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the reactor

By Paul Azevedo



He was one of the most homely persons I've ever seen. He was an Indian, large, brown and wrinkled, by heritage, hard work and outdoor habits.

Some people would have called him ugly, but that word just doesn't fit such a gentle, kind, unassuming person. He lived somewhere in my Santa Rosa neighborhood when I was growing up 30 years ago. He often had coffee at the little restaurant on the corner.

It was quite a news item when he fought and killed a large octopus with his bare hands.

The battle took place in the cold waters of the Sonoma coast, and it must have made the national news wire.

At any rate, some months later his story, well-dramatized, appeared in one of the national men's magazines. You may be familiar with the kind of story. A garishly colored drawing, a dramatic title. The story was more or less accurate, as far as I know.

But the artist turned my homely brown neighbor into a blond viking, his arms and legs entwined with the octopus.

I was angry then, and I am today. That artist, for whatever reason, had falsified the whole story. Ignorance? prejudice, stupidity? Who knows?

Nowhere in the story did it say the man was an Indian. So the credit for a remarkable achievement went to a blond WASP, at least by implication.

The story, which should have been something every Indian could have taken pride in, instead became a way of saying: "Your story is worth telling, but your face and your ancestry is not worthy of portrayal."

What should have been a proud moment, became instead another way of degrading, albeit subtly, a man who deserved to be treated with dignity.