

Aberystwyth University

'Make America Great again'

Nolan, V.

Published in:
Interzone

Publication date:
2020

Citation for published version (APA):

Nolan, V. (2020). 'Make America Great again'. *Interzone*, (287), 62-80.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

Val Nolan,
Department of English and Creative Writing,
Aberystwyth University,
Aberystwyth,
SY23 3DY,
Wales.

Word Count: 9,900

Email: pvn@aber.ac.uk

MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN

VAL NOLAN

“What’s a black boy like you care about little green men for?” The cop was rifling through the books and papers in the back seat of Jefferson’s car. One by one he threw them out on the shoulder of the I-94 where the looser pages shone briefly in the lights of the police cruiser before blowing away into the evening, just more trash along the highway.

“I *told* you,” Jefferson said, hands on the hood of his Impala. “I’m a reporter.”

“Uh-huh.” The cop continued to toss the back of Jefferson’s car. He shook leaves of notes free from magazines about UFOs and abductions. “You planning a kidnapping, son?”

Jefferson made a face. “It’s research,” he said as an eighteen-wheeler roared past, drowning him out. “For a story I’m writing.”

“A story...” The cop flicked through pictures of flying saucers and big-eyed extraterrestrials. “About spacemen, right?” He turned to a second cop, who had been running Jefferson’s details in the cruiser. “You believe this?”

The second cop only spat on the concrete. “You carrying any weapons?”

Just pens, Jefferson wanted to say, but he knew better when it came to police, specifically when it came to white police like these guys.

“Ain’t no one gonna miss a journalist,” the first cop said.

“Enemies of the people,” the second one replied, laughing. “Saw that on the news.”

Jefferson caught himself before he pointed out the logical flaw in that.

“You been drinking?” the first cop asked when he saw Jefferson hesitate.

Jefferson shook his head. He was painfully aware of the traffic moving past. Brothers whom he couldn’t blame for keeping their eyes on the road and driving on. White families slowing down just enough to have their prejudices confirmed.

“Time was,” the first cop went on, “an officer would pull you over with a few too many in you and he’d follow you home to make sure you got there safe.” He grinned at his partner. “Right in the slammer now though. Or worse if you’re Latino. If you’re Black...”

“I haven’t been drinking,” Jefferson said as another big-rig rumbled past followed by a fierce gust of dirty air. “Just want to get where I’m going.”

“And where’s that, Black Spock?”

“Fullham. I’m covering the anniversary. A year since the riot.”

The second cop, the bigger one, smirked at his partner. “It’s a riot now, is it?”

“I thought it was a goodbye party for the likes of you.” The first cop smacked Jefferson on the back of the head, trying to provoke him.

“I had some buddies who were in Fullham,” the second one said. The still flashing red and blue lights of the cruiser cloaked his face in shadows and wrath. “Crowd control, they called it. More like corralling fucking commies. Fucking cucks and race traitors.” He stepped closer. “What kinda lies you gonna write about those good cops, huh?”

Jefferson turned his head to look him in the eye. “It’s a human-interest story,” he said.

The first cop smirked. “I thought you said it was about aliens.”

“It is. It’s...” The reporter sighed. “People said they saw things, is all. Things that don’t add up. That’s what I’m writing about. About their subjective experiences of the riots.” A sheet

of paper from his notes, a flyer ripped from lamppost, fluttered past as he spoke. WHAT REALLY HAPPENED IN FULHAM? it demanded in blocky type above two CCTV photos of a young white man in a khaki jacket. Jefferson watched it drift across the median where it caused a speeding motorcyclist to swoop into the path of a sedan which sounded its horn in anger and surprise. "Shouldn't you be dealing with that?" he asked the cops.

"You don't worry about that," the first one said. "We're dealing with you."

"You know why we pulled you over?" the second one asked as he scraped his nightstick along the side of the Impala before raising it high and smashing a front headlight.

Jefferson jumped at the noise of the breaking glass.

"Defective light," the cop said.

His partner laughed. "Looks like excessive tint on those windows too."

"I say it does." The second cop admired his reflection in the clear glass. "Obstructed view. Very dangerous on the highway. Seems you're racking up the violations, son."

"Seems I am," Jefferson said as a bus passed by and he saw teenagers holding up phones to take pictures. He wished these cops would just give him the tickets and leave him go. He had resigned himself to a series of fines and court costs at best when a burst of static from the radio on the first cop's shoulder announced a frenetic dispatch in a woman's voice. It was all numbers and acronyms half-obscured by the traffic noise.

"Copy that," the cop said into the radio. Then, sneering at Jefferson, "Your lucky day, son." He looked to his partner. "Forget him, man. We gotta go."

"Fucking aliens," the second cop said to Jefferson before shoving him against the car. As he walked away he turned briefly and held up his hand in Jefferson's direction to make an OK gesture with his thumb and forefinger. But things were *not* okay, Jefferson thought as he watched the cruiser, its sirens wailing, pull back on the road.

How the Hell could things be okay with cops likes that on the beat?

How the Hell was anyone okay with racists and homophobes running the country?

How –

#

“– *the Hell do we still have Nazis?*” Words like a bomb inside the Fulham VA hall. Ordinance birthed from a shadow in the sky. Shock and awe. A question from someone who wasn't even there, a figure on the TV screen by the side of the stage, a young white man hiding behind a greasy fringe. The same face from the flyer which Jefferson had been mailed. The man was seated at a bare table in a dark room. His wrists were shackled and there was something between confusion and indignation, maybe even fear, in his face. He looked out from the recording as if searching for answers amongst the audience he couldn't know was there. He seemed to lock eyes with each one in turn: With the teenage girl who had dyed her hair in rainbow shades. With the man in a blue cap bearing the University of Michigan's yellow M. With the elderly woman thumbing rosary beads. Then finally with Jefferson himself who sat in a corner of the hall with his battered laptop computer open in front of him.

