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ME AND THE WIZARD

by David Pego

What was my most vivid memory of the day?

It was how white everything was—pure white!

No, put *that* thought out of your mind. *That* is definitely not what I was just thinking.

What I had in mind was the color of their clothing—not of their skin.

That is what was on my mind on that day nearly 25 years ago as I walked closer to where a small group was marching back and forth on the sidewalk, its members carrying signs that you had to squint to read from the street.

The group's members called themselves loyal members of the Ku Klux Klan—and I had no reason to doubt them. In fact, they proved proudly that they were card-carrying members a short time later. It didn't occur to me until I was driving away an hour later that anyone could have any sort of card printed, but I don't think I would have doubted the group anyway. I had no doubt that these were real Klan members. You could read their faces as well as their signs to see their mission, their resolve and their determination.

But that is not where my attention was at first. I just could not get over the color of their robes and hoods. The clothing was a white so bright that it reflected a bright blue back at the Oklahoma sky overhead. Maybe it was my imagination, but it seemed as though you probably could look hard and see the puffy, floating clouds drift by—an image reflected on their robes.

I had walked up to the scene after returning to my car to grab a reporter's notebook and thought, "Gawd, I wonder how come these folks can't get some sort of laundry detergent commercial?" Immediately, I caught the flaw in my logic and refocused on my assignment of the day.

I was off to see the Wizard—the wonderful Wizard of Uh's. Bad pun, huh? Sorry, but this is a *true* story. I really did call him that. It was a pet name that I never did tell him about, and now I'm a bit ashamed that my first instinct was to make fun of someone because I didn't understand that person. How ironic, right? Judgment without an attempt at understanding is how hate and other deep emotions begin.

Oh, his official title was the Grand Imperial Wizard of the Royal Knights of the Ku Klux Klan or something like that. The title was so long that it stretched all the way across the bottom of his business card and threatened to fall off the side. However, in describing my contact for this story to my assigning editor, I jokingly called him the Wizard of Uh's—because he never seemed to finish a sentence. He would say, "Uh," then he would skate away from completing the full quote that I wanted for a story as sharply as a figure skater does a 180-degree turn on a sheet of pure white ice to glide to the other side of the rink.

On this sun-baked day, I remember waiting and watching for a couple of minutes before approaching the person I guessed was the leader of the small group protesting outside of a suburban Oklahoma City abortion clinic. It wasn't a difficult guess to make. He was wearing the same type of flowing white robe as the others, but his was decorated with many more patches, including what appeared to be German Army military symbols and confederate flags on each shoulder. He and the others looked very impressive as they marched up and down the sidewalk in front of the clinic. Cars passing by slowed down so drivers could take longer looks. Some wore expressions of shock. Others seemed pleased and a few stuck arms out windows, waving thumbs-up expressions of support.

As for me? I could not get over the whiteness of it all.

My first question to the Wizard was an obvious one—but he beat me to the punch, probably because I had called him a couple of days earlier for some information and told him that I was coming out for the march on this particular Saturday morning. My assigning editor had decided it was time to do a long newspaper feature on this group to explain why they felt compelled to give up their Saturday mornings every week to protest against the abortion clinic. To us, and many of our Bible Belt readers, I'm sure, it seemed more than a bit unusual and we figured that a group like this probably had other types of things to protest. The Klan members had told us they were devout Christians with unwavering beliefs who just could not bear to see others killed or hurt unnecessarily, but it just didn't ring right with us. We had to see it for ourselves and share it with our readers. So, I had gone off to see the Wizard.

"Uh, David?" he asked, hesitantly and in what I thought was a very un-Wizard-like voice, hearing it in person for the first time. "Is that you, David?"

"Yeah, it's me," I said.

His eyes widened a bit, then he shook his head. He caught me reading his thoughts and his slightly stunned expression quickly changed back to that warm, endearing smile.

What an exchange! It was hardly the dialogue worthy of a history making moment—but I had no doubt that it would be a greeting that I would remember a long time. To me, it was something different and unsettling, and yet something very intriguing.

"It's good to meet you in person, finally," the Wizard said.

I nodded my head and said, "Yes, it's a pleasure to meet you, too."

And I am sure that he meant it.

I had been talking to this man for nearly three months. I had called him so much at home that his phone number had etched its way in my internal phone book, the one I normally reserve for mom, my girlfriend, a Pizza Hut and several restaurants near my house.

It was good to see him—because before this, I simply could not picture what a Grand Imperial Wizard might look like. And as it turned out, he looked a lot like the front-desk guy at my local Goodyear Tire Store. Only, he had that robe—the white-as-fresh-snow robe. There was no chrome tire gauge in his front pocket. There were no grease stains on his shirt. Somehow, I expected him to pull out a small white pad and start writing down everything that I would need to have my car fixed and how much I was going to owe.

But, of course, he didn't.

The next words out of his mouth were:

“Uh, you are not exactly as I expected. . . . Uh . . . Uh . . .”

