The footsteps on the porch woke Ed. While listening to the footsteps, he heard the rain. Ed thought (and would wonder later about the order of his thinking, why anybody would think that way), It's raining, followed by, There's somebody on my porch.

Ed slid out of bed and tiptoed into the foyer to the nearest window, where he peeked through the gap behind the curtain. A man had his face pressed against the glass of Ed's bedroom window. Had it not been for the pulled shade, the man would have been looking at Ed's wife, who, Ed hoped, was still asleep. Ed felt his heart lunge and try to run away; he was glad it was tied down.

The man turned and walked back up the porch toward the front of the house. He made no attempt to be quiet, which unnerved Ed; his boots clunked ominously against the floor boards. Ed followed the man from window to window, to the front door, where he peeked out from behind the shade. The man wore camouflage pants and a thin nylon jacket with racing stripes down the sleeves. His hair was long and matted, his beard unkempt. He looked like the kind of guy who would ask Ed for a dollar at the neighborhood convenience store. Ed never gave money to the men at the convenience store. He and his wife gave money to organized charities. The guys at the convenience store just pissed him off. Ed hated the calculation contained in their asking, the manipulative quality of it, the way they counted on his feeling so guilty about having an extra dollar that he would give them one. Wino, Ed thought while they were asking. Junkie.

a job. Ed had always considered himself a liberal Democrat, but sometimes his secret thoughts about the guys at the convenience store made him feel like a Republican—which made him hate them more.

The man stood at the top of Ed's steps—proprietarily, Ed thought—and stared out into the rain. His breath billowed and dissipated in the light from the street. After a moment the man turned toward the house and without fanfare lay down in front of the door. By twisting his head awkwardly to the side and closing one eye, Ed could see the man where he lay. The man wrapped his arms around himself and pulled his legs up close to his body. The porch floor was wet almost up to the door. Ed watched the man for a minute or two before realizing that he, Ed, had grown cold. Ed remembered that he was naked and looked down at himself as if to verify that fact. He tiptoed back into the bedroom, hastily put on his robe and slippers, and tiptoed back to the door, stopping at the thermostat to turn up the heat. (They always turned it down before they went to bed.) The man still lay in front of the door, coiled, Ed thought, like a snake.

Ed gingerly sat down on the church pew beside the door to think about things. The church pew beside the door to think about things. The church pew had been his wife's idea. Apparently, there was some kind of law in Nashville that said if you lived in a Victorian house, you had to have a church pew in your foyer. Ed's wife said it was a good place to put on boots. Ed didn't have any boots. Nor, so far as he knew, did his wife. But the church pew was proving to be a good place to sit in the middle of the night while thinking about the man curled up on your porch. Man on the porch, Ed thought. Man on the porch. The man was obviously homeless, and was looking for a place to get out of the rain. But he had also tried to look in Ed's bedroom window, which, to Ed's mind, elevated him from simple homeless guy looking for a dry place to sleep to something more sinister. Peeping Tom looking for a dry place to sleep. Burglar looking for a dry place to sleep. Rapist.

Bastard, thought Ed.

Ed had a shotgun (once a year he went quail hunting with his father-in-law) but didn't think he could dig it out of the back of his closet without waking up his wife. Besides, he didn't know, offhand, where the shells were. (He thought his wife, who disapproved of having a gun in the house, secretly moved them around.) Still, part of Ed liked the thought of accosting the man on the porch with a shotgun. (“Hey, what's the big idea, looking in my window like that? Get out of here. Don't make me tell you again.”) He imagined pumping a shell into the chamber, an unmistakably serious sound, as the man scrambled down the stairs.

But Ed also knew that the part of himself that liked the thought of getting after the man with a gun wasn't among the brightest parts of his personality, and was the part his wife cared for least, the part that was every so often prone to mild bouts of road rage, to the occa-

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tains that “African-American leaders, using a
script from the 1960s, persist in a style of racial
protest that is detrimental to the interests not
only of blacks but the nation as a whole.”

Last fall at Delaware State University, she
made her case to the black student body. The
discussion quickly became emotional, as young
people wrestled with their anger over slavery
and segregation and prejudice. For some,
Swain became a lightning rod for their rage.

“You are poison!” one male student shout- ed. “You hate your own people.”

