

THE MEDIEVALIST
By
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Exclusive Preview

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Were it not for the whiteness, you would not have that intensified terror.

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851)

CHAPTER | Loomings

> One Dead After Car Rams Into Anti-Fascist Protesters [hyperlink: *The Guardian*, 13 Aug 2017

Someone is typing ...

>
>

In the darkest corner of the dark net, I watched the blinking cursor as I waited for the next comment to appear, witnessing the plot unfold before my eyes.

> Charlottesville went 2 far
> Not far enough IMHO

Someone is typing ...

> Car ramming worked.
> Depends. Made the white chick a martyr 4 BLM

- > Black lives matter? As if! 2 bad she was white. But that panic & fear ... U can't buy that. LOL.
- > Undisciplined. Besides, goal was 2 unify the right. *That* only happens w/ ideas. Actions fade. Symbols last. Proud Boys, Neo-Nazis, KKK. Spencer had good idea—all fly under “alt-right” banner—but no unifying symbol.
 - > Less than 30 showed at Unite/Right!
- > Pathetic

Someone is typing ...

All posts are anonymous, fulfilling the prophecy of Peter Steiner's 1993 *New Yorker* cartoon that, “On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog.”

- > RU proposing ‘new & improved’ rally? Alt-Right 3?
- > Yes, but better venue. Kalamazoo in 9 mos.
 - > Michigan?
- > Militia groups strong there. Oath Keepers, etc
 - > Y 9 mos?
- > Need 2 get good symbol. Good unifying symbol = unstoppable movement.
 - > Any ideas 4 this symbol?
- > No. But I know someone who can help us.

CHAPTER 2

Sterling Library

I nipped across campus toward Sterling. One hand rested on my bookbag's leather strap, stretched across my chest like a baldric for a sword. The other clutched the ID and paperwork I'd need to confirm my assigned study carrel.

My carrel. My carrel.

Classes at Yale were scheduled to start the next day. I'd already moved into 300 squares west of campus—larger than a larder but smaller than an undercroft—likely no different than the studios of hundreds of thousands of other grad students since the invention of the U in the eleventh century. Fourth floor. No elevator. One room. A small sofa that, like, metamorphosized into a bed, crammed in one corner. In the other, two opposing chairs bordered a small, square table for both dining and study. Any madrigal feasts would needs be consigned to a hotplate and mini fridge. A bathroom smaller than a hermit's cell, with shower, stood to the left of the studio's one window. The four walls of the complex formed a shadowy cloister in the center of the building.

None of that mattered. Like, there was no mark on a measuring rod small enough to show how little it mattered. I'd be spending most of my time in the library and I, only in my first year, had been given a carrel!

Here's how events transpired. This morning, I met the grad student secretary, a woman of some stature named Joby

Wanamaker—*Help me, Joby Wan. You're my only hope*—who showed me my departmental mailbox and gave me the code for the photocopier.

“Eight-oh-oh. One-oh-six-six,” she said.

“800 and 1066,” I said back to her. “Charlemagne’s coronation and the Battle of Hastings.”

Joby Wanamaker didn’t respond, or, more likely, I didn’t notice if she did. Regardless, she also gave me the form that I now held in my hand, signed by my advisor—a scholar without peer as far as I was concerned, though I still hadn’t made his personal acquaintance—which bureaucratic permission slip would give me access to a library study carrel. It was the first I’d heard of this great perquisite.

I didn’t expect it to be much bigger than the proverbial broom closet—which it was not—yet it would be my own office, in the library no less! What kind of chair would it have? Wooden? Cushioned? Four-legged or swivel? Would there be shelves? A file cabinet? Would the door have, like, one of those nameplate holders?

Mol Isaacson, Graduate Student

Molly Rebekah Isaacson (whose father disapproved of her pursuing a degree in Medieval Studies, but I’ll show him),
MA/PhD Candidate

M. Isaacson, Medievalist

I was already picturing different fonts—Lucida Blackletter, Papyrus, Zapfino—but the library’s carved façade stopped me in my tracks.

“Oh, what a beautiful and complex thing.” The words of Sister Clodagh rang in my ears. In every history course I took from her, she said the same thing. “Every object has both

beauty and complexity. To understand this, first, find the context. Then describe. Then interpret.”

