

from *Wayfarer* · Leonard Harrison

“IT HAPPENED WHEN we was in our hideout and Gock was sayin’ what he saw in books. Like how water ’vaporate from the ground and go in clouds, and how the clouds get full and bust and pour out rain till they squeeze theyselves dry then disappear in ta nothin’. It happened when Gock was sayin’ it’s the sun what make the moon go glow and sparkle like a diamond rock at night. But I ain’t believe that, ’cause the sun don’t be ’round late at night. It happened when we was listenin’, a ways off, up our block: we could hear Spanish music and Spanish singin’. And the wind came like a song, soft and pretty, makin’ the clotheline swing between the buildings. It happened when some of us was makin’ the sandwiches, and some of us was watchin’ television—Bugs Bunny—our favorite show, and some of us was hearin’ Gock tell a story about a cloud.

“And all a sudden pieces of brick came rollin’, tumblin’ and yo-yoin’ over our way. And when Gock looked he put away his book, and went out in front of us to meet them three olda dudes comin’ our way. And me, I walked up and stood next to Gock, but everybody else was behind us.

“So Gock said, ‘What y’all want?’ real cool and slick-like, ’cause his voice was milk and sugar-like what made you wanna listen to him good.

“Then I moved myself a little step and rested on my leg and I said, ‘Yeah, watcha want?’

“But the one with a blue scarf ’round his head said, ‘What y’all got?’ He said it kinda smooth and sly, and we could see a smile on his face when he said, ‘Tell me what you got and I’ll tell you what we want.’ Then he put out bo’f his hands for his boys to slap him five. And they did, too, like they was all tuff and slick.

“And boy! I got hot to a ‘T’ inside me, like I was a ’bandon buildin’ all on fire, and I said, I said, ‘Yeah? Well we ain’t got nothin!’”

“Did you know them?”

“Yep, we knew ’em. The one doin’ the moufin’, his name was Railroad.”

“Railroad?”

“Uh-huh, he call hisself Railroad, ’cause his father he worked on a train and got pushed on a track and got kilt. Yep, he got kilt real bad. So he call hisself Railroad for his father.

“But so, he came up close and said, ‘Oh no?’—to us, you know— he said, ‘Oh no? Well what’s in them bags, look like grub to me.’

“And before I could breathe, I mean, before I could sneeze, ’cause I had to, I heard Gock say—after I sneezed, I mean— ‘that’s our shit, you dig it? So bop, and breeze.’ Gock was like poetry and he said, ‘This here’s our land, this here’s our territory, you understand. So trip, you dig it?’

“But Railroad just twisted his lips and said, ‘That was corny.’ Then Railroad came different: his eyes got small and his lips came closed and curled. His face got tight like he was chewin’ something hard to chew and had to stop. He was quiet, lookin’ at us. Everybody was tense and still, lookin’ at him. The wind came chilly, and we could hear the clothe and the sheets go snappin’ over our head. Then he said, ‘If y’all don’t wanna get hurt, y’all better cool the fuck out, that’s what I’m talkin’ ’bout.’

“And Gock said, ‘If anybody gonna get hurt, it’s you.’ Then Railroad got hisself close and Gock could only see his chest—’cause Railroad was in six grade, and he was lookin’ down at Gock like he was chewin’ rocks. Then he hit Gock in his face with his fist. But Gock, he just went back a little bit, and turned his face a little bit, then he got hisself set and hit Railroad back in his mouf. And when them other dudes saw Gock just stay there after he hit Railroad like that, they didn’t do nothin’, for a little while, and stayed in they spot: they felt something go in they stomach.

“Then Railroad hit Gock hard in his mouf and blood came. And, boy! I felt like ’lectric in my body, and I dived like a superman almos’ with my body. And I was on his back fast like you could throw a rock—that fast. And Railroad he was like a monster: he was twistin’, he was turnin’, he was growlin’ like Godzilla in that monster movie what be fightin’ little people. Then he got my arm and flew me like he was makin’ karate. I came to the ground, the ground came to me, and we crashed. I hurt my back, but I ain’t know till after. And then he got on top a’ me. I heard something click. I felt something cold and sharp on my neck. I made my body stiff like a pole and I could hardly breathe. Everybody froze and nobody moved. I saw Gock: his mouf was open, and I could see a dark spot where Railroad had knocked his toof out. His legs was spread like he wanted ta be Birdman and fly, but only he was in a make believe freezer.

“Then I looked at Railroad: his skin was brown, his eyes was black and squeezed, dark and mean and watery some. Then he moved the knife from my neck and hit me four whole times hard in my face: I could feel knuckles

in my eye. And I was wigglin' quick and fast, swigglin' hard and bad, like I was a mouse in a trap what was bleedin' but still breathin', 'cause I wanted ta live more and eat more and play some more. That's how I was, like a mouse in a trap what wanted ta live more.

