

THE FACE OF HATE
by STEPHEN L. BURNS

Illustration by Bill Warren

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People can learn from experience, but often only by small and painful steps...

Certain images can shake and remake worlds. The best of them can be nearly universally comprehensible, bullets of meaning snapping through the foggy barriers of language and culture and predisposition to strike a bulls-eye of revelation.

When I teach classes, I often use Stuart Franklin's classic Tiananmen Square photograph of the man with the shopping bag facing down a tank—a line of tanks. Show it to a rain forest tribesman who has never seen a tank before, and still he understands what he is seeing: a small, fragile, exquisitely courageous man facing down a monstrous power he cannot hope to stop, and yet who has, at least for a fleeting moment, stopped it.

Some images can imprint themselves on us deeper than scars, more indelibly than tattoos. They wind themselves into our brains, some even growing into fixation. This is an occasionally black magic perfected by religious iconographers, and still afoot in our own digital age.

A life-long photojournalist, luck put me in the right place at the right time to take one particular image that swept around the world, one image from a series documenting one of the most crucial turning points in human history, the first visitation of beings from another world. I ended up being official photographer to those beings and that visit, and a witness to history.

Although in some ways that one early image was superceded by others that followed, many of them taken by me, it has come to haunt and obsess me more than any of the others. Not even the one taken by an orbiting telescope, the one that shows the fiery bloom of our world being saved, is in my mind half as often.

Five years had passed since I took that picture, and I could no longer live with the questions it raised.

So I went seeking answers.

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The face of Marlene Jennings was famous, but now very few remember her name, five years was close to forever in a public memory constantly barraged and overwritten with new names and faces. Her name was out there when her picture first appeared, but like that Chinese man facing down a tank, the name of the person in the image was not the point of the image. I made her face famous—or infamous—but she herself slipped back to being a nameless nobody as more famous faces took up her shrill cry.

My picture shows her screaming.

Not the anguished wail of a naked napalmed Vietnamese girl, or of a young woman crouched over the body of a fellow student in Ohio. Hers was the sort of screaming face so often seen in pictures from an earlier era, the sort of howling rabble face you saw spewing furious poison at black children being escorted into newly integrated schools.

But these are not solemn black children in their go-to-school best she screams at, braided pigtails and determinedly shined shoes, notebooks clutched to their chests like shields to keep their pounding hearts from being pierced by slurs hurled like spears.

These were the Draconi. Five beings from another star whose ship's stardrive failed, and who took temporary, unhappy refuge on Earth.

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I could have called ahead. That would have been the polite thing to do.

News photographers quickly learn that there is a time for being polite, and a time to hunt.

I was hunting. I had flown from Maryland to Kentucky, rented a car. I was prepared to stay as long as necessary to get the answers I sought. Did I have a right to those answers? Maybe. Maybe not.

My anticipation and apprehension had me alternately sipping coffee and Maalox as I drove toward a small farm on the edge of town.

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My rental car was an electric, perfect transportation for a stalker. My quarry didn't seem to hear me pull over on the shoulder across from her driveway and get out. I took a moment to stand there and watch her, sizing her up.

Marlene Jennings was out in her front yard, wrestling bags of mulch off the tailgate of a battered pickup truck and into a four-wheeled garden cart. She looked older than I expected, as if for her the past five years had taken the toll of at least ten. The years since the Draconi came and then departed haven't been particularly kind to me, either.

She was thinner than I remembered, even stringy. She wore a loosely buttoned shirt with the sleeves cut off, her sun-browned arms all knotty muscle and sinew. She heaved the bags easily, and with an almost robotic fixity of purpose. Her jeans were grubby, she wore work boots, and a broad-brimmed straw hat covered her face.

Now wishing some of that coffee had been whiskey that might have soothed nerves gone jumpy, I headed toward her fenced-in front yard. When I reached the gate I cleared my throat, and called, "Excuse me?"

She turned around slowly, reluctantly. There was no sign of recognition in her eyes when she saw me. No surprise there. Very few photographers are as recognized or recognizable as their work. Besides, I had shed fifty pounds and most of my hair.

"Ms. Jennings? Marlene Jennings?"

Her face was thin and weathered, her mouth seamed and pinched, her hair looking bleached from either sun or age. Even the blue of her eyes seemed faded. Barely forty, she looked well over a decade older. "Yes," she said grudgingly. "That's me."

I made myself smile. "I'm Carl Brown."

The lines of her face drew into a frown as my name registered.

