

MASTER GARDENER

By James Montgomery Jackson

Nancy Gonzalez would be aggrieved to know we have gathered in this church sanctuary she called home to eulogize her. Today marks the anniversary of the November 16, 1989 murder of six Jesuits, their housekeeper and the housekeeper's daughter in San Salvador, El Salvador. Red, as I knew her, would have been in the front rows of the thousands who protest this year at the School of Americas at Fort Benning outside Columbus, Georgia. They call it the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation now, but it will always remain the School of the Americas to me, and it is the reason I got to know Red.

Red would ask us, "Why are you wasting your time talking about me? I'm dead. You should be out *doing* something."

I hear you rustling in your seats, afraid I will go on one of my rants about how our government has fomented and supported abusive regimes across the globe while ignoring our own disadvantaged. Fear not. Today is for us to remember and celebrate Red's life with stories and song.

Red's nephew asked me to share how meeting her transformed my life. My guess is you are here today because you too experienced firsthand Red's conviction that each and every one of us has important work to do on this thin crust we call planet Earth, and it changed your life.

In July 1983, Red was on her way to meet Father Roy Bourgeois to plan the protest that landed Father Roy in the Federal pen for fifteen months when the group, dressed in military fatigues, entered Fort Benning and, using a cranked-to-the-max boom box after lights-out, played the last homily of slain Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero. In the sermon given the day before he was murdered, the Archbishop pleaded for an end to their civil war.

She never got to "Casa Romero," Father Roy's name for the apartment in Columbus he had rented. Since I had to head north anyway and had briefly met her once, Father Roy tasked me to find out what happened to her. How many of you know this story? A show of hands. Good, only a few.

So...the temperature in Georgia that July didn't get much below ninety in the evening

and the humidity and temperature raced each other toward one hundred each morning. If you had to park your car during the day, you cracked the windows down so they wouldn't blow out. I had just completed a stint as a VISTA volunteer and the junker I drove didn't have air conditioning, except what we called four-forty AC: four windows down and forty miles an hour and at least your sweat would evaporate.

If you've been in a car with Red, you know she had to be the driver and she didn't cotton to Interstates. She had stopped for the night in an AAA-rated motel just south of Rome, Georgia and let us know to expect her the next day. When she didn't show we were concerned, but figured her for a flat tire or something that would delay her a few hours. The next morning we called everyone we could think of: her brother in New York City, friends back here, even her favorite nephew and not so favorite employer. Not a peep. She had disappeared off the face of the earth.

The next morning I started backtracking, knowing she would be taking US-27 down from Rome, just as she had the whole way from Cincinnati. I imagined an automobile accident, although we had called all the hospitals we could locate along the way. Back before ubiquitous cell phones I dialed the operator, plunked in the requisite quarters, dimes and nickels and then she placed the call. After three minutes of holding for a hospital receptionist to check to see if they had a Nancy Gonzalez or a Mrs. Esteban Gonzalez, I'd listen to the chimes again as I deposited three more minutes of coins.

I drove north out of Columbus and passed through rural Georgia towns—Cataula and Hamilton and LaGrange—and checked ditches for a wreck. At each crossroad I stopped at the country store to see if they knew anything. Back then, Georgia accents were thick enough to choke an anaconda and there were still local restaurants with southern cooking, not fast food junk at every turn. I digress. It felt like I'd already been consigned to hell, the sun so hot the blacktop would stick to your shoes if you didn't keep moving and the whole highway smelled like freshly paved road. I don't know if you like that smell—I kinda do; course I also like a light smell of manure scenting the air in springtime. Smell of money my father used to say.

North of Reevesville I stopped at a farm stand just off the main road: a tarpaper lean-to with a toothless stick of a black woman selling plums and blueberries and late peaches. Evian and the like were just a gleam in a marketer's eye and I was parched, so I loaded up on peaches

and plums, the woman steering me away from those not quite ripe enough for immediate consumption, although in that heat everything would probably be overripe by the end of the day.

I asked the proprietor about herself while I luxuriated in the sweet pulp of fresh fruit. Miss Martha was forty and looked at least sixty. Her family had been sharecropping the same land since her ancestors were freed in 1865. Between her drawl and lack of teeth it took me two plums and a peach before I figured that much out. I returned to task and enquired whether Red had passed by.

“You couldn’t miss her,” I said. “She’d be driving a twenty-year-old Ford Mustang convertible only slightly redder than the color of her hair.”

“Yas, suh,” she said. “Nice missus. Bought her some okra and pole beans and a peach just like yourn.”

Red had stopped late Friday morning and told Miss Martha she would stop back next week on her return north.

“Ya talk with the Sherriff?” I don’t know if she read the concern on my face but she quickly added, “Yas suh, betta do that.”

