert Alderman: "Shaved"

This is how the fight happened: earlier that morning, while waiting on reveille to bugle from the loudspeakers across the blacktop, Harvey forced it on the new kid, Private Gilmore, as the rest of us watched, some gruff comment about his curly, black ponytail—the barbers hadn't shaved him yet. Only two days into OSUT, Ft. Benning's one-stop infantry shop, and the poor kid couldn't catch a break. I remember shaking my head as Harvey yelled out to all the knuckleheads huddled there in formation, "What the hell's this faggot thinking enlisting without a haircut?" And right along with every other shivering private, he laughed and laughed.

Gilmore had arrived late the night before from Hortons Bay, up in Michigan, and right from the start of that cold January morning, Harvey Coates had it out for him.

"Bet that bitch has some nice pussy!" Harvey slapped his battle buddy, Wilkins, on the arm. "Hey, you think the Army issues jungle-green tampons?"

Gilmore muttered, "Shut the fuck up."

Just what Harvey wanted. That Alabama redneck wasn't exactly looking for a fair fight. He just needed a quick release, all pent-up from the barracks. "Boy better not mind me tugging on that cute little ponytail tonight," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "'cause he's gettin' *fucked* up."

And just then, Drill Sergeant Malone emerged from HQ and snapped the entire column to attention, stomping into the asphalt with the heel of his polished black boot. Two other drill sergeants followed close behind. When Malone spotted Gilmore, he let out a low whistle, advancing upon him slowly. "Well, ain't you just the battalion beauty queen!"

Gilmore's eyes glanced at Malone as he approached.

"Why your eyes flickering at me, private? You see something you like?" Then the drill sergeant leaned in to Gilmore's left ear. "Oh, I think so, battle. I think this joker does see something he likes." Malone's voice got really low, then—I could only hear him because I was nearby. "Hey, private. Maybe, we can work something out, you and me. Maybe, I'll slip in the barracks tonight, when everybody's sleeping," he whispered. "Maybe I'll let you touch it. You'd like that, wouldn't you, private?"

Sweating bullets, Gilmore said, "Drill sergeant, no, drill sergeant!"

"You don't like my cock, private? What's wrong with it?" Malone's voice got louder and louder until he was screaming. "Why wouldn't you want it in the palm of your hand? You think it's ugly, private? Not big enough like you're used to?"

That poor bastard didn't know what to say. "No, I—uh, yes, drill sergeant?"

Malone threw his campaign hat at the ground and yelled down the rest of the line, "Hey, Bravo Company! Listen up!" Malone checked the kid's name tag. "Private Gilmore here asked me to slip in the barracks tonight so he can rub my dick purple. That the kind of battle buddy ya'll want in this Army? A special kind of ground pounder? Or is this joker just the typical slack-jawed fuck-face that makes up this training cycle?" He waited as the wind blew. "Answer me, faggots!"

Within five minutes, the drill sergeants forced Gilmore to wear his hair down around his shoulders. They dressed him up in a flamingo-striped civvy polo and then mix-matched it with a pair of regulation BDU bottoms. And that was just the beginning. By the end, Gilmore was bear crawling up and down the hallway, with his ass up in the air, yelling out, "I want a big, gay Viking to ride me! I want a big, gay Viking to ride

me!" Their fun lasted over an hour, turning Gilmore into a rock star, a company legend.

I didn't get to see it all. And honestly, I'm glad I didn't. Although my hair was a lot shorter than Gilmore's and I'd cut it before heading to Georgia, it stuck out like a thick mane even by the laxest military standards. That was the thing. You didn't want to be different from anybody else. And mine was just long enough to be different—ten minutes before that, while headed to the latrine for a shit, I'd seen Harvey smirking and pointing at me with Wilkins, who pretended to toss his hair like some Vidal Sassoon model. That's probably why I kept so close to the Michigan kid. It was pack animal mentality: I knew they'd go after the longest hair first.

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Gilmore finally caught up to me a few hours later. "Lookit," he mumbled with that Michigan accent. He nodded down the hallway at this other recruit who'd gotten singled out by the drill sergeants. "Elliott's got the mannequin." Probably out of his instinct to survive—by finding someone lower on the totem pole than he was in that moment—Gilmore'd pointed out another company pretender, Tommy Elliott, who'd already skipped PT for sick-call three times in a row. Well, now they had that fat fuck sliding his duffel bags along the cold vinyl flooring with this ridiculous dummy-soldier slung across his back. A traditional hawes carry.

Officially, the dummy was known as Private Emanuel Ken—the drill sergeants always called him out during roll-call—but they told us he liked to go by "Manny" on the block. The top-half of a faded CPR dummy from the 70's, the mannequin had been dressed up in old BDU's to look like one of us. They'd built the lower half of his body by stuffing flimsy pillows into the leggings of an Army uniform strapped to the dummy's waist, using olive-green utility rope and a spare pistol belt. A camouflaged patrol cap topped off his head. One of the

supply sergeants joked that they packed half a sand bag in his crotch to help Malone pick him apart from the rest of us.