"I'd like to talk with you if I could," I continued, managing to sound offhand in spite of how much rode on her response.

"What about?"

I met her gaze. “I think you know.”

She only stared, all expression wiped away. I’m pretty good at reading faces, but on hers I couldn’t find one single line of intention. For all I could tell she was about to reach into her jeans, pull out a gun, and shoot me dead.

That would be an answer of a sort, but not the kind I had come hoping to find.

“I’m not—” she began, then shook her head.

“Not what?”

Another shake of her head, then a long sigh. “I don’t suppose you’ll just go away if I ask you to.”

My turn to shake my head. “I really need to talk to you.”

“Why?” Still no expression, but a plaintive note in her voice.

The *why* was complicated, but I tried to give her a simple, painfully honest answer that might make her willing to talk. “Because ... because for me in some ways, all of what happened is *still* happening. It’s not over.” I took a deep breath, and pitched a dangerous question. “Is it over for you?”

A flicker of pain showed before her gaze dropped to the ground and the brim of her hat hid her face. Her bare shoulders, stiff from the moment she first saw me, now slumped.

After what seemed like an hour but was really less than a minute, she turned her back on me.

“Come,” she said brusquely, heading for her house.

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Jennings led me to a flagstone patio off the back of her house and left me there, promising to return quickly.

It was obvious that this wasn’t the patio of someone who entertained very often. There were only two battered chairs at a sagging table half covered with

pots and tools; the umbrella was threadbare. The patio was clearly base of operations for work in her backyard. Everywhere I looked there were garden carts loaded with composted manure and peat moss, shovels and hoes and rakes, coils of hose, and other such paraphernalia.

As for the backyard it looked out over, that was enormous, at least a couple of acres. The entire space was jam-packed with garden after garden. Some were laid out in straight lines and circles, other were made into what looked like complex mazes. Gazing out over the riot of shrubs and flowers, I could see that if she had a life—maybe even an obsession—this was it.

I stood up when she returned carrying a tray with a carafe, two mugs, sugar and creamer and the like. After leading me back to the table she had excused herself, saying she was going to make coffee and come right back. The offered coffee was either good manners, a chance to poison me, or a way for her to have some time to compose herself.

“Cream or sugar?” she asked as she put the tray down.

“Black, thanks.” My preference, and a way to avoid bug-killer-laced creamer.

She tried to smile as she began pouring. “Well, there’s a subject we can agree on.” A quick, hopeful glance my way. “I don’t suppose we could stick to that topic and let the rest go?”

I smiled back. “Could we really?”

Her mouth drew down. “I suppose not.” She put a full cup in front of me, then sat down across from me, her gaze sliding off toward her gardens.

“Do you ever talk about it with anyone?” I asked quietly.

She shook her head, gaze still off on her flowers. “Not since they left. Not since ... you know.”

I knew. Not since the moment that a flash of distant light had stopped the world.

“But you’ll talk to me now,” I prompted.

A slow nod, then she faced me once more. “But there are rules. I have to

work on my gardens, so I can only give you half an hour. I will answer only if I want to. I will not be interrogated, and demanding that I tell you something will end our talk.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Just get it over with. I have work to do.”

But now that I had Marlene Jennings in front of me, and theoretically ready to talk, I felt strangely lost. There were so many questions, and they were so tangled in each other that each one was a piece of another. This woman had played only a small part at the very beginning of what had happened with the Draconi, and yet in some way the image of her I had captured made her, at least in my mind, the primal enduring symbol of the whole arc of events.

Was that fair? Probably not. Life and people rarely are.

I decided to begin at the beginning. “Why, um, what made you react so violently to the Draconi when they arrived?”

Jennings peered at me a moment, then her gaze went out to her garden. She stood up abruptly and headed toward one flowerbed. Once there she scanned the ground, bent down, then reached out and snatched something up.

When she turned back, a snake with long yellow stripes, what I had always called a garden snake, was trapped in her fist. It wriggled and writhed, tail lashing like a whip.

“Are you afraid of snakes, Mr. Brown?” she asked as she returned to the table.

“I’m, um, not a big fan,” I answered uneasily, shrinking back from it.

“Many people fear and hate snakes. Work in a garden long enough and you have to make peace with them.” She stroked the creature’s head with her free hand. “The same with spiders and worms. And bees.” She peered at me and smiled. “Would you like to hold him?”

“Thanks, no.”

“Has any snake ever harmed you?”

“No.”

