

PETER STINE

Boxcars, 1974

The moon was full and Jack's pockets full of joints that spring night we walked over to Steve Williams's house. He lived a couple of tree-lined blocks away from my own rental in a northwest Detroit neighborhood. About our age, early thirties, Steve was a colleague in the English department downtown at Wayne State, a light-skinned black man, with a pencil mustache, as handsome and debonair as a Motown vocalist. He had published a few novels. I didn't really know him, but Jack had regarded his invite to drop over as full of visionary possibility, at least privileged access to the city's creative energies. Jack and I went back to Berkeley days. I had seen him wrap himself in the shroud of universal brotherhood and slip below the surface before. Steve greeted us on the porch of a modest Tudor on Renfrew and led us down into his furnished basement.

Two black men were seated on a lumpy couch under the low ceiling. Rich was tall and muscular, his square shoulders bursting under a maroon pullover, sleek and intuitive in a pair of expensive slacks. More casually dressed, Russell was tall, high yellow, gawky, with big hands and a wide, insulting stare. From the start there was a feel of suppressed violence in the basement that seemed to turn the air glutinous. There were perfunctory introductions, drinks made, joints passed, eddies of disconnected laughter.

Rich turned to focus on me. "So you teach with Steve, that right?"

"Right, my first year down at Wayne."

"Where'd you come from?"

"California."

"You leave there for here? Where'bouts?"

"Berkeley."

"Whoa! All those hippie chicks into free love, right? They putting out for everybody?"

"Not exactly. What do you do?"

"I was one of the meanest college cornerbacks who never made the NFL."

"No kidding. What about now?"

“CPA. I’m a financial advisor, a walking tax loophole. How ’bout you? You got any money to play with?”

I smiled and raised my hands in surrender. “No, no, no prospect here. With teaching, you know, it’s month-to-month....”

Rich seemed to lose interest. Instead he stood up and strode around the basement, pausing before a poster of Malcolm X over the shallow, green-tiled fireplace. Then he started to deliver forearm shivers to ghost opponents, stopping just short of striking a floor lamp, just grazing the cinderblock walls.

I shifted attention to Jack, became aware he was catching a lot of intimidation and ridicule from the other guy, Russell.

“What do you teach, Ruhlman? Santa Claus?”

Jack laughed in a good-natured, conciliatory way but Russell kept it up. “Are you a hippie? What you goin’ to teach my kids? Say somethin’.... *Say somethin’!*”

“To tell you the truth, Russell, I’m just a frog on a lily pad in the middle of the pond, snapping at flies and whatever else comes by.”

“You ain’t calling me a fuckin’ fly now, are you?”

Steve appeared before us, back from the margins. “You jiving us, right, Russell?” He seemed to be the puppet master in charge, and exuded a sense of comradery, but he kept chuckling to himself, and suddenly looked with admiration at his friend, whispering under his breath, “How long you gonna sit there and play the devil’s game?”

Russell stood up now and towered over my friend, who was nursing a joint with a spacey, worried look on his face.

“Know how I get off, Ruhlman? I go out in my back yard with my machine gun and fire clips at the moon. That’s what I like to do. What you gotta say to *that*?”

Jack looked academic, helpless. How long was he going to tolerate this asshole?

“That’s how all those holes got in that cheese,” Rich added dryly.

I thought I was prepared when Russell spun next on me. “How ’bout you? Say somethin’!”

I was tongue-tied.

“Know what I like about Tokyo Rose?” Russell announced to the basement walls. “She wanted to liquidate America. Now that’s a program I respect.”

The hatred in his voice was tangible, like sound blisters. I looked away and noticed for the first time two other black men in the base-

ment, one in a beard and jump suit, the other wearing a pith helmet, both sitting in a far corner, grinning. What felt shameful was to allow Jack to be treated this way—so vulnerable in his pained sincerity and confused paranoia.

Then Russell's face was pressed close to mine: "What do you teach?"

"Back off a minute. How about *you*?" He was all lip and teeth. "My next-door neighbor just quit as a vet in Detroit because he got sick of digging bullets out of dogs. Is that what you do?"

"Don't get cute with me, motherfucker . . ."

Then Steve was posted between us, laughing, like he was watching a harmless joust, the antics of a weird friend. "Everything's cool, men," he said. "I got it all on tape. This is good material."

Material? Steve made clear what the session was about by going over to an end table by the couch and clicking off a tape recorder. As if on cue, the two of them stood up and left without a word, Rich leading Russell up the stairs like a circus animal, a sinister vaudeville team.

"Yeah, Peter, this is how I do my writing. It's the real thing. Listen, I just got a story here I want you and Jack to hear. Any critical suggestions would be appreciated."

