

RACIST STORY NO. 1

**STOPOVER
IN A
SMALL
TOWN**

Obie

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Obie

Stewart turned to the last page of his 14-year-old, twice-filmed novel, which now included 345 pages omitted from its earlier printings, and read the final paragraph. “As the acrid haze dissipated, like a vast toxic ghost seeping back into the netherworld, the three black Americans stood atop Boulder’s highest building and smiled as one. The battle, the fight, the war was over. They were the victors. Not just them but every member of their proud, long-suffering race. Portland, America itself, was now theirs to do with as they pleased. For them the future was a wide open road and, as they gazed upon it, they saw that it was good.”

He closed the book in the pretentiously unhurried way all “up themselves” authors did after a public reading and waited for the world’s greatest high: validation. He got it. With fewer than 20 persons in attendance, there wasn’t much of it, but every last one of them put their hands together for him. In just under two weeks he would hit the big 6-0, and he needed to know he still mattered as a writer and as a human being. Apparently he did. Funny how not even 38 bestselling novels could banish his self-doubt.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you. Morgan Freeman I’m not, but at least I made it through this reading without the hiccups. Shouldn’t have scarfed that double cheeseburger before my last signing.”

His hilarious remark garnered a mild titter from some of the audience. Five of them if he’d done a head count. But that was okay. He’d already got his applause hit. Everything he got after that was merely a bonus.

Marlene, the owner of the shop, a matronly lass pushing 50, with a smile like a first-prize win in Powerball, joined him behind the lectern, chuffed with the turnout. It was a big crowd for a small bookshop. His six-four towered over her five-three. “God bless you all for coming,” she said. “Mr. Brenin—”

“Stewart, please.”

“*Stewart* will happily sign your books now. Just form a queue at the table here if you’d be so kind.”

“Multiple copies are welcome. I love signing multiple copies.”

Marlene laughed. “Yes, he does.”

The last fan in line was a cute blond mom in a red, patterned bandana and

a denim shirt that hung over her 501s. Her husband, a former jock whose physique was being redefined by extra helpings, stood on the sidelines, cradling their slumbering baby daughter. “I love dystopian novels,” she said with a Southern lilt.

Dystopian novel?! Are you kidding me?!

“I like to think of it as a novel about hope,” Stewart said, “about the triumph of the human spirit.” He searched her indigo eyes for a flicker of understanding.

No flicker.

She gave him a fangirl smile.

Must be a Republican.

He poised a felt-tipped pen over the title page of her hardcover copy of the book. “What would you like me to write?”

“Oh. Um. How about, um . . .” Her fine features distorted into an uncertain grimace. “Nice to meet you, Carol?”

“Sounds good to me.” He took the liberty of excluding the question mark.

Some of the things fans had asked him to write over the years ran the gamut from trite to the FBI’s Most Wanted. One wildly staring fellow wanted a book dedicated to his deceased cat, which he’d brought to a signing in a green garbage bag strapped to his head.

Stewart returned the young mom’s book. “There you go.”

With a breathless “Thank you” she clutched it to her denim-clad bosom, as if it were a long-lost family heirloom. She went and showed it to hubby.

Marlene and Stewart bathed in the afterglow of a morning that had gone euphorically well. “I can’t thank you enough for this,” she said.

“Just doing my bit to ensure bookshops like this survive.” He rose from his chair at the signing table. “Well, it looks like I’m done here.”

A car door slammed shut, rattling the shop’s display window. Into the shop marched a lanky, 20-something Steinway-black man in less black stovepipe trousers, a white short-sleeve shirt, and a bright red beret. His gaunt, dreadfully intense face made a beeline for the table. When it got there, it and the rest of him halted with barely a millimeter to spare.

Marlene hopped backward. She was fearful he might have kept going.

Stewart plopped in the chair, gunned down by a pair of stark-white, fiery-

veined eyes.

“You da writa?” the black fan asked in perhaps a Nigerian accent.

Bracing for impact, Stewart said, “Yes.”

“Put it on dis.”

A brutalized paperback copy of *Paradise Redux* landed unceremoniously on the table.

Stewart flashed an amenable grin. “Sure thing.” He opened the creased, terribly faded cover. There was a cigarette burn in the title page and, unbelievably, a pubic hair lodged in the inside spine. He glanced uneasily up at the black fan. The black fan nodded. Go ahead! Go ahead!

Avoiding the cigarette burn and staying miles away from the pubic hair, Stewart signed the page. As no message had been requested—and he wasn’t about to ask for one—he wrote: All the best, Stewart Brenin. Generic but acceptable.

“Enjoy,” he said, easing the physically and possibly sexually abused book toward the black fan with the tip of his index finger. He dared not pick it up lest he dislodge the pubic hair. The thought of the wiry DNA sample touching his flesh made him queasy.

Grinning avariciously, the black fan held the book up. “Eeeebay!” He then turned and marched outside.