“Yet you are afraid of it. *Instinctively* afraid.”

“Distinctly afraid, anyway,” I said, keeping a wary eye on the snake. “Are you telling me that you had the same sort of reaction when you saw the Draconi?”

“Being afraid was only a part of it. I was horrified. I was repelled.” She bent down and let the snake go. It slithered back toward the bed it had been taken from. “Some people kill snakes on sight. Others react the same way to spiders.”

“Was it in any way an, um, Christian thing?” In the picture, she has a cross clutched in one fist as she shakes the other. From where I sat, I could see a small silver cross on a short chain around her neck, bright against the brown skin of her neck and chest.

“Maybe some,” she admitted, sitting down again. “My whole life I’d been told and shown what devils looked like.”

“Like them. The Draconi.”

“Yeah. To me they looked ugly and evil.”

From the very first I had found them strangely beautiful, though Marlene Jennings was certainly not the only one unnerved by their lean and wolfish faces, with their chillingly sharp teeth, their curling horns, their hard, glossy, red skin, their gaunt, unnervingly articulated limbs, their goatish feet and barbed tails. But to see one in person was to be awed by their air of solemn dignity, their otherworldly gravitas.

“Was that all?”

“They looked so smug.”

“The Draconi didn’t show emotion with their faces. They weren’t grinning, that was just the way they were made.”

“Still. Then there were the things they said.”

That the Draconi looked like devils co-imagined by Bosch and the creator of the Alien was one strike against them. Strike two was that they were unflinching—even brutally—honest about how appalled they were about what

they found here on Earth.

“I read that book the Dalai Lama wrote,” I said quietly. “The one comparing what they said to the teachings of Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed. To statements and writings made by King and Gandhi and many other spiritual teachers. They were all saying the same things.”

Her gaze had strayed back to her gardens. “Maybe so. But I didn’t think they had any right to call us brutes.”

That was a misconception purposely spread by certain people, then and now. “They never called us that. They said that it was a travesty and a tragedy that we chose to *live* like brutes.”

A shrug. I couldn’t help noticing that her brown, callused hands were rarely still, as if itching to go back to her weeding and digging. As if to prove that, she picked a trowel off the table and turned it over and over in her lap, tracing its lines like prayer beads.

“So why protest them? Why scream at them to go home? You must have known that their ship’s stardrive failed, leaving them marooned in our system, unable to go home.”

“That was what they said. How could I be sure they weren’t lying? The Devil is the Father of Lies.”

“Did you think they had come here to invade? To take over the planet?” A sarcastic edge crept into my voice. “All five of them?”

Still her attention remained on her gardens. “They did kill people here on the ground when they landed.”

I sighed at this seemingly ineradicable half-truth. “No, two people were killed when their ship crashed. The same way people on the ground are sometimes killed when a plane crashes. Twenty people died just this week when that commuter flight came down on a church.”

“Maybe it was an accident. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter now.”

“Still, why such hate?”

“It was just there, I guess. The way they looked. The things they said.”

People dying because of them. Because they were *alien*.”

“Were you listening to people telling you that you should hate and fear and despise them? People on the radio or TV? Wingnuts on the web?” The most viciously xenophobic, rabidly fundamentalist elements of society had declared war on the Draconi, branding them baby-eating, world-destroying monsters, and worse. As tools of Satan, as Satan himself, pretending to be from another star as a way to swindle us all into Hell. As was usual with such garbage, a certain percentage of the population gobbled it down, and once they had a burning bellyful, grabbed their guns and pitchforks and declared holy war.

“I suppose I was.”

“Why did you believe them?”

“I just did.”

“Why act on your hate?”

“Because I had to.” All her responses in a colorless monotone, as unemotional as a recitation of her mailing address and Social Security number.

“Did you think that if you screamed loudly enough, they would just disappear?”

“I don’t know what I thought,” she admitted wearily. “It wasn’t about thinking, it was about taking action.”

“By becoming part of a mob.”

That made her look at me, but her eyes were dead. “The British called the people at the Boston Tea Party a mob. The Alabama police called the Freedom Marchers a mob.”

“History judged both sides of those events,” I replied. “History judged what happened the day I took your picture, and what happened in the days after. You were on the wrong side.”

She made no answer to that. There was no way for me to tell if that was silent denial or a tacit admission of guilt. Her face, which had once burned with an expression anyone could read, now was as expressive as the flat stones beneath our feet.

“What about later, when they announced what they were going to do?”

“What about it?”

