

PREACHER ROE

Preacher Roe was moved to castigate his congregation for its laziness and stupidity and the tendency they had to do anything that was asked of them, provided they were asked three times, such as watering down a silo full of grain or killing the herd of pigs while the prices was falling, or to vote for the Devil's advocate, Mr. Neely, as Mayor of the town, in exchange for three hundred dollars and an antique oak picture frame containing a photo of Miss Peaches of the year 1920 in short pants, which was the fashion of the day then, and the promise of future prosperity for all. This was in modern time Oklahoma.

Preacher Roe knew it was all lies, as did the folk of the town, too stuck in the head and deprived, as they were, of reasonable thinking, and assuming, as they did, that things would go on as they had been -- that they'd survive another year or so, status intact, superior to the indigent of the town, and have their cereal in the morning and a beer at night, and an occasional sexual experience with somebody's wife, or maybe their own, in their dreams; but, for sure, they could watch their TV shows and be happy and the thirty or forty or a hundred commercials a night that they watched, like sheep, would fortify their knowledge of the wide commercial world and help them to know what to buy when they went to the big box store at the edge of town, which could be confusing in its proliferation of various products, whether they needed them or not, especially the poor, who could buy in bulk -- and the people knew the names of the products and could sing their songs and remember their heavenly functions in TV Land, and couldn't help but buy all that shit, from borax to eye-glasses to plastic dolls. Thought Preacher Roe.

Preacher Roe was a tall, thin, evaporated man with only one or two thoughts left in his head: one was the animal like stupidity of his congegation, and the other was fire, the efficacy and cleansing properties of fire.

Preacher Roe's congregation, Christian, of course, in its origins, had allied with Mr. Neely's political party, a party of the rich, who wanted to hold onto their money and make more if they could, and who sponsored Mr. Neely because of his talents as a county snake-oil dealer and circus barker, who could talk turkey with the congregaton, them who liked all things turkey, including the trimmings, and because he, Mr. Neely, was paid a lot of cash money -- he could wad it up in his pocklet and even slip a twenty or two from the wad in order to sway some dummie voter who never got past the third grade.

Not to be harsh, thought Preacher Roe, but there were those in his congregation, long after the Civil War, whose only primary idea, rising up from the bottom of their skulls, was the belief that life was their business, their very own lives, that belonged to them, only, and it was nobody's business what they did with it -- piss on a lawn, con money, fuck your sister—especially if your father did as well -- take a dump in the neighbor's yard, whatever, including the State, Local, and United States of

America: the basis of Government was to safeguard those very freedoms and liberties, those that any free-born animal deserved. And they would, if they had to, pick up a shotgun and fight for that right their very selves. "And go fuck y'all if ya don't agree. Fuck y'all anyway, fuck you and fuck you."

Preacher Roe did not agree. He did not agree with the part about guns, for one thing, having served in the War and seen and smelt gangrene and cut off legs and cut off arms, and castrated grown men to save their lives, and watched his own brother, Morris Roe, blow his own head off trying to shoot down a duck. And seen a bunch of other shit regarding guns he was not fond of, or supportive of, if you know what I mean, which anyone in his right mind would not. Preacher Roe, following the old traditions of his family, was a somber and peaceable man, born and raised in the great state of Oklahoma, a man of sobriety and piety, humble in the leadership of his church, he had, more or less, kept his personal views to himself; until one day he began thinking obsessively about fire and what burning things up meant.

He thought about water and he thought about rust. Hydrogen and oxygen. Iron and oxygen. Oxygenation. Fire in the trees. Fire in the hearth. Fire in the stove. Fire. He'd seen a boy drowned in water and a baby consumed in a house. He'd known a man walk into the woods and never come out again. Tired of life, he was. And that ain't be all, thought Preacher Roe. Not by a long shot. Men in his own congregation with the fixed stares of the Absolute and the voices of predators; women with shrieking judgements of the dancing young. Old folks frozen in place around silent tongues and closed eyes and downcast mouths. So he had decided to torch his gathering place and then walk on into the woods like his friend did, and then to die there, and not come out again. He'd walk until he got too tired to walk and then he'd lie down and look up at the sky, feel the spinning earth beneath him, and calmly breathe his last.

