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A tale of two Americas. And the mini-mart where they collided

"Where are you from?" said the pale, tattooed man. "Where are you from?" It's September 21, 2001, 10 days after the worst attack on America since World War II. Everyone wonders about the next plane. People are looking for scapegoats. The president, the night before, pledges to "bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies."

And in the Dallas mini-mart, a Dallas mini-mart surrounded by tire shops and strip joints, a Bangladeshi immigrant works the register. Back home, Raisuddin Bhuiyan was a big man, an Air Force officer. But he dreamed of a fresh start in America. If he had to work briefly in a mini-mart to save up for I.T. classes and his wedding in two months, so be it.

Then, on September 21, that tattooed man enters the mart. He holds a shotgun. Raisuddin knows the drill and puts cash on the counter. This time, the man doesn't touch the money. "Where are you from?" he asks. "Excuse me?" Raisuddin answers. His accent betrays him. The tattooed man, a self-styled true American vigilante, shoots Raisuddin in revenge for 9/11. Raisuddin feels millions of bees stinging his face. In fact, dozens of scalding, birdshot pellets puncture his head.

Behind the counter, he lays in blood. He cups a hand over his forehead to keep in the brains on which he'd gambled everything. He recites verses from the Koran, begging his God to live. He senses he is dying.

He didn't die. His right eye left him. His fiancée left him. His landlord, the mini-mart owner, kicked him out. Soon he was homeless and 60,000 dollars in medical debt, including a fee for dialing for an ambulance. But Raisuddin lived.

And years later, he would ask what he could do to repay his God and become worthy of this second chance. He would come to believe, in fact, that this chance called for him to give a second chance to a man we might think deserved no chance at all.

Twelve years ago, I was a fresh graduate seeking my way in the world. Born in Ohio to Indian immigrants, I settled on the ultimate rebellion against my parents, moving to the country they had worked so damn hard to get out of. What I thought might be a six-month stint in Mumbai[1] stretched to six years. I became a writer and found myself amid a magical story: the awakening of hope across much of the so-called Third World. Six years ago, I returned to America and realized something: The American Dream was thriving, but only in India. In America, not so much.

In fact, I observed that America was fracturing into two distinct societies: a republic of dreams and a republic of fears. And then, I stumbled onto this incredible tale of two lives and of these two Americas that brutally collided in that Dallas mini-mart. I knew at once I wanted to learn more, and eventually that I would write a book about them, for their story was the story of America's fracturing and of how it might be put back together.

After he was shot, Raisuddin's life grew no easier. The day after admitting him, the hospital discharged him. His right eye couldn't see. He couldn't speak. Metal peppered his face. But he had no insurance, so they

[1] a city in India

bounced him. His family in Bangladesh begged him, “Come home.” But he told them he had a dream to see about.

He found telemarketing work, then he became an Olive Garden[1] waiter, because where better to get over his fear of white people than the Olive Garden? Now, as a devout Muslim, he refused alcohol, didn’t touch the stuff. Then he learned that not selling it would slash his pay. So he reasoned, like a budding American pragmatist, “Well, God wouldn’t want me to starve, would he?” And before long, in some months, Raisuddin was that Olive Garden’s highest grossing alcohol pusher. He found a man who taught him database administration. He got part-time I.T. gigs. Eventually, he landed a six-figure job at a blue chip tech company in Dallas.

But as America began to work for Raisuddin, he avoided the classic error of the fortunate: assuming you’re the rule, not the exception. In fact, he observed that many with the fortune of being born American were nonetheless trapped in lives that made second chances like his impossible. He saw it at the Olive Garden itself, where so many of his colleagues had childhood horror stories of family dysfunction, chaos, addiction, crime. He’d heard a similar tale about the man who shot him back when he attended his trial. The closer Raisuddin got to the America he had coveted from afar, the more he realized there was another, equally real, America that was stingier with second chances. The man who shot Raisuddin grew up in that stingier America.

From a distance, Mark Stroman was always the spark of parties, always making girls feel pretty. Always working, no matter what drugs or fights he’d had the night before. But he’d always wrestled with demons. He entered the world through the three gateways that doom so many young American men: bad parents, bad schools, bad prisons. His mother told him, regretfully, as a boy that she’d been just 50 dollars short of aborting him. Sometimes, that little boy would be at school, he’d suddenly pull a knife on his fellow classmates. Sometimes that same little boy would be at his grandparents’, tenderly feeding horses. He was getting arrested before he shaved, first juvenile[2], then prison. He became a casual white supremacist and, like so many around him, a drug-addled and absent father. And then, before long, he found himself on death row, for in his 2001 counter-jihad[3], he had shot not one mini-mart clerk, but three. Only Raisuddin survived.

Strangely, death row was the first institution that left Stroman better. His old influences quit him. The people entering his life were virtuous and caring: pastors, journalists, European pen-pals. They listened to him, prayed with him, helped him question himself. And sent him on a journey of introspection and betterment. He finally faced the hatred that had defined his life. He read Viktor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor and regretted his swastika tattoos. He found God. Then one day in 2011, 10 years after his crimes, Stroman received news. One of the men he’d shot, the survivor, was fighting to save his life.