“This man should not exist,” said a woman who had introduced herself as Hallie Hughes at the start of the meeting, now pausing the video and speaking again. “This man, Kenny Hanson, a pilot, a hero. This man who many of you saw last year, who many of you *spoke to*, is supposed to have died seventy-five years ago. Instead he was here. Not a day older than when he was supposedly shot down in World War II. But he was here and he fought for us the way he fought for us before. He fought the Alt Righters and the fascists. He saved people's *lives*. And yet there are people who don't want you to know the truth! But this footage, this interrogation, was leaked to us by a patriot inside the FBI.”

"*Fake news!*" someone shouted from the back of the hall. The comment provoked some half-hearted laughter from those picking over bowls of chips and platters of chicken wings.

"No, friends," Hallie Hughes said. "Real news. News so outlandish that the government does not think that we are ready for it. News that there are powers beyond this world with an interest in our affairs. Powers that have intervened before to help bend the arc of history towards justice. Maybe you want to call them extraterrestrials. Maybe you want to call them angels," she shrugged in Jefferson's direction, "but they sent us Kenny Hanson. They sent us a soldier to remind us that this is the same war we have always been fighting. To wake us up to the fact that hate and division and fascism are not just outliers. They weren't outliers seventy-five years ago and they're not outliers now. The riot last year was a skirmish in the same war that we've been asked to fight before. The same fight that people like Kenny Hanson volunteered their lives for."

Jefferson, his fingers hovering over this keyboard, listened as she spoke. He judged Hallie Hughes to be in her early twenties. Mixed-race, based on her complexion. She was an engaging speaker, she masked her nervousness well, but this was not what he had expected when he had opened the flyer she had mailed him.

"Let me show you more," she said as she pointed the remote at the television. The recording started playing again but there was a cut. Kenny Hanson had moved position. He was still shackled to the table but had slumped back in his chair. Resigned. Despondent.

"I could see the Luftwaffe bearing down on me," he said. "Could see the hell at the bottom of their long barrels lighting up right ahead of me. I know that the bullet was meant for me. I *know* it. But then they..." He looked off to the side.

"But then they what?" A prompt from an unseen inquisitor.

"They pulled me out of the fight," Kenny said, sullen. "Pulled me out of my plane. They took me someplace."

“Like... a black site?”

“More like a white space.”

“Great, now the aliens are racists too.”

Kenny tilted his head.

“And that was 1945?” the off-screen voice asked.

“That was 1945.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you, son, but this is 2019.”

Jefferson looked around the hall at the audience’s reaction. Some were curious, some were outright skeptical, and he himself was somewhere in between.

“I know when it is.” Kenny Hanson leaned towards the camera once more. He raised both hands to cover his face for a moment, then looked up again. “I mean... I’ve seen bits. They showed me... glimpses. But I had no idea. Did the Nazis *win*?” He looked around the dark room. “Did they invade?” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Why are there predators with gavels in their hands? Why are there children in cages? What’s happened to America?”

The image of the man froze as Hallie Hughes paused the recording again.

“What happened to America,” she repeated quietly, as much to herself as to the audience. Then, staring down those in the hall, “How the Hell *do* we still have Nazis?”

Jefferson had not been here a year ago, but he had seen the footage captured by the local TV crews. Hundreds of people moving past with flags and signs saying *Dissent is patriotic* or people chanting slogans like *No racists, no KKK, no fascist USA...* Greybeards with guitars strumming along while clergy and volunteers passed out bottled water to the attendees. By all accounts the mood had been cathartic until the Alt-Righters had shown up. An angry, roiling mass of them. Crisp white polo shirts on the younger ones. The older ones wearing red MAGA hats over camouflage clothing like the former didn’t render the latter pointless. Many bore tattoos of eagles or flags or firearms or weird combinations of all three. Some wore

neckerchiefs made from confederate flags over their faces. More than one shirt proclaimed *I'd rather be a Russian than a Democrat!* They were supposed to have been outside the park but really they had intermingled openly with the resistance march: shoving people out of the way with bats, cursing and shouting and spitting in people's faces; roaring *Blood and soil* and *You'll never replace us* and *You're going to die today* and – Jefferson still shivered when he thought about the footage – *Into the ovens...*

“Many of you were at the march last year,” Hallie Hughes said. “Many of you were hurt or traumatized. And how did the authorities respond? They praised the ‘very fine people’ who brought hate and death to our streets. That, as if we needed any more of it, is evidence of how the current administration is corrupt. Evidence of how the GOP –”

“*The Grabbers of Pussies!*” someone shouted to hoots and hollers.

“– are complicit in the perversion of our republic and have endorsed the violence that scarred our lives. You know the Democrats are outmaneuvered again and again. You know the white supremacists are emboldened and the misogynists elated. And as for these people running around screaming MAGA-this and MAGA-that and MAGA-Fucking-Lago?” The woman was incised now, her audience jeering at the invocation of their opponents. “Make America great again?” she asked. “Friends, America's always been great. Maybe we ain't always been good, but we've always been great. We got greatness *in us.*”

Jefferson, still smarting from his encounter with the highway patrol, wasn't so sure. But the small crowd cheered and clapped regardless. The atmosphere was part political rally and part revival meeting. People were chugging cans of soda and clearing the finger food as Hallie Hughes clicked through pictures of the riots and railed against the government's supposed spiriting away of Kenny Hanson. But the mood grew more subdued as her talk began to take a more abstract turn, as she began to weave in worldlines and historical continua, to discuss unobjective presencing and non-locality and blackbody radiation. Her slideshow began to mix

images from the Fulham riot with graphs and tables and scans of documents from World War II, as well as unintelligible extracts from scientific papers. The more she drew her unlikely connections, the more her audience began to slip away. They had come to protest the government and, while enthralled by the footage of Hanson, they were left cold by Hallie Hughes's portrait of him as the tool of otherworldly intercession.

When her presentation was over, when the stragglers were drifting from the hall, Jefferson approached and introduced himself.

"You came?" she said.

"You didn't think I would?"

She shrugged. "I sent flyers to every reporter in the Detroit Metro area. You're the only one who showed."

Jefferson offered her a smile. "The man in the video," he said. "Who is he? Really?"

"I told you. He's Kenny Hanson. You saw his service record."