Meanwhile, Preacher Roe thought on. Rather, the mechanism in his head, composed of neural links and electrical sparks and the voices of the dead, ticked and tocked endlessly like a metrical poem, or a metronome, sing-song, or flat as an iron track, or like a mill-wheel on a rolling river. Sad observations, rueful condemnations, attacks, images, regrets, excuses, resolutions, and so on, you know the rest. Now it was time to *do* something. The preacher went into the forest. There, he gathered an armful of kindling and logs, returned to the rectory, or parish, or church house, brushed himself off, and quietly entered his wife's peaceable domain. Her name was Rosamene.

"Castigation won't do it," he said, "won't even be the half of it."

"What then?", asked Rosamene.

"I'm gonna burn the hell out of 'em," replied the preacher, "and that oughta do it, be the end all of it all, burnt to ashes and ashes."

“Hold up, Preacher,” said Rosamene, “and let’s the two of us talk this over.”

“I said what I said already,” insisted the Preacher.

“Won’t work, whatever you said.”

“Oh?”

“You’ll just end up in the shithouse. Again.”

“So, then what?”

“Give ‘em hell, Preacher, give ‘em hell.”

“How so, Rosamene?”

“Bring the heat, Preacher, but not yet the fire. Virtually and verbally. Yell it out.”

So the Preacher went onto his mobile and sent out a blast: YOU ALL CAN EXPECT WONDERS AND REVELATIONS BUT THEY AINT WHAT YOU THINK – THEY COMETH FROM GOD ABOVE AND ARE MESSAGES OF PEACE AND GOOD WILL TO ALL THEY ARE NOT AGGRESSIVE OR WARLIKE. I’M HERE LOOKING FORWARD TO SEE THOSE HAPPY SHINING FACES OF YOURS IN THE MORROW.

Next day was a Sunday, when the congregation met in Church and the Preacher preached. The sermon was about Fire: “I know what you’re thinking, folks. You are thinking bad thoughts. You can’t much help it, the reason being, the reason being, there is no reason going on, because effort is required, effort and a measure of active looking around at the world and taking in what’s going on there. Why? Because you been hijacked. You been told what is and you therefore don’t have to see for yourself. And what you been told is a lie, namely that Jesus Chirst is coming again, maybe tomorrow or the next day, if we just got our shit together, or if we get the Jews to fight the Anti-Christ, whatever that is. What’s a jew, for that matter, and what’s up with Jesus? I’m here to tell ya he ain’t comin’. He ain’t on his way. He’s happy where he is. And we all have to stay here and suffer and take it like men. And women.”

Thereupon came a chorus of boos. Preacher Roe had not even got to his real subject -- fire and brimstone – and now he had to quiet the crowd. Teenagers on the scene began throwing cabbages and tomatoes. I guess they came prepared. They caught the Preacher by surprise.

“Holy Moley,” he exclaimed, “stop throwin’ the vegetables, or I’ll call the State Police!”

A pause, and then the hooligans picked up where they left off and let him have it again. "Go ahead, Preacher! Give 'em a call! They's one of us all what knows what's right and what's to come! Be the End of days! The final pandemic! Armegeddon! The day of the Beast! And the Police is us!"

And so on. Preacher Roe was nailed to the floor, his hands glued to the lecturn, his eyes frozen stiff, his mouth stuck in a grimace. This went on for a minute. And then he looked into his mind, into the top of his head, some part of his brain, where he saw visions of the End Times, with the bodies of his parishioners torn to bloody bits floating in the sky like kites, and then he looked at the stupified faces in front of him, and he said: "Listen up, my friends, stop yelling and throwing things, and remember the Lord, who wants us to be quiet for a few minutes, and take a day off, and reflect on my words and deeds and for giving my fellow man a helping hand once in a while?"

"Aint it what we all do?", shouted Mr. Neely from the front row, "It's what we been doin' this whole time on this bad earth! Aint' that right?"