Stewart and Marlene watched after him. That he hadn’t purchased a book or thanked Stewart for signing his copy was neither discussed nor mentioned. Enlightened times called for enlightened silence.

The display window shook again. The black fan settled into the driver’s seat of a gleaming silver Lexus coupe parked outside. With a curt screech, the luxury ride zoomed off, and so did he.

This too was neither discussed nor mentioned.

Stewart’s eyes stung and his arms ached. He’d been riding his Easy Rider replica Harley-Davidson into the blazing afternoon sun for almost three hours. He needed to take a break, unfold his legs. An ice-cold beer would be a dream come true, as would a gas station. He was on less than a quarter of a tank.

The infinite ribbon of asphalt he blasted along was flanked by farm land, vast green and straw-colored expanses, mostly the latter, divvied up by

enough wire fencing to corral the universe. He hadn't seen another soul since the two Arab-looking guys sending Allah their love on the side of a road 60 miles ago. It was lonely out in space.

He glanced at his watch. Five to four. Provided he found a gas station—from memory, there were at least three along this route—he'd make it into Taylor's by six. By seven he'd be sitting down to a plate of piping-hot beef brisket in plum sauce at The Wooden Spoon, the town's choicest eatery. His needy gut burbled in anticipation.

Small town America. May it live long and prosper.

Was that a sign up ahead?

**GAS
STATION
1-MILE**

Allllriiiight!

Disappointment grabbed Stewart in a bear hug when he saw the circular Texaco sign lying, with a pie slice missing, at the base of its weather-dulled frame. He pulled up alongside a cement platform once home to gas pumps. Someone had air-conditioned the station shop with a brick. Inside was nothing but broken glass and abandoned fittings.

The men's room door bore a spray-painted 666 and some lame death metal band's lame satanic logo. It was ajar. Despite a growing need to pee, he declined the invitation. Whatever bacterial horror show lay within was something a much braver man would have to investigate.

Onward.

The Stars-n-Stripes was clean out of gas. He'd coasted to a stop at the crest of a hill. The road twisted its way deep down into a heavily wooded valley below. He considered staying put. Approaching motorists could see him better on a hill in crystalline sunlight than in the murky shadows cast by all that *Lord of the Rings* greenery. If only there were approaching motorists.

His cell phone was comatose. He should have recharged it at the

bookshop. No roadside assistance for him.

He contemplated the spot where the road became forest. What if somewhere not far beyond it was a gas station? An *operating* gas station. With a big push from gravity, he might be able to roll a mile on the Harley. Should there be no gas station within that distance, he could always flag down a motorist. One had to come along eventually. His dorky mug was famous. Somebody, a fan even, was bound to stop.

Running as fast as his cramp-prone legs and middle-aged paunch would allow, he pushed the Harley to where the hill dipped, and jumped in the saddle. His left testicle griped about the awkward landing.

The hill's plunging grade made for a daredevil descent. He didn't want to use the brakes. Not if he could avoid it. The greater his momentum, the farther he'd travel. But he came dangerously close to applying them a couple of times, especially on the first bend, which was as tight as a body builder's bum crack. Harleys with extended forks preferred long, straight curves.

After almost five minutes of coasting at speed, he slowed to a stop. The Earth had turned flat. He deployed the Harley's stand, removed his black open-faced helmet in the rugged, defiant way chisel-jawed male models did in TV commercials, then shattered the illusion by peering mole-like at the road ahead. It seemed to end in blurry nothingness. He could see a touch better with his Coke-bottle glasses, but they were still Coke-bottle glasses. Contacts gave him an air of optometric sophistication.

His vision sharpened sufficiently for him to make out a bend about 200 yards on.

Shit.

He'd have to push the Harley all that distance. No way was he going to leave it unattended. Bad luck would arrange for some whooping redneck in a swerving pickup to depreciate it by 100%.

Heeeeeeeave!

He wasn't half as spent as he'd predicted. Maybe it was the pristine air. Scented with hardwoods and the kind of moist, mineral-rich soil any greenie would be proud to bar public access to, it had cleaned his sinuses and re-energized his sinews.

There was a large clearing on the other side of the bend, and a lamppost in front of it. Nothing particularly special about a lamppost. Except slumped against this one was an old man in “blue” coveralls who looked a lot like a gas station mechanic. That meant a building that looked a lot like a gas station had to be nearby.

And there it was!

AL’S GAS & MOTOR REPAIRS.

The sun-bleached sign was just a stiff breeze away from toppling off the gas station roof, onto a pair of antique, rust-streaked pumps in the driveway. Set well back from the road, the red-brick joint likely needed renovating when Barney Fife was handing out tickets.

Stewart guided the Harley toward, presumably, Al. “Man, are you a sight for sore eyes.”

Al dragged long and hard on a roll your own. If he was aware of Stewart’s presence, he was keeping mum about it.

“Hello there!” Stewart said at auctioneer volume.