“Private Ken!” Malone would yell across the barracks at the dummy, which was propped up against the wall to make him stand. “Sound off with your name, Manny Ken!” The drill sergeant charged past us right across the bay as if he were going to hit him. “Why don’t you ever sound the hell off?” Sometimes Malone yelled so loud at him, Manny’s legs would cave-in at the knees like a raptor, his entire body deflating under the drill sergeant’s shadow. “Since Private Ken ain’t enthusiastic today like the rest a-you dickheads, I’ll just have to make the whole company push!” And so, another smoke session would begin.



Wikipedia. “Drill Instructor at the Officer Candidate School.”

But the mannequin wasn’t just an excuse to regularly fuck us. The drill sergeants kept their eyes open for unattended TA-50.

They said we were accountable for every last piece of our issued gear, so to hammer that home, when a private left a Kevlar at the water cooler and turned his back to crack a joke with his buddy, they'd swoop in, and God help you if Malone got his hands on your sensitive equipment before you did. It could be taken that quick.

The punishment was always the same: Private Manny Ken. You'd get 24 hours of light duty honing your fireman's carry, that familiar dummy weighing across the length of your back, that sandbag pressing into it hard. Made a long day even longer. I remember Malone crooning over me the one time I earned it, "That's good training, private!" hands on his hips like a proud parent. "Damn fine training." The mannequin was heavy against my body, and a layer of sweat had started to form, but even so, I pulled it tighter.

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That afternoon, Malone marched our entire company to the PX, the Walmart of the Army. We'd get to buy phone cards there, and buzz cuts. As our feet loped along, out of step and undisciplined, the pine trees loomed along the road like an old frontier fort's paling. The January wind had died somewhat. Then the PX came into view—a low brick building with the words *Post Exchange* in thick, bold lettering. Our phone privileges lay inside. A gang of drill sergeants stood on the street corner across from there, shooting the shit, and after taking one good look at our marching column, they shook their heads.

Malone greeted them. "When I get these jokers down-range next week, ya'll gonna be happier than fags at a hot dog stand!"

"You sure right about that," one of the drill sergeants shouted back.

"It's just too easy, battle—too easy!" Malone pulled his belt up a little higher as he passed them on by and grinned.

The entire cluster of campaign hats doubled over, and they began talking fast to each other, just low enough so that we couldn't hear them. I swear, even though they were laughing the entire time, they glared at us like a pack of hungry wolves tethered by invisible leashes, growling through rabid teeth.

To avoid mixing us with the rush of Army wives and old retirees, Malone filed the company into the PX through a side entrance, warning us: "You will all shut the fuck up and act respectful inside, is that understood? And you'd better not be cat-callin' any teenage girls or officers' wives. If I see or hear any of that shit, it's gonna be a long fucking night, privates—a *long* fucking night! I don't give a flying titty if you've got a PT test tomorrow. I will smoke you retarded, trackin'?"

"Drill sergeant, yes, drill sergeant!"

"All your fancy handbags are locked up in storage, so the Army's gonna give you a monetary advance." The drill sergeant pulled out a stack of what looked like black debit cards from his pocket. "Each of you gets a 200-dollar money card. That'll get ya'll through reception until them first paychecks hit at the end of the month. Since Mother Army don't put out nothin' for free if she ain't gettin' something back, your earnings statement will show this amount deducted."

Good ol' Mother Army.

Shops lined the exchange's main corridor inside—a women's salon, vitamin store, uniform tailor, travel rep office, food court, and barber shop. The main department store had its own double-wide entrance, flagged with shoplifting detectors. After a quick glance inside, I could see designer clothing racks, a shoe department, grocery aisles, shelves lined with Harlequin romance novels, and even a big sign for home decorating and gardening. Everything a man needed to get by.

Malone snaked us around the entrance of the barber shop in long, orderly rectangles, packing us in elbow-to-elbow and nut-to-butt. When a few of us caught glimpses of the younger wives or the older daughters moving past, we kind of puffed up and all, being that we were dressed for the first time in our Army uniforms. "Move aside for them shoppers, privates. Eyes front. Mouths shut." His inside voice was considerably lower than the one he used on the blacktop. The drill sergeant pointed at the main department store. "When ya'll finished getting a haircut, head straight to them workers up front and buy a shaving kit." He hesitated, then rolled his eyes. "You can get phone cards, too."

"Holy shit," Elliott cried.

"We're really getting phone cards!" Gilmore said.

Our first chance to call back home. A collective sigh issued from the entire company as we grinned with excitement—all in agreement, for once.