I didn't have a clue about the context. Standing before the great façade on that sunny, back-to-school afternoon, the only research tool I had available was my smart phone. I didn't want to look. I knew better. Knew that I shouldn't. But the façade was so alluring I gave in to temptation—*get thee behind me Satan*—and opened Wikipedia. I had not, like, officially started graduate school. Yet. But I still prayed that no one would look over my shoulder and catch me choosing the permissive path, taking, as they say, the easy route.

Context (paraphrasing Wikipedia):

John Sterling, Yale class of 1864, was a successful lawyer in New York. When he died in 1918, he left almost \$30 million to his alma mater. A chunk of this went to build the library that bears his name. Sterling Library, completed in 1930, was designed by James Gamble Rogers, Yale class of 1889. From the 1910s to the 1930s, Gamble designed several buildings at Yale in the Collegiate Gothic style, even basing the university's master plan around this aesthetic. Gamble's work became so popular that he received commissions for other university libraries, including Columbia and Northwestern, in the same Collegiate Gothic. Rogers caught some flak from other architects of the Gothic revival because he used, like, steel frames under stone cladding, thus betraying medieval architecture's use of gravity as a force for holding the structure together. Flying buttresses for show, rather than necessity. To give his designed environments a sense of antiquity, Rogers also took some liberties, like splashing the building's façade with acid to simulate older stonework.

Okay. Description:

“*Thick* description,” Sister Clodagh would say.

Looking up from the bottom of the library steps, a larger-than-life statue of a medieval scholar, writing with a quill pen on a manuscript he cradles in his arms, stands centered between two heavy wooden doors. Two detailed bas reliefs

flank the scholar on either side, above the arched doorways. Each side is divided into five vertical segments. Each segment has an upper and lower section, what art historians call a register.

Starting on the far left, the first segment shows images from cave paintings. Lascaux? The figure in the bottom register is ambiguous, perhaps wearing animal skins. The inscription in the second segment is in Egyptian hieroglyphs, with an Egyptian scribe hammering away in the bottom register.

The third segment is wider and purely pictorial. It contains three registers. The top register has a triumphant eagle holding two snakes in its talons—not a symbol I knew. The middle register has a ship that looks like a Greek trireme, except the Greek inscription is on the other side of the scholar, so what is the ship doing over here? The bottom register shows that Babylonian (?) “bull-man with wings” deity. I couldn’t recall its designation.

In the fourth segment, the inscription seems to be cuneiform—Hammurabi’s Code and all that—with the scribe in the bottom register using both his arms to hold up the clay tablet he’s reading. The last segment on the left is in Hebrew, with a Jewish scribe, unidentified (at least to me), in the lower register. I try to make out the Hebrew.

“Lord.” Hmm. “Lord, you have been our dwelling place through all generations. Before ... before the mountains were born ... you ... brought forth the world ... the whole world ... something, something.” That’s from the Psalms but I can’t recall which one.

The panel to the right of the medieval scholar is also divided into five vertical sections. Each vertical section is divided into two more registers, top and bottom. I wasn’t sure about the first segment. The inscription looks like Arabic, but it was hard to tell from where I stood and the figure in the bottom register was no help. The second segment is a Greek inscription with a Greek scribe in the lower register. As on the left side, the central segment is a bit taller and wider than the

others. It depicts a Mayan serpent, an Athenian owl, and the Roman Capitoline wolf, nursing the combative fraternal founders Romulus and Remus.

The next segment to the right has a Chinese inscription, with a Chinese scribe in the lower register. The sculptor chose an awkward pose for this figure, with his head bent over his writing his long beard hangs down toward his desk. He looks as if he's, like, vomiting. The final segment has an inscription with Mayan hieroglyphs, with the bottom register depicting a Mayan priest writing in stone with a hammer and chisel.

I was unable to Rosetta Stone any of the inscriptions, except for the Hebrew, and even that was spotty. They all have to do with cultures that invented writing—or in the case of the cave painter, a graphic record of the culture's thoughts or experiences. As far as I could remember, all of these writing systems were invented independently of one another. Cuneiform and Chinese and Mayan for sure. Maybe Egyptian hieroglyphs. What's most interesting is that Yale chose a design that seems to give each of these cultures and their writing systems equal weight, equal importance. A fairly egalitarian nod in the 1930s.