Staring absently at the trees across the road, Al failed to make a bid.

The Harley’s kickstand got another workout. Arms waving, Stewart stepped between Al and the trees. “Hello there.”

Al jerked to life. “Whoa! Didn’t see you there, partner.” He flicked his roly away and grinned, baring a smattering of yellow-stained teeth clinging precariously to his gums. His face was a scribble pad of wrinkles and grindstone rough from decades of thumbing his battered, east-skewed nose at the elements. Of hair he had no shortage. It grew up and out in a greasy, gray amusement park ride with enough dips, twists, and loop the loops to satisfy the most demanding thrill seeker. Denim stained his oil-and-grease coveralls. “Got to daydreamin’,” he said. “Ain’t much else to do round here these days. What can I do for you, partner?”

“Some gas would be great. I’ve run out.”

“Wheel ‘er in.”

Favoring his right leg, Al limped toward the collectible pumps.

“The road’s been pretty much deserted,” Stewart said. “Wasn’t like this the last time I rode through here.”

“When was that?”

“Five years ago.”

“Been some changes since then, partner.”

“Oh?”

“Some of them . . . what do they call ‘em now? Some of them *demographic* changes. Yeah, that’s the word. Too big for an old duffer like me to be luggin’ round. Me, I call ‘em people changes.”

Stewart suspected what Al meant by *people changes*, but just to be fair sought clarification. “What kind of people?”

“Coloreds.”

Oh, so you’re a fucking racist, huh?

The urge to chide Al for using such an odious term was strong, but Stewart restrained himself. Why bother anyway? In a generation’s time, bigots like Al would be rarer than Fabergé eggs.

“It’s always the same,” Al said. “Coloreds move in and whites move out. Those who got the money to move out. Where you headed?”

“Taylor’s Bend.”

“Taylor’s Bend?” Al pondered the destination with a concerned *hmmmm* as he inserted a pump nozzle in the Harley’s tank. “I’d be givin’ Taylor’s a miss, partner, if I was you.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s had a people change. A real sweepin’ one.”

So fucking what, you racist bastard?

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“Wouldn’t call it a good thing. You got business in Taylor’s?”

“I’ve got a book signing there tomorrow.”

Al snorted out a laugh. “Can’t see ‘em doin’ much book readin’, partner.”

Racist myth number 273: blacks hate reading books.

“No? I spoke to the bookshop manager just yesterday. She said she’s expecting a big turnout there.” Stewart sneered. *Take that!*

Senescent blue eyes sparkled with intrigue. “You one of them writers, eh?”

“Yep. One of them.” Stewart was tempted to throw in *but not one of those*; however, there was enough homophobia in the world without his adding to it, even in jest.

“What’ve ya written?”

Books, asshole. When was the last time you read one? This century? Last century? Ever?

“Some novels.” Stewart reached into the Harley’s saddlebag. “Here’s one you might be interested in.” He handed Al a copy of *Paradise Redux: The Complete and Uncut Edition*, back cover facing up so the grimy redneck would get a load of the blurb.

The grimy redneck squinted at it myopically. “What’ve we got here . . . Paradise Reduck? No, that looks like an X. Paradise Redux. That right?”

“That’s right.” Stewart was having a hard time keeping a conceited grin off his face. *This is gonna be great.*

Trying to coax his eyes into clarifying the blurb’s hazy print, Al pushed the book away, then pulled it toward him. “Need muh readin’ glasses . . . That’s a bit better. Let’s see now . . . When a deadly . . . what’s that? . . . *bio-engineered virus sweeps the United States . . . layin’ waste to the white population, it’s up to a resourceful group of Black Americans . . .*” He looked at Stewart wryly. “Seems like you capitalized the B in *black*.”

A racist and a smartass. Well, at least the bastard can read.

Al picked up where he’d left off. “To rally the ethnically diverse survivors to restore and protect the nation. But they aren’t the only survivors. Locked away in an . . .” He did the push-pull thing with the book again. “In an . . . impenetrable nuclear weapons facility in the Colorado Mountains are some of the last remaining whites. Led by a fanatical right-wing Christian, they aim to take America back, even if they have to unleash Armageddon to do it.”

Spluttering with laughter, Al pointed at the book with a scuzzy index finger, the tip of which had been ground down to the first knuckle. “This for real?”

Stewart was all out of conceit. With softly spoken gravity, he said, “What you have in your hands is a widely acclaimed novel.”

“Widely acclaimed? Who widely acclaimed it? Al Sharpton?”

“The New York Times, USA Today, The Washington Post, Entertainment Weekly, The Chicago Mail.”

“No offense, partner, but if them Jew rags told me the sky was above, I’d go lookin’ for it under muh boots.”

None taken, you antisemitic turd.

Stewing, Stewart grabbed the book back. "How much do I owe you?"