Suddenly, Malone was up in Elliott and Gilmore's face, whispering loud enough so we could all hear: "Have you two dirty dick-beaters lost your damn mind? If you two don't shut the fuck up this instant, I'm gonna stick my foot up both your asses and wear you around like a pair of autistic flip-flops!" The drill sergeant looked the rest of us up and down, watching us squirm like kindergartners about to start recess as a pair of grannies shuffled by. He nodded his campaign hat at them politely. "Afternoon, ladies," which made them blush. When they were far enough away, he added, "And *no fucking candy*, privates. It's contraband. Makes your dick small."

The first recruits rushed into the barber shop as soon as Malone gave the word, and the old men inside directed them to the row of black leather chairs on the righthand wall, reserving the left side for non-recruits. This portly grandma wearing thick glasses waved me over after ten minutes of

waiting. She was the only lady barber. "Get over here, son." My turn to get shaved and soldiered, I guessed.

I sat down and said, "A number one on the sides and a taper near the top—"

"Boy, you gettin' a monkey cut!" She palmed my head with her hand and flicked the razor on. It buzzed like a wasp as she brought it close to my ears. I felt it press against my sideburn and shave up my temple, a rush of cool air on my open skin. Clumps of hair didn't fall like I thought they would—the razor had this vacuuming device built into it that sucked the loose debris down a thick tube. As she mowed up and down the back of my neck and head, the barber yelled over the razor's noise, "You got a lotta moles on your head, boy." I watched her in the mirror as she ran her tongue across the front of her teeth. "That's a sign of good luck."

I felt special. Then I felt a sharp pain.

"Oh. Sorry about that." She'd cut one of my lucky moles. A thin stream of blood ran down the smooth grooves on my scalp. "Just nicked you some. You'll be all right." She only slowed her handiwork to slop a hot, dripping wash cloth on my skin, rubbing it over the wound. "It'll heal." When she'd finished my hair, the barber spun me around to give me a good look in the mirror, holding a smaller one up behind me so I could see the back of my head's reflection.

I looked like a leukemia patient. My eyebrows were longer than what was left atop my head. She might as well have shaved them off, too! If there was one thing I'd taken pride in as a civilian, it'd been my thick, dirty blonde hair, all styled and gelled. Ma always said I'd never go bald. Apparently, a sliver of Cherokee blood ran in her family.

The barber slapped a cotton ball against the cut and fastened it down with white electric tape. "That's the only band aid I got, kid. Clean it tonight in the shower."

Next, I had to get my Private E-2 rank sewn on my uniform at the tailor shop. Because I was a university drop-out with over thirty college credits, the Army decided to promote me to a higher starting rank than the kids out of high school, but that meant I needed the E-2 patch sewn onto my BDU collars and my field patrol cap. This Korean lady behind the shop counter steadily worked at the needle and thread with her lined and thin hands. She seemed to know that I was in a hurry, but took her sweet-assed time. There was a moment, when she was about halfway done with her delicate work, that the patch just hung there flimsy off my uniform as I watched. A single chevron rested on it. It made me wonder about the Asian ladies—swarms of them worked as grocery baggers, wives, and tailors on most military installations. They came from countries our soldiers had conquered. Now they labored to provide.

When she finished, I paid her the four-dollar fee and moved on to the main department store to get my shaving kit and phone cards, like Malone ordered.

Gilmore—still rubbing at his own landscaped head—nudged my arm when we'd finished shopping and formed back up outside. "Bro, you might wanna get back in there and buy some Selsun Blue," he said. "Your head's ate up with mad dandruff."

Elliott laughed. "He's right! Red patches all over your scalp."

"Sons of bitches," I muttered. That was the other reason I loved having a thick head of hair—they hid my skin flakes.

But there wasn't any time for that. Malone had returned. "Fall in!" The company formed up too slowly, and it made our drill sergeant grit his teeth. But something kept his anger in check. "Hurry up," he shouted at a few stragglers. When the company was ready, he looked us over. "I tell you what," Malone said, before ordering *column-right march*. "A company of fresh-bald privates'll make even the most grizzled old first

sergeant weep. Goddamn beautiful.”

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“Phone calls!” Malone came storming into the bay. “You shit-birds get fifteen minutes, the whole damn company!”

Our entire bay of recruits dropped what they were doing and scrambled for their phone cards, stashed away in wallets and duffle bags, even their shaving kits. We pressed out the bay doors to a series of metal booths with black pay phones under white artificial lights. We still wanted our mothers to save us. Each recruit jockeyed for position. “Every man gets three minutes!” Malone yelled. “That includes dialing time.” Then our fearless leader signaled the phone calls to begin, even as privates were already dialing home.

I was about halfway back in the third line. Gilmore stood in front of me, his face impatient and eager. “It’s pot roast night,” he said aloud to everybody and nobody. “Momma makes the best damn pot roast—I hope to God I can smell it.”

Elliott was huddled against his booth one line over, trying to hide the fact that he was crying. Some of the more respectful privates just turned away, pretending not to notice. It seemed the right thing to do. But a few made sure to rub it in good.