Steve pulled a manuscript from a nearby table drawer and started to read aloud. We were treated to a slang-ridden exchange between two drug dealers in the Cass Corridor, down near Wayne. A transcribed tape? Anger and depression started to weigh me down. This was just bad acid, those faces, the fake fireplace, the two guys in jump suit and pith helmet still grinning in the far corner, the rough surface of cinderblock showing through the green wall paint.

It was time for some fresh air. I was able to get Jack off the couch. He seemed stoned, genuinely disoriented, as if he didn't recognize a slug was resting in his gut. I had no heart to confront Williams now, who was all brotherly affection as he waved us home from his driveway.

How to act when confronted by a homicidal case like Russell was unresolved, no disgrace there. I had swallowed a lot of fear and rage, an unmanning experience. But it was more the deviousness of Williams that impressed me as we walked back that night. At the least, what happened was staged, a racist psychodrama, with Jack offered up for white humiliation to feed the tape. He had been

duped, used as a means, and the hell with hurt feelings. Or any human consequence for that matter—for the fantasy back there in the basement fed a lot of impulses, including murder.

And then the voyeuristic vacancy of that story Williams had read.

Saturday broke warm and sunny. In the afternoon I drove a mile over to my brother's huge Tudor in Palmer Park and found him cleaning his garage. "I'm back here with the bugs," he called out, "the only ones who understand me." That had been true since Vietnam. And after a long week with patients at Henry Ford Hospital, he took refuge and strength in working his grounds. I returned from the kitchen with a Molson's, stretched out in a chaise lounge, and told him about the cast of characters in Steve Williams's basement last evening.

He listened, working a broom until I was through. Then he looked up. "Peter, yesterday the ants were marching across this garage mouth, so I did some stomping. At first they seemed oblivious, so I stomped some more. They scattered and then returned to drag off their dead, and returned for me to stomp them again. But after the fourth time, they all vanished from one end of the garage to the other. There's been no trace of them since."

"A learning curve there . . ."

"The point is that you and Jack ought to stay out of Williams's basement."

"It was hardly that dangerous."

"You know, your new pals remind me of when I was called to testify in court after the Bethal Church episode. This was a couple years after the '67 riots. Two white cops pulled up to the curb downtown to question four uniformed members of the Republic of New Africa totting M-14s. They were gunned down in a volley coming through the door of a church across the street. I happened to be working the ER that night, when they brought the cops in. One was DOA and the other wounded in the arm. The wounds made it clear the RNA was using weapons designed to maim and not just kill. I suppose their guerilla manual told them it takes four men to handle a wounded comrade, none a dead one. The arm wound of the one cop, it was amazing, his whole forearm was missing. A bullet had entered the dead cop high in the throat and left at the back of the pelvis, taking

all his organs with it. ‘We had a pail o’ blood,’ a black orderly told the court that day.”

“It sounds like dum-dums.”

“Yup.”

“I suppose if you’re going to be an urban revolutionary, may as well go all the way.”

“But this wasn’t a costume party.”

“And maybe Russell wasn’t just jive-assing. He might belong to the Republic of New Africa, for all I know...but Williams was something different.”

“You’re right...but I’m getting there.... Anyhow, there I was on the stand, and confronted by three slick smart black lawyers for the defense, who knows, they might have been the kin of Williams. They were trying to undermine my credibility by casting doubt on the time of death, a maneuver I wasn’t ready for. Obviously the guy was DOA. *Can’t you say exactly when Officer O’Brien died?* Not exactly, I said in truth, and they leapt on that equivocation. But I gave them an estimate: between five and ten minutes before his arrival at ER. They came right back, *How do you know that?* But now I had them on my turf. ‘With a small light,’ I told the court, ‘I looked into his eyes, at the tiny blood vessels in the back of the retina, which looks like the surface of the moon. These vessels reflect the general condition of the circulatory system. When the heart has just stopped, the blood in the retinal vessels coagulates momentarily into a string of rectangular globules. He had what we call in the ER, *boxcars.*’”

It was an image that convinced the court that day. And one that unfortunately defined my relations with Steve Williams in the years that followed down at Wayne State. Now and then I went to one of his readings, yet knowing his modus operandi, these occasions had all the artistic uplift of coagulated blood. I never knew social charm to fail him, whether aimed at students, faculty, or administrators, but somehow it just left them as globules on his string of self-promotion. We remained amiable as colleagues, but his orchestration of that evening in his basement made me feel I was reaching out to befriend someone who’d been dead about ten minutes.

Last I heard Williams had found a niche for which he had been predestined: a deracinated American writer in Paris.