

Obama, Jude, and Me: Friendship and Murder

by Samuel Hux (June 2018)



The Menaced Assassin, René Magritte, 1927

This is a true story. But right off the mark I should alert the reader that Barack Obama has no more than a walk-on role here. Although I am not an enthusiast for Donald Trump, I am not about to purchase on-line the t-shirt with Obama's face and the caption "Miss Me Yet?". This is the most painful thing I have ever written, and I will not extend an apology to a person for whom pain is merely a distant human rumor.

The "Jude" of the title is an intentional disguise, sharing with the real name only the fact of being a one-syllable proper name that can also be a diminutive. The "Me" is what it says: I, me, myself: a self that has sorely missed Jude for more than half my adult life. To say that I have missed him is entirely inadequate. But to say what I really mean by that is difficult—and potentially embarrassing. *Infatuated*. There, I've said it. Jude was the only male (father and son aside) for whom I have ever felt something deeper than strong friendship, what I might call love did I not—uncomplicatedly heterosexual to the core—associate that word with attraction. I might call it *Platonic* love did that concept not suggest to me, whatever Socrates and Plato had in mind, something like the mental achievement of overcoming a physical attraction.

After a generally unsatisfying freshman year of college, at the age of nineteen I joined the army, moved by a combination of wanting to see something of the world and that culturally definitive urge Southerners seem to have to test the military experience—totally unconcerned that I might be risking some months later being shot to death by a commie. Basic and advanced training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina was followed by attachment to the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia—which I never left for the extent of my enlistment no matter my request for transfer overseas. So much for seeing something of the world which, in retrospect, my imagination having been matured by the realities of infantry training, I can appreciate, since war-time Asia was "something of the world."

It is a fact that military friendships are among the most intense—even when not as dramatic as in Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers*. Intense at least for the duration of service, if not necessarily after demobilization if one's experience was

not bloodied by combat as the Brothers' was. The intensity of my feeling for Jude never abated. It just changed in its nature, pleasure yielding eventually to pain.

My first college year was nothing much to speak of. All my professors but one were drab and boring, that single one my English instructor who'd get so excited lecturing that he once fell over his desk backwards, completing a somersault and lodging in my memory permanently. But sparsely educated as I was, I had certain intellectual ambitions (or pretensions). Having gotten into a spate of trouble at Benning tangling with the chain of command, I was almost court-martialed; the legal officer (the JAG in military jargon) of my unit asked the regimental commander's clerk if I was stupid, to which the clerk answered "Not at all! He's read Plato's *Symposium* twice." That clerk was Jude.

A graduate of a distinguished university and five years my senior, Jude struck me immediately as the real thing, to my pretended or hoped-for version. He'd read "everything" and had seen something of that world I joined up to see, although not as a soldier. After graduation, he had worked in Paris with the CIA in some minor capacity I never got straight. Why he had joined the army remained a mystery to me. "I'm capable of doing something stupid" was all the explanation I ever got. That the JAG asked a mere corporal for his opinion bespeaks the commanding presence higher-ups recognized in Jude. The regimental commander, a colonel, respected his corporal-clerk to the degree that he treated him as a sort of social equal, as far as this Colonel Asshole could. Jude once shared an incident with me. He'd entered the colonel's office on command to find the colonel perusing a pornographic girlie magazine, was called over by the colonel, shown a photo, and was asked, "Tell me, corporal, how'd you like to stick your head between

those knockers?" But more respectable types as well had made Jude a kind of favorite. The regimental sergeant-major, a gnarled and rough-spoken combat veteran of two wars, in appearance and manner an old Hollywood notion of a warrior, practically adopted Jude, making him his and his wife's constant guest off-base.

If that suggests that Jude conformed to the Hollywood image of the soldier, stand corrected. Jude really had no military bearing at all. Although handsome enough in a clearly Mediterranean sort of way, he looked and he talked and he moved in a style which announced, as it were, *my God*, how cultivated, how extraordinarily cultivated this cultivated young man must be. I'm trying to give that a kind of Wildean ring. Nonetheless, Jude was strong and athletic enough to have made Infantry Officer Candidate School (OCS) even though he, like most, washed out, which was no disgrace.