“Be gentle with her,” Harvey was saying to Wilkins. “She just needs a little something in the bay tonight to make her feel better.”

I hated that motherfucker.

“Twelve minutes!” Malone shouted.

Gilmore was up. I’ve never seen someone dial a phone number so fast. You woulda swore he called 911. That got me thinking about who I’d call on my turn so I could dial it just as quick. My girl needed a phone call, for sure, but I hadn’t told my parents that I’d enlisted yet. They still thought I

was back home.

"Nine minutes!"

Gilmore's back got animated. He was talking too low for me to hear, but I just knew he'd gotten his mom on the phone. Whatever he was saying sounded really happy. Family does that for you. No matter how many times you hurt each other, you can always push all that aside. Just be there for each other. I rubbed at the palm of my hand. The artificial lights hummed above, and for the first time, it dawned on me how quiet Ft. Benning was. Above the still pine trees and the freshly mowed grass, the American flag, towering above our complex and wider than several cars, hung limp from its metal post.

"Hurry, man. Time's up."

Gilmore turned and gave me a dirty look.

"Six minutes!"

"You're done, Michigan." I inched forward to the booth, trying to be as close to that damn phone as possible so I could get a dialing head start.

"Back the fuck up," he mouthed to me, pissed. "I'm talking to my momma!"

"We all gotta momma." I flashed him my phone card, as if to reason.

Gilmore shook his head and turned back into the booth. "I gotta go," he said. "Tell Charley and Liz I miss and love them. You need any money, mom? I'm gonna send you my first check." He listened for a few seconds. "Nah, I'll be fine. It's going straight into your account. Just keep your eyes open for it soon—I know, I know. But I gotta go." He let out a deep breath. "Love you, too."

I heard her tell him, "My big strong young man! I'm so proud

of you.”

Then I pounced on that damn phone. Gilmore started throwing sass my way, but I was too busy reading the dang instructions on the phone card. It took me over a minute just to get through to the other side.

And then she picked up.

“Hello?” Her voice sharp and suspicious—it was after eight o’clock. I could hear the clanging of pots and pans in the kitchen sink.

“Ma.”

The sink faucet got quieter. “Danny? Is that you? Why are you calling from a strange number? You’re lucky I didn’t hang up.”

“Look Ma, I can’t talk long. There’s a line behind me.”

“A line? Did you drop your phone and break it again?”

“No, Ma. I didn’t drop it—”

“Well, no wonder you didn’t answer your phone last night. I tried calling but it went straight to voicemail. We can meet tomorrow at the mall and I can get you a new one—”

“Ma, *listen*. I’m a hundred miles away from there. Is Dad around?”

“You didn’t go on another one of those EMD road trips, did you?”

“It’s E-D-M, Ma: electronic dance music.”

“Oh, God, you’re at a pay phone and you’ve lost all your money again! Last time you lost your wallet I had to wire money into your account just to—”

“Jeez, it’s not *that*. I’ve got all my money, for cryin’ out

loud!" My grip squeezed the edge of the phone booth. "I joined the Army."

It sounded like a glass casserole dish struck the sides of her stainless-steel kitchen sink. "You did *what?*"

"They sent me to Ft. Benning." I wrapped my finger around the telephone cord. "Same as Dad." As I waited for her answer, I noticed that the metal phone booth had a clean look to it, like it had been wiped down recently by recruits that looked too bored when Malone waltzed by. Those little smear marks you always see after.

It reminded me of this one time, back in high school, when my mother had called my little brother into the driveway to help Dad carry this heavy couch she had ordered from La-Z-Boy. She came into my bedroom right before and told me to Windex the front bay window, so I took the paper towels and went into the living room like I was told, spraying that blue shit all over the glass panes. Wiping and wiping at them. When I started working the double-hung on each side, I saw my Dad and brother out there, struggling to heave that big-assed piece of furniture up the sidewalk and through the front door. Even though he was in his late fifties, Dad kept up his old PT routine, hitting the gym pretty regularly. My brother sometimes lifted weights with him, too. Ma stood outside watching them, hands on her hips, the three of them out there working. I guess I really never liked the gym anyways. As I finished my chore, I went to set the Windex bottle on the dining room table, but just then, Ma came inside and took it from me, tucking it into the shadows of a kitchen cabinet as I watched.

"Three minutes!"

"Look, I gotta go. We only get a few minutes to call."

"But—wait, Danny! When did you—? What does this mean?"

"Hey, get off, rawhide. I need my phone call, too." Wilkins behind me.

I raised my elbow at him to fuck off and give me another minute. "It means—" I uncoiled my finger from the cord. "It just means I ain't got no choice, Ma."

