

The Town Drunk
Presents

The Liberation of Roscoe White

LaShawn M. Wanak

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I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. “Oh, lord, Uncle Roscoe, what the hell you talking ‘bout now?”

He pointed a pudgy finger towards the living room window. “Right there, baby girl. It was standing right there. I turned my head for a moment and there it was, staring at me through the window. Just staring!”

“You saw an alien.”

“Right.”

“Staring at you through the window.”

“Yep.”

“Uh huh. What it look like? Them things from *The X-Files*? How you know it ain’t one of them neighbor kids down the street?”

Uncle Roscoe sat up on the couch and grinned. “‘Cause it was *green*, baby girl.”

Them giggles I was holding in started busting out. Thinking he’s seeing aliens on his lawn—ain’t that something. “So what you do? Invite him in?”

“Tried to. Held out some Harold’s, see if he wanted some...”

Now *that* got me howling all on the floor. Thinking of Uncle Roscoe in his striped bathrobe, holding out a greasy chicken wing in his fingers, alien sniffing at it like some hairless housecat—I *told* Grandma he’s been living on his own too long. When I could finally talk again, I asked him, “Do aliens even eat soul food?”

“Not that one. All it did was stare at me, then *zoop!* Gone, just like that.” Uncle Roscoe grinned and popped open a beer. Like he had something to be proud of. “So, what you think, baby girl? Should I call the *Enquirer*? Oprah? I ain’t doing no Jerry Springer though. Only *crazy* folk go on that show.”



Uncle Roscoe lived in a one-bedroom ranch surrounded by overgrown grass and chewed-looking hostas. Celia tried to prettify the lawn when she moved in a year ago, but she gave up on it, just like she gave up on him. He didn't seem too broken up—I mean, it ain't like he married her or anything—but for a while he acted like she'd just went shopping.

“You'll see,” he told me after she left. “She'll get tired of chasing them men in Vegas, then she'll come crawling back to me. Get her some Roscoe again, yeah.”

But she never came back, and Uncle Roscoe stopped talking about her. I dropped in every week or so, made sure he ain't died or at least ate something that wasn't from McDonalds or Harold's Chicken Shack. But he told me as long as he had his TV and beer, he was juuuuust fine.



“I saw it again, baby girl!” he said a couple of weeks later. “The other night, during Leno.”

“Damn, Uncle Roscoe, you still on that alien thing?”

“Ain't no thing, baby girl. I heard it tapping on the window to get my attention. Look, I bet if you go out there, you can see the footprint it made.”

“I ain't going out there. ‘Sides, ain't no alien. You just making it up.”

He frowned at me from the couch. “You think I make this shit up? I *saw* it, baby girl! A real alien, staring at me with them huge yellow eyes.”

“I thought their eyes are supposed to be black?”

“Not this one. Yellow, like a banana.”

“Uh huh,” I said, thinking, *here we go with the bullshit stories again*. Just like when I was a kid and he told me Santa Claus was coming through the stove, so I stayed up all night to make sure no one turned it on by mistake. At least it wasn't like the joke he pulled on Grandma. Uncle Roscoe wouldn't dare do anything stupid like that to me. “Come on. Ain't no such things as aliens. Anyways, why the hell would an alien come all this way just to see *you*?”

He changed the TV to ESPN and leaned back. “Who knows? Maybe it never saw a black man before.”



When I saw him again, he was on the couch as usual, but he wasn't smiling anymore. He sat there, holding the remote loose in his hands. “Hey, Uncle Roscoe.”

“Hey, yourself.” He looked towards the window. “It still out there?”

He must’ve meant the alien. “Nope. Didn’t see a thing.”

“Huh.” He clicked the remote a couple of times, then looked back at the window. “Do me a favor, baby girl. Get me a beer, huh?”

I started to say, “Get your lazy black ass up and get it yourself.” But the way he slumped on the couch and stared at the TV without really looking at it didn’t seem right. So I kept my mouth shut and went to the kitchen.

Now, I didn’t like Uncle Roscoe’s kitchen. The man’s a pig—plates rotting in the sink for days, greasy burger cartons spilling all on the countertops and floor. Hell, I wasn’t expecting it to be *clean*. But when I went in, all I could do was stand there in shock—dishes put away, sink shining, not one speck of food on the stove or floor. I thought Celia must’ve come back after all.