"Sure, I saw that *name*," Jefferson said, "but I don't know who that man –" he pointed at the now blank screen, "– really is. All you have is a couple of shaky photos and a YouTube video. This could be a student art project for all I know. A deepfake."

"People met him," Hallie said. "*I* met him and he told me his story. I saw him take down a gunman at the rally. A Nazi. I was there and I'm telling you it happened."

"But that doesn't make him a time-traveler," Jefferson said. "That doesn't mean aliens plucked him out of the past and dropped him down in the here and now."

"It might have been God," Hallie said, averting her eyes.

"It might have been the afternoon Greyhound from Chicago."

Hallie Hughes turned away from him. "You drove out here to mock me?"

"I didn't," Jefferson said. "I think this Hanson guy is a story alright. But I don't think it's the one that you're telling."

“The story I’m telling isn’t finished yet. I don’t know the outcome. I don’t know the ripple effects of what he did. I’m just glad he did it.”

Jefferson sighed. “There’s something here,” he said carefully, “but it’s about a guy who stood up for what’s right. About a hero in a moment of crisis who put himself in front of the bullet when this community needed him to but then, for whatever reason, disappeared again.”

“So you’re gonna write about him? You’re gonna get his story out there?”

“I’d need evidence to even *think* about filing something like this.” Jefferson rubbed the back of his neck. “I’d need corroboration.”

Hallie nodded. “Then I know exactly who you should talk to...”

#

Jefferson took the details Hallie gave him and, the next morning, pulled his Impala slowly onto Main Street. Fulham was quiet at this hour. There, in the window of a café named ZeeZee’s, white twenty-somethings hunched over phones or nursed Faygos or stared into each other’s eyes across platefuls of pancakes. Next door was a bicycle shop which had arranged a selection of stock beneath the shade of dusty awnings. Beyond that again a smokehouse and a deli. Road traffic lazed past all of this – every third or fourth driver offering a wave to someone on the sidewalk – and the sound of children playing echoed from just out of sight. Five minutes further and Jefferson came to a sprawling, makeshift shrine of bouquets and photographs and teddy bears and handwritten notes marking the entrance to the town park, the site of the rally and the riot which had torn this community apart.

It did not look like much. Just a green space dotted with oaks and maples, with varnished benches and silver drinking fountains and a wooden bandstand at the center. If anything, it looked far smaller than the photographs had made it appear. It did not seem like it could have

held all the people who claimed to have attended the rally. Yet Jefferson had seen the footage of hundreds of people holding signs which read *Pussy Grabs Back* or *Build Bridges Not Walls* or, his favorite, *Michigan Lefties*. He recalled the famous picture – the one that had won the Pulitzer – of a sea of people breaking around the boulder by the park entrance on which someone had painted the word *RESIST* in blood red letters. One year later and the word was faded but still visible as Jefferson drove by.

He passed a tract of retirement housing, rattled over a railroad crossing, and then left town through a mixture of woods and cornfields and well-worn red barns. He liked it out here. Liked the way the mailboxes, like distance markers, grew increasingly crooked in half-mile increments. Then, following Hallie's directions, he took a turn onto a side road and all at once the straight lines of the settlers gave way to the tarred-over echoes of Potawatomi bones and trails. Unpaved roads spiraled away to the left and right, an occasional cloud of dust haunting their tunnels of green. Eventually Jefferson found the right address and turned in to a driveway in front of a two-story wooden farmhouse painted white and adorned with flowerpots and hanging baskets. It stood on a square lot cut out of the enveloping woods the way someone might clip a coupon from the paper. A middle-aged white woman was unloading grocery bags from an SUV as Jefferson got out of his car.

"This ain't a gas station," the woman said. "Ain't a campground."

Jefferson deployed his best smile. "Allison Porter?" he asked. "My name is Jefferson Dodds. I write for the *Detroit Citizen*."

The woman made a face.

"I'd like to ask you about what happened last year? About the riots? About a man named Kenny Hanson?"

The woman moved towards the house. "I ain't got nothing to say about Mr. Hanson."

"I'm told you're the one who found him?" Jefferson pressed.

"Told by who?"

"Hallie Hughes."

Allison sighed loudly at the name. "Yeah I found him," she said. "Skulking around my barn. Rambling about foo fighters and time travel like a madman. Almost blew him away with my shotgun. Which I keep loaded, by the way."

"Duly noted, ma'am."

She placed her grocery bags back on the roof of her car. "I reported him to the cops. Thought he'd escaped from the prison down the road. It's happened before. But he was gone when they got here and I didn't see him again until the riot."

"Until he saved your kids from the gunman?"

Allison Porter narrowed her eyes.

"Hallie's words," Jefferson said.

"I have complicated feelings about this, Mr. Hanson. More complicated than can be discussed on my stoop." She gave him the kind of once-over he was far too used to. "If I invite you inside, I assume you won't try to murder us?"

"I promise."

She led him through the garage door which, in contrast to the clean façade, was strung with cobwebs and bore a faded, crookedly applied American flag sticker. Then up three steps into an L-shaped kitchen-living room. One half of the of the space was dominated by the great silver bulk of a magnet-crowned refrigerator declaiming *My mother was right about everything, Life is too short to cook for you people!, Yay! Wine!* and so on. The other half was in thrall to a tightly folded flag, dense with meaning, which lay in a glass case on the mantelpiece. There was a photograph beside it of a man in a Marine dress uniform. Bookshelves lined this side of the room and Jefferson traced his hands along their spines. History and theology, for the most part. Heavy looking hardcovers bristling with brightly colored bookmarks. Beyond them a

television and, opposite this, a pre-teen boy and an older girl – maybe early twenties – sitting on the sofa.

“That’s Riley,” Allison said, indicating the girl, “and Moses.”

Jefferson smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

“Hi,” said the boy.

The girl said nothing.

“Riley,” Allison said, “don’t be rude, sweetheart. You can text boys later.”

Riley made a face. “Actually I’m reading about the history of the Emoluments Clause.”

She snapped the cover on her phone closed, got up, and marched out an open door.