"Let's have a look." Al squinted at the pump's mechanical display. "Glass sure needs a clean. Okay now . . . that comes to . . . nineteen and a quarter I reckon, partner." A twenty-dollar bill slapped his unscrubbed palm.

"Keep the change, *partner*."

Not willing to spend another second in Al's company, Stewart mounted the Harley and roared out of the gas station.

"Hey!" Al shouted after him. "Stay outta Taylor's!"

"Up yours," Stewart growled at the miniature Nazi standing in his rear-view mirror.

Stewart sang a famous road song, sung by a famous country and western singer, the lyrics to which would cost his publisher big bucks for the printing rights if he included them in a novel. He was happy, *relieved* was a better word, to have put Al miles behind him. He opened the Harley's throttle to increase that distance.

YeEEEEEEEEEE hAAAAAAAAAAAA!

The utility poles formed a picket fence.

The ride into Taylor's Bend was a tourism commercial. Stewart had forgotten just how beautiful it was. Road-hugging limestone cuttings topped with fir trees, a girded coat-hanger bridge spanning a river effervescent with trout and smallmouth bass, and bald eagles carving airy circles high above a world full of forest.

He passed the cedar TAYLOR'S BEND sign. It had been modified since his previous visit. There was now a squirting penis spray-painted on it in hi-viz orange. He shook his head. *Kids*.

Chugging into the main drag (roaring in on his hey-look-at-me bike at full rev would've been hoonish), the first thing he noticed was the marked change in the motor vehicles parked there. Last time, it was all aging SUVs and workhorse pickups that looked as if they'd been hosed down with a mud slurry. Now, it was spotless late-model high-end Japanese cars and the odd BMW. Was that the black fan's Lexus?

He parked in front of the Taylor's Bend Hotel, cut the Harley's engine.

Screeching birds filled the sound void. In the park opposite the hotel, buzzards descended on an animal carcass. What sort of animal he couldn't say, since overgrown grass blocked his view of the feast. The lawn there used to be immaculate. Didn't anyone in town own a mower?

His aching muscles kicked up a fuss as he prized himself off the Harley. He stood on the sidewalk and savored the view. Dick sign and unkempt public park notwithstanding, Taylor's was a berg straight out of one of his novels, a living memorial to 1950s small-town America. It even had a red-brick firehouse and an art deco cinema where a double bill of *Tarantula* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* would look right at home. He could see out his days in a town like Taylor's.

Someone whistling this way came.

Stewart didn't recognize the tune, nor he suspected did the whistler, a dreadlocked black man in a rainbow Rasta cap, dancing, loosely speaking, along the opposite sidewalk. The man had a gasoline can tucked under his arm. He stopped and emptied it on a public trash receptacle that was vomiting garbage. Then he stepped back, well back, lit up a joint, took several lung-inflating puffs, and flicked it at the receptacle.

VOOOOOMP! Garbage holocaust!

Dreadlocks moved closer to the receptacle, hands rising and falling in worship of the raging fire demon he'd summoned.

A car horn blared. A Porsche Cayenne sped in a not altogether straight line from the far end of the street. Black teens hung out the windows. They hollered excitedly as if their basketball team had just won the NBA Championship.

Stewart stood by the Harley, ready to rush it to safety should the celebrating get too close.

The Porsche slowed as it drove past. The driver appeared to be a midget—*little person*. Just the top of his buzz cut was visible. A girl with dental braces was leaning far enough out of a rear passenger's window to become a road statistic. Glaring defiantly at Stewart, she tore a big bite out of a barbecued leg of meat.

A non-textbook U-turn happened. Gunning back the way it had come, the Porsche smashed floating ashes from the trash receptacle fire into smaller floating ashes. Dreadlocks duck-clapped the ash-smashing.

Stewart caught himself wondering what all those kids were doing in a Porsche that didn't look long out of a dealer's showroom.

Whoa, that's racist! Keep that up and you'll turn into Martin Pruitt. You know, the crazy Bible-thumping sack of shit in "Paradise Redux"? That book you wrote?

Deeply repentant, he grabbed his overnight bag and started for the hotel entrance. He checked on Dreadlocks, who disappeared into a shop further down the street. Good. He didn't want a fire being lit near the Harley.

The hotel had two glass entrance doors. Both marked PUSH TO OPEN. Door one defied his application of force. Door two scraped firmly against the dark green carpet in the lobby. Had it put up any more resistance, he would've had to shoulder his way inside. Hotel maintenance, lift your game!

The desk clerk, a well-fed black-as-black man in his thirties, was on the phone when Stewart entered the lobby. The hotel dress code must have specified "carnival popcorn vendor," for he wore a canary yellow pinstriped suit and a charcoal tank top. All he was missing was a top hat with a spinning hypno-wheel. "No," he said in a similar accent to the black fan. "No. No. No. He not come here, right? No. No record, right? Not here. He go somewhere else." Muttering abuse in an offshore tongue, he slammed the phone into its cradle.