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Later that night, Harvey finally hit him. It was about a minute or two into personal hygiene. Gilmore had walked up to his own bed and laid his uniforms on top of it, and as he adjusted the bags and tried to figure out how he'd store the things—maybe under his bunk, he'd said aloud—and as he talked with Elliott, who was sleeping on the mattress above him with that damned mannequin by his side, about how all the girls in the hick town he was from were easy to sleep with if you knew how to hunt or fish, Harvey rounded the aisle with a small, patriotic wall of eager recruits, their heads gleaming under the LED lights. Every last one of them savaging for a good fight. He locked eyes on poor Gilmore, that scarred eyebrow tightening on his skull as he picked up speed, and leaning forward, swung hard at the Michigan kid's baldness. Harvey's forearm bulged as Gilmore's head snapped back. The poor bastard slid along the polished floor until his body stopped. Gilmore lay there a moment, a puffy redness around his right eye that immediately began swelling. He palmed blindly at the metal bunk rails nearby.

"Get up, muthafucker," Harvey shouted. "You think I was playin'?" He reached down and grabbed Gilmore by the shirt and yanked him up, landing his rough, beefy knuckles on the Michigan boy's nose. Blood slung through the warm barracks air. "I ain't no liar—I said I'd fuck you up this morning, that's what I meant!" Harvey hit him again and Gilmore's skull whipped up and down like a fishing bob in the water. The poor bastard's mouth hung open in shock, his eyes wide with fear.

"Please—stop, Harvey!" he begged, panting heavy. "I don't want to—"

"The fuck you don't." He hit him one more time and Gilmore crumpled to the floor. Then Harvey hocked up a huge wad of spit. The phlegm shot from the roughneck's lips onto the naked scalp at his feet, and then, his face red and his blood pumping, he stomped on the poor kid's stomach. Gilmore heaved and whimpered and fell again to the floor. After finishing, Harvey shook his head with disgust and barreled through the crowd, storming away to his side of the barracks.

The Michigan boy just laid there, crying.

We all stood around and looked at him for a while, waiting for him to get up. I went over finally and put my hand on his shoulder, rolling him onto his back. Someone muttered *man, he fucked him up* and then the crowd began to disperse, in ones and threes, until only me and Elliott stood around him. He helped me pull Gilmore off the ground and we tucked him in bed. I wrapped the sheets over his shivering form. Turning away to my own bunk one aisle over, I stripped off my uniform, piece by piece, covering myself in a thin towel. Then the shower heads in the latrine fired up, and listening to them, like a faraway rain, I drifted through the barracks until I stood underneath one, its hot lines of water tracing my exposed body and face. The thick steam roiled across the checkered tile flooring, and as the other privates lined the showers—saying little—their collective sigh rose above the running water. It came up heavy and joined the showers' mists.

On Racism and Other Bigotries

Racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, tribalism, nationalism, parochialism, xenophobia, jingoism, bigotry, intolerance, hatred. These are the topics to be discussed presently. I was inspired to write this after reading a short essay by Sartre called "Portrait of an Antisemite," and realizing that all forms of bigotry are connected and share the same pathologies and deficiencies. Firstly, the bigot appeals to emotional and passionate arguments rather than reason. The bigot is happy to confound rational interlocutors by means of either worn-out cliché, invented evidence in his favor, or, in the last case, hysterics. The bigot prefers intimidation and bullying, and uses these tools to bring his opponent down to his level. He does not accept the authority of logical consistency, and if he uses any form of logical argument at all, it is an obviously flawed one that he hopes will go unchallenged. Therefore, the bigot is typically (but not always) anti-intellectual. He reacts to challenges by resorting to hysterical or violent rhetoric, or, in the best case, merely dismissing the challenger as "one of them".

Secondly, the bigot lives in a world that is constantly defined by "us versus them" and other types of Manichean struggle. His world must be a simple one in which he is on the side of "Good," and there is always something else which threatens his own well-being, which is "Evil" or "the Other." His world is defined negatively, by what he is not or what he is against, rather than positively, what he is for. Therefore, the bigot is often (but not always) politically conservative, and when changes happen in the world he tends to become a reactionary.

Thirdly, the bigot only exists in a specific social context. He is never alone in his beliefs. His attitude itself is always the product of social indoctrination, and often validates the bigot's special sense of belonging in his

community. Sartre writes: "Antisemitism is distinguished, like all the manifestations of an irrational collective soul tending to create a conservative and esoteric France. It seems to all these feather-brains that by repeating at will that the Jew injures the country, they are performing one of those initiation rites which allows them to feel themselves a part of the centers of warmth and social energy; in this sense anti-Semitism has retained something of the human sacrifice."

The impulse to bigotry almost certainly stems from a vestige of the human tribal instinct which has survived in the development of our species. Everyone who was not a member of our immediate family or tribe was potentially, and most likely, an enemy to be avoided or killed. We are no longer in need of this ancient urge, however, and its survival attests to the strength of the instinct. The more prominent place in our modern lives of reason, science, and historical knowledge also dictates that there is no excuse for those intolerant masses of people who cling to beliefs that have long outlived any usefulness they might have once had in pre-history.