“Write if you find work,” Allison shouted after her. Then, turning to Kenny, said with less flippancy, “It’s... been a tough few years. Taken a toll on everyone.” There was strong emotion behind her eyes but she held it in check. She indicated that Jefferson should sit at the table. “Ask me your questions,” she said, unpacking her groceries.

“Okay. Why did you go to the rally last year?”

“I didn’t,” Allison said. “Didn’t even know that this pair –” she tilted her head towards Moses and the absent Riley, “– had gone there.”

“My sister wants to be President someday,” Moses said. “But her emails...”

“*Too soon!*” came a shout, stern and firm, from Riley in another room.

Allison offered a strained smile. “Kids, right?”

“Sure.”

“You gotta understand, Mr. Hanson, I ain’t happy with the things that girl says these days. Don’t like the protests she goes to. I’m a conservative. Fiscally and socially. I vote Republican and always have. My husband too before he died.” She looked towards the flag and the photograph. It’s fine for you folk in the cities, but out here we gotta lock our doors.”

“We have to lock our doors in Detroit too,” Jefferson said.

Allison Porter stared him down. "What I mean is I don't hold truck with the liberal nonsense my daughter is flirting with." She sighed. "*Anyway*, I got a call from Sandra Meekhof down the road telling me that she spotted my two at the rally and that things were getting hostile. You've seen the footage, I'm sure. People throwing beer bottles and rocks. Jeering and shouting. An Antifa *mob* about to trample my kids by the time I got down there."

"Antifa weren't the aggressors," Jefferson said.

"Weren't they? Allison asked. "So what are they protesting? Where is this thing called fascism exactly? Where are the jackboots? Where are the swastikas?"

"Saw one on Old Highway 12 yesterday," Moses said idly from the sofa. "Spray-painted on a roadsign."

Allison folded her arms. "You," she said to her son, "need to go tidy your room."

"But mom..."

"Now, please."

Jefferson watched the boy shuffle away. He fully expected Allison to ask him to leave too but, instead, she closed the door behind Moses, went to the refrigerator for a bottle of water – she pointedly did not offer one to Jefferson – and returned to the table.

"The riot was in full swing when I got there," she said as if nothing had happened. "It was madness. I remember pushing through the weight of people. I remember stumbling over an abandoned picnic, over a child's stuffed bear orphaned in the chaos." She blessed herself. "There was screaming coming from the far side of the park. I heard what I thought was a motorbike starting up..."

"But it wasn't."

"But it wasn't. It was the first gunshot. Then there was a second. Then a third. I was shouting for Riley and Mos but I couldn't find them. People were throwing themselves over their children. No one knew where to run to. It was only luck that I saw the kids. Saw the

shooter standing over Riley, and I thought... God, I thought that was it. I thought she was dead.” Allison opened her water and took a drink. “Then I saw Kenny Hanson step out of the crowd, a glow about him, a weird light I must have imagined. I knew his name because he had told it to me when he appeared in my barn but I didn’t know anything else about him. Certainly he didn’t know anything about us. Didn’t owe us anything. But I saw him put himself between my child and the gun regardless.” She took a breath. “There was a scuffle. Hanson knocked the shooter to the ground. Bashed the man’s head in with a rock –” Allison shuddered a little, “– and then he was gone. Vanished like he’d never been.”

Jefferson allowed her a long moment to gather herself. “It was suggested to me,” he said at last, “that God might have sent Kenny Hanson.”

“God sends angels and prophets, Mr. Dodds.”

“Then –” and Jefferson couldn’t quite believe that he was saying this, “– maybe aliens sent him after all?”

“The whole idea that *anybody* sent him is ridiculous. If he was sent to save people then why didn’t he save anybody else? If God sent him – my word, even if aliens sent him – why was my daughter’s life worth more than those of the other people shot?” Allison looked pained. “I’m grateful, of course I am. I love my girl. But those people were loved too. How am I supposed to rationalize that?” She took a sip of water. “I struggle with my hate for that man but I don’t hate Kenny Hanson because of his politics or his stupid games. I hate him because I have to live forevermore with the guilt that other people’s children died and mine did not. I need to wrap my mind around the idea that someone made a choice about that.”

Jefferson noticed that she was almost crying but wasn’t sure that she had realized.

“You know,” Allison went on, “I did some research a while back. Found out there *was* a Kenny Hanson from Michigan, from Dearborn, actually, and he *was* in the Army Air Forces in World War Two. I probably read about him on the same website those crazies in town did. He

was shot down in May 1945. The poor bastard. Another few days and it'd all have been over. Proper American hero too. Cutesy backstory growing up barefoot on a farm. Even some photos of him and his dad in the Ford archives. He flew dozens of missions against the Nazis. Earned medals, decorations, the whole thing."

Jefferson's eyes drifted to the folded flag atop the mantelpiece. It was bathed in the light of the television which showed a fire so big it seemed as though the world itself was all ablaze. Men in white played golf in the foreground as though oblivious to it all.

"I used to think Hanson was a crisis actor, you know? Cause ain't no kid from 1945 gonna be talking about 'otherings'. I used to think he was part of some kind of scheme to deceive us or embarrass our family." Allison took a deep breath. "Do you know what I think now though?"

"Tell me."

The woman's expression was one of certainty. "I think he *was* over there. Not Germany or France but Iraq. Maybe Afghanistan. All gung-ho War on Terror. I think he saw or did things over there that he couldn't cope with. Things he didn't know what to do with. The kind of things no one should have to see or do. And I think he invented his whole story as a way of coping with that. Some kind of PTSD thing. He, whatever his real name is, he couldn't process what happened to him but maybe 'Kenny Hanson' could. Because he's got distance, he's got perspective." Allison flexed her hands. She looked at the flag and the photograph beside it. "I think he's using Kenny Hanson as a human shield and I bet if we'd actually got to see those tags he was wearing then we'd have found someone else's name on them." She placed her bottle on the counter. "Now though, Mr. Dodds, I think it's time you left."

