

# Isaiah on Route 6

By Michael Fine

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At least she was wearing a mask. That was the only normal thing about the woman.

She appeared out of nowhere, in front of the old motel, near Cindy's Diner, across the street from the IGA Plaza where the Chinese restaurant is. Where Walgreens is. Which used to be Rite Aid which used to be Brooks Drugs which used to be Gregg's Pharmacy. Across the street from the gas station where they fill up propane tanks. Down the street from the hardware store.

She was almost six feet tall, and was walking on the side of the road toward Johnston and Providence. She had this great strong stride – nothing shy or contained about *this* woman. She walked with purpose. She wasn't mumbling to herself, spitting, shouting, or looking from side to side at unseen voices or at people she could see and hear but who weren't there. Dreadlocks, to be sure, but neat dreadlocks. Her face was smudged with something dark and grey, almost like war-paint, that looked like it had been put there by design. She did not look like a woman who had been sleeping in the woods, let me tell you. She was pretty well put together.

But the way she was dressed, man, that didn't make any sense at all. Some kind of brown bag. Shapeless, like she was wearing a burlap bag – but who has even seen a burlap bag in like, thirty years?

There's no law against walking on the side of the road. In the time of Covid you don't want to go near anybody. She wasn't obviously crazy. Just weird. Who walks in America anymore? People hike, sure, with hiking boots and day packs or those fancy water sacs on their back which have tubes sticking out and with hi-tech walking sticks, one in each hand that makes it look like they are rowing, not walking. Or people bike the back roads on \$10,000 bicycles

made from space age materials wearing spandex biking shorts. But no one ever walks now. People drive when they have some place to go. Just the way it is.

Nobody called it in. Probably no one else noticed. Or even saw her. You don't even see what you've never seen before, most of the time, even if it's right in front of you. Like that old story of the Fuegians and Magellan's ships. They say that the Fuegians, the native people who lived on the southern-most tip of South America, couldn't see Magellan's ships when he sailed around Cape Horn, even though those ships were anchored right off shore. The Fuegians didn't know how ships were made or what they do. Those ships were so far from the Fuegians' experience that the ships had no meaning to the Fuegians – so the Fuegians didn't recognize the ships at all. We see only what we already know.

So no one else even saw her. Live and let live, I said to myself. But let me check once in a while. Black lives matter. There was probably some of that in my brain. Law abiding citizen. No need for any confrontation. Or trouble.

The state cop drove back and forth as I walked down Route 6. I stayed off the road, so there wasn't any reason to arrest me. Getting arrested wouldn't have been terrible but it was beside the point. Sitting in some jail cell in Scituate or Johnston or ending up at Intake at the ACI wasn't going to do anyone any good. The modern version of getting swallowed by a whale. Out of sight, out of mind. I wanted to be present so people could see me, be freaked out, feel confused and start thinking.

It's not just about racism. There's plenty of that in the good old USA. But racism is the symptom. Greed is the cause. Greed, arrogance, materialism, jealousy, lust, it's all in the mix. Narcissism. Only I matter. Only what I want counts. Only what I see and feel exists. We talk ourselves into little boxes from which we never emerge. They might see a Black woman with dread locks walking on Route 6. But they don't see the sackcloth and ashes. Or think about repentance. And never look at themselves, never think that our wants and our choices are actually the cause of this pandemic and the rest of this empty mess, the stupid lives we have chosen for ourselves and one another.

Their cars, whiz past on Route 6, but they don't see me at all. All they see are other cars while their radios play Spotify, NPR or WPRO. Maybe they see a crazed homeless Black woman, because everyone walking must be homeless, right? Maybe they roll up their windows so they don't get panhandled when they stop at the light near the liquor store, or the one in front of the gas station across the street from Bishop's Hill Tavern, or the one at the pool store and Cumberland Farms, just past where the old Subway and the old fire-station used to be.

Let the oppressed go free. Feed the hungry. Bring the homeless into thine own house. Cover the naked. Thou shall not hide thyself from thy fellow human. Care for the widow and the orphan. Let justice well up as the waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream. Etc. Etc. You know the drill. We got plagues again now, Covid and what not. Black people getting shot in the back by police. Riots in the cities. Climate change with its floods and fires. Swarms of locusts in Africa, the whole nine yards. You think anybody in America would ever roll down the windows of their cars, turn off their car stereos, and ask me what I'm doing, decked out in sack-cloth and ashes, walking down Route 6? Or think for one second about what is going on in this crazy world we've built where people can't be in the same room together anymore?

I crossed over into Johnston. Walked down that strip across from Cumberland Farms where the pool store is. Walked past the tire place, the auto parts store, Tractor Supply, Dunkin Donuts and the Dollar Store.

It was late in the morning by then. The trees around the reservoir were red and gold. The air was filled with falling leaves and smelled of overripe grapes, maple leaves, diesel exhaust and wood smoke. You don't really live unless you walk in the fall air. You live and you feel and you breathe when you walk. Mine eyes were seeing the glory of the coming of the Lord, right here and now in Johnston RI.

You might think the Johnston cops would have noticed – you know how *they* are. But nothing. Nobody even slowed down to gawk. Just that state cop, who drove by every couple of minutes.

I wasn't expecting the guy at the house near the reservoir. The houses there are on a narrow strip of land between the road and the water. No sidewalk. She had to walk on the lawns and driveways, with only mailboxes between her and the whizzing cars, which all do 55 in a 30 mph zone. Just sayin.

Okay. There was a big flag flying from a huge flag pole in front of the house.

The guy came barreling down the road in a big blue F350 with double rear tires and a swept up exhaust that was pouring out black smoke. Two American flags, one on each side, snapped and fluttered in the wake of the truck, which coughed and bellowed and then quieted, as it slowed where that woman was walking and turned into the driveway in front of her. I didn't

want trouble right there and then, but you always got to be ready. So I threw on my lights and swung the car around.

There are two lanes in each direction over there. My vehicle closed off one of those lanes. Pretty soon there was a backup of ten or fifteen cars. The cars slowed and people turned their heads to see what was going on, as if they had never seen a state police car with its light bar lit up.

The guy came out of his truck and ran right at her. No mask.

Holy shit, I thought. Here it is.

“Stop,” I yelled. My service revolver was pointed at the guy. I didn’t think about it. It was just there.

But it was too late. The guy grabbed her before he heard me.

“Janine!” The big guy yelled. He was a big bear of a guy, six two or six three and three hundred pounds if he was an ounce.

“Dwayne!” she yelled back, and she wrapped him in a big bear hug.

Then they looked at me.

“You have a problem?” the woman said.

“You know each other?” I said.

“Like for a hundred years,” the big guy said.

“We work together at the ACI,” the woman said. ‘I’m a psychologist.”

“I run the auto shop in Industries. Teach the guys a trade.”

I holstered my gun and shook my head.

Maybe there is a god after all.

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