But then I opened the refrigerator. Someone must’ve taken the entire produce section of the grocery store and shoved it right into Uncle Roscoe’s fridge. No fast food cartons, no TV dinners, just green stuff—the healthy kind of green. I had to push aside some tofu (since when did Uncle Roscoe start eating tofu?) to find the beer stashed way in the back.

I brought the whole six-pack to him. “What up with the veggies? You ain’t going vegan on me, are you?”

He snatched a beer from me, popped it open and drained it in one long gulp. “Ain’t me. It’s them aliens. They took my food!”

I laughed. “Riiiiiiight. Do you even know how to cook half that stuff in there?”

He glared at me. “You know what else? Last night, that alien came back again and it brought a couple of others with it.”

“Oh, lord, do I even wanna know?”

“They just stood on my lawn for a bit,” Uncle Roscoe said, staring at the window, “then they took out these flat boards and started marching about. They did that for a few minutes, then poof! Gone, just like that.”

“Marching...? Wait, Uncle Roscoe, are you saying they were protesting? Like the civil rights marches?”

“Damn straight,” Uncle Roscoe took another can of beer. “And you know what was on them signs?”

“You can read alien now?” I said, rubbing my forehead.

“‘Free Roscoe White.’ That’s it. That’s all. Nothing else.” He snorted and drank some more, but his eyes kept flicking to the window. “‘Free Roscoe White.’ What the hell that supposed to mean?”

I had some thoughts as he started his third beer, but I decided to keep my mouth shut.



“He just doing that for attention, honey child,” Grandma said when I called her from the car. “Ain’t nuthin wrong with him.”

I gripped the steering wheel with one hand and the cell phone with the other. “Grandma, you didn’t see him. He’s acting all paranoid. Talking ‘bout aliens and shi—stuff. He’s never acted like this before.”

“Child, please. You know your Uncle Roscoe.” Grandma was just like Uncle Roscoe in that she never said my real name. Always “honey child” or “baby girl” or “sweet thing” like I’m still in second grade or something. “If he’s got the mind to, he can do it as long as he wants. Ain’t no sense in that man.”

“Well, can’t you at least stop by and see him? Check him out—?”

Grandma’s voice slapped me good. “After what that damn fool did to me? He better be grateful I don’t cut him out my life altogether. He needs to grow up and get some sense knocked into him. Maybe if the two of you didn’t sit around drinking beer all the time...”

I listened to her yell all the way back to my apartment. After all that time, she was still sore at him for what he did to her. Couldn’t blame her, I guess. Uncle Roscoe tricked her good back then. But dammit, she was supposed to be the one taking care of him, not me.

But no. No one else gave a shit about him. And I was his *favorite*. Which meant I was stuck. As usual.



“They took your *couch*?”

Uncle Roscoe’s leather couch was gone. Just like that—gone. In the broad patch of clean carpet where it used to squat now perched... a stationary bicycle. Brand-new. One of the fancy ones you see in health clubs. I went up to it and poked it. Yeah, it was real.

“Damn aliens!” Uncle Roscoe roared, pacing up and down the room. “Took my couch and left me this... this... the hell is this thing, anyway?” He kicked at the bike hard and roared again, trying to grab his foot in pain.

This was getting weird. “Uncle Roscoe, what do aliens want with your couch?”

“How the hell should I know? I went to go get some real food, I come back and my couch is gone!”

“Riiiiight. I don’t know what to tell you...”

“But that’s not all they did.” He snatched up his remote from the coffee table and turned on the TV. “Look at what they did, baby girl. Look!”

He started flicking through the channels. Shows went by in a blur: Public Access. Cooking show. Indie film commentary.

I rubbed my forehead, right between my eyebrows. Felt like I’ve been doing that since this whole mess got started. “Uncle Roscoe, I gotta be at work in twenty minutes—”

“Look, dammit! *Look!*”

Nature show. Documentary. Another cooking show. I frowned, then grabbed the remote from him and turned to channel 242. It should’ve been BET, but instead, two ballet dancers spun on a stage. I turned to CNN and got two people talking about... Picasso? I stared at the remote, then pulled up the TV guide. None of the normal channels showed up—nothing but documentaries and culture stuff.