Of all the types of bigotry, anti-Semitism is one of the oldest in existence and most infamous. Its history can be dated specifically to the first two centuries of Christianity, and its roots derive completely from religious intolerance, though it has acquired over the centuries a racial aspect due to the fact that Jews did not often mingle with Gentiles and thus kept their Semitic physical features. [Note on the word "Semitic": it derives from a root word that originally only described a broad group of languages that were based around Mesopotamia and the Arabia peninsula. Though "Semitic" is commonly used to refer only to Jews, or speakers of Hebrew, it could properly be used for anyone who speaks Arabic, Aramaic, Maltese, or diverse ancient languages such as Phoenician and Akkadian.]

The Gospels of the New Testament became gradually more anti-Jewish as they were written. Mark, the first to be written

around roughly 65 CE (over 30 years after the crucifixion), took no especial notice of the role of the High Priests of the Temple, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or any other Jewish agents as complicit in the death of Jesus (except Judas, of course); it was a Roman-led affair. By the time we get to John, written around 100 CE, the local bands of new Christians had begun to spread, and to win ever more converts among the Gentiles as well. The new religion needed to separate itself as a faith from its monotheistic progenitor, and placing blame on the Jews for the death of Jesus was an easy solution. After John, we see the earliest of the Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr and Tertullian, place emphasis on the guilt of the Jewish people as a whole for their crime of deicide. Ironically, Tertullian, who was an anti-Semite and celebrated the eternal hellfire awaiting all non-Christians, also wrote tracts arguing for religious freedom for Christians, who were being persecuted sporadically around the empire. From there, it is a long 2000-year history of intolerance towards Jews in European societies leading ultimately to the Holocaust.

Racism is the belief that a difference in the amount of the pigment melanin in his skin makes a person of particular hue incomparably superior to those with a slightly higher or lower amount of the pigment. Europeans and their descendants, having first achieved dominance over the rest of the world due (mostly) to fortunate geography that led to the strategic and ruthless deployment of guns, germs, and steel (Jared Diamond has written a book by this title that explains convincingly the long series of causes and effects that led to Europeans dominating the world through colonial expansion and empire—I previously reviewed the book [here](#)), are the biggest abusers of the bogus “racial superiority theory” which roughly states that some “races” (namely, Europeans) are superior to others (the rest of the world, and especially other humans with darker skin) because they (Europeans) have stronger militaries. Never mind the fact that these militaries were developed over the centuries through a vicious cycle of

escalating warfare amongst themselves, to which all other indigenous peoples would have rightly been unprepared and shocked upon finding themselves on the receiving end of European barbarity during the Age of Discovery. Because of this rather arbitrary course of history, we most often witness humans with white-ish skin tone being racist against other humans with darker skin tones. I must emphasize that the mental disease of racism can be found in all societies, but that it is especially common and despicable when used by those wielding power (Europeans and their descendants for the last 500 years) against those who are relatively powerless (Third World countries, and the poor and minorities in all countries).

Italy, the country in which I live, recently elected a new government; one of the appointed ministers of the majority Democratic party is Cecile Kyenga, a woman of African origins, having immigrated to Italy at a young age from Congo. She received an education in Italy, lived her life in Italy, and is obviously Italian for all practical purposes; she now serves as the Minister of Immigration, a post which would seem to fit her skills quite well. If you ask a racist, however, the only pertinent issue is her inferiority and otherness due to the higher level of melanin in her skin. Members of the Italian Parliament from the far-right Northern League party felt that it was appropriate, during a recent speech of the Immigration Minister, to throw bananas at her and yell "Go back to Africa!". Another senior member of Parliament from the Northern League party publicly and shamelessly called Kyenga an orangutan. These were elected members of Parliament, and racists, who were elected by other racists to support their bigoted beliefs and to try to stop the immigration of people with more pigmented skin.

Closer to home for me is the case of Barack Obama. The election and re-election of America's first black president (half-black, but no one seems to care about that distinction)

would have naturally made us assume that racism was waning. In some ways it was true (we elected a “black” president!) but in other ways it revealed exactly to what extent racism is alive and well. The election of Obama seems to have deeply offended racist bigots around America (I cannot imagine why). For years they had quietly been forced underground and could not openly express their racist beliefs in mixed company, but they always knew they were right since people like them – people with white-ish colored skin – were in charge of things. They muttered about the injustice of affirmative action, and howled whenever a darker skinned person was accepted for a job or in a university when there was at least one person with lighter skin who was rejected. They knew that there was something inherently superior about their relative lack of melanin. So you can imagine the shock when Obama was elected.