Despite my attempts to draw her out, the only thing else I got was, “I don’ need no trouble. Best be goin’, suh.”

I doubled back south, troubled by Miss Martha’s sudden transformation from loquacious to sullen. What had she meant about talking to the sheriff? Just before a roadside sign advertising Reevesville Antiques the speed limit was posted as fifty-five, but hidden by the sign and a curve in the road, the limit dropped to twenty-five. Around the bend two county sheriff roof-racks flashed in celebration, each having captured a rabbit in their snare. If there had been a third trooper I would have been nailed as well, but luck was with me that day.

In Reevesville I stopped at the only open establishment that Sunday afternoon, the village drugstore. Outside were four codgers decked out in suspenders, two playing checkers under the striped awning; the other two in rocking chairs keeping up a running commentary.

I excused myself for interrupting their game and asked about Red.

“She that Yankee lady the deputies caught yesterday?” Rocking Chair One asked Rocking Chair Two.

“Spect so. Heard she refused to pay and she’s enjoying a stay at Ralphie’s Inn.”

“Ralphie’s Inn?” I said. “Where’s that? Pay for what?”

The game stopped and eight eyes took me in.

“I’m confused,” I said, although all five of us were clear on that issue already. “I thought I had a list of all the motels in this area.”

Whenever I need a soundtrack to accompany my stupidity, I replay their laughter. Finally, the player with his left sleeve pinned up to a stump of arm took pity on me. “Not from around here, are you, boy?” He laughed some more. “Ralph Bluxton is sheriff in these parts and Oren was referring to the county pen. What I heard is your lady friend refused to pay the speeding fine and the deputies are housing her at the jail until court opens up.”

“Yep,” Atlanta Braves Hat chipped in. “Happens once or twice a year. They ain’t got enough ready money or they’s dumb enough to think they can win.”

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Finding the county courthouse was a breeze. The Italian Renaissance palace was a block or two past the town square and shuttered tight. After some bad directions I found the Sheriff’s office a mile or so farther down the road. Behind the desk sat a sleepy old-boy, puffy eyes dominating bloated cheeks and jowls. Once he finally deigned to acknowledge my presence, he asked, “Sumpin’ botherin’ you, boy?”

I explained I was trying to locate Red. He took off his Smokey-the-Bear hat and scratched his shiny pate. “Gonzalez, you said. ‘Fraid visitin’ hours was yesterday—all female inmates last name beginning A to L. Have to wait ‘till next Saturday.”

“So she’s in jail?”

“Don’t know. But if she is, you can see her next Saturday.”

Telling an asshole he is one doesn’t usually enhance communication, so I tried to start again from the beginning, inquiring how I might determine if Red was in custody.

“Sarge will be in Monday mornin’. He’ll know.” He put his feet up on the desk, leaned back in the chair and closed his porcine eyes.

A part of me wants to tell you that I grabbed his ratty shoes and flipped him onto his back and beat the information out of him, but I didn’t. I walked out and after getting turned away at the jail, checked into a motel. The yellow pages listed a lawyer who promised prompt

resolution of traffic violations. Bluxton was his name, not Ralph, but I figured there was probably a family connection to the Sheriff. I left a detailed message and never got a call back. I couldn't get in touch with Father Roy either. Sunday was the day he and two others slipped into Fort Benning for their civil disobedience.

So put yourself in my position. It's Sunday afternoon. You are torpid in the blast furnace called Georgia summer, enervated from the heat and intransigence of the local constabulary. You don't know for sure your acquaintance is in jail, but think she might be. You guess it's because of the speed trap. If so, maybe the best you can do is get some money to pay her fine. Your checking account has less than a hundred dollars and you are supposed to be driving home to start a new job as a management trainee the next day.

Needless to say, I didn't sleep well that night.

Time for you folks to stretch your legs, so please stand as you are able and join me in singing one of Red's favorite songs, hymn number 108, "My Life Flows On In Endless Song." Red first learned this song from Pete Seeger way back, and always thought its title should be "How Can I Keep From Singing."

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I don't know if Red had a favorite verse, but she certainly practiced the final one throughout her life: "In prison cell and dungeon vile our thoughts to them are winging, when friends by shame are undefiled how can I keep from singing?"

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The Sergeant was a veritable fountain of information. Traffic court started at 10:00 am Tuesday morning. I could see her there and if she were still imprisoned Saturday. My visit could last thirty minutes. I could see her each and every Saturday if I wished.

"You want to help her? Bring a lot of money. She's got the ticket, court costs and what I hear, room rent and food costs since she's refusing to work for her keep. Add in towing and storing her vehicle and she probably already bought some clothes and soap and stuff. Should come to less than a thousand, but don't quote me on that, boy."

