

The White Man Asleep in the Black Man's Yard

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At dusk on a hot Saturday evening at the outskirts of a small rural Alabama town inhabited only by blacks, a freight train came to a halt and from one of the cars a feeble young white man emerged. He looked around momentarily then crossed a tan field and joined the dirt road which ran parallel to the tracks, shuffling slowly toward the receding daylight.

Uneven, stringy hair covered his eyes and he wore a drab outfit comprised of a dusty blazer, checkered shirt, and ochre work pants. There was a small sack slung over his shoulder but he seemed so lost in thought that someone could have easily snatched it away without him even noticing.

Several minutes later a beat-up old convertible carrying four young blacks went speeding by in a cloud of dust. It immediately came to a jerking halt and lurched back toward him in reverse.

“What's up, cracker!”

“Where you goin' with that sweet-ass knapsack?”

“Out for a hike? Ain't no mountains 'round here!”

The white man had paused and now stared at them in bewilderment.

“Did you just call me... a cracker?”

The guy in the front passenger seat spat on the ground. “Sure as hell did,” he said in a slow Southern drawl.

“Yeah,” one of the two younger kids in back chimed in, “you're a goofy-ass cracker.” They all began to laugh.

The man stepped close to the car and the two boys in back hoisted themselves onto the top of their seats to face him. He peered at each one curiously.

“And a cracker is... white?”

The guys in the car grimaced at each other and laughed even harder.

“Yeah, man. A cracker is white. *You* are white!”

“*I* am white? You think that I'm white?”

The driver, oldest in the group, was getting agitated. “What's your damn problem, man?” he snapped. “Look at yourself. You're white as all hell.”

The white man leaned his head back to the sky, threw his arms out to the side, and shouted, “I am white! I! Am! White!” Then he lunged toward one of the kids in back and locked him in an embrace, whispering, “Thank you so much.”

“Man, get off me!” the boy cried as he squirmed free.

“No, you don't understand—”

“Hey man, white is aight, gay no way!”

The stranger then leaned in to hug the front seat passenger when he heard a click and felt something touch his forehead. The driver was holding a gun.

“Get your ass away from my car, *white boy*.”

The man, rather than being frightened, stepped back with a big smile. “White boy? Yow!” And despite his frailty he began to run down the road with leaps and twirls and kicks as he chirped like a wild bird.

The driver was still angry. His passengers were frozen.

“Ain't gonna laugh in my face,” he growled, wrenching the car around with his pistol trained on the stranger.

“Troy,” the guy next to him said, “don't do nothin' stupid. He's just crazy.”

“A crazy *white* boy!” the two in back cheered, and a smile broke out on Troy's face.

“Alright. Let me just mess with him though. Chris, take the wheel.”

They switched seats and Chris eased the car up behind the stranger who was still jumping in the road ahead. Troy leaned over the side with his gun, fired a shot into the air, shouted something about how did he like being white now, then sent two rounds toward the man's feet.

The white man, seeing the dirt kick up around his ankles after each shot, made a motion of victory with his fist, roared, "Oh yeah, I like it!" and ran even faster down the road.

The car sped by and turned around to make another pass. As Troy hoisted himself up again and took aim, this time weighing whether to still keep playing with the guy or actually pop him one in the leg, the car was greeted with such a maniacal shriek of "I am white!" that he and the others just stared blankly as they passed this lunatic who was dancing and twirling his way not to the circus but heading directly into the heart of an all-black Alabama town on a hot summer night.

For the next several hours reports were sketchy. Old Sondra Washington was watering the plants on her porch when she swore she saw a phantom run through her yard. People dining on a restaurant patio said a young white man greeted them, inquired as to how their meals were, and then informed them that he was white before scampering off into the night. Nobody seemed to catch his name. (Even a couple of the town drunks later admitted to having celebrated with the man by shaking a leg and shouting that *they too* were white.) And the Reverend Coles, who was out for a quiet walk meditating on his Sunday sermon, also saw the pale stranger come at him from out of the darkness to shake his hand vigorously with assurances that he was white, only to disappear so quickly that the reverend could not even send him off with a "God Bless."

As this mystery man made his rounds through the small town concern began to percolate because they very well could not have some crazy person accosting residents at all hours of the night. There was simply no telling who he was or what he would do next—all they knew, and this fact was certain, was that he was white.

Meanwhile Keisha Smith was arguing with her boyfriend Wayne in the small front yard of her grandfather's house, where she stayed some weekends to keep him company.

"Listen, Keisha," Wayne was saying, "it didn't mean anything."

"Then why'd you do it?"

"I'm sorry, baby. I shouldn't have done it. But hey, I only kissed her."

"Just like you *only* kissed Theresa and Stephanie."