Stewart gave the desk clerk a few seconds to compose himself. One . . . two . . . three. "Hello."

Unaware of Stewart's presence until now, the desk clerk eyed him suspiciously, then grinned all of a sudden. "Hello, boss."

Boss?

"I'd like a single room for the night, please."

"Sure, boss. Any room you want."

A deceased rubber plant in a pot by a window besmirched with grime and bird poop distracted Stewart momentarily. He looked at the waiting desk clerk, whipped out his wallet. "Oh, you'll want my credit card."

Black-as-black hands swished back and forth. "Credit card, no, no. Cash. Cash for room."

"Cash? Oh. Okay. How much?"

The desk clerk had a good sticky-beak at Stewart's open wallet. "A hundred. No. No, tree hundred. Tree hundred."

Three-hundred bucks?! And I don't even get clean windows and a viable rubber plant!

Stewart exorcised his outrage with a measured breath. The desk clerk was obviously new to the country and therefore not au fait with proper hotel etiquette—or attire. If he, Stewart Brenin, was to be the paragon of liberal-mindedness he always strove to be, then he'd have to make concessions for people from other cultures and their at times off-putting way of doing things. Off-putting for somebody whose cup overflowed with white privilege.

He handed the money over. Cheerfully. "Here you go."

It was pocketed.

Easy now, Stew. There has to be a safe out back. He's sure to pop it in there soon.

"You want me to sign the register?" Stewart asked.

The question elicited a stupid—*uninformed*—look.

Stewart made a scribbling gesture on his palm. "You know, the book guests sign?"

"No, I don't know," the desk clerk's perfunctory grin replied.

"Fair enough. Guess I'll head off to my room, then. Any room you said?"

"Any room, boss."

"I'll take room 12. I stayed there last time. May I have the key?"

The desk clerk plunked a shoe box on the desk. It contained a mess of room keys. He took a half-step back and smirked.

One minute of full-on rummaging later, Stewart said, "Hey, here's an idea. If you had a pegboard with one peg on it for each room, and you numbered—"

His suggestion met with texting. Back turned, the desk clerk was laboriously typing a message on a deluxe model iPhone.

More rummaging, then, "Found it!"

Happy for Stewart, the desk clerk rebuked an egregious typo with a tongue click.

The first-floor hallway smelled like a homeless encampment. A plywood sheet covered a broken window at the far end. Below it lay the ruins of a mahogany hall table. Dust and cobwebs loitered on the hallway's floral wallpaper, which was torn in places, and stains vandalized the carpet.

What had happened to this hotel? It had once been as well-maintained as the Louvre. Where were all the cleaning staff? Where were all the *staff*? The popcorn-vending desk clerk couldn't be working on his own.

Bad thoughts, intolerant thoughts, *racist* thoughts buzzed Stewart's mind like mosquitoes in KKK robes, demanding he blame people of color for the hotel's terrible state of neglect. He sprayed them dead with the insecticide of reason.

He slid the key into room 12's door lock and turned it. The door opened smoothly.

So far so good.

The room light blinked on when he flicked the switch.

Excellent.

The bed was made and the sheets looked somewhat clean.

Terrific.

The maggot-ridden rat squelched when he stepped on it.

Oh shit!

The waste paper bin that had sat beside the John in room 12's bathroom, filled with unrolled toilet paper, was now home to a dead rat. The desk clerk took one look at the rotting rodent and wheezed out a high-pitched laugh. "Gonna eat dat, boss?"

Stewart was pissed. He could overlook most of the hotel's failings, but a dead rat in his room? No fucking way.

"Give here," the desk clerk said. He wanted the rat, and he got the rat. In no great hurry, he transported the bin to the hotel entrance and tossed it outside. It bounced off the sidewalk and rolled into the gutter, taking the rat and the future flies of America with it. He then sauntered back to the desk.

Bumfuzzled. Stewart had been watching, bumfuzzled. He still was bumfuzzled.

The Porsche teens burst into the lobby. They weren't as black as the desk clerk, just regular black-American black. Giggling pharmaceutically, a

girl in a bilious green halter top and cut-off denim shorts stumbled to the floor. "I'm on the floor!" she squealed. She ground her hips against the carpet as if dry-humping an invisible lover. A chunky teen with orange-dyed hair pushed on her well-endowed rump with a Nike Air Zoom, giving her a coital get along. He received an "Oooh yeah."

The desk clerk greeted the teens with a merry "Heyyy."

"Hey, man," said the Porsche's diminutive driver, a kid of about 11. The three males with him were noticeably older. All four looked like gangsta rappers who'd got Family Dollar gift cards for Christmas.

Cornrows lagged into the hotel, picking bits of meat out of her braces with a glittery gold fingernail. She gazed at Stewart longer than was considered polite, licked her lips, as she waltzed up to the desk. The other teens eyeballed him weirdly.

Unease blew an icy draft over Stewart's corpuscles. He didn't like the attention the black teens were paying him. Didn't like it at all.