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Red was last on the morning docket and entered the court, her dress streaked with dirt, hands cuffed behind her back. When she saw me her face lit up in a patented Red smile and she

waved her shoulders at me.

The court clerk read the indictment: she was clocked doing forty-two in a twenty-five mile-an-hour zone. The ticket was \$10 per mile over the speed limit for \$170. How did she plead?

“Not guilty, your Honor,” she said in a clear voice that filled the courtroom.

The judge looked down at the scruffy woman standing in front of him. “Where’s your counsel, young lady?”

“I have no counsel, your Honor. I was not allowed to make any long distance calls to contact my lawyer. But,” she shrugged, “assuming I can have the handcuffs removed I will represent myself. I’m part Italian, your Honor, so I need my hands to talk.”

The judge cracked a grin and covered his face with both hands. When he spoke he was under control again. “You are ready to proceed?”

Assuring the judge she was and after her cuffs were removed, Red sat at the table; two six-foot, two hundred pound deputies stood guard. The prosecutor asked for a recess. The arresting officer needed to be called in to testify. The judge appeared annoyed, but offered a continuance until 2:00 that afternoon. Red was shackled and taken away, but shot me a smile before she left.

At 2:00 on the dot we all rose at the judge’s return and the prosecutor called the arresting officer to the stand. He gave the facts, confirmed the defendant was the arrestee and stood up after the prosecutor said he was through.

Red sat him back down. “A pleasure to see you again, Officer. Can you tell me the distance between the point when a motorist proceeding southbound on US-27 first sees the 25 mph speed limit sign and the sign itself?” After a long pause while the officer looked pleadingly at the prosecutor, she added, “I’m sorry, I must have accumulated some ear wax over the last few days. I didn’t hear your answer.”

“Don’t know,” he mumbled. “Don’t make no difference anyhow.”

“Relevance?” the prosecutor asked.

“Would you agree, officer that it might be about 125 feet?”

After another long look at the prosecutor the officer agreed, “Might be about that.”

“The speed limit before the change to twenty-five was how much?”

This time the officer looked at both the prosecutor and the judge, who said, "She's asking you, not me. Answer her."

"Uh, fifty-five."

"And if a car pulled out in front of you, how quickly could you step on the brake?"

"Objection. Relevance?"

"Overruled. I have nothing else to do this afternoon and it's your fault we didn't finish before lunch since your officer wasn't here. Please answer the question."

"Pretty fast, I guess."

"Pretty fast," Red looked to the top of the courthouse ceiling for a count of two. "Two seconds? Or maybe your reactions are twice as good as that. A second?"

"Faster than that. Tenth of a second."

"Really? And here I thought the South was a slower part of the country. In college I did a research project that showed students averaged between a fifth and quarter of a second to respond to a flashing light. Of course they were expecting the light and didn't have to process something unexpected, like a speed limit sign hidden by a billboard and the curve of the road. And they didn't have to take their foot off the accelerator and get it to the brake either."

The prosecutor waved a hand around as though he needed permission to go potty. "Is there a question?"

"I'm sorry, your Honor." Red nodded in his direction. "I just wanted to give the officer a chance to reconsider his answer. It being sworn testimony and all."

"Maybe a second then," the officer said.

Red paced back and forth before the witness, his eyes following her movement while his head faced straight forward.

"Officer, what percentage of the people you arrest for speeding at the spot you arrested me would you say are from outside the county?"

The officer looked as though he finally understood the joke. "Prettineer all of 'em," he said, drawing a chuckle from the gallery.

"The defense wishes to put into evidence exhibit #1." She pulled toilet paper out of her pocket and waved it around. "I apologize to the court for the flimsiness of the exhibit, but it seems to be as strong as the case."

The prosecutor toppled his chair in his hurry to object. The judge gaveled the guffaws to silence.

“Oh I’m sorry, your Honor. I didn’t mean it like it came out. Are you good at math, officer?”

He shook his head and only after the judge reminded him that gestures were insufficient did he offer a mumbled, “No.”

About that time I noticed a steady stream of people entering the back of the courtroom, including several deputies and looked back in surprise to see the four checkers players from Reevesville had joined the gallery.

“Can I put myself on the stand, your Honor?”

The deputy was dismissed and Red sworn in. The judge gave her free reign to ask and answer questions, unless the prosecutor objected; then she had to wait for the judge’s ruling. On the toilet paper written in eyeliner because, she explained, the deputies had taken away her purse with pens and paper and she’d had to borrow the eyeliner from another inmate who had smuggled it into the jail, was a mathematical demonstration of how long it would take to slow a car from fifty-five miles per hour to twenty five (about two seconds of braking and a second to hit the brake.) The car would travel two hundred feet.