"So?"

"So maybe I should just kiss the next man who happens to walk past the gate?"

"Sure, why not?" he laughed.

"Oh, you make me so mad..."

Just then a stranger came tearing toward them with fists pumping from the back of the property and in a flash Keisha blocked his path, grabbed his face with both hands, and pressed her lips to his. The man staggered back and tripped over a hose, regained himself, said quietly, "That was my first kiss," then fainted. Wayne stormed off.

A somewhat dazed Keisha found herself standing over the collapsed man who was sprawled out next to a row of bushes. She hadn't seen many white people in person before, let alone kissed one—it had been an act of madness and it was all Wayne's fault for getting her so upset in the first place! He was always fooling around and in this spontaneous moment of revenge her brain simply saw that a man was here and she must kiss him.

Now for the first time she really looked at the young man, his soft pale face, his thin and unimposing body—she felt drawn toward him as if to a sick kitten, both precious and vulnerable.

"Keisha, he dead?"

Nosy Ms. Davis from down the street was at the picket fence.

“I don't think so.”

“Know who he is?”

“No, ma'am.”

“Better get your granddaddy.”

So she went inside and roused her grandfather with a hasty explanation—somehow she forgot to mention the kiss—and brought him out into the yard.

By now a handful of people who had been trying to track the white man down had arrived after hearing that this is where his mad dash had ended. As they pieced it all together some wanted to rouse him immediately for an explanation. But the old man intervened.

“Now hold on,” Calvin Smith said. “What if we wake him up and he starts freaking out again? We'd better let him sleep off whatever drugs he's on.”

“By the way,” someone wanted to know, “why'd he stop running here?”

“Keisha?”

She blushed and looked away. “I kissed him.”

“What on Earth! But why?”

“Oh, Wayne and I were fighting again... It doesn't matter.”

“But then what happened?”

“He fainted.”

“Fainted?”

She smiled. “He said it was his first kiss, then he just fell down. I don't know!”

Calvin stepped toward the group standing in his yard and said, “Folks, none of this makes any sense. Let's sleep on it. Go home, I'll keep an eye on him, and we'll figure this out in the morning.”

After the crowd had gone Calvin and Keisha knelt over the crumpled body which had not moved a muscle and now breathed softly.

“Well Keisha, at least you didn't kill him.”

“Do you think we should move him inside?”

“No, miss! He might not *look* dangerous but let's not get carried away. He'll be just fine out here in the yard tonight.” As they rose he added, “Besides, I wouldn't want you taking advantage of him, huh!”

They went into the house, but about ten minutes after all the lights had gone out the front door opened and Calvin slipped into his rocking chair on the porch. He gazed at the unconscious man strewn out in the grass and whispered several times, “What are you doing here?” as he rocked himself to sleep.

The next morning several neighborhood children were gathered around the body debating whether or not he was dead, while the bravest among them poked at him with a stick. Calvin, stirred by the sound of their giggling voices, grumpily shooed them away and jostled the man.

“Come on now, time to wake up.”

After a few minutes of prodding he half-dragged the man into his living room, set him down on the couch, then brought in a tray of coffee and muffins. “Now tell me,” Calvin began as he sat down, “what's going on with you? What are you doing around here?”

All of the incredible vitality the stranger had shown throughout the previous evening was gone and as he sat staring listlessly ahead it seemed impossible that this was the same man who had run amok through the town.

“Here today,” he mumbled. “There yesterday. Somewhere else tomorrow. Does any of it matter?”

“But how'd you end up in *my* town?”

“Freight train.”

“What in the hell is a scrawny white boy like you doing riding the rails in Alabama?”

The stranger's face twitched and his eyes momentarily widened, but then he breathed easy and sat back. “I am white... but I'm not.”

“Enough with these riddles! No white people live within thirty, forty miles of here but apparently you went running through town last night acting like the mayor—so give me some straight answers! Who are you?”

“My name is Jamal.”

Calvin coughed. “A *white* Jamal?”

“My father felt guilty for all the bad things white people had done to blacks. He wanted to make amends and heal the divisions, so he named me Jamal.”

“And your mother went along with this?”

“Oh, yes. But she got sick and died a long time ago. When I was eight my dad painted himself in blackface and hit other white people with a whip in front of the courthouse. They said he was a danger and locked him up, then sent me to live with my aunt. One time when she took me to see him, he hugged me and said I was the best Jamal of them all. He hung himself two weeks later. I wish I had the courage for that.”

“You don't mean that.”

Jamal sat still and feeble, never touching his coffee or muffin.

“I hate my life. And everybody's always hated me. In school, the white kids didn't trust me and the blacks thought I was making fun of them. So they all beat me up.”

“And your aunt?”