So—how shall I put it?—I was surprised and pleased that Jude became my closest buddy in "Benning's School for Boys," as enlisted men called the base, that he chose me in a military unit that was (full of OCS wash-outs) maybe the smartest and most educated group of privates and corporals in the whole damned army. (The bull sessions I would enjoy later at university were petty compared to those at this one company at BSB.) I was flattered that one so worldly and sophisticated invited me to collaborate on an effort to get rich by writing a play which Broadway couldn't possibly reject, a plan which died soon after birth for two reasons: my lack of talent, and Jude's loss of interest because the fun of the idea was all that was engaging his mercurial mind for a brief time. But it was entertaining while it lasted

And Jude was nothing if not entertaining. He was the best confidential, if somewhat self-deprecating, story teller I've ever known. The story for instance of an absurd venture when an undergraduate: Exam week. Idly twisting a ring on a finger, he took it off and wondered if it would fit around his limp penis. Well, it did, but of course could not be removed. Nonetheless, in spite of swelling and pain, he went to his Shakespeare exam and then, after hours of trying with oil and sweat to de-ring his penis, gave up and waddled to the infirmary. The physician, with some injury to Jude's manhood (both his pride and his pecker) cut through the ring with a steel-cutter . . . just in time! "Sam, can you imagine? The doctor said an hour more and I would have ended up dickless!"

A favored source of his stories was his long-time girlfriend back in New England, "Meg" as I shall call her. He'd never slept with her, he said. Well . . . not quite true, for they had indeed slept together, in the nude in fact, but without penetration or even much touching—as he told me with his habitual "Sam, can you imagine?" "Well, no I can't." "That's because you're not an idiot . . . and, besides, not Catholic. Intercourse is only for after marriage."

Jude was serious, the first fiercely intellectual Catholic I had known (and an influence on my own brief flirtation with the Roman faith). He nonetheless—always surprising—wore his Catholicism lightly enough to nervously twirl his Rosary as if it were a long keychain, singing "Hold on Jesus, you're going for a ride." Which little habit, amusing in itself, will not give the reader confidence that I know what I'm talking about when I say Jude took his church seriously indeed. Although, confession, I am not sure why I chose the word *church* in the sentence above instead of *religion* or *faith*. Did I sense some merely institutional allegiance rather than a deeply felt

commitment? And it need not have meant as much as it seemed to me that should he father a son with Meg he would name him *Christian*.

Perhaps if Jude had published something besides scholarly articles he possibly did during his subsequent academic career that I am ignorant of, I might have some help understanding his singular Catholicism. The only piece of writing I possess is a poem I doubt was ever published. I won't vouch for its quality, only for the pride he took in reciting it at the same time he, perhaps self-protectively, affected to toss it off as just an aesthetic trifle.

I endure the day for night alone,
For day is but a wandering of soul through mind
And mind a little mad.
The labyrinths of lunacy that thoughts create
All lead to crucifixion.
But when the spirit bleeds beyond its strength,
God sends the night, and with the night,
Redemption pure.

I would like to think . . . *I think* I would like to think . . .
. that with the night redemption or some approximation (I am getting beyond my depth) did come even if without total purity.

When I left the army, Jude still had a year to go as he had enlisted for a longer tour than I. He managed to get a day off (certain privileges come to the regimental commander's clerk) to dine with me in Columbus and see me off on the train. I have only the faintest memory of that day except for pleasure at being a civilian again mixed with sadness at leaving a buddy. But I do remember embraces and tears at the station, and promises of we'll meet again—that sort of thing, as if life were a movie. And we did meet again, later, and again . . .

I returned to university, although not the one where I'd been a freshman. In fact, before I graduated into adulthood I attended four, as if I were a medieval itinerant scholar, three of them in the South. (I am being indefinite in order to cover my tracks, for reasons I am not ready to reveal.) I matriculated, I married, I graduated, I attended grad school in one university, I became a father, I transferred to another university—which I shall call Common U since it's the one Jude and I would soon have in common. We lost touch, as will happen, in spite of that Hollywood scene in Columbus, Georgia.

Three years later I am strolling the campus at Common U when I see Jude approaching me. I run to embrace him, when he backs off, says rejectingly, "*I beg your pardon!*"—and walks on. I am stunned—is there a double?—and stand helpless, until I hear behind me "Sam!" and turn to see Jude running toward me with arms open. "Goddamned you," I laugh.

