

Obama's election has produced an ugly backlash



BARB GUY

The downtown neurosurgeon's waiting room needed a style makeover but at least the magazines were current and they had *The New Yorker*.

My husband Chris and I waited for my appointment; another couple waited as well. The other woman didn't look so different from me: roughly my age, dark hair, glasses. October drizzle had both of us wearing fleece jackets. She was fiddling incessantly but quietly with her cell phone. Repulsive soft disco wafted among the Naugahyde chairs. Strangers in close proximity, the four of us were silent.

Suddenly, peals of laughter and the woman looked at her husband, eyes shining. She said to him, "Oh, this is the best one yet!" Then reading from the screen on her phone she said, "Get your guns and your dogs and come to Washington; there's

a coon trying to get into the White House." More laughter.

Silence again. Did that just happen? I looked at Chris. He missed it. He knew the people were laughing but he also saw the color had drained from my face, my eyes had widened, and my arms had crossed themselves over my chest the way they do when they're offended. Quietly, very close to my ear, he said, "What?"

Turning slightly, through my teeth, I breathed, "I'll tell you later."

"But what's it about?" he whispered back, putting his arm around me protectively.

Sudden realization: Why on earth should we be quiet?

In my out-loud voice I said pointedly to Chris, "It's about racism." Whew; there was a lot of emphasis there on that last word. Wow. The word hung there, reverberating over the four of us for eleven silent minutes. Tick-tock.

Since that day, I've thought a lot about the racist couple who looked so regular. One trait of mine, and a failing to be sure, is I assume everyone is good. Somehow getting disappointed now and then hasn't disabused me of this flaw.

As my heart broke, it benefitted me to know— know in my bones— that Obama was going to win. That helped me to not flip out. Yet I had known in my bones George Bush could not possibly be elected and certainly not re-elected. So I couldn't help thinking, what if the candidate these horrid people choose wins instead of my candidate? What's better for the country, pacified racists or riled-up racists?

During those eleven heart-pounding minutes I wondered 1) how many racists are invisibly out there among us every day, and 2) what will they do when we have a black president.

Now we know. Racial incidents have been logged all around the United States in the last two weeks. Comments, tussles, N-word and swastika graffiti, a boy beaten with a baseball bat, families finding human poop in pizza boxes or crosses burned on their lawns, black effigies hung from nooses, a man in KKK garb walking through city traffic, a business holding a lottery to guess the day our president-elect will be murdered. It's quite a list. Let's just say the racists are on parade. The incidents are isolated, the perpetrators are few, but it's still extremely disturbing. Perhaps most horrifying, although it's so hard to choose, is the report of second-graders in Rexburg, Idaho chanting, "Assassinate Obama."

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We have an opportunity here. A teachable moment, as they say.

Many people have a racist relative, co-worker, or friend, but too often we sit silently, uncomfortably, not wanting a confrontation. My near-accidental blurt in the waiting room has made me stronger. If there's a next time, I hope to be courageous enough to calmly say a few simple words in response, words that are suitable whether the offender is a stranger or your grandpa: "That's racism and racism is wrong."

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