Oh for . . . will you can the racist paranoia? They're just kids with black skin instead of white. It's not like you acted like a total dick when you were their age. Is it?

Sighing, he zeroed in on the desk clerk. "Would you mind terribly if I changed rooms?"

Stewart conducted a thorough sweep of Room 18. He checked the bathroom, under the bed, behind the bamboo nightstand, an odd furniture choice for an old-world hotel like this, and inside the freestanding wardrobe, a door of which had either been stolen or removed for repairs. No dead rats! Then he washed his hands. Twice. Once for coming into close contact with a decomposing rat asquirm with maggots, and once for remembering that he had. He didn't bother drying them. The bathroom towels may have been white at one stage, but time and a lack of laundering had turned them an unsanitary shade of brown. A pink baby bib left in the room's rust-stained bathtub was equally unusable.

The room had a bad yet subtle odor, like a group of cadavers had played nude Twister in it a week prior. He wrestled open a window to let some fresh air in. He leaned outside, breathed deep.

Gahhhhhhhhhhh!

The stench he copped would've made a stone gargoyle's snout bleed.

In the alley, directly below, was a dumpster that hadn't been emptied since Virginia Dare was a girl. Struggling not to puke, he slammed the window shut. He plopped on the end of the bed, breathed in and out vigorously, trying to cleanse his nasal palate of the heinous pong. A lightheaded feeling got him to stop.

He fell back on the bed. It shook in solidarity with its wobbly legs. He gazed upward. Water stains, nascent mold, and writing in red marker defaced the ceiling. He couldn't see the writing very well. It was small and faded, but it was there, all right, calling out to him: Read me! Read me!

He arose maladroitly. The mud-soft bed offered him little in the way of purchase. He stared at the writing for a good 10 seconds before its hastily scribbled block letters focused to the point where he could decipher them.

**GET OUT OF HERE
NOW!
STAY AND THEY WILL
KILL YOU!**

The message was signed D. Russell. D. was probably a bored college kid who thought he'd have some fun by urging guests to sleep with both eyes open. How very droll.

Stewart had to admit, though, that scaring guests like that wasn't a half-bad idea. Actually, it was a damn good idea. In fact, he just might incorporate it in a future horror tale. Thank you, D.

His stomach murmured, reminding him that he had a dinner date to keep.

Lights out. Doors locked. Blinds down. It was 7:16 pm—dinner time for Heaven's sake!—and The Wooden Spoon was closed. CLOSED!

Stewart knocked politely but impolitely on the door. He hadn't come all this way not to stuff his safari suit of a face with their beef brisket, especially when eating at the hotel presented a grave health risk. "Come on, it's the second week of June, one of the busiest times of the year. You can't be closed. You can't be."

He heard faint giggling. He couldn't tell whether it was coming from

inside or outside the restaurant, only that more than one person was involved in its production.

He knocked again.

He knocked again.

The Wooden Spoon was closed.

The Wooden Spoon was closed.

Cussing under and over his breath, he turned toward the shrinking orange bump on the horizon. His gut made plaintive fart-like noises. It expected to be fed, but feared that it wouldn't. He carried Fruit Adventure Tic Tacs in his pocket. He may have to subsist on those until tomorrow, after he'd ridden to a town where the people weren't—

Yes? Where the people weren't?

Weren't *unaccustomed* to pandering to spoiled white folk, who've never known true lack or hardship.

He sucked on some Tic Tacs. He sucked hard.

Needing to get his mind off food, he started walking. Walking and plotting. He had a book to write and a contractual obligation to write it. His previous four books had persons of color as the main characters, but no one transgendered. His next book would correct that appalling oversight.

What if a man who'd transitioned to a woman . . . ?

What if a man who'd transitioned to a woman . . . ?

What if a man who'd transitioned to a woman . . . ?

What if a man who'd transitioned to a woman became a superhero?

Nope. Been done.

What if a man who'd transitioned to a woman became a serial killer who preyed only on transsexuals?

Now, there was a story guaran-damn-teed to win him fans in the LGBTQ community.

Try again.

What if a man who'd transitioned to a woman was bitten by a werewolf and turned into a sexually ravenous man when the moon was full?

Interesting though politically hazardous concept. Plus there was the problem of what would become of the man's, or rather the woman's, breast implants and artificial vagina when she, or rather he, transformed back. As they were made of non-biological material, they couldn't regrow,

which would leave her as either a dickless man or a flat-chested, vaginaless woman—depending on how one looked at it.

He found himself outside the bookshop. Book It was its name. Clever.

That was odd. The insides of the windows and the glass door were covered in brown paper bags. Maybe the shop's manager, a shy lady with an outgoing accent, much like the desk clerk's, was hiding a new display she planned to unveil for the signing tomorrow. Also odd was the absence of a sign advertising the event. All of the promo work must have been done online.