My first wife, who had heard about him those few intermediate years, grew to adore him. As did his students (Jude and I both handling freshman courses). As did his professors, inheriting as it were the extended affection of the sergeant-major,

especially one who would years later be ultimately responsible for a brief eulogistic volume for the departed. After a year of starvation wages as a grad assistant, Jude left for New York and a job in advertising. We visited the city that summer, camping in Jude's apartment. Then I, still the itinerant scholar, transferred yet again to let us call it Uncommon U—while Jude a bit later, fed up with writing ads, returned to good old Common U and finally married Meg.

A few years later, maybe ten, I am an established faculty member in New York, having completed a few before the "Fud," as I habitually call the Ph.D. As a member of the Personnel and Budget Committee, I read job applications, sorting them in piles to be reviewed by other members to make sure that what one prof rejects can be reconsidered by another prof or two. I pick up a letter from a newly-brewed Ph.D. from another Uncommon U. Jude. I bury the letter so no one else will see it. I don't want to offer my colleagues any explanation. What was that all about? Let me return to where I was in my narrative before this rude interruption confessing my rude and unprofessional behavior.

After I moved north to Uncommon U in pursuit of the Fud and Jude moved south back to Common U in similar pursuit and life with Meg, I visited briefly on other business and to meet Meg, whom I had never seen, only to be disappointed that she was in New England on family business. I never did meet her. A few months later I was visiting my parents over Christmas vacation—my father's health was in decline—a lengthy car-ride from Common U. A day after Christmas it was that my mother, holding the newspaper, cried out to me, "My God, son, your friend Jude has been murdered!" In shock, I grabbed the paper and read. "No, not Jude. His wife has been murdered. Jude has been arrested."

I threw the paper aside and immediately drove the two hours or more, top speed, to the village home of Common U, ran into the police station-jail to ask if I could see the prisoner. As I'm standing at the sergeant's desk, Jude walks by hand-cuffed with police guard on the way to another room. "Sam," he says calmly and disappears. An hour later I am allowed to visit Jude in his cell, privately—which surprised me—for about half an hour. "Sam, can you imagine?" Of course I couldn't. I was shocked and relieved at the same time at his calm. Jude did not protest his innocence. He obviously assumed that I assumed it. Which I did. To this day I cannot recall in detail the conversation, only the vitals. Jude left with a friend for Christmas shopping in the neighboring city, leaving Meg, pregnant, at home. When he and friend returned early afternoon, they found Meg dead—having been struck on the head, strangled, and smothered. The coroner's findings, supported by a medical examiner from the medical school at the university, made it clear that she had been killed while Jude was miles away. So why was Jude arrested? "It makes no sense. They don't know what they're doing." Hence the calm, a calm which I assumed was in part the result of the shock of Meg, his beloved since prep-school days, being dead, murdered, for no conceivable reason: he could not talk about her.

My half hour up, I departed—no embraces permitted. A week or so later there was in the local courthouse a hearing to "show cause." There was no evidence to justify a trial of the original suspect, and Jude was freed. A month or so later my father died; I took a flight to the city near Common U—where Jude had been shopping the day of the murder—since there was no airport in the vicinity of my parents' home. Jude met me at the airport ready to drive me to my home-town, a proposal I rejected because it would have meant a five-hour two-way trip for him. So in spite of the fact that I could have rented a

car at the airport Jude drove me to an agency in the capital so that we could "catch up" on the drive since we were unlikely to see one another for some time. He was right.

My own life was getting too hectic to even consider visiting Common U even had I known I might be needed. Course work, freshman teaching, comprehensive doctoral exams, research for dissertation, move to New York for faculty appointment, writing dissertation while now teaching full-time; but much more important, a general sense of unsettlement at what I only recognized later was a pre-looming of divorce, which I should have recognized even then since I, a good boy all my life to that point, was suffering and enjoying guilty fantasies of adultery (an insult to a good woman deserving of fidelity). An older and wiser colleague told me I seemed unhinged, which I took as a left-handed compliment (How interesting I must be!), how stupid I was. If I were less clinically sophisticated than I am I might say I was close to losing my mind. Why do I sound so apologetic? Because I am talking about a roughly two-year period of such self-consumption that I (never much of a letter writer . . . or receiver) was totally oblivious to what was going on in Jude's much more hectic life since our catch-up drive. That is:

Eight months after Jude had been freed and Meg's death left an unsolved crime, he was re-arrested and brought to trial on new evidence. A general factotum at a local restaurant who had also worked as a cleaning man in Jude's apartment building told his employer (why not earlier?) that the previous fall Jude had offered him money to kill his wife, and also made sexual advances. Charges which Jude of course denied. The sexual accusation (about which later) was of course legally irrelevant, but colored the prosecution's arguments nonetheless. The more important accusation was unprovable: he

said, *he* said. More new "evidence," that Jude had taken out a double-indemnity insurance policy on Meg, a big issue naturally for the prosecution, was mitigated to some degree by the fact that Meg had signed off on it and Jude had taken one out on himself as well. The coroner stood by his finding at the show-cause hearing—which should have given the defense more heft unless one assumed the coroner was an incompetent who couldn't tell body temperature from rigor-mortis or either from his elbow. The incompetence belonged rather to the jury, which simply assumed the coroner must be wrong, and there were hints that man and wife (one maybe a deviant) had marital problems, and God knows what else was on their minds. The incompetence belonged to the judge as well, who allowed the verdict of *guilty* to stand when there were clear grounds for "reasonable doubt" and nothing approaching "preponderance of evidence."

Jude then spent just short of one year on death row at the state penitentiary. To this day I find it impossible to imagine what it was like, and I am glad I did not know what was going on when it was going on.

The following autumn Jude won on an appeal, as he should have given the shoddiness of the trial, and was re-tried for the crime of murder. This time, there being no new evidence, and any reference to his possible homosexuality disallowed, the jury "correctly" found him innocent. Should I be ashamed that I did not, by then finally aware of what had been going on, rush southwards to offer my dearest friend my congratulations?

Let me get an ultimately minor and inconclusive issue out of the way first. I grasp that some might think Jude homosexual; I hinted at a certain ambiance early on: that he had no

military bearing at all and talked and moved in my-how-cultivated a style. But no matter the handyman's accusation, I know that during our extraordinarily close relationship he never made a quiver of a sliver of an adumbration of a gesture toward me, or anyone else I knew. (A fellow grad student who roomed with Jude for months before the marriage insisted on the same experience.) I recall a conversation over beer at Benning when a member of our unit was about to be discharged for "deviant behavior." "Sam, can you imagine?"

Still, I recognize how inconclusive these memories and remarks are; so I thought it possible of course that a buried bisexuality had at least once surfaced. But who should know better than Meg—whatever she knew? I mention all this because back in that horrible time, when I was just beginning to ponder the possibility of "guilty," I wondered if a discovery of homo-erotic feelings could trigger a murderous impulse toward one's mate, some sick response to the female body as some repulsive unfamiliar what-shall-I-call-it? But, nonsense I said to myself, Jude was already long familiar with Meg's body, and was indeed the father of a child that died with its mother.

Now, I have just revealed that I was suffering the possibility that Jude was guilty. Why? Some of Jude's friends and colleagues doubted the accusations of the restaurant-worker-handyman that Jude had tried to hire him as an assassin. But in order to deny credence to this man I have to imagine the following:

"Ned," let's call him, knows that this graduate student at Common U has been arrested on suspicion of murder. Ned knows with the rest of the town that grad student has been freed for

lack of evidence and case is cold and closed. Whoever committed the crime is in the clear. So—can you imagine it?—Ned goes to his employer and police and *invents* a story that grad student had offered him a murder contract, thereby re-opening the case and, more important and a dozen times more dangerous, thereby making *himself* unavoidably a “person of interest” and possible suspect—a suspicion that never quite died out as a matter of fact. This fantasy will not wash.

So I could not convince myself, no matter how hard I exhausted my soul trying, that the accusation was a lie. Of course, in my desperation I wondered the following. Would Ned, who, remember, had cleaned apartments in Jude’s building and therefore could have kept a key or its copy, have killed Meg for the contents of her purse—which some believed—and then with no police suspicions about him at all, gone to the police with a lie that put him in possible jeopardy?

The only thing I could believe, since all evidence showed that Jude could not have killed Meg himself, was that although he had failed to tempt Ned, he succeeded in hiring some other amateur or professional hit-man, who disappeared as such figures do.

Or one last possibility for Jude’s innocence: Ned lied, no matter how amazingly stupid that was; there was no other successful contract murder; and some thief-murderer wandered in one Christmas Eve. Which is really all that’s left if one wishes to believe in the innocence of my friend. Why I could not fix on the “possibility” I will explain shortly.