I scaled the few steps and was just about to heave open one of the massive doors, when, wait a minute. What's this? The panel on the left, the central segment, right next to the eagle holding the snakes. Is that, like, a swastika? In a building built in 1930? I knew the swastika was an ancient symbol, found in many cultures, but it was impossible to see it and not think of the Nazis, or, like now, the neo-Nazis.

Fucking Nazis?!

CHAPTER 3

The Carrel

Before I could follow my thoughts down that Nazi rabbit hole I was stopped short again, awed. Inside the heavy doors, through the security checkpoint, the main entry hall of the library was like the nave of a great cathedral. I step-by-stepped a long procession from the front portal through columns and vaulted ceilings that made the space resemble a giant stone forest. This is, like, a holy place, I thought. Evil cannot enter such a space, only good. At the far end of the nave, I spotted the circulation desk, large and wooden, carved with figures and inscriptions. This was the guardian and gateway to the great tower of stacks, the *sanctum sanctorum*. Six stories of books, all waiting for me.

It was functional, in spite of its inspiring architecture. The south aisle of the nave had computer terminals and seats for reading. The north aisle had desks with small signs that said, “Consult a librarian.” I laughed; it was the book lover’s equivalent of a confessional. In the middle of the north aisle stood the information desk, where the department secretary had told me I could retrieve the key to my carrel.

I handed the form to an efficient but friendly woman of about fifty whose name tag read “Patty Cist.” Poor Ms Cist! I imagined some puss filled bubo from the Black Death, then remembered that’s spelt c-y-s-t. She located the carrel records on her computer, looked up at me, then back at her computer screen.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Yes, fine,” she said. I’m not always great at reading people, but I thought I noticed a slight smile on her face. She retrieved the key from a folder behind her desk and handed it to me with a one-pager entitled “Use of carrels.” She took a copy of the library floor plan, marked the location of my carrel, and handed it to me. It looked like Patty Cist smiled again, this time through pursed lips, but I couldn’t be sure.

Use of carrels:

- 1) Carrels are available for use during regular Sterling Memorial Library hours.
- 2) Study carrels are for Yale graduate students and faculty members doing active research, as an alternative to carrying home loads of books. Books are charged to your carrel instead of to your personal account.
- 3) Please note that reference books and reserve materials are not allowed in your carrel. No personal items in your carrel.
- 4) Locked carrels are for faculty member use only.
- 5) If a carrel is not being used for its intended purpose, you will be asked to relinquish it.

Wait. Number 4. Locked carrels are for faculty only? Why have I, a humble first-year grad student, been given a locked carrel? I decided not to linger by the information desk to find out but conducted a *Treasure Island* upon the library map to the second floor, where I found my carrel.

The carrel doors in Sterling, at least this carrel door, didn’t parrot the medieval grandeur of the rest of the building. Other than a diamond-shaped window at eye level, the door to carrel 220—fine, dark-stained wood—was without ornament. The

lock was stiff, but the key worked, which was all I cared about in that moment. I swung the door open and flipped on the inside light. What the—? Carrel 220 was stuffed with someone else's stuff.

I looked at the carrel number that Patty Cist had assigned to me, looked at the key, then looked again at the succinct, one-page operator's manual entitled "Use of carrels." Item 2 declared that books would be "charged to the carrel." There seemed to be plenty of those. But the carrel also overflowed with "personal items," the kind forbidden in item 3. I must be in the wrong place. This carrel belonged to a professor, what with its locked door (item 4). But, like, why would she give me the key to a professor's carrel after she had seen my student ID? As these thoughts went through my mind, I began to check out the books—the surest way to judge the character of the unknown inhabitant. Almost all of them were about the Middle Ages. Mmm. I closed the door behind me and sat down. No rush of emotion in sitting. No elation. No pride. Just a memory, again, of Sister Clodagh before I left for Yale.

"The main thing you'll need for success in grad school is *Sitzfleisch*," she said.

"Sit-meat?" I said.

"Your buttocks," said Sister Clodagh. "If you've got good *Sitzfleisch* it means you can sit still long enough to be productive. It's endurance, perseverance, staying power. Think of *Sitzfleisch* as the opposite of ants in your pants."

