**ROBERT YOUNKIN’S CHRISTMAS BIRTHDAY**

--Where ignorance is bliss, ‘Tis

Folly to be wise.

Thomas Gray

I first met Robert Younkin, then age 16, as he was kicking an eight-inch diameter blue inflated rubberized ball down Rivermont Road in Athens, Georgia. I was out on the street to get the mail. We struck up a conversation. He lived just down the street with his parents and his older sister. It was quickly quite apparent that Robert suffered from considerable mental impediments, no doubt congenital. He did not enunciate words clearly, though he was understandable. He seemed thoroughly genial and polite. He was also quite a bit overweight.

He asked pointing to my house, “Is that where you live? May I come over and visit you sometimes?” I said, “Sure, anytime.”

Well, he showed up the next afternoon just after I got home from work. (Had he been watching for my car?) He began by telling me this story about how his grandfather was killed on a bus in Spain. Robert was sitting next to him when his grandfather was shot for no apparent reason. The bus driver grabbed the shooter and restrained him until the police arrived. I later learned that his story was true. Robert did tag onto his story that the arresting policeman asked Robert if he would like to slug the shooter, and Robert said he hit him three times in the face. He had several other stories, some fully believable, such as when he came upon a place in town where he could eat all the food he wanted, no doubt the Salvation Army soup kitchen just off Prince Avenue.

Robert, or Roberto as his Spanish-born mother called him, became a frequent visitor. He was an interesting person and, despite his arrested mental age or affliction, he could carry on an adequate conversation. He seemed to enjoy talking, and his demeanor was certainly not threatening or hostile. Twice, though, I had to ask him to go home when he started telling an off-color story, really an indecent, sexually-based tale. Once, I told him he would have to leave if he used any swear words, and this in front of my mother who never uttered a profanity in her life.

It became rapidly clear that Robert was exceedingly lonely. Both his parents worked during the day. He no longer went to school and had spent all of his earlier studies in special education classes. He could only read and write (print) to a limited extent.

Robert wanted me to meet his parents, of whom he was obviously extremely proud. His father worked at the U.S. Post Office unloading trucks. His father told me he hated it when the monthly *National Geographic Magazine* arrived, so heavy were they to lift and tote. His mother’s English was spoken with a heavy Spanish accent. She was a waitress at the nearby Navy Supply School and she typically brought home uneaten leftover food for the Younkin’s evening meal. Mr. Younkin bragged to me of his library perched on top of his television set and held in place by metal bookends, a paperback collection of about a dozen western novels. He said he saw no need to buy more books. He would start reading books on the left side until he reached the book on the right side. Then he would read them all over again in the same sequence.

It was revealed that Robert had been in the Psychiatric Ward of the Medical College of Georgia on several occasions. Apparently, the best they could do was to medicate him, and he remained on a numbing palliative most of the time while at home. He was also supposed to be placed on a diet.

One afternoon I heard a rampageous racket down the street. There was a police car in the Younkin’s driveway, blue lights flashing. I curiously strolled down the street. Robert, enraged, frenzied, and red in the face, was shouting at the perplexed and placid cop: “You don’t scare me with that nut house stuff. I’ve been in and out of mental institutions all my life.” I stepped in, telling the Officer that I knew this kid (now 18). I said firmly, “Robert, please calm down.” Surprisingly, he did. I said, “Go in the house and call your mother, tell her what happened, and ask her to come home. Then go to your room.”

As Robert turned and tramped to the house, Officer Ragsdale acting stunned, reported, “He called the police on himself.” “That’s a good sign,” I replied as I strolled away.

One day my wife Emily and I were driving through Milledgeville, Georgia, on our way to Dublin and I-16 to Savannah to celebrate Christmas with Emily’s relatives. We knew that Robert was incarcerated in the Milledgeville State Mental Hospital. We thought an unexpected visit might encourage and cheer him. It was the right thing to do.

We first went to the wrong building and were redirected to building D, where the nonviolent patients were held. The door to building D, however, was locked. Just as we were turning to walk away, a man identifying himself as Dr. Sharma, unlocked the door and said, “Come in. It’s against the rules, but you can see him. I’m a medical doctor.”

As Emily and I approached the main nurse’s station, a pudgy older gentleman attempted to initiate a conversation. He asked, “Do you have a cigarette?” I said, “We don’t smoke.” He persisted, “A match? A toothpick? A penny?” This budding and one-way conversation was abruptly stifled by a nurse who stiffly but calmly ordered him to return to his room. I then put out my right hand to shake hands with him. “Not with the right hand,” he said rather sharply, and offered his left hand, which then met my left hand. As he pivoted his ample body around, he said, “But ain’t it Christmas?” The nurse later explained that he doesn’t shake with his right hand because that is the hand he used to do “bad things” with.

I twisted my face away from the older man and toward the nurse, who asked what we were doing here. When I explained, she informed us that Robert Younkin was not allowed visitors and Dr. Sharma had violated policy.

My wife and I suddenly realized we were locked up in the State of Georgia Mental Hospital!

Just then Robert Younkin suddenly appeared from his room, next to the nurse’s station. He must have heard my voice and ran to us shouting, “Mr. Wheeler, Mrs. Wheeler,” flinging a heavy bear hug on us.

The stern countenance of the nurse began to melt. She blurted out, “Robert, I’ve never seen you so animated,” and then rephrased “so happy.” Apparently, Robert was being treated for depression.

Robert was now hollering excitedly to the nurse, “Let them come in my room. Ain’t I getting a cake for my birthday?” The nurse, her taut expression now softened and her eyes becoming mistily moist, glanced around and whispered, “I guess it will be all right just for a few minutes.”

Since Robert had been placed on the “No Visitors” list, not even his parents were permitted to celebrate his Christmas birthday.

Yes, a white-frosted, red-velvet cake was brought in, with 20 lighted candles. A few other nurses came into Robert’s room, along with the culpable Dr. Sharma, who had flaunted and violated policy by allowing us egress to his off-limits State Mental Hospital. Robert was told to blow out the candles. In undisguised glee, Roberts enormous huffing and puffing effort generated unintended slobber—I mean saliva—over the white frosting.

The cake was cut and we all gamely ate the contaminated cake, avoiding the spatter-showered frosting.

A good time was had by all, especially Robert, who requested that he keep the rest of the uneaten cake in his room. He did, despite his diet.

We later learned that, in spite of the auspicious and festive outcome resulting from our improper entrance and incarceration in the State Mental Hospital, Dr. Sharma received a letter of reprimand. We also learned that Robert was so buoyed by our visit that his depression vanished. He was sent back home to Athens three days after his 20th Christmas birthday.

Merry Christmas and Happy Birthday to Robert or Roberto and to all of you.