“She treated me like an animal that had to be fed. In her mind it was like father, like son.”

Calvin leaned in. “Jamal, did it ever occur to you that your dad was just plain crazy?”

“But it was already too late. I was a white boy named Jamal and nobody forgave me for that. On my eighteenth birthday I went to the courthouse to change my name to Ryan. When the clerk read the application he laughed in my face, so I went home.”

“But you still haven't told me how you got all the way out here.”

“Well, after that I sat in my room for three years. Then when my aunt let her new boyfriend move in she gave me some money and said to leave forever. So I packed some clothes, walked through town, saw a parked freight train, and got on. I rode for a while, got off, looked around, then took another one. There's no place for me so I keep moving. I'll be out of your way soon.”

Calvin sat in a state of saddened shock. “How long have you been living like this?”

“A year, probably longer. I'm not sure what month it is.”

“And now what?”

“I don't know,” Jamal said, putting his head in his hands. “I'm tired. It's all so confusing...”

“All because of a name.”

“This damn name.”

Calvin scratched his chin in thought. “But what about last night? From what I hear you seemed pretty sure about who and *what* you were.”

“When those guys said I was white—everything got clear and I just felt free!” Jamal clenched his jaw and his pupils seemed to recede into themselves. “But now that's over.”

“You know what your problem is? You've got no spirit—*no guts*. And that's got nothing to do with this 'Jamal' business,” Calvin grumbled. “At some point a man runs out of excuses and he's got to take action. Well?”

“There's nothing to say.”

Calvin and Jamal sat in silence for nearly half an hour until the townsfolk, who had shared personal anecdotes about their encounters with the wild white man and now had a rough timeline of events, began to gather outside the house. A knock at the front door drew Calvin from his chair.

“They're getting fussy out here,” a friend whispered through the cracked door. “You'd better tell'em something.”

So Calvin stepped out onto the porch, closed the door behind him, and addressed the crowd.

“This young man is in pain. Life played a cruel joke on him but he's too weak to fight back. He would let you beat him but wouldn't smile if you embraced him as a brother...”

Keisha, who had spent the night brooding, was dressing to meet her parents at church when she entered the hallway and overheard most of the conversation between her grandfather and the stranger whom she had kissed just hours before. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she envisioned his tormented life, one without the love of family and community she had always known. Why would God let anyone suffer so much?

Then, in the ensuing silence, Keisha lost herself in a swirl of thoughts about the world beyond this small town, what plans God had for her life, and her frustrations in love. Wayne was breaking her heart—why couldn't she find a good man? Then she thought crazy thoughts about this strange white man, this white Jamal, who had never known love or had an hour's peace. *She* was capable of these things, was ready to give them—was this what love at first sight felt like?

The knock on the front door jolted her out of this reverie, and after her grandfather had gone onto the porch she felt herself float into the living room and kneel beside the catatonic Jamal.

“I heard your story. All these terrible things happened to you but they couldn't turn you into a bad person. Isn't that wonderful?” She looked down at her clenched hands. “All I want is a good

life with my family serving God. You wouldn't have the courage to send me away if I cooked for you, or took you on walks, would you?"

"No."

"Or if I treated you with kindness every hour of every day?"

"No."

"Or if I kissed you again."

"No."

She leaned toward him and applied a small quiet kiss to his cheek. He still did not move or look at her. Moments later the front door opened and Calvin leaned in.

"Jamal, come out here, please. They want to see you."

The ashen young man rose slowly and slunk out onto the porch, followed by Keisha, who stayed just inside by the door.

Calvin again addressed the crowd. "See, he isn't so wild now. Show some compassion, open your arms to this poor white boy named Jamal."

Murmurs began to spread of how sad he looked and soon all apprehension had left the group. "You're welcome here," someone said. "Stay!" shouted another. Others echoed these kind words.

Jamal was looking down at his tattered shoes when he began to sense something foreign, a feeling of warmth not quite inside or outside of his body. The beginnings of a smile were starting to form when an instinct triggered somewhere deep within and a familiar old voice reminded him of all that he had ever known.

He looked to Calvin. "I'm sorry," he croaked. "I can't."

As Jamal descended the porch steps a path cleared and he walked through the small yard, out the gate, and down the street alone. No one dared move or speak as the exciting mystery came to such a somber end.

Keisha, momentarily stunned, threw open the front door to chase after him but was caught in her grandfather's soft but sure embrace.

“No, sweetheart. We've got to let him go.”

“Don't let him leave,” she pleaded. “We can help him get better!”

“He's got to figure it out for himself.”

Calvin led her to the room where she stayed and she collapsed onto the bed in tears. He shut the door and left her to her cry it out of her system.