“Where’s my sports? Where’s my Comedy Central? There’s nothing but this crap on every channel. They’ve turn my TV into freaking PBS.” Uncle Roscoe snatched the remote back from me. “And look at *this!*”

The channel he clicked on next had no one on it, just a sign sloppily written in yellow paint: “Free Roscoe White.”

“Goddamn aliens! Trying to mess with me.” Uncle Roscoe threw the remote at the screen. Miraculously, it didn’t break—the remote bounced off and went spinning across the floor. “I hear them outside my window at night, when I’m trying to get some sleep. Marching and chanting, ‘Free Roscoe White.’ Who the hell do they think I am? Some kind of political prisoner?”

Okay. I could understand someone pretending to be aliens for fun. Even all the health shit was sorta ha-ha funny. But changing the channel lineup? That sign on TV? That was freaky. No, waaaaaay beyond freaky-deaky. That... just... didn’t make... sense.

Someone was out for Uncle Roscoe. But who? Celia? Some neighbor’s kid? I looked at Uncle Roscoe, stomping up and down and swearing, and thought, *Hell, maybe there really are aliens...*

I pulled out my apartment keys. “Look, maybe you should chill at my place for a bit. You know, just ‘til I get off work. I don’t think these... aliens... gonna do anything to you at my place.”

“Nuh-uh. I’m staying right here.” Uncle Roscoe looked around, then plopped down on the exercise bike. “They think they can mess with me? Well, bring it! Uncle Roscoe’ll take allllll that shit on! What the hell more can they do to me?”



The answer came when I got to work twenty minutes later.

“THEY TOOK MY BEER, BABY GIRL, THEY TOOK MY BEER!”

I jerked the phone away from my ear. “But I just left you. How could they take your beer?”

“I don’t know how they did it, but all my beer—it’s gone, all gone! All that’s left is this... bottled water junk.” On the other side of the line, I heard a big crash and all sorts of banging. *Oh lord, he’s lost it. Lost it good.*

“All right, calm down. I’ll be there in a sec.”

“Goddammit, ain’t no calming down. They got my *beer*, baby girl!”

People stared at me from their cubicles, so I hunched over the phone. “I know, I know. Just sit tight. And for god’s sake, don’t do anything drastic.”

When I got back to his house, I could hear him screaming and hollering inside. A couple of neighbors stood on their porches, trying to see what was going on. I yelled at them to mind their own damn business and burst through the front door. Immediately my shoe skidded on something—a plastic water bottle, like you buy in a store, lying unopened on its side. In fact, the whole floor was covered with water bottles. I picked one up to look at the label. It only had three words on it.

Uncle Roscoe was nowhere to be seen. Neither was his TV—it had been replaced with a large bookshelf filled with Bibles, yoga and meditation CDs, books I never heard of: *Voluntary Simplicity. Living More With Less*. His lamps had been replaced, too, by candles of all sizes and colors: on top of the bookshelf, on the coffee table, even a couple on the seat of the bike. Over in the corner stood one of them homeopathic crystal fountains that changed from blue to pink, with water running down its sides.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. Oh no. What really got me was the words painted all over the walls. In dripping yellow, the same words that were on the water bottle: “Free Roscoe White.”

All this happened right after I left? What the *hell* was going on?

I heard Uncle Roscoe holler again from out back, so I ran through the kitchen door. He stood in the middle of his backyard, chucking more water bottles at the fence at the end of the yard.

“They were just out here!” he shouted, his face all shiny and splotched. “I saw them. A whole bunch of them, running off with my beer!”

I ran to the fence and peered back and forth down the alley. Empty. “How many?”

“I don’t know. I was too busy yelling. They gone too far this time, baby girl! Didja see what they did to my house? You bastards call this freedom?” He wound up and flung another bottle with all his might. I jumped back as the bottle crashed into the fence. “I’m sick of this shit! I want my TV back. I want my food back. I want my couch back. I want my *beer* back!”

Oh, lord, he’s gonna pop something and have a stroke. I started pulling him towards my car in the driveway. “I think it’s time we call the police—”

“What the police gonna do? They *aliens*, baby girl! They can—” Suddenly, Uncle Roscoe went all still-like, freezing in his tracks.

“What?” I asked.

He didn’t say a word, but raised his finger and pointed...

...right at the house.

It felt like someone took one of them water bottles and dumped it all over my head. I turned slowly, thinking that some guy stood at the back door with his face painted green, ready to scare us... or maybe one of them aliens from *Close Encounters*, holding a dripping yellow paintbrush... or...