Obama represents, for the racist, the Great Other—a person who is so far removed from the familiar and correct world that the racist inhabits that he might as well be an alien. Never mind that he is just a moderate, centrist Democrat with a great family and biography who is almost totally inoffensive as a person. Never mind the fact that the people who oppose him as if he were the second coming of Vladimir Lenin in America are basically opposing a guy who would have been a moderate Republican a couple decades ago. I have visited America three times since Obama was elected, and one of those times I visited the dentist. This dentist was previously unknown to me, and I went to him on the recommendation of my family due to his low prices. He and his two assistants were very friendly and loquacious elderly people with deep Southern drawls (one might even say Southern charm). When it came time for the final inspection of my teeth, the dentist, while I was unable to talk or reply due to the metal tool jammed in my mouth, proceeded to tell me in confidence that Obama was secretly a Muslim, and that of this fact he (the dentist) had never been so sure of anything in all his life. Charming.

Though they are rarely empowered to openly state their racism (progress!), the bigot can easily transfer the reasons for his distrust of Obama from one thing to another. He will not say, in company, that the amount of pigment in the president's skin makes him evil, but that is what they mean when they accuse him of being un-American, socialist, fascist, Marxist, Kenyan, and talk about "taking their country back". Back from whom? Since white people exploited black people for slave labor in the building of America, after completing the genocide of the original darker skinned native people, to the racist this is the proper relationship for all time. In America, the strongest form of racism appears as white supremacy, which was used to control the huge African slave population of the South for centuries, as well as to ensure that the lower classes of poor and disenfranchised whites never sided with the slaves against the rich upper classes.

One final note about racism and politics in America: the Southern strategy. This was a cynical strategy formulated by Republican party operatives in the time of Richard Nixon to exploit and wield the racism of the South to create a wedge between white voters and black voters, and to ultimately win elections. The strategy was used quite effectively by Ronald Reagan, who mocked black recipients of welfare aid and casually let the white racist voter know that he will not allow black people to take advantage of the system to get ahead any longer. The Republican party continues to use the strategy today, kicking and screaming and becoming less and less coherent in their indiscriminate use of intolerance for political gain. The two elections of Obama, and the changing demographics of America, has basically doomed to failure the Southern strategy (though not racism itself). Another strategy will doubtless be formulated to pit people of different skin tones against each other, and distract them from those who truly exploit them.

Sexism, on the other hand, is the belief that a human animal

of one sex is inherently, or innately, superior to one of the other sex. While there are surely some scattered examples of women who hate or look down on men as inferior, it is obvious to all that the real issue is male chauvinism, or misogyny (from the Greek "hater of women"). This is the belief that humans of the male persuasion, who are genetically predisposed to produce more of the hormone testosterone and so become physical larger and stronger, are therefore superior, more intelligent, and more fit for power than women. You see, to the sexist bigot, bigger size means both bigger intelligence and bigger right to rule the human world. It is hard to say which is more prevalent between racism and sexism, but sexism is probably more tolerated and more bound up in the structure of all except the most progressive societies. This has been the story ever since the rise of modern human civilizations around 10,000 years ago, when agriculture led to new cities, new kings, and new war gods (who overthrew the old mother goddesses). Is there any reason a women should not get paid the same amount of money as a man for doing the exact same job for the exact same amount of time? Rationally speaking, no. But to the chauvinist a woman can never be as good as a man in anything (except raising children, of course), and so she should not deserve equal pay or equal rights.

Back to Italy, my country of residence, we can see some of the worst examples of structural misogyny in the developed world, as well as some reasons to have hope for improvement. The man who has led Italy for the largest part of the last two decades, Silvio Berlusconi, is both the richest man in Italy and the owner of a media empire. He surely has one of the most openly disrespectful attitudes towards women of any "leader" in the developed nations. He appointed female porn stars to cabinet positions, and has very effectively employed Italy's long-standing culture of chauvinism and machismo for his own purposes. Though he still controls the country's right-wing party, he was finally convicted in one of the dozen lawsuits against him (this one not for underage prostitution but for

tax fraud) and will not serve again as prime minister. On the flip side, a recent election has just made the new Italian parliament the youngest ever (average age 47) and the highest female representation ever (31% – for comparison, after the recent US elections Congress now has its own highest female representation ever at "only" 18%). This part is too easy: elect more women, and things will improve!

It is no secret that religions have played a huge part in maintaining and justifying institutional sexism. We shudder to imagine the sad lot of most women born into most majority-Muslim countries. Not being able to drive, not being able to leave the house without a male relative, and husbands being legally protected against beating and raping their wives are three common features. It is difficult to even imagine a road towards political empowerment at this point, but we can hope for an quick improvement in basic education and human rights at the very least. Christianity has also celebrated the submission of wives to their husbands, and the second-class status of women in general. Thus, many Christian women have accepted their lot with resignation for millenia because it was written in the Good Book. Fortunately, the Enlightenment and the advent of secular politics in the Christian countries has led to the gradual enfranchisement and empowerment of women. We can already imagine the potential sexist resurgence that will accompany the first female American president (much like the resurgent racism after Obama), but let us hope in any case for more women in positions of power.

