**A First**

**by Melanie Coffee**

Everyone remembers where they were that day. You know the day. THAT day. People were at work, getting ready for work, getting the kids ready for school. All in our usual morning routines on that particular Sept. 11.

At the time, I was a journalist for The Associated Press and hours after the twin towers fell, I was one of the four people who were put on the team that’s sole aim was to document all who died that day. We were told we were going to work 12 hour shifts, day in and day out until every last person was documented. Every. Last. One.

Being younger, I pulled the night shift. I was about half-way through my shift, sifting through lists of confirmed dead, unconfirmed dead and unknown. The news desk heard that there was an anti-Muslim protest bubbling up in Bridgeview. We had no reporters available to go, so they plucked me from the Death Beat, as we had begun to affectionately call our team.

Apparently someone tried to throw a Molotov cocktail at a mosque. We’d been waiting for the anti-Muslim or anti-Arab blacklash to happen in the wake of 9/11, and the first notable incident manifested here.

A photographer, Mikey, was to go out with me. Mikey is like your uncle who drinks too much. He’s got that potbelly that’s supported by impossibly thin stick legs, but he’s a tough teddy bear and you’re glad he’s your uncle. Anyway, we needed to take separate cars, so we agreed to meet in Bridgeview.

Before he left, he furrowed his brow and pointed at me. “If you get there before me, do NOT get out of your car. You wait. For. Me.”

This was so unlike Mike. “Why?”

He fumbled for the words. The right words to tell me that he was worried about me. Me, an African-American reporter going into an area that’s known to have racial tensions at a time when emotions were still raw from that September day.

While driving down to Bridgeview, I began to wonder. Now what is it that I heard about Bridgeview… I’d only lived in Chicago for about five months, so the suburbs and neighborhoods were still a patchwork of jibberish to me.

Bridgeview, Bridgeview, Bridgeview… Was that where those white kids beat up that black kid on a bike so bad he was in a coma? Or was that Bridgeport? Or some other Bridge?

Just then a fire red Ford F150 zoomed past with the largest American flag I’ve seen ever attached to a truck. It was bigger than the truck’s bed. On the other side of the truck was a smaller Confederate flag.

I know that the Confederate flag is touted as a symbol of Southern pride, but for me, my guard goes up. I’ve had too many instances where after seeing that flag, something rude’s been said or done.

Anyway, my mind goes silent. I focus on getting to the mosque. About a block away, I see a pulsating, chanting crowd. They’re shouting “U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!” I pull over, it’s almost “Go Time.” I call Mikey on his cell and he doesn’t answer.

His words ring through my head: “Do NOT get out of your car. You wait. For. Me.”

\*sigh\*

I called him again. No answer.

Screw it. My story’s outside, not in this car. I’m going.

Heart pounding, I open the door. The chant had changed. “Down with brown! Down with brown! Down with brown!” I looked at my brown skin. “Damnit.”

Clutching my notebook in front of me, as if it was a shield, I marched up to the American-flag waving crowd. I started wading through. “Down with brown! Down with brown!” As I passed some of the shouters, they quieted. I pressed further into the group to it’s ugly center. A tallish young, white man, shouting above all the rest. Down with brown! The hate in his cold eyes gave me pause, but my feet had taken over and walked me right up close to him.

“Excuse me sir, my name is Melanie Coffee and I’m a reporter with The Associated Press!”

He stopped shouting and leaned over to hear me better.

“Um, I was wondering, what are you doing out here tonight?”

I know, I know, lame question Edward R. Murrow turned in his grave. But this was the guy’s response:

“They attacked our country and killed our people! I want to spill Muslim blood!” The crowd behind me cheered.

“And so you’re out here because…”

“Because I’m proud to be American and I hate Arabs and I always have.”

I got a few more hate-filled quotes and then slowly slipped out of the pulsating crowd, which had changed its chant back to U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!

Sitting in my car, I was shaking. And then something struck me. When 19-year-old Colin Zaremba stopped shouting down with brown and looked at me, it was clear he didn’t hate *me*. He wasn’t mad at *me*. This racist didn’t have racist feelings toward *me*. His passions were just as ugly and scary, but it was different than the other times I’d come across such hate. It was because that was the first time that a racist did not see my color.