"And blood was up my nose and on my face and Railroad said, 'Say sorry, lil' punk.'

"I was weak now and sore, and I said it like a baby or a girl, I said, 'Sorry.'

"And Railroad he wasn't fair 'cause he said, but louder this time, he said, 'Say it again.'

"And I could feel my heart go 'boom-boom, boom-boom' like a drum be and I said, 'Sorry.' I was cryin' when I said it, 'cause Railroad he wasn't fair.

"And he said, 'Yeah, you better.' Then he used my chest to get hisself up and said some more, he said, 'Next time, chump, I'll cut your fuckin' throat,' and he turned ta the rest of them and said, 'I'm Railroad John and nobody fucks with me, 'specially no lil' second grade punks.' He looked at Gock and said, 'You dig it?' And then they took our food and left, walkin' like they was all cool and tuff and slick.

"I got myself halfway up and was leanin' on my arm. Gock came over and knelt hisself down: I could see eeny, beeny pieces of glass and pebbles in his arm, round his elbow. But Gock he wasn't never worried 'bout hisself but 'bout other people and he said, 'You all right?' to me, you know.

"And I said, 'Yeah, I'm aw'right.' But I wasn't, 'cause I was feelin' sick and dizzy like I was goin' round and round—backwards maybe even—on a merry-go-round for one whole day and one whole night. I got up achin' and slow like I was old, but I wasn't 'cause I was only in the second grade. But still, I felt like a hundred or maybe a hundred and two but not a hundred and five. I could taste blood in my mouf so I spit. It came out glob and red. Gock turned his face, 'cause what I spit slided a little over garbage. Then I started walkin'. I was walkin' and I heard my name, but I just kept walkin'. Then I heard it again, I heard 'Black'—that was my nit-name, you know—I heard 'Black, where you going?' But I ain't say nothing in front of me and I ain't say nothing in back of me. I just kept walkin'."

"Because you was embarrassed and probably afraid too. And maybe now you was happy inside because they was gone. That dude Railroad and

his boys was gone. And you never did turn around either — the whole time you didn't. Because tears was coming down your face now, and you couldn't stop 'em neither, not then and not a long time after, right?"

"Somethin' like that."

"And deep, deep down inside you was shamed, because you never lost a fight in your life, and you didn't know how to take it. You didn't know how to take it, losing a fight, right?"

"Ma only time."

"And so you wouldn't turn around when that dude called you. He even called you by what you like to be called, because it tells something about you and you like the way it sounds: Black. You didn't even turn around when that dude called you."

"'Cause my eyes was puff and I was cryin'. Then I heard Gock say, 'Let 'em go, Homeboy, he be all right.' So I kept walkin' till I reached the avenue.

"And no matter where I turned or how I looked to see, all I saw was Railroad: Railroad's face, and it sent chills in me. And I couldn't think of nothin' else or nothin' not else but how my friends had saw me. I felt real bad. I felt real scared. I felt real weak. I felt littlier than little Bobby Jake what shine people's shoes for money. I felt even littlier than little Bobby Jake. And while I was walkin', I didn't care 'bout the clouds and rain no more, and I ain't care 'bout the moon no more: it could be out or not be out, I ain't care. And I didn't feel good when I heard Spanish music and Spanish singin', and I wasn't happy when I saw my best coconut candy in that winda' store. Nope, nothin' could a' made me happy, not even all the bubble gum in the world.

"So I just kept walkin' — walkin' and thinkin', walkin' and thinkin' 'bout Railroad. And I 'magine myself punchin' Railroad, in his face. And I 'magine myself kickin' Railroad, in his face, in his mouf — hard in his mouf. And then I saw people try ta stop me from beatin' Railroad and hurtin' Railroad, but nobody couldn't stop me. Not even a cop, and not even Mr. Parse who owned the bakery shop, and he was the biggest man in the block, what weighed three hundred pounds. He weighed three hundred pounds and not even Mr. Parse could stop little ole me. 'Cause I was strong like Sampson in the Bible what beat up a thousand people by hisself — now! I was like Sampson punchin' Railroad in his mouf. And I saw me draggin' Railroad through the street; his head was bangin' stuff,

but I ain't care. And he was beggin' me and beggin' me, but I wasn't nice but mean more and I said, 'Shut up, little baby.' But he wouldn't 'cause his face was hurt and I ain't care. His whole face was hurt and I ain't even care. Then I went ta a fire station and got a fire truck. I was Sampson and nobody couldn't stop me: I got a fire truck. Then I threw Railroad in the street and ran over him, and I blew my siren so nobody could hear 'em scream and try ta save him. And that was the end of Railroad by me. While I was walkin', that's what I was thinin'—like a dream.