An hour later the solitary figure of a man could be seen slowly emerging into a wide open field next to the rail line. The morning sun already burned bright and hot yet he dragged his feet as if in a daze. Just as he began to cross the dirt road near the tracks a speeding car barreled toward him and skidded to a stop at the last second. The man stood petrified.

A young black woman leaped from the vehicle and ran toward him with her arms flailing.

“Why are you running away?” she screamed. “You're not the only lonely person in the world, you know!”

She smacked his arms and shoulders, pawed at his chest, kicked his shins, but he did not speak or try to stop her. He just stared straight ahead. She began to hit him harder, bopping him on the nose twice, wrenching his shirt with her fingers, shaking him violently. Still he did nothing.

“Why won't you fight back?”

She ripped his coat sleeve.

“Just *say* something!”

Her face collapsed onto his shoulder.

“I'm right *here!*” she wailed.

And now he was down in the tall yellow grass, clenching his eyes but still taking the beating obediently, when she pulled back. A clear thought calmed her mind and she understood that this abuse was simply more of the same for him, so if it was acceptance and love he needed that too must flood over him.

In mid-slap she grabbed his cheeks and began covering his face with kisses. Yet even then, as she kissed him long and passionately, he did not react in any way. Finally she sobbed, “I will not stop until you do something about it. Hit me, throw me off... Show me you're alive!”

For Jamal, lying tense with his hands down at his sides while she affectionately stroked his face, there came a crack in the ice, a glimmer of hope as he relived their first encounter and the feelings her touch had ignited. With his eyes still closed, his mouth still not responding to the kisses, he raised a hand and found Keisha’s arm. He squeezed it tightly for a long time.

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Afterward by the Author

Because “The White Man Asleep in the Black Man's Yard” deals with race and currently our nation feels like a powder keg ready to explode into social unrest, I wanted to lay out its historical timeline as well as discuss what inspired the narrative style. I vaguely remember the title coming to me as part of a dream in the early 2000s, then developing the plot during downtime while working as an extra on movie sets, and finishing a first draft in 2005. An important revision was completed within a few years but ultimately I left the story to languish on the shelf.

Besides being preoccupied with trying to take on a city as big and indifferent as Los Angeles in my 20s, I think the most compelling reason why I never pursued “getting it out there” was that the underlying premise just seemed too preposterous for readers to buy into. Remember that this story was conceived and written long before the country pinned its hopes on Obama's presidency to unite the races, the Black Lives Matter, “teens,” and “knockout game” phenomena, as well as the OCD mush that social media and smartphones have turned everyone's brains into.

Due to the Social Justice Warrior mind-parasite that has infested our culture I recently determined it was time to revisit and finalize this story which has always been important to me—now that it is officially *not* too ridiculous to publish. In fact, despite ultimately deciding against setting it in a particular year, my prescience was confirmed when I stumbled upon a handwritten note from 2003-04 that says, “This story could be set in the future. His father was caught up by the liberal guilt of the 90s and the main character is journeying in 2015 or so.”

But it is important to note that while this story does start by envisioning the Leftist notion of “white guilt” taken to an absurd extreme, unlike my revoltingly dystopian piece “Whose Pride?” here the political is just the starting point for a more varied, entertaining, and ultimately sympathetic and hopeful tale.

Back in the early 2000s when I was finding my voice as a writer I developed the two main concepts which fueled the narrative style and content of my stories: “modern fairy tales” and “realities colliding.” The most important inspiration for my fairy tale pacing is the German Romantic Heinrich von Kleist, whose breathless style is incredibly efficient and forward-moving despite how dense with information each paragraph is. I have always been in awe of his classic short stories “The Marquise of O—” and “The Betrothal in Santo Domingo,” and I would be remiss not to acknowledge some parallels between my story and the unfathomably ahead-of-its-time “Betrothal.”

Beyond fairy tales there are two other influences worth mentioning. When I happened to reread Faulkner's "Light in August" last year for the first time in at least 15 years I couldn't help but notice some similarities between the haunted Joe Christmas and my own main character. I also recall the 1993 version of the film "Kaspar Hauser" and how the ashen protagonist expressed his mental torment in a similarly stiff, dissociative manner. Hopefully these inspirations only served to help flavor the "White Man Asleep" story which is otherwise completely from my own imagination.

In closing, it's bittersweet for any artist to release a work over a decade after its initial creation. Were the years wasted or is the timing just now right? Having pursued so many paths all in good faith I now understand that a young man's creative talent has to be fortified by participating in the real world—only by getting my hands dirty and learning how to endure disappointment could I now at age 37 be confident that both my ideas and my craft are strong. Plus, now I'm eager to polish off other stories that either once seemed too "out there" or stalled because I was simply not mature enough to steer them into port.

-Philip Wyeth
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