But of course she only had 125 feet before the sign and the police radar. As her calculations showed, if she were doing exactly fifty-five when she saw the speed limit sign, you would expect the officer to have clocked her at forty-three mph.

“Therefore, your Honor, I respectfully request that you dismiss the case as it is not physically possible to go only twenty-five at the sign unless you knew in advance that the changed speed limit sign was there. The proof is no locals are arrested for speeding, just we out-of-towners.”

The prosecutor had only one question for Red, “You admit you were driving forty-two in a twenty-five mph zone?”

The judge rapped his gavel to quiet the crowd, which had been buzzing ever since Red had asked for dismissal. Into the silence he pronounced his verdict: “Guilty. Defendant will pay court costs of \$200, the traffic fine of...” he looked at the papers in front of him, “...\$170. Towing costs...”

I was stunned by the miscarriage of justice and didn't hear the total damage. What I did hear was his summary: "Defendant will be remanded to jail until the fine is paid... or for thirty days. Time served will count toward the sentence."

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The next day I presented myself to the court clerk with funds Western Unioned from her brother. After an interminable wait two deputies brought her out. She was still handcuffed and each one held an arm. "He's not going to believe us," a deputy said. "You tell him."

"I will not condone paying ransom," she said. "Send the money back to my brother and tell him I love him dearly." Her face shone with her smile.

"What about Father Roy?" I said. "What about your job?"

"I can always get a new job, Joshua. But I could never look myself in the mirror if I wasn't willing to stand up to injustice when it presents itself. To misquote someone, 'if not here, where? If not now, when?' Thanks for your help and let everyone know I'm okay." She flashed her escort with a smile. "Shall we, boys?"

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As far as I know, Red never talked about her thirty days in jail. She insisted what happened to her was not relevant; what mattered was that her actions improved life for others. Now's a good time to read a letter written by one of Red's fellow inmates. I'll skip the first part that talks about several of the inmates Red knew.

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I've never had the courage to tell you we were sure you were lying when you told Sarah, Marissa and me you were in for speeding. Why would they put a skinny white chick in a cell with three bad mommas like us? Figured you for a stoolie, especially when you got us all singing spirituals Sunday morning. I still remember my spine tingling that first time you got us to stomp our feet and use the bars for percussion and the whole joint joined in. Only after you left us did we get the idea that it wasn't about sassing the man. It was about celebrating us.

When they threw you into the hole for not ratting out Marissa about her eyeliner and again when you refused to work, you got me wondering.

"I will not be a slave to an unjust system," you said.

At first I thought you had no right to talk about slavery. What did a honky know about

that?

Turned out more than this black girl. I hawked your every move, trying to figure you out. You'd tell stories about Martin and the movement. I thought you were making stuff up—trying to fit in or maybe just funning us. That's what first got me to the library—I wanted to prove you were a fake. Now I've earned my GED.

That reminds me: Marissa and I figure we've written over a thousand letters for the ones who can't write so well. I never thought of it until you wrote a letter for Sarah that first week. "We each have to find our own ministry," you said.

Amen, sister. Amen

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The letter continues, but you get the idea. Red served her full sentence and since I was fired from the management trainee job for showing up a few days late, I met her when she was released on a Monday morning and drove her to pick up her car. The interior was ruined; they had left it outside in the weather with the top down. The floor mats were moldy. Worse, the okra and beans and peaches had rotted, ruining the upholstery.

The ACLU won the suit she filed based on the Polaroid pictures we took that day and the testimony of the four checkers players who had seen a deputy drive the Mustang through town and were none too fond of Ralph Bluxton as it turned out. You should have seen the four of them the day they testified, dressed to the nines but still wearing the same garish suspenders. The trial provided them with three days' entertainment and lost the sheriff the next election.

Every time we passed Miss Martha's stand we always stopped in to buy whatever was fresh and shoot the breeze. That was Red's way.

Red testified before the Georgia legislature about her rural speed trap experience. For years afterward the billboard that had previously advertised Reevesville Antiques proclaimed "Speed Trap Ahead. Reduce Speed to 25 MPH." Nowadays, all over the country we have warning signs showing an upcoming decrease in a speed limit. Never underestimate the power of one motivated individual.

A couple of months ago it was clear Red was slipping from us and I told her again how inspired I had been by the way she handled herself in Reevesville. It was the trigger that caused me to go to law school and become a poverty lawyer.

Through her pain she cracked her smile. “It’s nice that you think I did something,” she said, “but every seed knows its time.”

True, but don’t you agree Red was *the* master gardener?

Before I turn the podium over to our next speaker, I’ll leave you with another of Red’s proverbs: “Life is not separate from death; it only looks that way.” Red is never dead to us as long as we remember. Thanks, Red.