“Did your opinions change? Did any of the hate subside?”

A shrug, her gaze leaving me for her gardens once more.

“Were you still listening to hate speech?”

“I believed I was listening to the truth.”

This brought me to something I previously thought to be only a minor question, one that suddenly seemed important.

“Some people say that the people you were listening to should have been silenced. What do you think?”

I could see that my question had caught her by surprise. She seemed to take it seriously, taking a sip of her coffee, working on her answer.

“I don’t know,” she said at last. “Maybe there is an argument for that, but what if they had been right, the voice crying that the British were coming?”

“What if one of—” I almost said *your kind*, but bit it back. “What if one of the extremists had managed to kill the Draconi? Where would we be now?”

“I guess we will never know.” With that I lost her again, her attention returning to her flowerbeds.

Little of what she had said meant all that much. I had no idea whether she still believed as she had then, if she felt remorse or shame, or even anger at my dredging it all up again.

I had to wonder if she was part of any of the groups that denied the existence of the Draconi, or maintained that their saving us was a lie or ruse or plot. Every major human event has spawned those who, afterward and even in the smoking ruins, deny it ever happened. The Holocaust. Man on the Moon. Rwanda. Sarajevo. Every genocide, every war crime, every hate crime. You could bury these people in the skulls of their victims, and still they would maintain that it never happened.

You are, we fear, hopeless, and doomed by the darker sides of your own natures.

The Draconi said that before returning to their damaged ship and lifting off. The stardrive was useless, but the craft worked well enough to let it leave Earth and accelerate at ten gravities toward its apocalyptic rendezvous.

We cannot bear to abide here. Death would be preferable.

Now there was an indictment.

You have our pity, and our hope that our actions may prove to be some sort of lesson to your kind.

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I was there, I *heard* the one we called Scratch say those words, and though his face showed nothing, and his translator's low monotone gave the words no special emphasis or inflection, they had an impact I can't even begin to describe.

We had been judged, and we had been found wanting.

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I let out a sigh. The memory of that moment and what came after still made me feel sick, still broke my heart, still filled me with shame and despair.

I was tempted to get up from the table right then. This was taking me further back than I wanted to go, a journey that was all pain and no gain. I could have given up and let it go. Taken that as my answer, gone home, and tried to live with it.

But I had begun this, and I would see it through to the end.

"We knew the Bullet was coming long before the Draconi appeared, right?"

"I guess."

"Were you aware of it? It was big news."

A shrug, her eyes on distant flowers. She had put down her cup and begun

worry-beading her trowel again. "I have to deadhead the geraniums this afternoon."

"We learn that there is an asteroid headed for Earth, one big enough to cause severe devastation, if not outright mass extinction, and there is serious question whether it will miss us or not. You heard all of that and it didn't mean anything to you?"

"I guess it didn't mean much to me until, you know."

I knew. "Not until the Draconi arrived, and the crazies started screaming that they had sent it, that the Bullet was the gun they were holding to our head. Did you believe that?"

"Isn't it obvious that I did?"

"Why? Because you thought they were devils?"

"I thought they looked like devils."

"What about when astronomers proved that where they had come from, and where the Bullet came from, were almost directly opposite each other?"

"You've never heard of a so-called expert lying? Or the government lying?" She lifted her arm and glanced at her watch. "Five minutes left, Mr. Brown."

Five minutes, and I didn't feel like I had gotten anywhere.

"Okay," I said, "How about when the Bullet's trajectory was calculated well enough to be 95% certain it was going to hit us? What did you think about that?"

A mirthless chuckle. "I believed we were all going to die."

"And you still believed the Draconi were responsible."

"I was pretty sure."

"Some people were saying it was better we die than be ruled by aliens or demons. Did you believe that?"

"Wouldn't *you* rather die than be ruled by aliens or demons, Mr. Brown?"

I didn't want to waste what time I had left debating that. "What about when they made their announcement? When they stated that they found us so unpleasant, and what we had made of this world so terrible that they would rather splatter themselves against the Bullet and keep it from hitting us than be subjected to us and our world any longer. And even then, they could have lifted off and stayed safe, gone to sleep and waited for rescue. But they chose to help us instead, and sacrifice themselves. What did you think?"

She waved a fly away. "Good riddance—if they really were going to do it."

"You weren't grateful?"

"How was I supposed to know it wasn't another trick?"

"What they said about us. How did that make you feel?"

"I didn't think they had any right to judge us."

"Do you now?"