But now let me explain why in this story I have covered my tracks with false personal and place names (and altered a couple of insignificant details). In the annals of murder and in court history, Meg is a victim of an unsolved crime and Jude is innocent of murder. So be it. I don't want to re-open a case and overthrow a verdict. What would that accomplish? If someone were to recognize the lineaments of this story as that of the "real" Jude and Meg I will deny that they are who I am talking about. Enough said.

So where was I left? (A less significant question than where Jude was left, internally, which I will never know.) There was no way I could believe my friend had not killed his wife by his own hand or another's, and unable to escape that conclusion, and, as banal as it may sound to some, strongly disapproving of murder, I knew that I was choosing *never to see him again*. Furthermore, I felt that I had somehow received a confession. I think that if I were in deep trouble, for which I was not responsible, I might turn for strength or solace or something (!) to a close friend or loved one. I was not in those days hard to find. Jude knew exactly where I was. Never, not, a word. Not then, and not later. (The job application I mentioned earlier was merely that, not an appeal to me, for he would not have known at that date what had become of me or where I was; it was just a formal letter sent to dozens of colleges.) This is of course possibly a delusion, but I took it as silent shame. *I think he knew that I knew.*

But one thing I did not know was *why*. I will die not knowing why he did what he did. It makes no sense to me, and I have long ago ceased trying to understand—and not from lack of curiosity. So desperate I was to understand the motive that at one point I wondered if his Catholicism had anything to do with it: perhaps trapped in a relationship he was, perhaps,

sexually incapable of sustaining, and divorce disallowed by his church . . . This was crazy—and I stopped searching for the *why*. The entire story remains a heavy emptiness in my life.

Jude died ten years ago, having lived out most of his remaining life in his ancient mother's house, for at least twenty-five years no more than thirty miles from where I resided. Whatever his life was, it was not the life of cultural significance I would have predicted back at Benning's School for Boys. I know of no scholarly or creative record left behind; I have wondered if public knowledge, available to the curious, of his record as an ex-con at the least, limited the chances of academic appointments. I only know that he retired after a deanship at a jerkwater college so insignificant that no one in the state naming local educational institutions would think to name it. Not even that is as depressing as the rumors I have reason to believe are true, that his last years while he, always so neat in every way, now dressed in tattered elegance, lived in physical squalor. What I read in all this is suffering. And who deserved it more? Was there ever any redemption? Only God knows.

But although I resolved never to see him again, and could never discover to my satisfaction the *why*, I never found a way of not wondering *how*. That is, how this lovely (yes!) person I knew in the army, over a summer in New York, and at Common U could turn out to be a *monster*, for whether he murdered his wife with his own hands, which I continue to find unlikely given the evidence, or by a successful contract, which I find more likely, that is how I judge the murder of a woman and her unborn child. But I am dissatisfied with the verbal clause I have used: "could turn out to be." So I am about to launch

into a thought process that will strike most people as insane and/or stupid. Nonetheless I take the risk.

For to say Jude "turned out to be" a monster implies or translates as "was all along although you didn't see it." Of course that sounds to the educated mind, I am sure, wise, sophisticated, psychologically attuned, but I have to say to me it sounds just too easy and even superficial, the ease facilitated by the conventional wisdom, sophistication, and psychological attunement the educated mind congratulates itself on possessing.

With no ease at all, and, I suspect, with no support, I insist that the Jude I knew in the army, in New York, at Common U, was not capable of doing what the Jude I chose never to see again did indeed do. I do not mean the Jude I knew was not capable of killing. He may have been as capable of that as I, myself, am. I am not talking about the capacity to kill in warfare, which after all I was trained for (The Infantry School, remember); nor talking about killing in self-defense, nor about avenging the death of a loved-one. I am confessing that there are a couple of people at least that, had I a terminal disease, I would willingly sacrifice what time I had left on earth to remove them by assassination from this earth. I am rather talking about the capacity to murder someone one loves or has loved, whether with unborn child or not. The Jude-I-knew had that capacity no more than I do. So I am suggesting that sometime after that deep friendship had matured "something happened"—but a *something-happened* that is not consistent with a *turned-out-to-be*. Allow, please, a metaphor arising from a matter that has long fascinated and challenged my mind.