“And before I knew, I was in a elevator in our buildin' ridin' up to our house. When you come in our house, the first thing you see is our picture of Jesus on our wall. He got long hair and a stringy beard. His eyes is brown and follow you. It don't matter where you go, his eyes follow you. And behind his head is a light shinin' down on a mountain. And there's angels everywhere, and there's flowers everywhere, and there's peace. But the main thing is his eyes, 'cause they follow you: they follow you. And when I came in our house, I kept my eyes lookin' down so I couldn't see our picture. There was a closet in our kitchen, and I was goin' through it fast, throwin' stuff—here and over there. Then I found it. I found it. My father's sailor knife, I found it underneaf some junk an' stuff. I found it. It was hard to open but it was sharp: I felt the blade with ma finger, it was sharp. And right then, my oldest sister Trisha came and saw me—my face, and me with a knife and she said, 'Give it here.' And I said, 'No,' movin' away. I said, 'No,' and I ran to our door and I was gone: zoom! I was on my way down our steps and I heard my sister say, 'Go 'head git yourself kilt.' And I could hear her voice go after itself, it said, 'Go 'head git yourself kilt,' like the hallway itself was a voice and it breathe.

“Then I got outside and I was runnin'—runnin', runnin', runnin' with all my speed. I was hot, even in ma eyes and toes and ma knees. And all a sudden, I stopped, and ma breath went 'cause I saw Railroad 'cross the street. I saw even Railroad and his boys 'cross the street. So I bent myself low, and sneaked behind some cars, and went quick inside that building where Railroad live. Sweat was comin' from ma head, and I peeked out the door ta watch and see.

“Railroad was teasin' Peek-a-boo with a bottle. They called him Peek-a-boo, 'cause he stay at the bottom of steps and look up ladies' dresses. That's how he got his name: Peek-a-boo. And I heard Railroad say, 'Come and git it. What's the matter, can't you git it? Here, I'm givin' it

to you.’ But every time Peek-a-boo reached, Railroad pulled away, till Peek-a-boo got so mad that he got hisself in a old time boxin’ stand. But when he swunged his fist, Railroad moved back a little bit, and Peek-a-boo fell like a bunch a’ old throw-away clothes and wouldn’t move. For a long time, seemed like, he wouldn’t move—’cept his breath—and he looked heavy on hisself. Then Railroad said, ‘Okay, no more playin’. Here,’ and he put the bottle on the ground. Peek-a-boo looked around: up the block, across the street, inside the grocery. Then he crawled on his knees, like a dog or a cat, and picked the bottle up to his face. He stood up slow and held it close to his chest, lookin’ down the avenue for a spell. Then he looked at Railroad: he moved his lips but no words came from his mouf. He put out his arm and pointed at all three of them, but still no words came from his mouf. He walked away, holdin’ that bottle to his chest and mumblin’ words to hisself.

“Then I saw Railroad shake hands with his boys in a funny way: they hit each other in they chest and hit each other on they arm, then took a long time shakin’ hands in different ways, and when Railroad turned to his boys to say some more, I hurried on ma toes and ran down the hall, where the light was dim and it was dusty and kinda dark, and got myself underneaf the stairs. I heard my breath come loud and clear and I could a’ swore Railroad heard it too, ’cause he was comin’ down the hall, but Railroad was whistlin’ the song ‘Michael row your boat ashore . . . ’ and drummin’ his fingers on the thin, metal walls. And when I peeked from underneaf the steps, I could see his shadow gettin’ bigger on the wall. My heart jumped and I felt a cool, nightish breeze blowin’ in from the window above me. Then something went inside me—I ain’t see no light and I ain’t see no dreams. I just scrabbled quick and fast from underneaf them steps, wigglin’ ma butt to help me. Railroad was on a stair, and when he looked back he seed me, but late—way too late—’cause I had stabbed him. I could feel the sailor knife go quick and easy in his leg like you slip a nickel in a bubble gum machine. Then he fell back and almos’ hit me, ’cept I moved: he crashed in the hall and screamed, loud, so people in the building could hear him easy. Then he curled and swiggled like a snake on the ground what was wounded and angry-angry, and I saw blood what was black!”

“Blood? Black?”