"No, it ain't," replied the Preacher in his almost singing voice, "you all been desecrating the word of the Lord, by letting yorselves be conned by this carnival barker, this snake oil salesman, this clown from unholy houses – he ain't the Anti-Chirst, and the world ain't coming to an end for the Messiah!"

"How the hell do you know?", shouted the flock of two-legged farmers and clerks, and bad apples, all in their own way, "How the fuck do you know?"

"We been tole by the President of the United States!." Shouted another, "and there ain't no higher Authority!"

"Horseshit," answered the Preacher, "it's the Lord what's the higher Authority, and you're a dumb pig if you don't know that."

"I'll not be insulted!," cried the one piggish character, "he is himself the Anti-Christ!"

"Say again!," called out the Preacher.

"The President of the United States! We the holy land of the Modern World! He'll get the Jews up in arms to fight the infidel Mohammedens, or the unbelievable Chinese, and then He'll come, sure as you is standing foolishiy where you are! He'll come down and we'll rapture on up!"

"And you ain't comin'!"

"And who do you think you are!" shouted another.

“You ain’t no smarter than any of us!” yelled an older woman in the back, which struck a deep chord in the congregation – they resented those folks who thought they was better endowed them in brain-power and general ability, and who had better looks and more income, and so on, none of which, except his undoubted intellectual gifts, applied to him. Why? Because Preacher Roe was a modest man who lived in the church house on a cot with a pine bureau and a chair and a bathroom and two sets of clothes, and a kitchen -- shared gladly with his good wife Rosamene -- and they all knew it, because they hardly paid the man a living wage.

“They’ll get the Jews to war with the Arabs and atomic bombs will fall and if it aint them, the Israelites, it’ll be the Chinese!”

This comment made the Preacher’s head spin and his knees buckle. He had to grab hold of the lectern and cough a few times. Then he thought again about a blazing fire, as apocalyptical as any prophecies coming from the idiots in front of him. He had a vision of burning them all up right then and there. But he hadn’t brought his equipment. I.E.: His can of gasoline and his old cigarette lighter. He looked deep inside for the well of patience he used to have and found a few drops left.

“I have a vision!” preached the Preacher, and I know what it is and how to say it so the simplest folks can understand it!”

“We ain’t simple! We ain’t dumb! We ain’t retards! We watch TV and we know what’s happening in this shitty world and we totally ready to hop out of here to the heavenly heaven!” And on they went, like that, the folk of the congregation, while the Preacher hallucinated about fire and brimstone.

“Hear me out,” replied the Preacher, “and after that , I’ll let you go your way and hopefully it’s up to Heaven and not down to the crevices of Hell with shit on your pants and piss sliding down your legs!”

Nobody laughed. The crowd crunched closer. They looked like waste unknowingly hushed into a disposable sewage plant. Thought Preacher Roe. They looked like matter what turned to muck. It was either suicide or arson or disappearance into another dimension. In the painful pause that followed, Mr. Neely, an elected official, spoke up for the Assembled Evangelicals:

“The Supreme Court,” he pronounced, “under the leadership of the very fine and regular fellow, a black man who is one of us, regular and regular, and duly appointed as a certified Moral Christian, has said, and I quote, ‘ain’t nothin in the Constitution what deprives a man of his religious convicts, I mean convictions, nor ever his thoughts or ways of thinking, his opinions or his reasoning, his attitudes and preferences and anything else he might have in his brain, or thought.’ Therefore, you are wrong, Preacher Roe, in the challenging of our beliefs or certainties in regard to the inevitable occurance of Armegeddon, as it is described so well in the Holy Book. You ought to know, therefore, and be aware of, that the consequence of

such a fight in the wide open fields of this great land America, which could lead to a perfectly legitimate hanging by a rope around your neck of your dishonorable person. In other words, if you keep it up, we'll lynch you to the nearest tree."