In quantum mechanics there is a phenomenon that defies classical physics to say nothing of defying common sense. An elementary particle takes a “quantum leap” from one orbit within an atom to another orbit without actually *leaping*. That is, it does not traverse the distance between its position in orbit A and its new position in orbit B. It simply *is* in one position and without *moving* to a subsequent position *is* in that second position. According to quantum theory (and mathematics) the particle in A and the particle in B are, without any transition from A to B, the *same* particle. OK, physicists are more mathematically attuned than I and smarter than I, so maybe that’s why I cannot follow them here. I mean that I cannot help but retain my commonsensical belief that the particle in A and the particle in B are two different particles, that one died and the other was born, that “something happened” which “killed” one and “birthed” the other. And even when I agree or try to agree they are one and the same because I want to be scientifically sophisticated, my doubt is as strong as my respect-saving forced agreement. You see where I am going with this.

I don’t know what to call this metaphor (or whatever it is). Something happened—which severed Person A from the Person B who had the same name, looked exactly the same, walked and talked the same way, and rendered B capable of acts A was incapable of. I am not suggesting some physical something-that-happened, for we know already the body undergoes a complete cellular change every seven (or is it fifteen?) or so years so that I am physically a different collection of matter from that which my Mama loved. In fact I have no idea what the something-that-happened is/was. I don’t rule out the possibility of some material—that is to say medical—something, for I know nothing about brain lesions and such phenomena. So I am not satisfied with some psychiatric (that kind of medical) something. For if I pronounce a sentence like “Freddy

went crazy, became insane," there is that word *became*, which implies same Freddy, now somewhat changed. So even if I am now way over my head and thinking beyond my pay-grade, I am thinking of a something-that-happened that's far more radical. Will it help if I christen it a *characterological quantum leap*?

Now, I doubt that this line of thought is convincing to very many people, if any one of them at all—and I can sympathize with that skepticism. But I would prefer that the skeptic not propose or assume that my argument is driven by a kind of self-interest, that I simply do not wish to admit that I could be so thoroughly mistaken about the Jude-I-knew because it would hurt my pride to be so wrong. If the skeptic is indeed so inclined, I would like that skeptic to admit that he or she did not know Jude and is after all quarterbacking from an armchair.

But no matter, agreement not absolutely essential. I simply want the reader not to suspect my motives, and not dismiss as unworthy the affection I have (present tense)—and suffer—for the Jude-I-knew, given the actions of the Jude in B orbit, so to speak.

One final matter before I force Barack Obama to make his entrance.

That is, my *ethics of forgiveness*. I can forgive someone, and have done so more than once, for what he or she has done to me. The Judaeo-Christian tradition, of course, even endorses such a mental action. But I cannot, and I have no right to,

forgive someone for what he or she has done to someone else.

I am sure the reader has wondered long before this moment what Barack Obama—neither a friend nor a murderer—has to do with any of this. And I will admit there is no absolute *narrative* necessity for Obama's walk-on role in this story, not if I am interested only in telling a compelling story about a murderer; but that is not the case. For this is a story in transition to a kind of essay, an essay of an autobiographical nature, or better yet a memoir, a confession, as it were, of how the murder affected me and how I came to cope with my hopeless and helpless affection for my friend the murderer. If I (or any memoirist) cannot trust my (or his/her) mind, what is the point of a memoir in the first place? Consequently, I am stuck with my mind (and so is the reader who's persisted this far) and the way my mind works. And for better or worse (but that's the way it is in any case), the phenomenon of Barack Obama has become for me a part of the way I think of Jude—so that when I learned of Jude's death and was forced thereby to revisit my Jude-experience once again, and again, my mind would drift to the elevation of Obama, the association having nothing to do with the fact that both events occupied the same year. But I did not know, not then, why my mind drifted in that direction. I knew only that something Obama said back in his first presidential campaign stuck and sticks in my mind like a foreign object in one's eye. I will get to it.

I was never tempted by his historic race for office, and not simply because my politics are generally Tory-ish. I can tell a fraud when I hear or read one. Such as an orator whose accent is one thing when addressing an Ivy-Leaguish audience but quite a down-home drawl when talkin' t' th' folks. Such as a graduate of Columbia and Harvard Law who joins the church of

an ignorant rabble-rousing preacher to gain "street cred." Any spiritual or theological motivation for such a downwardly-mobile choice by such a successful yuppie is laughable.