But when I looked at the house, nothing was there. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

I turned back to Uncle Roscoe, started to ask him what he saw, but stopped. There was this look on his face, this weird look—his eyes nearly popping out his head, mouth all dropped open, but the edges curved up, just a tiny bit, and quivering...

“What? What’s wrong, Uncle Roscoe?”

“Look at them.” He whispered. “All them aliens up in my house. What do they *want*?”

I begin backing away. “You scaring me, Uncle Roscoe.”

But he wouldn’t look at me. Kept staring at the house. “What else they gonna take from me, baby girl? Huh? They took everything I own. What more do they want? Look at them.” Uncle Roscoe’s eyes started watering. I mean, real, honest-to-God tears forming in his eyes.

And right there, I thought to myself, *Hold up...*

I've seen him look that way before. Had to be 'bout, what—ten, fifteen years ago? He decided to pull one over on Grandma, so he got some drinking buddies to move all her furniture into the basement to make her think she got robbed.

I remember standing in that empty house, just a kid, not really knowing what was going on, watching Grandma turn round and round, mouth open in shock. My folks telling her it's okay, they'll get the cops, they'll get the fire department, don't worry, don't worry. And Uncle Roscoe wearing that look, that eye-popping, gut-churning, I-know-something-you-don't-know look, the strain of keeping quiet so bad he actually started tearing up, all that secret glee spilling out his eyes...

When my folks finally went down to the basement and found all her stuff, Uncle Roscoe hollered, "Gotcha!" and started cracking up, doubled over, tears streaming down his face. He was still laughing his ass off when Grandma told him to get outta her house for good.

And here was Uncle Roscoe now, wearing that exact same look.

I turned around and started towards the driveway. It took him a moment to realize I wasn't near him anymore. "Baby girl? Where you going?"

"Back to work."

"But... you see them, right? Standing there, wanting me to go in." His voice was so hoarse and shaky, I couldn't help myself and looked back again.

Nope. Still empty.

"Whatever. I'm outta here."

"Wait!" He grabbed my arm. "You gotta believe me—"

I snatched my arm back. "Get your *fucking* hands off me!"

With all the cussing we do, Uncle Roscoe and I never said the "f-word." It's been like an unspoken pact between us. But once that word slipped out, damned if I could keep the rest from exploding out.

"You know what, Uncle Roscoe? I put up with this fucking alien shit at first 'cause it was fun. It was all just a game. But then you go weird with all this New Age bullshit and it's getting fucking *old!*"

Uncle Roscoe's eyes turned so round I thought they'd pop right out of his head. "B-baby girl?"

"Don't 'baby-fucking-girl' me! I'm thirty-two years old. I'm ain't some kid you can fool around with like you did to Grandma. I got a fucking life, you know?"

“But, them aliens—”

“Ain’t no aliens there, Uncle Roscoe. You just playin’ me just like you did Grandma all them years ago. Where these aliens at? Huh? How come you the only one who sees them? Where they go when they ain’t marching and pulling shit on you? Hiding under the couch? Oh, wait. You don’t *have* a couch.”

“But... but... the beer, the TV...”

“Don’t mean shit ‘cause you did it all. I don’t know what the hell is wrong with you, but Grandma was right—you need to *grow* the fuck *up!*”

I reached my car and got in, but Uncle Roscoe grabbed my arm again before I could close the door. “I know I played some shit before, but this time you gotta believe me! Them aliens—” He looked back at the house, his words rushing out all panicky. “They gonna do something to me, I just know it. They just waiting—waiting ‘til I’m all alone...” He stared at me, his hand on my arm squeezing so hard, I can feel the blood pounding. “Don’t leave me, baby girl. You gotta stay with me. You’re all I got left.”

For just a tiny second, I wavered. He looked so *serious*...

Then that bullshit look came back, that grin hovering around the corners of his quivering lips, tears of suppressed laughter shining in his eyes, that look that screamed *Gotcha*...

I pulled my arm away. “Bye, Uncle Roscoe.”

He watched me, goggle-eyed, as I started the car. “Baby girl? Baby girl?” Then, as I pulled away, I heard him call out, “Denise? Denise! Not you, too. Not you. *Deniiiiise!*”

I pulled the rearview mirror up so I couldn’t see him running behind me, yelling his fool head off. If he thought saying my real name would make me come back, it was far too late for that.