Jefferson sat in ZeeZee’s that evening scrolling through social media. He saw the usual gloating and outrage trending across all the expected hashtags and accounts. He saw Alt-Right fan-fiction masquerading as history. He saw elected representatives gaslighting their constituents. He saw women sharing stories of abuse only to be mocked or belittled. He saw people crowdfunding for insulin and surgeries. He saw tone-policing from the most spiteful and vulgar corners of the internet. He saw hate speech masquerading as free speech. He saw videos of flooded cities and photographs of storm-flattened towns. He saw ideologues becoming yes-men and yes-men becoming ideologues. He saw how violent rhetoric against critics of the government had escalated to physical assaults. He saw homegrown terrorists radicalized by the supposed leader of the free world. He saw the administration scaremongering about caravans of – Jefferson laughed darkly – ‘aliens’ as they trudged through swamps a thousand miles away. Again and again he saw lies uttered without any consequence. Again and again he saw the media denounced as traitors.

“What a shitshow,” he said, turning his phone face down on the table. He was about to resume work on his article when he saw Hallie Hughes and Riley Porter enter the café. They cast their eyes around for a moment before spotting Jefferson and moving to join him.

“You weren’t hard to find,” Riley said by way of greeting.

Jefferson considered all the white faces in the café. “No,” he said. “I guess not.”

“I couldn’t talk to you when you came to my house,” she said. “Not with my mother the way she is. She’d prefer I was out with boys but –” Riley shared a glance with Hallie, “– she doesn’t even know they’re not my type.”

“Right,” Jefferson said, getting it.

“She sits in front of her computer every night with a glass of wine watching videos about the deep state or the coming storm or –” Riley made air-quotes with her fingers, “– ‘white

genocide'. And yet *I'm* the conspiracy theorist for believing in a man I *saw*, a man who saved my life?"

"You gotta admit, there's a difference between believing in disgruntled civil servants and believing in time-traveling aliens."

"Not time travel," Hallie interjected. "Relativistic physics. That's science."

"That's science *fiction*," Jefferson said. "Extraterrestrials aren't a thing."

"Maybe," Riley said, "they're not a thing because they always destroy themselves? Maybe the explanation for the Fermi paradox is gerrymandering. Maybe the Great Filter is fascism and maybe civilizations who make it through the bottleneck want to help other species do the same?"

"Said Cortés to the Mexica."

"There *were* lights in the sky the night before Kenny appeared," Hallie said. "People saw 'em. Photos and all. You can go back and check the news."

"Everyone's drunk uncle has seen lights in the sky out here," Jefferson said. "Airplanes or satellites or drones. Doesn't mean Kenny Hanson was dropped off by flying saucers." He sat back with a sigh and thought for a moment. "You say he appeared the week before the rally, yes?"

Riley nodded. "We were in the barn, Mos and I. Just cleaning up. And we heard rattling behind the wood-stack. I thought it was rats so I went to shoo 'em off. But there was a man back there. Maybe about Hallie's age. Looked really confused. Did the whole name-rank-serial number thing. That's how he introduced himself. Kenny Hanson, Lieutenant, blah blah. Didn't know where he was. Said he'd been away. Mos had run back to the house by then, and I didn't know what to do, so I told this guy he was outside Fulham but he didn't seem to know where that was. I asked him if he was okay, if he wanted me to call an ambulance, and then he asked me what year it was."

Jefferson looked at Hallie. Her expression seemed to say *see*.

“He kept asking questions,” Riley said. “Wanted to know why there were concentration camps on the border? Why the government was colluding with foreign powers? Like in the video. Though he made less sense than he did on camera.”

“Did you think he was dangerous?”

Riley shook her head. “Just confused. He seemed out of it. Real anguished, real dismayed. I helped him to his feet, but when I touched him...” she trailed off.

“What happened when you touched him?”

The girl took a deep breath. “I saw... *something*. I dunno. Soldiers? Judges? People taking oaths, I think? A jumble of stuff that’s never come clear.”

“It was an extrasensory event,” Hallie said. “Something Kenny was a conduit for. Unobjective presencing.”

Jefferson had his own thoughts on the lack of objectivity at play here, but he kept them to himself. “What happened then?” he asked Riley.

“Then I dropped him,” the girl said, “just as my mom showed up.”

“Bet that went well.”

Riley let out a sarcastic laugh. “She started screaming. Literally *hauled* me back inside. Locked the doors and straight away she was in dad’s old den opening up the gun safe. I had no idea until right then that she kept the key on her. Then she marched back out there and confronted Hanson. They had some sort of conversation. I could see it from the window but I couldn’t hear them.” She shrugged. “When Hanson took a step towards her she let off a shot over the barn. That cleared him pretty fast. I saw him dart off towards town.” Riley took a breath. “Mom thought he was an escaped con but I thought he was just a drifter. A crazy guy. Didn’t see him again until those Nazis gate-crashed our rally the next weekend.”

“And what were they like?” Jefferson asked. “The Nazis?”

Riley thought about this for a moment. "Riotous and unafraid," she said. "People I knew as my mom's friends. People who ain't been right since they got into podcasts and Twitter and all that shit. I remember the pastor on an apple crate calling for calm. I remember the police ordering people to go home but no one was listening. They were throwing things at us: rocks and cans and bottles. We were linking arms and shouting back but the noise was such that I couldn't make out words anymore. It got scary. Real scary. I remember the crowd tighten until all I could see were fists and elbows and the timber shafts of placards marching forward like the legs of toy soldiers. That's when I heard the first gunshot. I looked around for Moses and Hallie. I felt everything slow down and, at the same time, everything becoming a whirl. Like I could see it all happening at once: a gang of white boys stomping on old Mrs. Hernandez; a lost child screaming; the bloodied face of the pastor; the glint of a blade, the crunch of glass, a flag trampled into the mud..."

Hallie reached out to take Riley's hand as she spoke.

"People were running everywhere," the girl said. "I found Mos. Dunno how but I found him. I was trying to get him out of the park but suddenly this guy was standing in front of me. Some middle-management type, you know? Slacks and a big-box logo on his shirt. Pointing a handgun at me. I swear that I thought I was dead." She looked Jefferson straight in the eye. "Then Kenny Hanson came out of nowhere. Maybe he'd been sleeping rough in the park and had been displaced by the rally? Whatever reason, he was there and he tackled the shooter."