I settled my butt further into the chair's hard wooden seat and looked up at the books on the carrel shelf. I knew some of them from my days hanging out at the Texas Renaissance Festival. Others I'd read as an undergrad: Maggie Black's *The Medieval Cookbook*, Emilie Amt's *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe*, and *Life in a Medieval Village*, by Joseph and Frances Gies. There were a few books by Kantorowicz (my as yet unmet advisor): *Crips, Bloods, and Crusaders: Medieval Pre-cursors to Modern Gang Signs*. Next to that, *The King's Too Bawdy: Urban Graffiti as Medieval Marginalia*.

Kantorowicz was the whole reason I'd come to Yale. I loved being a history major and reading medieval history books in particular. But reading Kantorowicz was like reading a Molotov cocktail. His ideas were, like, incendiary. His prose was explosive. The way he connected medieval history to all the problems of the contemporary world was, like, he was Tolkien, only literal instead of allegorical.

Whoever belonged to all these books in the carrel had a row of works on a similar theme. Lynn Ramey's *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages*, Cord Whitaker's *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking*, Matthew Vernon's *The Black Middle Ages: Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages*, and Geraldine Heng's *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. One handsome volume caught my eye, not the least because of its lengthy title: *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Volume II: From the Early Christian Era to the "Age of Discovery", Part 1: From the Demonic Threat to the Incarnation of Sainthood*, 2nd Edition, edited by David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. I knew Professor Gates from that "Finding Your Roots" show on PBS. The cover of *The Image of the Black in Western Art* had a beautiful picture showing a sculpture of a medieval knight. The knight wore a hooded hauberk of chain maille and, over that, a surcoat that still showed colorful paint across the belt. Most surprising, to me at least, was the face that peered out of the hood. It had a broad nose and full lips and was painted black. I noticed a flyer taped to the wall next to me that had the same image of the Black knight. It advertised a grad student 'mini-conference' scheduled for next semester called "Race, Class, and Gender in the Middle Ages." As I read the flyer, I saw out of the corner of my eye a face similar to the knight's peeping into the window of the carrel, but with eyes that were decidedly alive.

I yelled! A short burst. Not from fear really. More, like, being taken aback.

The face outside the door backed away until I could see an entire body. Hands held in the air. Tattooed arms. One of the tattoos looked like the labyrinth at Chartres cathedral. The

other arm also had a labyrinth, but in the Minoan style—the minotaur next to it was a dead giveaway. I was still shaken by his sudden appearance but, somehow, having these images to focus on helped me calm down. My inked-up peeper moved back further and leaned against the edge of a table. I opened the door slowly. He spoke first.

“You’re with Kantorowicz?”

I nodded.

“So am I,” he said. He pulled out a chair from a desk outside the carrel and sat down, closer to the carrel, but not too close. “He likes to do this,” he continued. “In fact, when I first arrived and was given a key to this carrel, there was another grad student in here. It’s a faculty carrel, but the man doesn’t use it, so he portions its use like a benefice to his doctoral students. I’ve actually had the space to myself for the last two years. I thought I was going to be his last grad student, what with his current imbroglio. I guess I’m surprised somebody new has shown up.”

“It *is* a faculty carrel,” I said, picturing “Use of carrels,” item 4, before my eyes. “Isn’t that, like, illegal or against the rules or something?”

“Oh, it certainly is. But Kantorowicz winks at the librarians and they look the other way.”

“Current imbroglio?” I said, but even as he started to explain, I lasered in on his right arm.

“Chartres?” I said.

“Yes.” He smiled and stretched out his hand to introduce himself.

“Quick,” he said. “Quinton Quick. Call me Quint.”

“Quinton Quick. Call me Quint. Alliteration,” I said. He shrugged.

“Molly Isaacson,” I said. “Call me Isaacson.” I took his hand confidently, like dad had taught me, *like a professional*. I looked Quint in the eye and shook his hand with a firm grip.

“So, like, how does this work with the two of us both assigned to the same space?” I asked. “Our own Avignon Papacy on the second floor of Sterling Library?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “If you want to use the space, I can make room for you on the bottom shelf. We can figure out a schedule, if you think you’ll be here a lot.”