I did feel kinda bad once I got back to work. Maybe all this alien shit was messing with my mind, too. I mean, dissing him like that when he was obviously crying for help—what the hell was I thinking?

So, I called up some friends who worked at a nursing home on the south side. I told them about Uncle Roscoe and they were like, “Oh yeah, we see that type of thing all the time. Bring him over—we’ll take good care of him.” I figured, hey, I finally get some peace and quiet, Uncle Roscoe gets some new sucker to pull his shit on. It’s all good, right? When I drove over after work to get him, though, his front door stood wide open.

Uncle Roscoe was gone.

Nothing was left in his house. The bookshelves, the exercise bike, the water bottles. All his furniture. Even the writing on the walls. Gone.

I asked his next door neighbor what happened and she said after his screaming fit, he went back into his house and that was that. No one saw him leave. No moving van. No spaceship. Nothing. Like a giant invisible vacuum cleaner came and sucked Uncle Roscoe and his stuff away.



Everyone thought it was my fault—though no one really said it to my face. After all, I was his favorite, so I must've done *something*. My sister was the only one who thought it hilarious. “You told off Uncle Roscoe? Dang, that’s messed up!”

Grandma didn’t talk to me for a whole year.



We did everything to find Uncle Roscoe. Put up “Missing” posters, hired a detective. But no one cared about some sixty-something black man disappearing, and soon we started forgetting him too. Grandma started nagging me on the usual stuff, when I was going to get a better job, when I was going to get a husband, blah, blah, blah.

But no one ever mentioned Uncle Roscoe. Not even me. Until I saw him again, several years later.

There he was, in the Lifestyle section of the newspaper, next to a beat-up mountain bike, pumped and lean with dreadlocks down his back. He lost a whole lot of weight, but I still recognized that bullshit grin of his. The headline above his picture read: 69-YEAR-OLD BREAKS RECORD IN MOUNTAIN BIKING.

I called up the family and we got together at Grandma’s place to tear apart the article. Seemed like a few months after he disappeared, some shepherds found Uncle Roscoe wandering in the Andes, stark naked and ranting about living a simpler lifestyle. Since then, he’d been acting like some sort of outdoor fitness health freak.

“I don’t remember anything from my past or how I got this way,” he told the newspaper. “All I know is that I’m alive, and life is short. Somehow—I don’t know how—I got a second chance to do whatever I wanted to, and I can’t waste it. There is so much out there in the world, and I want to experience it all.”

“Can’t be Uncle Roscoe,” said my sister after a while. “That don’t even sound like him.”

My father shook his head. “We need to sue whoever did this to him.”

I stared at Uncle Roscoe's picture. There was no trace of madness or alien mumbo-jumbo on him anywhere. Just that badass grin, like he knew the punchline to a joke no one's heard yet and it had him cracking up inside.

"He looks happy," was all I could say.

Grandma wadded the paper up. "Damn aliens messing with my child..."



Sometimes, I wonder what would've happened if I stayed with Uncle Roscoe. Would I have seen them aliens? Was it all really in Uncle Roscoe's head?

It *was* aliens that made Uncle Roscoe change like that, right? Right?

I want to call him up, or send him a letter, just to get him to remember me. But I'm afraid to. This new Uncle Roscoe, I don't like him at all. Every time I see his grinning face in the paper or on the news (I hear Oprah's trying to line him up), I don't know how to deal with it.

There's been other things, too. Weird things.

At night, when I'm at home in my apartment, I keep getting the feeling that someone's watching me through the window. Which can't be right, because I'm on the 22nd floor.

One night, I got up to look out the window, just to prove I wasn't paranoid. Nothing was there, of course. Nothing but a bunch of pigeons.

Pigeons sitting on my windowsill.

Pigeons with yellow eyes.

Pigeons holding tiny signs.

Signs that read, "*Free Denise White.*"



LaShawn M. Wanak is still learning how to juggle writing and motherhood with a part-time job. She does think moving to Madison, WI was the best thing for her, even though she can't see past all the snow in front of her windows. She's been published in *Ideomancer* and *Third Order Magazine*, and she is currently working on her first fantasy novel. You can read about her progress at her blog, Cafe in the Woods, <http://tbonecafe.wordpress.com/>.