Swain, at first glance, seems an unlikely tar- get for that kind of venom. She speaks in a soft,
steady voice—a handsome woman, now 48,
with a round, pretty face and dark, gentle eyes.
There was a time, she says, when the criticism
bothered her. A decade ago, she wrote her first
book, an award-winning study of Congress
titled Black Faces, Black Interests. In it she
argued against creation of additional black
districts in the House of Representa-tives—a
policy that had the unintended effect of cre-
at ing other districts that were nearly all white,
where officials were indifferent to the needs
of black people. She was deeply shaken at first
when black leaders criticized her position.

“I was not ready for it,” she remembers.
“It caused me to question whether I was hurt-
ing black people. I entertained the possibili-
ty of being wrong. I found it very painful.”

Now, however, she says she feels more
secure, more certain of the message that the
country needs to hear. In many respects, it’s
a message that offends every shade of opin-
ion. She believes, for example, that prejudice
and poverty still need to be addressed, and
she draws on the lessons of her own troubled
past. She remembers her escape from her fam-
ily of dysfunction, where her brothers and sis-
ters all dropped out of school, and some of
them drifted into drugs and petty crime. She
was a teenager, working at one of her low-pay-
ing jobs, when a supervisor and one of her
colleagues told her she was smart and ought
to go to college. Swain believes in the need for
that kind of outreach, and thus as a matter of
public policy, she argues not for an end to
affirmative action, but a revamping of it, mak-
ing it a race-neutral policy based on need.

She thinks a majority of Americans might
agree. As a part of her research, she sur-
veyed 850 people, scientifically chosen from
multiple backgrounds, presenting them a
hypothetical situation. An admissions officer
from a state university must choose between
two qualified applicants. One is an A student
from a prosperous family who has held down a job while attending his classes.
Should the university reach out to the less
advantaged student—a young person who
appears to show initiative and promise—or
should it be guided by objective criteria, the
bottom-line average of grades and test scores?

Swain discovered that a majority of Amer-
icans, regardless of their own race and the race
of the students involved, wanted to reach out
to the person less advantaged. They rec-
ognized the subtleties involved in admissions
and didn’t want to reduce it to a matter of
numbers. But the majority of those surveyed,
black and white, did not support a preference
based on race.

Swain sees hope for the future in that. She
believes it is possible to build a consensus for
attacking the problems of poverty and preju-
dice, and she has offered a set of proposals to
that end. Among other things, she calls for
an income subsidy for the working poor in
order to guarantee a living wage, a larger invest-
ment in community colleges so that everybody
who wants to attend one can do so, stepped-
up enforcement of discrimination laws, and
even a public-private partnership to assure that
the working poor have access to cars and, thus,
to the ability to hold down a job.

Partly because of what her scholarship tells
her, and partly as an article of faith, she believes
the nation could adopt that agenda. There
is a strain of compassion in the American
character that could be the cornerstone of
consensus. But Swain can imagine the oppo-
site possibility, and in fact her greatest fear for
the country is a terrifying era of racial hos-
tility, exploited by sophisticated white national-
ists and fed by the knee-jerk militancy of
black leaders. The antidote, she believes, is a
national dialogue, unshackled by the norms
of political correctness.

It is no longer acceptable, as Swain under-
stands it, for the media to fly into a national
frenzy when whites drag a black man to death
behind a car, but to give it only sporadic atten-
tion when a black man shoots five whites in
Pennsylvania and police officers discover “hate
writings” in his home. At the same time, it is
equally abhorrent when police in New York
shoot an unarmed black man 41 times, while
white suspects, even those going armed,
“are treated like family members gone astray.”

Her fundamental message is that it’s time
for all double standards to stop. We are all the
children of God, she says, and are therefore
the brothers and sisters of one another, and
that is the understanding that can save us.
With the publication of her book in the fall,
she has presented her case with relentless
rationality, and from the New York Times to
the Washington Times, the national media has
begun to take notice. She has found herself
vilified on occasion, but she has also won her
share of admiration, even from some of the
people who disagree.

John Egerton, for example, is a white southern
author living in Nashville. He has written
extensively about the civil rights movement,
and has established himself over a long career
as a voice of decency and racial moderation.
He still believes in affirmative action, a delib-
erate reaching out to people of color. Other-
wise, he says, prestigious universities such
as the one in his city will rapidly become even
whiter than they are. But he also welcomes
the views of Carol Swain, particularly her call
for a national dialogue of civility and candor.