Jefferson released a long exhalation that he had not realized he had been holding in.

"The shot went wide," Riley said. "Went up in the air. But I can still hear it every time a car backfires or someone slams a door." She bit her lip. "But he saved me. This guy, this total stranger with basically no clue what was going on. Kenny Hanson stood up to a gunman, to an Alt Righter murdering people at a legal, *peaceful* protest, and he saved my life. Then he was gone. Just... vanished."

“Seized,” Hallie said. “Apprehended and detained in an extrajudicial action.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Jefferson told her. He was wary of Hallie’s interpretations but, at the same time, he was struck by Riley’s version of events. And, he thought, to an extent it did not matter where Kenny Hanson had come from. It did not matter where he had gone. Maybe he was a drifter or deserter, maybe he was unwell. Maybe he *had* been abducted by aliens, but none of that was important. In the heat of the moment, Kenny Hanson been better than he had to be. That, Jefferson decided, was the real story of what had happened in Fulham. That, once he was back in his guesthouse, was the story he hammered out with a righteous fury. That, without second thought, was the story which he filed.

#

MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN

By Jefferson Dodds

There is a photograph in the archives of The Henry Ford. It shows a ten year old boy sitting on a plough. He is wearing a wide smile and a pair of dungarees at least one size too big. He is happy. He is safe. It is 1933 and he has no idea of the evil rising half a world away.

Dig deeper, this time in the Dearborn Public Library, and you will find another picture. The boy is now a young man. This time he is sitting on the wing of an aircraft, his chin resting on one raised knee, and wearing the jumpsuit of what was then called the Army Air Forces. It is 1945 and Kenny Hanson has answered the call to fight Fascism in the skies over Europe. Many young Americans did. A great many died in the process. Kenny Hanson died in a fight with the Luftwaffe high above northern France. He died so that others could be free.

Or maybe, just maybe, he did not. In Fulham his week I was told that Kenny Hanson appeared during last year's riots and saved several lives. There would be no reason to believe that this is the same man except for two other photographs, a CCTV still and a cameraphone picture, both of which show an individual who looks exactly like Hanson. Some people call this evidence of alien abduction, which is fantastical, or of angels intervening in our affairs as though God has not given up on us. "Not my God" you may say but, in the age of #NotMyPresident, one has to wonder. Because whether or not the Kenny Hanson who appeared in Fulham was the same man from 1945, certainly it was the same fight.

And that fight goes on: Last week alone a white supremacist killed two African-Americans at a grocery store, a right-wing extremist mailed improvised explosives to critics of the current administration, an anti-Semite murdered eleven people in a synagogue, an incel gunman killed three women in an exercise class, a former soldier shot up a country bar and murdered college kids on a night out... All as we mark the anniversary of the Fulham riots when a peaceful rally was attacked by a grab-bag of Alt-Right extremists, by nativists and masculinists and neo-Nazis. Three people were shot dead in the fracas. Many more were injured during fighting in the town park. That more were not killed is down to the actions of the man identified as Kenny Hanson by a young woman who witnessed the violence. This week that woman told me that while America has not always been good, we have always been great. That we have greatness within us.

But I think she is wrong.

I think any greatness we have achieved has been *in spite* of what is within us. Because what is within us is cruel and ugly and greedy. What is within us has caused us to enslave our brothers and our sisters, to stock and breed them as though they were animals. What is within us is a fetish for dollars and death. What is within us is racist and misogynistic and homophobic and transphobic and corrupt. We send bombs to the churches of our neighbors. We let gunmen

stalk the homerooms of our schools. We lynch our sons and rape our daughters. We interfere in the affairs of other nations and we glass them from beyond the horizon if they refuse to do our bidding. Anything that makes us great lies outside ourselves. What makes us great is an idea that outlasts lifetimes as easily as it does financial quarters. An idea that sometimes, like nowadays, seems to disappear entirely as we fall in behind leaders who refuse to stand up against our own worst impulses. To pretend that this has not happened before is to be blinded by nostalgia. To pretend that it is not happening now is to abandon any semblance of moral clarity and leadership. To ignore it is to disregard the theme of the American story.

Because America *is* a story. One that never ends. Person versus nature, person versus person, person versus self. Sometimes all at the same time. Kenny Hanson fighting an Alt Righter is just one version of that tale. Really he is fighting all threats foreign and domestic. He fights a man in a suit. He fights a militia member weighed down with bandoleers and manifestos, a German Stormtrooper in black gear and gasmask. He fights a Confederate soldier. He fights an unmounted Cavalry officer, a slavecatcher, a British Redcoat. He fights himself, a colonist with his own eyes clear beneath beard and manifest destiny. Aliens did not bring Kenny Hanson back. They did not have to. He has always been here. Because there is not just one Kenny Hanson. There is a hundred. There is a thousand. He is black, he is white. He is everything in between. He's a Native American. He's a revolutionary. He's a Buffalo Soldier, a Tuskegee Airman. He is a liberal, he is a conservative. He is a train driver who looks the other way. He is a preacher who calls out the hypocrisy of his congregation. He is a lawyer fighting to clear his client's name. He is a man standing in front of a fascist's gun in a Fulham park. He is what makes America great.

Of course, the editorial board pulled the article. They insisted Jefferson be fired and, without much in the way of formality, he was. A security guard stood over him as he cleared his desk into a cardboard box, and then walked him through the grubby lobby of the *Detroit Citizen*. Outside, by the curb, there was a white man waiting in dark glasses and a cheap grey suit. Maybe mid-forties, maybe older. He stood impassively beside an illegally-parked sedan

“Jefferson Dodds?” the man said.

“Just gimme the ticket,” Jefferson said. “Whatever it’s for this time. I’m not in the mood.”

“I got your name from Hallie Hughes,” the man said.