You see, late in 2009, eight years after that shooting, Raisuddin had gone on his own journey, a pilgrimage to Mecca[4]. Amid its crowds, he felt immense gratitude, but also duty. He recalled promising God, as he lay dying in 2001, that if he lived, he would serve humanity all his days. Then, he’d gotten busy relaying the bricks of a life. Now it was time to pay his debts. And he decided, upon reflection, that his method of payment would be an intervention in the cycle of vengeance between the Muslim and Western worlds. And how would he intervene? By forgiving Stroman publicly in the name of Islam and its doctrine of mercy. And then suing the state of Texas and its governor Rick Perry to prevent them from executing Stroman, exactly like most people shot in the face do.

[1] *Olive Garden*: an American restaurant chain
[2] *juvenile detention center*: a prison for underage criminals
[3] *Counter-jihad*: a far right anti-Islamic movement in America
[4] a city in Saudi Arabia that Muslims consider holy

Yet Raisuddin's mercy was inspired not only by faith. A newly minted American citizen, he had come to believe that Stroman was the product of a hurting America that couldn't just be lethally injected away. That insight is what moved me to write my book *The True American*. This immigrant begging America to be as merciful to a native son as it had been to an adopted one. In the mini-mart, all those years earlier, not just two men, but two Americas collided. An America that still dreams, still strives, still imagines that tomorrow can build on today, and an America that has resigned to fate, buckled under stress and chaos, lowered expectations, and ducked into the oldest of refuges: the tribal fellowship of one's own narrow kind. And it was Raisuddin, despite being a newcomer, despite being attacked, despite being homeless and traumatized, who belonged to that republic of dreams and Stroman who belonged to that other wounded country, despite being born with the privilege of a native white man.

I realized these men's stories formed an urgent parable about America. The country I am so proud to call my own wasn't living through a generalized decline as seen in say Spain or Greece, where prospects were dimming for everyone. America is simultaneously the most and the least successful country in the industrialized world. Launching the world's best companies, even as record numbers of children go hungry. Seeing life-expectancy drop for large groups, even as it polishes the world's best hospitals. America today is a sprightly young body, hit by one of those strokes that sucks the life from one side, while leaving the other worryingly perfect.

On July 20, 2011, right after a sobbing Raisuddin testified in defense of Stroman's life, Stroman was killed by lethal injection by the state he so loved. Hours earlier, when Raisuddin still thought he could save Stroman, the two men got to speak for the second time ever. Here is an excerpt from their phone call. Raisuddin: "Mark, you should know that I am praying for God, the most compassionate and gracious. I forgive you and I do not hate you. I never hated you." Stroman: "You are a remarkable person. Thank you from my heart. I love you, bro."

Even more amazingly, after the execution, Raisuddin reached out to Stroman's eldest daughter, Amber, an ex-convict and an addict, and offered his help. "You may have lost a father," he told her, "but you've gained an uncle." He wanted her, too, to have a second chance.

If human history were a parade, America's float would be a neon shrine to second chances. But America, generous with second chances to the children of other lands, today grows miserly with first chances to the children of its own. America still dazzles at allowing anybody to become an American. But it is losing its luster at allowing every American to become a somebody.

Over the last decade, seven million foreigners gained American citizenship. Remarkable. In the meanwhile, how many Americans gained a place in the middle class? Actually, the net influx was negative. Go back further, and it's even more striking: Since the 60s, the middle class has shrunk by 20 percent, mainly because of the people tumbling out of it. And my reporting around the country tells me the problem is grimmer than simple inequality. What I observe is a pair of secessions from the unifying center of American life. An affluent secession of up, up and away, into elite enclaves of the educated and into a global matrix of work, money and connections, and an impoverished secession of down and out into disconnected, dead-end lives that the fortunate scarcely see.

And don't console yourself that you are the 99 percent[1]. If you live near a Whole Foods[2], if no one in your family serves in the military, if you're paid by the year, not the hour, if most people you know finished college, if no one you know uses meth, if you married once and remain married, if you're not one of 65 million Americans with a criminal record – if any or all of these things describe you, then accept the possibility that actually, you may not know what's going on and you may be part of the problem.

[1] *the 99 percent*: ordinary Americans, people who are not among the one percent who are very wealthy

[2] *Whole Foods Market*: an American supermarket chain that specialises in selling unprocessed organic food

Other generations had to build a fresh society after slavery, pull through a depression, defeat fascism, freedom-ride[1] in Mississippi. The moral challenge of my generation, I believe, is to reacquaint these two Americas, to choose union over secession once again. This isn't a problem we can tax or tax-cut away. It won't be solved by tweeting harder, building slicker apps, or starting one more artisanal coffee roasting service. It is a moral challenge that begs each of us in the flourishing America to take on the wilting America as our own, as Raisuddin tried to do.

Like him, we can make pilgrimages. And there, in Baltimore and Oregon and Appalachia, find new purpose, as he did. We can immerse ourselves in that other country, bear witness to its hopes and sorrows, and, like Raisuddin, ask what we can do. What can you do? What can you do? What can we do? How might we build a more merciful country?

We, the greatest inventors in the world, can invent solutions to the problems of that America, not only our own. We, the writers and the journalists, can cover that America's stories, instead of shutting down bureaus in its midst. We can finance that America's ideas, instead of ideas from New York and San Francisco. We can put our stethoscopes to its backs, teach there, go to court there, make there, live there, pray there.

This, I believe, is the calling of a generation. An America whose two halves learn again to stride, to plow, to forge, to dare together. A republic of chances, rewoven, renewed, begins with us.

Thank you.

(2015)

[1] *freedom riders*: civil rights activists in the 1960s who rode buses through states of the southern U.S. to find out whether public facilities were desegregated