“Dr. Swain herself embodies that call,”
Egerton says. “Even if you disagree with what
she says, hers is an urgent warning to the
country. She is not a person to be ignored.”

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professional high-speed, tailgating, one-fingered
wave. (His wife always said, “What if that car
had stopped? What would you have done then?
You’re putting us in danger.”) Ed always apol-
ogized—You’re right, you’re right, I’m sorry—
but deep down allowed himself to think, I’d
kicked his ass.) Another part of Ed, a smarter,
mature partner, but one that he didn’t like
nearly as well, suggested that he call the police.
(“Hello, police? There’s a man on my porch
and I’m too afraid to take care of it myself.
Could you send someone over? Policewomen
would be fine.”) No, sir, thought Ed. We can’t
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‘‘It’s just a toothbrush,’’ thought Ed. ‘‘But Jesus would do what? Jesus was the Son of God. He could get away with stuff like that. Ed wasn’t the Son of God. Well, maybe he was, sort of, but not really, not like that. Ed was more like one of those sheep Jesus was always talking about. He had no problem with that, being a sheep. Sheep should be held to a lower standard. Sheep didn’t let wolves into the barn, or lie down with tigers, or whatever. They were just sheep. Ed closed his eyes. ‘‘Sir, he thought, ‘I’m not opening that door. There ain’t no door-opening in the Book of Ed.’’

The Book of Ed
Then he said unto them: ‘‘A householder is wakened in the middle of a storm by a sound. The householder rises and sees a man, a stranger, staring in the window of his bedchamber. The householder stays in the shadows watching the stranger because he is afraid. The stranger moves away from the window and lies down on the householder’s front porch, out of the wrath of the storm, and goes to sleep. What should the householder do? Peter?‘’

Peter fell to the ground and rent his garments and gnashed his teeth, for he hated parables.

‘‘Peter?‘’ said he. ‘‘What is thy problem?‘’

‘‘I never get these right,‘’ said Peter. ‘‘They vexeth me.‘’

‘‘Peter,‘’ said he, ‘‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, when the wise shepherd quizzeth his sheep and does not bet all his talents on their getting the answer right.‘’

And Peter said, ‘‘That’s another parable, isn’t it?‘’

He said, ‘‘Stick to the point. What should the householder do?‘’

Peter said, ‘‘Hit him with a stick?‘’

He shook his head.

‘‘WAKE the servants and have them stone him?‘’

‘‘He shook his head.

‘‘Call the night watchman?‘’

‘‘Peter,‘’ he said. ‘‘Verily, verily, I say unto you. Thou art like a rock. The stranger is like a fish in the sun or a sheep that has been bitten by the wolf. The householder knows him not. The householder knows what the householder knows. The householder SHOULD do what the householder should do.‘’

‘‘But what does that mean?‘’ said Peter. ‘‘The householder should do what the householder should do?‘’

What does that mean? thought Ed. He sat up straight. The householder should do what the householder should do. That’s the whole problem. The householder didn’t know what to do. So much for the Book of Ed. Ed rubbed his face. He’d been to Sunday School enough. He ought to be able to get this one right. The Christian thing to do, he decided, would be to let the guy sleep on the porch because it was raining, but to keep an eye on him because he might be dangerous. There. Ed would stay on the pew and keep watch for as long as the man stayed on the porch. He would be both a Christian and a responsible male simultaneously. The man was on the porch. The baseball bat was in the umbrella stand. God was in his heaven. Ed was on the job, and all was right with the world.

The only problem was that within 10 minutes, Ed was bored out of his mind. He didn’t want to sit on the pew any longer (God, it was uncomfortable) but knew better than to lie down again. He couldn’t walk around because the man on the porch might hear him, and even if he made it to the kitchen, he couldn’t risk turning on the light to make a sandwich. After a few more minutes, Ed decided to check on the man to make sure he was still there. He eased over to the door, leaned toward the shade, and whacked his head loudly on the door jamb. The man climbed to his feet and walked down the steps into the rain. He didn’t hurry, and he didn’t look back at the house. At the sidewalk, he turned right, shoved his hands into his pockets, and in a few strides walked out of Ed’s sight. Well, damn, thought Ed. He pulled the shade all the way back and shook his head. He checked to make sure the door was locked, turned down the heat, and scuffled off bed. ▼

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