Jefferson stopped. He narrowed his eyes as he studied the stranger again. A G-man, surely. A career Fed. Though there was something shifty about him... “You leaked the video,” Jefferson said. “Didn’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the man said, though it was clear that he did. “I do, however, think you would be interested in knowing that the Bureau *does* have someone named Kenny Hanson remanded to psychiatric custody upstate. Low priority, but being kept out of the way. Nonetheless, if you can make it up to Marquette by tomorrow then this –” he held up a manila envelope, “– is a court order granting you a half-an-hour sit down for the purposes of researching the treatment of inmates in the Michigan penal system.”

Jefferson stared at the envelope. “Who are you?” he asked. “Why are you doing this?”

The man smiled. “This is an inflection point, Mr. Dodds.” He tucked the envelope into Jefferson’s box and sat into the waiting car. “What you do next is up to you.” Then he was gone, the sedan lost to traffic straight away.

Jefferson opened the court order when he got home. It appeared legitimate. Or at least legitimate enough for him to take the I-75 north through the heart of the state the next day. He left very early and did not stop until he reached Mackinaw City where Lake Huron kissed Lake

Michigan. There he ate lunch along the shore as thousand-foot lakers – oreboats and straightdeckers for the most part – passed serenely through the strait. When he returned to his Impala he watched a big red pickup bearing a weatherworn *Infowars* sticker as it backed out of its space, executed a wide turn, and then pulled away from the lot. Jefferson let the truck move away before he too rejoined the Interstate and trundled over the mighty Mackinac Bridge as a fully laden bulker passed beneath it. To his shame, Jefferson had never been across the bridge before, had never been to the Upper Peninsula at all prior to this trip. At once he found the roads straighter and the traffic lighter. The ancient old growth of North America, now stained with acid grey, began to close around everything. Skies empty but for the birds seemed to promise peace and contentment. Yet still Jefferson saw the telltale indications of survivalists and supremacists. What few homes were visible along the endless road displayed driveway signs like *America First* and *Keep rioting, I'm reloading* alongside flags the size of bedsheets. About two hours north of Mackinaw he saw a pair of eagle statues – each must have been nine or ten feet high – standing on somebody's lawn. Giant, incongruous dog-tags strung between the two plaster birds declared that *Freedom isn't free*.

“I don't think that means what you think that means, friend,” Jefferson muttered as he kept driving. In all, it took him about eight hours to reach Marquette, a blue island in a sea of red counties clinging to the coast of Lake Superior. Where posters on the surrounding roads implored Michiganders to *Take your country back* and bombarded passing traffic with nativist dog-whistles, Marquette offered pride flags and *Fuck 45* bumper stickers and posters supporting a nurses' union in a dispute. Driving through the harbor, Jefferson passed the endless interlaced fingers of the town's disused ore dock. It looked to him like some vast spacecraft which had landed along the lakeshore, but people were out strolling and walking dogs in the surrounding parks and streets without giving it a second thought. Among them Jefferson saw the first dark faces that he had seen since Detroit, and he relaxed his grip on the

steering wheel a little. Marquette looked much more like the America he knew. A content and happy place despite the thunderstorm above the lake. An ideal as much as anything else.

He signed into the hospital a little before four in the afternoon and watched a mute television as a bored beat cop went through his bag. The screen showed a march, some kind of protest, through the streets of a city. Thousands of people of all colors and creeds carrying a rainbow of placards and slogans. They seethed beneath the watchful eyes and rifles of bulky men in black armor, the kind of police Jefferson was all too familiar with these days.

“So,” he asked the officer, “this guy Hanson? Is he dangerous?”

The officer shook her head. “Just loud.” She handed him back his laptop bag. “Feds stuck him here but lost interest pretty quick. They check on him every few weeks but I reckon they’ve all but forgotten ‘bout him.”

“And did he do it? Did he kill that guy?”

“You know I can’t discuss that with you that.” The cop yawned. “But yeah, he did.”

“And is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

The officer did not reply. Instead she directed Jefferson to a deserted canteen – decades-old linoleum creaking with every step – where he found another muted television glowing in the corner. It was so quiet that he imagined he could hear the blood pumping in his own body and, for a moment, his amazement that Hallie’s unlikely source had paid off – that the drifter from Fulham actually existed – was eclipsed by his curiosity as to where the hospital’s staff and other patients were. Then Kenny Hanson was escorted in by another uniformed officer. The young man looked thinner than in the video shown in Fulham. His hair was longer and he had grown an unkempt beard.

“I’m Jefferson Dodds,” the reporter said. “Late of the *Detroit Citizen*.” He turned to the cop. “Can you leave us, please?”

The cop handcuffed Kenny to a metal chain attached to the table before stepping back outside to the hallway.

“So,” Jefferson said after a long moment of silence, “aliens, huh?”

“They don’t consider themselves aliens.”

“No one ever does.” Jefferson scratched the side of his nose. “But they have a hell of a sense of timing, don’t ya think?”

Kenny Hanson said nothing.

“All the bad shit that’s happened in the world these past seventy-five years and they drop you back in 2019? Why do you think that was?”

Kenny’s eyes flicked towards the ceiling. “I’m sorry?”

“Why do you think your aliens returned you to last year? To Fulham? What finally made God send his son down to Earth, Mr. Hanson? Was it the Emperor’s debauchery? The brutality of his legionnaires? Was it the moneylenders in the temples?”

The man only shrugged. “That’s a bit above my paygrade, sir.”

“Sir,” Jefferson smiled. “Bet people love the whole Steve Rogers thing you’ve going on.” He stretched his leg, stiff from the long drive, and tried a different tack. “What I should perhaps ask,” he said, “is why *you* chose last year to make your appearance?” The television in the corner was showing the aftermath of a shooting. Bodies covered in black tarps lay on a plaza of some kind. Investigators in blue windbreakers adorned with yellow acronyms wandered through the scene, stopping here and there to kneel beside a causality or a numbered marker on the ground. Jefferson briefly wondered where it was this time – a mosque, a nightclub, a yoga studio, another school? – but he had seen enough to know that it could have been anywhere in America. That it was *everywhere* in America. “What,” he asked Kenny, “are you trying to accomplish?”

The imprisoned man just looked around the empty canteen. He seemed like a different person than the one Jefferson had seen in Hallie's video. He was sullen now. More resigned. Though Jefferson supposed that a year's incarceration would do that to a person.