Changing to another form of bigotry, homophobia is when a person hates human beings who love other human beings who happen to share the same genitalia. The homophobe is filled with fear, hate, and typically suppressed homosexuality. Religions, once again, have told people that homosexuality demands a death sentence, and there are probably not a small number of homophobes who would like to enforce such a legal code (and still do today in certain Third World countries such

as Uganda and Russia). In Leviticus, there is a long list of verses specifically outlawing sex with mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, sisters and brothers in law, mothers and fathers in law, sons and daughters in law, mothers and daughters or granddaughters at the same time, women having their period, and animals, in addition to those proscribing men lying with other men (the preceding verse also warns against child sacrifice); those other things tend to get ignored and forgotten. That would require too much logical consistency for the bigot. Even so, I do not recall any of the words of Jesus condemning homosexuals – he hung out with 12 unmarried dudes! –, or for that matter women (he hung out with prostitutes!), dark-skinned people (he was a dark-skinned person!), or Jews (he was a Jew!). He did say, however, that all of the laws of the Old Testament were valid, so we should assume that he was anti-incest, anti-child sacrifice, and anti-gay. Homosexuality is a trait that can be found in at least 1000 other animal species, including all the primates (such as chimpanzees, monkeys, and humans), many other mammals, birds, and even fish. It is a product of evolution, just like higher or lower amounts of melanin or testosterone. And despite the bigoted homophobe, love always trumps hate.

Finally, let's talk about nationalism. This is the peculiar belief that the particular section of the earth's crust on which you are born is superior to every other piece of earth, and thus it demands your lifelong loyalty. This idea is appealing to large numbers of ignorant and easily manipulated humans who, as we have seen, often need little excuse for emotional prejudice against anyone other than those who look like them or were born in close proximity to their section of earth. This idea has had great utility for governments since the advent of the modern nation states in state-sanctioned homicide and theft against people born on more distant pieces of earth. Never mind the fact that national borders are highly artificial and arbitrary, and are often the result of accidents of history if not intentional theft. Also never mind

the fact that the place where you are born is completely random and outside of your control, and that the only thing we can ever control is our own actions. Those would be facts based on reason and reflection, which are things not to be found in the bigot's arsenal.

It is no wonder that nationalism has been expertly and cynically whipped up by political leaders since the beginning of civilization, but especially since the rise of the modern industrial nation states in the last few centuries. At the outbreak of World War One, Germany and England enthusiastically asserted their mutual superiority and hatred towards each other, despite each being the biggest trading partner with the other prior to the war, and despite being the most developed scientific nations in the world. Dr. Samuel Johnson famously said: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." While we cannot be sure exactly what he meant, we can guess that it has something to do with the ease with which a malicious intent can be excused by an appeal to Patriotism. Presumably, love of one's country, but not love of anyone else. It is not common in which we find even the most ardent patriot who evinces love even towards all the people of his country.

So now, what do we do about racism and other forms of bigotry? First, we always keep in mind that there are no different races, but only one human race. Race is a social, rather than a biological construct. Biologically, the genetic diversity between the human species is a tiny fraction of a percent of our genetic code, and the genes that determine pigmentation are even still a smaller fraction of that fraction. According to the United Nations, there is no distinction between the terms *racial discrimination* and *ethnic discrimination*, and superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and that there is no justification for racial discrimination, in theory or in practice, anywhere. Similarly, there is no human

nature, but only human behavior. We are all free to make our own choices in how to act, but there is no excuse for acting badly towards others.

Next, we need to keep in mind that there is no paradox of tolerance, and tolerance of intolerance is, in fact, intolerance. If we create a system based on rules and reasons, and someone acts outside of those rules and reasons, then that person is outside the system. Our society is what we make it, and to protect tolerance we must not support intolerance. Every act of intolerance or bigotry is, however minor it may seem, ultimately an emotional injunction to hatred and violence. As Sartre writes: "Antisemitism is not in the category of thoughts protected by the right to freedom of opinion." This could be applied to the other forms of bigotry as well. He writes later: "The Jew is only a pretext: elsewhere it will be the Negro, the yellow race; the Jew's existence simply allows the antisemite to nip his anxieties in the bud by persuading himself that his place has always been cut out in the world, that it was waiting for him and that by virtue of tradition he has the right to occupy it. Antisemitism, in a word, is fear of man's fate. The antisemite is the man who wants to be pitiless stone, furious torrent, devastating lightning: in short, everything but a man."

Equally, the bigot is someone who falls short of reaching full humanity by excluding other humans. What is needed is a sense of solidarity, for our shared planet, our shared lives, and our shared fate. What we need is a love of humanity as a whole. That is the only way to live, and the only way to live together.