I nodded, then looked back at the shelving and all the books I’d been eye-balling before my humiliating scare.

“These are, like, your books?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Then *you’re* a medievalist, too?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re *Black!*”

Filtering my thoughts was never a strong suit. I flashed on a memory from my teen years at the Ren Fest.

Walking through the fairgrounds one hot summer day, I spotted a family of three moving toward me. The father wore a friar’s costume, tied at the waist with a rope. The mother was dressed as a noble lady of the court: a flowing dress with tight bodice and a conical hennin on her head with a veil that trailed behind her. These two characters, the monk and the noble woman, seemed disjointed. Their son, maybe six or seven, created the link. He wore a blousy green shirt gathered at the middle with a leather belt. A short wooden sword at his side. On his head, he sported a green *chapeau à bec*, which is, like, the proper name for Robin Hood’s hat. If the boy was Robin Hood, which was clearly his intention, then the father was Friar Tuck and his mother was meant to be Maid Marion. The kid’s costume was actually very good—much better than what I’d thrown together for that same role when I was his age. And the three of them went together nicely. It was clear what they were going for. But something about the sight of them didn’t fit into my *universum*. The whole thing was wrong. Like, ahistorical.

“You’re Black,” I’d said to seven-year-old Robin Hood and his family. “You’re *all Black!*”

I stared at Quint, my jaw agape. Ellipses hung in the air like just-launched stones from a trebuchet that would soon drop on my head. Quint was the first grad student I’d met and there

I stood, foot firmly wedged in mouth, as I searched for a different word to fill in the blank.

“You’re Black,” I said. “I mean, like, you’re ...”

“American?” he said. “Yes, I know. Exactly. So many people think that only Brits or Europeans can have any insight into medieval history. The same way they think that only Blacks can study Black history, or only Jews can study the Holocaust.”

“Yes,” I said. “I guess.”

CHAPTER 4

Quinton Quick

White people.

White people are so ...

—interesting?

—annoying?

—crazy?

Condescending, ignorant, arrogant, fragile, capricious, privileged, controlling, fascinating, fearful, uninformed, ill-informed, misinformed, hateful, dangerous.

Yes. I could've knocked on the door and stood back, offering a gentler, less threatening first encounter. But she was in my space, or at least I've thought of it as my space since what's-his-name left. I submit that any normal person who walked up and saw a light inside their carrel where there shouldn't be a light would justifiably peek in the window to see what the fuck was going on. And suddenly I'm Henry Louis Gates trying to explain to the Cambridge cops that I'm breaking into my own house because I've locked myself out.

She yelps?! Like some scared puppy.

And I back up, offering my best Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin. Hands up—don't shoot! Because mama trained me from the moment of my birth to code-switch into the least aggressive posture my melanized body could muster lest I put my life at risk, though from the moment of my birth it was already too late.

Was it just that I caught her off guard? Or was it my black face catching her off guard? Hard to say, in and of itself. But her follow-up reveals all.

"You're a medievalist? But you're Black!"

No. She said, "You're a medievalist, too." She's just starting with Kantorowicz. His newest rabbit.

Okay, little rabbit. You just got here, and you don't know a thing about people of color in the Middle Ages. Hell, outside of Kantorowicz, most of the older generation don't know anything either. Cut her some slack, Quick. She's probably never been exposed to anything but the all-white "real Middle Ages." Probably started her medieval fandom as a "festie" or a "rennie", driving every summer weekend to some "Ye Olde Ahistorical Faire," wearing a laced bodice and playing the part of the wench.

And if Black folks in the Middle Ages or a Black medievalist disrupts your worldview, well, I'm sorry but we've been there all along.

On the ninth day there came riding towards them a knight on a goodly steed, and well-armed withal. He was all black: his head was black as pitch, black as burnt brands, his body, and his hands were all black, saving only his teeth. His shield and his armour were even those of a Moor, and black as a raven. But in all that men would praise in a knight was he fair, after his kind. Though he were black, what of it?

That's how it reads in the "Tale of Morien". Thirteenth-century, Arthurian romance. Morien, son of a Moorish princess and a goddamned knight of the round table! There were Black folks in the Middle Ages, and not just a few.

What of it?