But these might seem mere peccadillos, more or less normal in relevance for a politician, and really irrelevant in a story or essay about friendship and murder, for Obama was, unlike someone you now know about, certainly himself no murderer. For it is not murder for the president to announce publicly in time of war that the troops will be removed from action on such-and-such a date, although one thing I learned at The Infantry School is that never, never, do you broadcast to the enemy what your strategic and tactical plans are, for that aids the enemy in his counter-strategy and tactics and insures that more of your own soldiers will be endangered, which is to say wounded and killed. Nor is it murder for the president to deny an embassy or consulate abroad adequate military security (let's say in the vicinity of a 9/11 anniversary) because publicly enhanced security might contradict electoral-campaign assurances that the principal terrorist enemies are no longer the essential threat given the proclaimed success of our foreign- and military policies, although that denial of adequate security (let's not lay all responsibility at his Secretary-of-State's feet) led to the death of an American ambassador and a few of his few protectors, the deaths insured by the failure to respond immediately to the Benghazi attack on the grounds that it was too late, when there was no way to know how long the attack would be. Neither this disgrace, nor the strategic failure to know that secrecy of movement is a weapon itself, can be called murder even when the insurance that there will be victims is so obvious and the number of the dead will exceed that in a murder by far. No, the president was not a murderer. But he was a contemptible person, which is why I make no apologies for my introduction of him into this essay.

One of the publishing scandals nipped in the bud was the question did he or did he not write those books. One rumor had it that Bill Ayers, Obama's Chicago friend, ghost-wrote *Dreams from My Father*. I don't know how to judge, for I've never read a word by Ayers so have no sense of his prose style. But I do judge it hard to believe that the same person wrote both *Dreams* and *The Audacity of Hope*, for I do have some sense of what characterizes a prose style—and I will eat both books if it's ever proven they both have the same author. Which brings me back to Mr. Ayers.

William Charles Ayers was a founder of the Weather Underground Organization of the 1970s, remembered (when remembered) for its bombing campaign, its terrorism. Ayers cannot be condemned for murder since the only direct deaths were those of three terrorists who died while assembling a bomb, but it's only a lucky accident that he can't be so considered since the Weather Underground was by its chosen actions a murderous organization in its intentions. (*Nail* bombs, such as the one that killed its assemblers, are not meant merely to destroy property.) Nonetheless, Ayers, not just a founder but an active bomber, never spent a day in jail, and ended up finally a Distinguished Professor at U. of Illinois-Chicago, as the liberal academy will forgive anything judged radical enough.

When Obama's friendship with Ayers became an issue in the 2008 campaign, the candidate distanced himself to some rhetorical degree, but dismissed Ayers' 1970s criminality as, given the passage of time, rather forgivable and not in itself actually relevant, and justified his own self-perceived liberality of mind in a manner which should have been revelatory. Ayers' bombing campaign—which I repeat was “victimless” only by

luck—was, Obama explained with his typical egotism, something that happened when he, Obama, was after all only about eight years old. Ponder that a moment. It was a naked assumption—expressed with no embarrassment because no awareness that any was called for—that the significance or lack of significance of events depends not upon the events themselves but upon their temporal proximity to, or distance from, *him*. By that logic (to use a word hardly deserved), my own offspring should have no particular feelings about the Holocaust, since it occurred before they were even born.

When I think of Jude today, I am helpless not to feel a certain affection when recalling him *as I once knew him*. But when I recall the turning point, what the ancient Greeks called the *peripeteia*, I am quite simply helpless. And the reader must have noticed that in the first pages I recall events with, and write with, an obvious pleasure. However all this goes, I have been blessed and cursed with a rich emotional life, and . . . or is it *but* . . . with the exception of my transformative love for a certain woman, and my violent unnerving when an off-spring was medically endangered, my Jude-experience has been the most emotionally *explosive* phenomenon of my existence. And I understand something I did not fully grasp before I decided to tell this story, for sometimes writing is what a critic once called “technique as discovery.”

I understand why I avoided any opportunity to see Jude again: I was afraid that if I did, after all those years, half my adulthood, I might be tempted to forgive him. And if I did forgive him, exhibiting that superficial liberality of mind Obama so confidently displayed, then I would be no better a man than, no more a *Mensch* than, and just as shallow as, Barack Obama.

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