"Lemmie guess," Jefferson crossed his arms, "you don't remember? Little green men meddled with your grey stuff?"

"Something like that."

Jefferson removed his laptop from his bag and switched it on. "I'm sympathetic to your story, Mr. Hanson. You mightn't think it but I really am. Lost my job over it and all. I just... I just want to know what happened at the riot?"

"There were people there," Kenny said, taking a deep breath. "People who weren't ashamed of what they were saying. Nazis just like before. They were proud of it. Even though we fought a war, even though the *whole world* fought a war to stop this from happening again. I was there. And then to see this? These people who called themselves Americans? Didn't they understand?" He placed his right hand over his left hand, which had begun to tremble slightly. "There was a man. Looked just like any regular Joe: neat haircut, clean button-down, tan slacks. An ordinary guy. No tattoos. No crosses or hammers or swastikas or any of that shit. Just another dude moving through the crowd. Waving a gun in people's faces. Letting off shots. Letting off peals of laughter."

Jefferson was typing as Kenny spoke. "And you thought you'd have a go, yeah?"

Kenny leaned back, the silver metal of the chain and handcuffs straining against his freckled skin. Jefferson suspected that if he and Kenny had swapped appearances then the Fulham police might not have been so restrained. "I was *compelled* to intervene," the man said. "They showed me what could happen and what I needed to do." Kenny edged towards Jefferson again. "You've never seen America from the outside, have you?"

"I've driven to Windsor a lot."

“That’s not what I mean. I mean you don’t know what it’s like to see it from the higher dimensions. Higher than any plane I’ve ever flown in. From up there, America is a vast thing. A thing barely comprehensible to the human mind.”

“Gotta be honest, it sometimes feels pretty incomprehensible from down here too.”

“America isn’t just forty-eight states –“

“Fifty,” Jefferson said, quietly impressed with how Kenny stayed in character.

“– it’s something more than that. We only see a part of it from here even though it envelops us, even though it sticks to our skin, gets in our food and into our bodies, even though it sucks us into its greater mass...”

“America is a story that never ends,” Jefferson said, thinking back on his article.

“That’s right. But they, them that took me, they showed me a whole series of ways it can yet play out. A whole series of divergences from that moment at the rally.” Kenny stretched his fingers. “I saw a woman behind a dark timber desk, a man framing a house with his own hands. Soldiers on the streets, a deep red rain falling across the land... I felt them there, them that took me. I felt them guide me, steer me through the bloodshed and parades, through grand ceremonies of reconciliation and quiet moments of fear and doubt and hesitation. They showed me worlds that would be better and worlds that would be worse. I heard speeches spoken honestly in one and twisted in another. I saw how everything is connected. How everything led to that moment and everything led away from it. For that one instant I was at the heart of it all.”

Jefferson smiled with a kind patience. “You got messed up bad, didn’t you, man.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I think you’re touched, friend. I know guys who served in country. Iraq. East Africa. I knew good guys who got turned around. Believed one thing and found out the opposite was true.” He sighed. “Lot of that going ‘round these days.”

“You’re saying I’m making this up?”

"It's been suggested."

"Is it what you think?"

Jefferson laid his palms flat on the table. "I think you came home from the war – today's war, any war, it doesn't matter – and you looked around and saw racists marching with burning torches and misogynists glorying in their abuses, saw Nazis on the street and white supremacists in the halls of power. I think you saw the moral malady rotting our nation and you saw the kind of things that happen when our institutions falter. I think you saw a just cause in fighting that. Because I don't reckon you to be a bad guy. I think you're just hurt. Confused even. I think you're... misguided."

Kenny said nothing for a long moment, then, "I know you talked to the President."

Jefferson laughed out loud, the sound echoing through the empty canteen. "Man, they wouldn't let the likes of me within a *mile* of the President. Especially *this* President."

"But I saw it," Kenny said. "You met her at her childhood home –"

Jefferson raised an eyebrow.

"– then you sat with her in a café. You spoke. You discussed the country. You discussed the future."

"Are you talking about... Riley Porter?" Jefferson looked around for the hidden camera. He felt sure he was being punked. "How do you know that I met Riley Porter?"

"Because they *showed me*," Kenny said with the urgency of a man possessed. "Babylon is fallen. It's become a dwelling place for deplorables. The kings of the Earth are wallowing in their adulteries and the Nazis never really went away. That's why I needed to stop her murder. Why I needed to put us back on the path. *This* is what they want for us."

"So they... spoke to you? Does that happen a lot, Kenny?"

The shackled man shook his head. "I told you, they showed me things."

“The aliens? The angels? Who showed you these things? Who are you? Really, who are you? And why were you in Fulham? What were you really doing?”

In response, Kenny reached out before Jefferson could stop him and placed his hands over those of the reporter. In an instant Jefferson was at the center of an exploding firework. All at once he saw mothers with clipboards registering voters and he heard the scratch of eager signatures across their pages; he smelt the tang of hand sanitizer as strangers in a subway car joined together to scrub away swastikas and Nazi slogans; he listened as a high-school student, a survivor, demanded stricter gun control; he felt lightning bolts of pain course through people dragging themselves out of wheelchairs and forcing senators to step over them; he saw racist cops dismissed from the force, saw a soldier refuse an illegal order; he heard the voices of millions as they filled streets, filled entire cities, with their calls for resistance. And there, in a tight knot at the center of it all, he saw –

Jefferson, dizzy and nauseous, pulled his hands back. For an instant he had glimpsed everything. Then it was gone and he felt like he had dropped back into his body from an impossible height. “What the Hell,” he said as he heard Kenny’s jailers jangling their keys, and he realized that their time was already up. “What the Hell was that?”

“You said it yourself.” Kenny smiled. “America is a story.”

Jefferson wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as a cop prompted Kenny back to his feet. “Okay,” he said. “Okay, so it’s a story. So what happens now? What happens next?”

Kenny looked down at the reporter’s computer, at the waiting cursor which blinked and blinked and blinked. “You tell me.”