"Only we can judge ourselves."

So now, with my time almost over, we were finally getting nearer the issues that had driven me to seek out Marlene Jennings, but still I had nothing like the sort of answers I wanted.

"Things have changed a bit since then," I said. "Some of the things the Draconi said have been heeded, some of the cruelties and inequities and horrors addressed. They hoped we would learn something from what they did. Some of us have. But what about you? Did you learn anything? Was your mind in any way changed? Were you in any way changed? Have you come to understand how misplaced your hate was? Are you—are you *sorry*?"

Marlene Jennings absorbed all of this impassively, her gaze still out on her gardens. After a moment, she stood up.

"Your time is up, Mr. Brown."

I opened my mouth to argue, then shut it again.

"Thank you, Ms. Jennings," I said tiredly as I got to my feet.

“Just leave and let me get back to my gardens,” she said with a weariness to match mine. “I have too much to do to waste any more time like this.”

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My career has cost me two marriages, but it did buy me my own plane. Fortunately, I’m a better pilot than a husband.

I did my best to put my time with Marlene Jennings out of my mind as I ran my pre-flight checks and prepared to take off. It was only after I was off the ground and had a course laid in for my home airport back in Maryland that I let my mind return to my afternoon visit with the Face of Hate.

What had I been looking for? What had I hoped to hear?

You are, we fear, hopeless, and doomed by the darker sides of your own natures.

I had been looking for some proof that the Draconi were wrong. That we could change.

We cannot bear to abide here. Death would be preferable.

I had wanted some proof that we had been in some ways changed by their words and example. That we and all we had made would not be regarded as some horrific hellhole by some outside observer. That if we were not worthy of what they had done, we were at least moving in that direction.

You have our pity, and our hope that our actions may prove to be some sort of lesson to your kind.

Some of us had learned to look afresh at what we had made, to take steps to change things. How wide and deep and long-lived this rebirth and redirection was and would be was still subject to considerable debate. I had taken pictures showing both sides, but could not help but feel that we were already failing to turn ourselves around in any meaningful way.

So why track down Marlene Jennings?

I had come to regard her as a sort of litmus test.

If the Face of Hate could change, had changed, then maybe there was hope

for our kind after all.

But if she hadn't—couldn't—then maybe I should just drive my plane into the side of a mountain the same way the Draconi had chosen to crash their crippled ship into the Bullet. More and more I had come to wonder if I could bear to abide here any longer. More than a few people committed suicide after they left. I could all too easily understand the impulse. Some people I knew had turned to drink, to drugs, to extreme behaviors both fleshily excessive and mortifyingly self-denying. Marlene Jennings had buried herself headfirst in her gardens.

I wished I hadn't come. At best my trip had been for nothing. At worst I had just seen the utter futility of hope for my kind.

I wondered if I should have screamed at her, shaken some sort of reaction from her, squeezed the truth out of her, done *something* to get through the non-responsive shell she had built around herself, a woman who tended beauty while inside, the roots of ugliness still thrived.

Sudden impulse had me checking around me and changing my flight path, veering back the way I had come.

In just a few minutes, I was nearing the place where Marlene Jennings lived. I wasn't sure why I'd come back. I wasn't gripping the wheel and bracing myself for the act that would send me screaming down on her, taking us both out in a perverse act of atonement.

Maybe it was just as she had said: it wasn't about thinking, it was about taking some sort of action.

I bent a few rules, taking the plane lower as I neared her place.

Closer yet, I tipped one wing for a better look. That's when I saw it.

The big field behind her house. The complicated garden beds. On the ground, a maze.

But from above it all took on a new shape.

A patchwork of geometric shapes. A large central bed, and made from flowers, her face as it had been in my picture. Around that, more beds arced, forming the words **FORGIVE ME**.

I could see Marlene Jennings on her knees at the edge of one bed, tending her penance, tending her plea for forgiveness. Paying for what she had done in the only way she knew, and not even admitting to me that her life had been rededicated to erasing the wrongs she had committed.

I leveled out and began climbing into the sky, something inside me rising faster than the machine around me, lighter than the hazy clouds above me.

Suddenly I felt better about myself and my kind than I had since the moment I witnessed the delayed image of the Draconi taking the Bullet for our sakes, unworthy though we might have been.

Maybe there was hope for us after all if the Face of Hate had come to see the light.

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When I got home, I sent her a postcard bearing the same message she had put out for the universe to see.

Forgive me.

A small thing, but that's how great things are begun.