"Holy shit," thought Preacher Roe. He was clutching the lectern tightly with both hands and urine was running down his left leg. He figured he had one more chance or it was a hanging for sure and goodbye to Rosamene and his dog, Fletcher. He hadn't the heart to set fire to all these devoted advocates and he could no longer out-run these folks, though he'd been good at track in High School -- they had some young-uns amongst them who could scamper like minnows fleeing from a thrown stone. Such was the turn of his associations in this dangerous moment, and he opened his mouth and spoke up in the loudest voice he could muster: "I was wont at one time to go fishing with some of you, remember, down at Neely's pond, and catch a catfish or two and boney sunnies and an occasional pike." This change of subject and tone altered the emotional thrust of the massed audience, or mob, and a sudden pause occurred. Preacher Roe continued: "You'all recall as well The Mighty Atom, who pulled our fire engine with his beard down Main Street every Fourth of July? Well, his name was Meyer Rabinowitz. And, you know, he died, aged 99, over in Patterson County, two or three years ago?"

"So what?", yelled one one of the wiseacring teenagers in the audience.

"I knew him well," recounted Preacher Roe, "and he was much like the Black Justice -- regular as regular, take away Meyer's beard and his Romanian accent. Loved his Golden America and fire trucks and the Constitution. About as educated as many of you -- third grade, I'd say -- obedient to his religion, and an admirer of the sublime Harry Houdini, himself of the Jewish faith."

"Oh, come on, get to the point!," came a defiant voice up from the congregation.

"We gots to plan and figure out how to be and where to go when the Good Times come and we rise!" Cried another lost soul.

"May his memory be a blessing!," sang the Preacher, and another pause came as if from the clouds. "The point here being," went on the Preacher, "that there ain't no Heaven for Meyer, only the remembrance, his body sacrificed to the Earth, and he had no interest in warring with no Mohammedens or Chinese. And neither do his people."

"That's a lie!"

"You got the Israelites warring with the Persians! You got the Chinese making deals with the Jews!"

"Ain't that the truth!"

“Not so!” The Preacher raised his right hand straight up into the air in as perfect a vertical as he could. To himself, he looked like a slimmer, male, tall, version of the Statue of Liberty. To the congregation, he looked like Lincoln locked in a conundrum. “I truly understand your true yearning for God on Earth, I truly do!” he pronounced, spit coming out of the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah, yeah,” responded the crowd, “ain’t we heard that one before!”

“BUT HE ‘S HERE ALREADY!” shouted the Preacher at the top of us lungs, ‘HE IS HERE AMONGST US ALREADY!”

At this point, Mr. Neely stood up front, took a position adjacent to the Preacher, huffed and puffed, and proclaimed: “We follow the written word of God. We have seen the Golden One, the Chosen One, the Anti-Christ, the Immaculate Politician from Above, Who has earned our vote and who has saved us from iniquity and poverty and over-regulation, and we shall be resolute! RESOLUTE! Do you hear me? Are you with me?”

“We are!” sang back the congregants.

Mr. Neely was himself a small town hustler selling parts of washing machines and refridgerators and air conditioners and microwaves and telephones, and computers, and stoves, and so on. He knew everybody’s consumption and had a way of grabbing your arm and talking faster than you could think. He was not a total believer in the Second Coming, himself, but he thought What the Hell, and he wanted to keep all his trade options and his wife and his kids fed and the general status quo. Like the Chosen One, he could tell these Americans almost anything, and they’d take up a pitchfork if they had to and throw a few immigrants around the metaphorical hayloft.

Christians!

What to do? They hoisted the Preacher up by his pants and threw him into the nearest barn, owned by a fanatical congregant, named William Smith, or Brown, or Hadley, and -- cut his throat. No, that wouldn’t be right – the Preacher pulled his pants back on and called his wife on his trusty mobile smart phone while the congregants gathered round him with shotguns and ropes and shovels and brooms and everything else you can think of, like bibles or hoes or automatic rifles.

“Rosamene, they got me cornered.”

“You’d best start preachin’ Preacher or your days are over!,” She answered.

“Listen up before you tear me apart!,” Cried the Preacher.