“HAL-LE-LUJAH!”

He jolted at the verbal crash of thunder.

A bald black man in a cream silk suit that clung to his massive frame like vacuum-sealed plastic strutted up to Stewart, hand extended. “The Reverend Solomon Spivey,” he said with televangelical gusto.

A meretricious ring collection devoured Stewart's hand. “Uh, Stewart.”

The Reverend lifted his gaze Heavenward. “Oh thank you, Lord Jeezuss, for bringing this man unto us.” Without another word, he strutted off. His broad back glowed like a silken moon in the sun's dying rays.

At first Stewart didn't know what to make of the encounter. Then he knew exactly what to make of it.

What's that, Al? You can't see them doing much reading? Well, let me tell you something, “partner;” they hate reading so much, they thanked God I paid them a visit. What've you got to say to that?

Just then, the bottom of the burnt garbage receptacle broke off and hit the opposite sidewalk with a ringing *clang*.

The overpriced piece of crap. His Samsung refused to commune with the microwaves at street level in Taylor's. This necessitated a hike up a rugged hill overlooking the town to get a decent signal. *Decent* might have been stretching things. Fifteen minutes of his growling curses elapsed before Google gave him a search result that didn't proclaim NO INTERNET CONNECTION. But his persistence had paid off. It just had to. He couldn't solve the mystery of Taylor's baffling decline without the World Wide Wonder.

Connectivity brought more diverse search results. Pages and pages of

them. All in response, in order of relevance, to *taylors bend wisconsin*. Alas, the result he sought, the one that would explain what had happened to the town, was missing from the litany of tourist and historical information. Where oh where was it?

He visited Tripadvisor. He figured, reasonably, that negative reviews of the town's restaurants and accommodation would provide valuable intel.

What negative reviews?

He couldn't find one less than four years old. Every review posted during that period gave a four- to five-circle rating and was positively glowing. The latest was just a week old. It was of the Taylor's Bend Hotel. Terry L. wrote:

Really enjoyed my recent stay at Taylor's Bend Hotel. The accommodation was great and the service from the hotel's friendly staff was second to none. The breakfast there is to die for.

Five circles from Terry.

Unless "Terry" had stayed at another Taylor's Bend Hotel—to the best of Stewart's knowledge, there was only one in the state of Wisconsin—his review was bogus. So were most if not all of the positive reviews posted over the last four years. Each bore the same writer's syntactical fingerprint—a dead giveaway. Nothing unusual about that. There were people in Third-World countries who eked out a living by posting shill reviews for businesses on websites like Facebook. IMDB was chock full of shill reviews. But what set apart the Taylor's reviews was that one person had separately reviewed a range of businesses in the same town, which suggested that those businesses had conspired to mislead the public into visiting there.

Stewart Googled the following:

taylors bend what happened to

taylors bend downturn

recent history taylors bend

taylors bend sucks

taylors bend news

None of the search terms yielded anything of worth, save the last. At the

bottom of the second page of results for that term was a link to a five-year-old *HuffPost* article:

Small Town's Anger Over "Gang" Related Thefts

By Erin Freisberg

Business owners in the small town community of Taylor's Bend, Wisconsin are up in arms over a string of thefts in the area, allegedly committed by gangs of young black males.

Beverly Holland, proprietor of the town's general store, said black youths had stolen thousands of dollars worth of goods from the store.

She told *HuffPost* that despite the perpetrators being caught in the act on security camera, police from nearby Sawyer County refused to pursue the matter. Instead, they recommended she take out an insurance policy covering her for any future losses.

According to Holland, the youths regarded the police's inaction as an open invitation to continue taking merchandise.

One trader, who wished to remain anonymous, claimed rampant theft had made it impossible for him to run a profitable business. He blamed his predicament on aggressive political lobbying by leftist groups, but Black Lives Matter especially.

"Taylor's Bend was the site of several black lynchings last century," said BLM spokesperson Desiree Otunga. "Sounds like the shopkeepers might be pining for those days and that's disturbing."

Otunga is confident that refugee families due to settle in Taylor's Bend next month under the government's Diversity Initiative program will make a positive contribution to that community.

The article gave Stewart only part of the story. Blacks took up residence in Taylor's, and then whites left. That much he could surmise. But what happened after, as Al put it, the people change? What caused Taylor's Bend, erstwhile best small town in America, to lose its dazzling shine?

Ain't that obvious, partner? Al drawled.

"Not going there," Stewart said aloud to the voice of hate inside his head. "I have a college education keeping me off that benighted path. Ow!"

A mosquito had violated his neck. He slapped it into the hereafter. He scanned the forest behind the taxing basalt seat where he'd sat for the past hour. The tiny bloodsucker's attack had him worried. What if a much larger member of the animal kingdom, a bear or a cougar, was lurking up there just beyond the tree line, fixing to make beef brisket out of him? Here he was without so much as a pointed stick. The closest thing he had to a weapon was his cell phone, which, reportedly, could double as an explosive device if its battery overheated.