And it suddenly occurred to me that he probably was as much overwhelmed by the moment as I was. His engaging smile faded just a bit—not so much that others who were watching probably could tell, but I definitely could see the corners of his mouth start to drop a bit. Neither of us was probably anything close to what the other had expected. He and his robe were so, so white. And I quite definitely was not.

I have a lot of white hair now, of course. But in those days, nothing about me was that color. I had jet-black hair, dark brown eyes, and a darker brown skin that had been burnished to a walnut glow every summer by time spent playing soccer on the broad red dirt fields of Central Oklahoma. Grass on those fields was as rare as the spring and summer rains. So, it was clear the Wizard probably was looking at me and thinking how very much I didn’t look like him and his white robed companions. I guess I had only somehow sounded like them on the phone. You can’t judge a book by its cover or the color of a caller by his voice.

Over the previous few weeks, the Wizard and I had become friends—I would even say that we had become good, close “phone friends.” He was a funny guy who could make you laugh with a quick, humorous observation about nearly anything. I could easily see how his wit and cool demeanor could have prompted others to follow him. And I seemed to make him laugh back in return. We seemed to have a special bond and closeness that I would have hated to ever admit to anyone. But it was there. We respected and appreciated each other—not for whom or what we represented but for what we were when away from white robes and white-paged reporter notepads.

If I had put a stopwatch to it, I’m sure the pause before he spoke next probably came close to a full minute. But he wasn’t measuring time in his mind, I’m sure. He was measuring his words.

“David, I like you a lot...” he began.

“And you know I respect you...”

I glanced around to see what the others were doing. They had stopped marching and were standing nearby. They were watching and waiting to see what was going to happen next.

“Well, David, uh....”

The smile had vanished. In its place was a look of genuine concern.

“Dammit, David, I’m just going to have to tell you straight out: As much as I hate to do it, I’m going to have to withdraw my invitation to you.”

I tried to look shocked. But, of course, I was not. In a way, I had secretly wanted to see him squirm a bit at this particular moment, as he explained why I was not a perfect fit for Klan membership. However, I was not feeling that way now. I just wanted to get my story, get this over and get back to the office. I had been happy to finally meet the Wizard and was glad to see him when I first arrived. But now, I just wanted to go away and leave him alone in his own white-robed world.

“I perfectly understand,” I said, nodding my head slightly. “That’s why I didn’t want to tell you yes or no over the phone. I wanted you to see me in person before you asked me to join.”

At the door of the clinic, a couple of employees peered out to see what was happening. They and others had noticed that the march had stopped. A couple of pickets had even set down their signs and one young woman had taken off her white robe to reveal a confederate flag T-shirt underneath. The searing Oklahoma sun was climbing rapidly and you already could see mini-mirages of heat waves floating above the bright, white sidewalks. It was going to be a scorcher. Maybe that's why the Wizard and I were both sweating profusely as we looked intently at each other in what had to be one of the longest short conversations on record.

"Uh, David," the Wizard said. "I understand, too. Thanks for not accepting my offer too quickly. I'm not sure it would have been a good thing."

The warm smile returned and I smiled back at him, nodding my head again.

I flipped open my white reporter's notebook and said,

"Now, why is it important for your group to picket this clinic?"

The Wizard nodded his head and brushed a lock of his long brown hair back away from his brow.

"You know what, David?" he said. "I just had a thought. You could be an associate member. I think that would be all right. We had an American Indian who was an associate member once. I don't think any of the others would mind. What do you say? Would you like to be an associate? There's lots of folks who support what we do..."

I shook my head as his voice trailed off.

"Oh well," the Wizard said. "You just tell me if you ever change your mind."

I asked him a few more questions, then left to write my story. It was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. I was supposed to write about his group but I could not get my thoughts off this one man. As much as I liked him, we never could have become close friends. I knew that I was never going to change my mind. I also knew he was never going to change his. I liked him as a person, but it was difficult for me to have any sort of respect for what he believed. We never spoke again.

All I remember about how that day ended was how long it took me to find the right words for that story. Those were the old days when we typed on large, loud Royal typewriters using paper and carbon sheets that would later be sent to one of several deaf Linotype operators on the second floor. Those huge machines would clank and bellow as they magically turned molten lead bars into raised type line by line.

My editor yelled at me several times that day, telling me to hurry with what he had planned as a section-front story. Normally, words flowed easily from my mind to my fingertips. But on this day, the words were interrupted by confused thoughts. All I could do was think about how we all grow up hating others yet could come so close to really liking them. My sensibilities were making no sense. And my story wasn't getting written.

I walked across the newsroom and got a cup of coffee. It was chocolate malt thick because it was late morning brew that had been cooking all day long.

I walked to the doorway and looked outside. The clouds still were rolling by lazily, slowly making their way to Missouri. Then I returned to my desk and sat down.

Once again, the words refused to come. This time, I didn't even hear my editor screaming more loudly than before. I put my hands on the keyboard and stared at the paper.

All I could think about was how white it was.