“What for?” was the answer, “We heard enough!”

“Well, we got an election coming up soon and I heard tell in the night, in my dreams, in my soul – they’s an epidemic coming, and the Golden One on high will not be spared the consequences because he is unworthy and unprepared. He has an attention disorderly and the sickness will whack him like a tsunami or a thunderstorm and knock him for a loop! So he won’t be in no condition to start any war or run for re-election. He’ll have to lie down and have his people wave fans at him as he blubbers and groans and whatnot and so another man will walk gamely into his office and try to put things back in truly order. I saw this in a Vision! Thank you for your trust and support! I can’t thank you enough! I appreciate it more than I can say! May God love you as you love one another! Goodbye and good luck!”

The Preacher, while mesmerizing his audience with his Southern eloquence, wriggled free of his captors, and ran for his life.

But that ain’t the whole story, because the people rioted across the entire United States, protesting another murder by a cop of an innocent, unarmed, black man -- burning cars and houses, looting high-end stores, blocking highways and roads, throwing missiles and garbage at policemen and the National Guard, causing general mayhem, and thereby halting the Preacher’s way to safety and solace from the bloodlust of his crazy congregaton. He, a white preacher-man, was stuck in front of the County Federal Courthouse, his canvas backpack slung over his shoulder, wearing his Pastor hat and pastor collar, and shades, and surrounded by hollering young people, half of ‘em black, among whom he recognized a few of his parishioners, notably Mr. Neely, who, in turn, recognized him. What to do? He had to find a pulpit whereupon he could preach and thereby save his life. He got up onto a turned -over police car, waved off the cabbages and shoes being thrown at him, wiped his brow, and began to orate:

“Listen up,” he shouted, “You all have to vote! You gots to get this President of ours, this slow, retarded, maniacal, narcissistic, bad-ass President, who doesn’t know the time of day, or understand the meaning of meaning – gone to oblivion from which we will never hear from him again! Especially not in a fucking tweet! No more fucking tweets!” This announcement was greeted by a barrage of objects smashing into his face, including a coca-cola can and a bottle of milk and what seemed like a tire wrench. The Preacher, dirtied up, fell to the ground. He wanted badly to talk to his wife, Rosamene, and, crawling under an upside-down vehicle, managed to get her on the smart phone.

“I was telling it like it is, honey, and they thrown the whole world at me, including lettuce and tomatoes!”

“It ain’t you, Preacher, they mad at the Government and the Police, and you can’t blame them.”

“Mr. Neely is out there and God knows who else, out among the riotors, and he got no sense at all!”

“Call him out, Preacher!” replied Rosamene, “Call him out and give him hell, and if that don’t work, well, do the best you can.”

“I’d try that, Rosamene, but it’s near impossible in this situation, what with the noise and the fighting and the police and the army every which way and the congregants hiding in the crowd!”

“Maybe get a job of work and and stop the preachin’, change your attire, hide out where you are, and I’ll come to help you get dressed up and all. ”

“I do have to get a job, Rosamene! And there ain’t no jobs, and the populace is ignorant of the situation!” And then he stopped. The Preacher stopped. Everything stopped. Not a stroke, not a heart attack. Just a STOP. Dead in his tracks. Two thoughts he had. Visions he had. Plastic dissolving in the oceans, particles killing everything on the watery Earth, little lies corrupting the nation like krill. Big lies, too. What’s real in the Real? Then, nothing. He stared into his own thoughts, running like deer in a forest, like bugs in a bed, like short-short films, like blips, or sparks, or flashes of weak electricity.

Then, like many a hero, many a villain, he walked into the woods. Like he planned. What to do next? Leafy forest, fragrant air. Air. Oxygen. Fire in the trees.

Rosamene watched him go from the window on the phone. She, too, was thoughtless and dumb. He had a sprightly hitch to his step, a bounce to his walk, like a hipster from Memphis, or like the Southern Preacher he was, Oklahoma-born, big-voiced, plus a slight cough and a wheeze, and a heart rate going sixty miles an hour.

Murray Mednick
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