“Uh-huh, black, Jack, ’cause ma mind was a mist and a fog, and the

light bulb was bare, almos' dark, makin' the hallway a cave what was all over shade and green and dim. It was black, Jack, it was blood. And I was like a picture on a wall, and I was starin', starin', starin' at Railroad swig-glin' on the floor. My throat was dry, my eyes was stretched, my heart went 'boom-boom, boom-boom' like that, 'cause I was so, so scared and all alone. That's how I was, just like a picture up on a wall. Then I started movin, seemed like a invisible hand was movin' me to dust the wall 'cause it was dirty. Then I started runnin', bumpin' one wall with this shoulder and bumpin' the other wall with ma other shoulder, till I got to the door and busted out like a cowboy what was throwed out a bar."

"A saloon, you mean."

"Yeah, a s'loon. And I jumped the whole stoop steps and landed in the street. For a while I ain't move. Cars came honkin' and beepin', honkin' and beepin', and swervin' round me. I could feel they wind wrap me like a coat, 'cept only chillin' me. I moved to ma left: cars was comin'. I moved to ma right: more cars and a truck was comin'. Then I saw the tunnel what trains run on top of, rumblin' and screechin'; so I ran my fastest and stopped inside it, holdin' the ruff and rocky stuff with ma hands, and lookin' back to see if somebody seed me, 'cause maybe a lady or somebody had saw me. Everything was still and quiet, 'cept cars speedin'. Everything was calm and sweet, 'cept I could hear ma breath go and I could feel ma heart thump. Then I knew a train was comin', 'cause I could feel a shakin' motion—I could feel a tremblin' motion with ma hands.

"Then I heard a voice in my head: it was Gock and he said, 'They get your fingerprints then they come lookin' for you. They call it investigatin' and they find you, it don't matter how long it take, they find you and put you in jail.' Then my mind made a picture: there was bars in front of me and a guard watchin' me, lookin' mean, and he had a stick what to beat me. I was cold and hungry, all because they didn't feed me and give me heat. I was in a corner what was dark: I was lonely and misery. And nobody didn't care, even if I died, not ma mutha or nobody. And I was real, real sad 'cause not even my mutha didn't care. And I saw my sister Trisha shakin' her finger and she said, 'I told you. Now you got what was comin' to you,' she said, 'I told you.' Then I got more scared 'cause when I looked around, I was the onliest kid in the whole place, but everybody else, everybody else was old.

“Then I was back in the tunnel, ’cause the train came zoomin’ up above me, noisily, and the wheels came a-screechin’, crazily, like the whole train ’sploded like ‘BOOM!’ and went spillin’ off the tunnel and crashed itself in the street, to pieces. And it was loud like thunder on top the tunnel, rollin’, and sparks was flyin’ and steel was screechin’ and all what was missin’ was pourin’ rain and bunchy clouds and stormy breeze — and I ain’t lyin’. Then I opened up ma mouf and screamed ’cause I knew I was down there. I was way, way, way, way down there. And then I shivered up and down me, even in my toes. And fast as I could, I shot like a bullet, boy, from outta that tunnel and ran up Park Avenue all the way home. When I got to our building I didn’t go in, ’cause I ain’t wanna see our picture of Jesus lookin’ at me.”

“I would’ve been scared if I was you.”

“I was scared.”

“And I would’ve been shamed if I was you.”

“I was shame. Me, myself, and I—I was scared and I was shame, ’cause his eyes follow you.”

“And I would’ve been nervous too, because that dude Railroad, you might’ve kilt him.”

“I might a’ kilt ’em. And all that time I was sittin’ on that bench my mind was trickin’ me, makin’ pictures ta scare me, like showin’ me Railroad dead in that hall. Way, way back there with hardly no light, I could see Railroad dead in that hall.”

“And then you knew what you did was wrong, but then again you knew what you did was right, because that dude Railroad was nothing but trouble. Even that wino knew that dude Railroad was nothing but trouble.”

“Peek-a-boo. Everybody call him Peek-a-boo.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, Peek-a-boo.”

“And everytime I heard somethin’ I jumped and was ready to run, even if it was just a rollin’ can or maybe a piece a paper scratchin’ the ground, I jumped. Then I sat myself down again, tryin’ to be invisible and hardly breathin’. But I saw somethin’!—a dog or somethin’, and I jumped like a scared-dy cat.”

“Then you started feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I felt sorry for what I did. Even if Railroad was a trouble-maker, I felt sorry for what I did.”

“My best friend felt sorry for what he did.”

“Then I pictured our picture of Jesus in ma head: he had long hair and a stringy beard, his eyes was brown and follow you. And behind his head was a light shinin’ down on a mountain. And there’s angels everywhere, and there’s flowers everywhere, and there’s peace.”

“But, Roy, could I say something?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I wonder if Jesus ever forgave you for what you did.”

“Yeah, Bobo, I wonda . . .”