Butt aching, knee joints cracking, he heaved himself to his feet and plodded down the hill, checking over his shoulder with nervous regularity for pouncing man-eaters. Night had fallen, but the moon was standing. Full, bright, and silvery gold, it guided his footfalls. The dulcet doof doof of hip hop music pounding out of a car woofer assured him that civilization was waiting for him below.

Darkness occupied whopping gaps in the main street. Barely a third of the street lights were working. A strobing bulb on a street light outside a vacant butcher shop wanted everyone to know that it had reached its use-by date.

Stewart trudged onto the sidewalk. He was quite proud of himself. He'd spent an hour in the wilderness and lived.

His thoughts turned immediately to his Harley. Was it where he'd left it? Was it still in one piece?

Oh no. Here we go again.

Look, even people of color steal stuff and cause criminal damage. It's a valuable bike. Who wouldn't want to steal it?

White people who used to live here, as opposed to the black people who do now. That's what you're saying, isn't it?

No, it—

“Shut up,” he muttered to himself. “Just shut up.” He was dog tired and in no mood for a Democrat vs Republican debate.

His concern for the Harley proved unwarranted. There it was safe and sound outside the hotel, right where he'd parked it.

All that racism for nothing.

“Shut up.”

Squeaking with alarm, a squirrel scampered up the middle of the street, chased by a deepest, darkest black man in a dinner suit, arms in the “Come to papa!” position. The fleeing critter had nothing to worry about. The man's lumbering pace and shagged-out breathing disqualified him as the town squirrel catcher. Too old. Too slow. Too fat.

Noticing Stewart, the man blundered to a stop and looked him over with the culinary intensity of Hannibal Lecter.

“Lovely evening,” Stewart said, upping his walking pace.

Sweat rained off Black Hannibal's plump dial, polka-dotted the asphalt around his patent leather shoes, as he stalked Stewart with his eyes.

“Yeeeeeeeeeah. Luvleeeeeeee.”

Stewart's brisk walk got brisker.

Upon arriving back at the hotel, Stewart examined the Harley. It may have appeared unmolested from a distance, but how about up close?

He scoured every square inch of it.

No dents. No scuffs. No scratches. No worries.

A twinge of guilt marred his relief.

Would you have checked the bike if this had still been a white town?

Yes. Yes, I would.

Would you have checked it as closely?

Get stuffed.

“Hey, boss!”

The desk clerk was leaning out of the hotel's good door. “Want the food?”

Do I ever!

As Stewart spurted toward the entrance, he glanced down the street. Black Hannibal was there, standing skateboarder-style on a dashed line, leering at him like a child molester with a hard-on.

Once inside the hotel lobby, Stewart stopped dead. In all his excitement at the prospect of eating a cooked meal, he'd forgotten where it had been cooked. He was hungry but not *that* hungry.

A brown-skinned woman in her early twenties with a ball of frizzy hair hedge-clipped by a royal gardener manned the reception desk. She pointed to a bucket of KFC on the desk. "All yours."

Take-out fried chicken? Gimme a hell yeah!

Stewart floated trance-like toward the rich bounty. Frizzy added to its already irresistible allure by placing a box of fries, tub of gravy, tub of coleslaw, and bag of dinner rolls next to it.

"Is this all for me?" he asked, scanning the smorgasbord.

"Uh-huh."

"Yeah. All yours, boss," the desk clerk chimed in.

Stewart grabbed the bucket. "Wow. I certainly wasn't expecting this. Thank you so much."

"Here, let me help you," Frizzy said, scooping up the other items. She hurried ahead of him, pausing at the bottom of the stairs to throw him a "Coming?" look.

He came.

They hastened up the stairs like two lovers anxious to get some assignation.

The desk clerk smiled east and west.

Frizzy deposited the fries and the rest of the artery-clogging delicacies on the nightstand. Stewart sat on the bed. The room lacked a chair. He removed the lid on the bucket of KFC and practically swooned at the lip-smacking aroma that flooded his nostrils.

Raring to chow down, he noticed that Frizzy hadn't left. She was staring intently at the bucket.

"Like some?" he asked.

She shook her head.

The staring continued.

He was too starved to let her curious behavior keep him from his meal.

“Well, in that case.” He sunk his dental implants into a drumstick.

She exited the room a happy person.

“Thanks again,” he mumbled, cheeks bulging with battery-farmed fowl. Reaching for the gravy, he thought he heard her say, “No. Thank *you*.” But she said it, if she said it, from down the hallway, so it was faint and possibly imaginary.

Stewart was stuffed. Indigestion had gatecrashed his gut, though he’d held the door wide open for it. He’d eaten too much, too fast. He foresaw hiccups in his immediate future. The meal, not the freshest ever, was just a few degrees warmer than cold but, Marsha, Marsha, Marsha, did he enjoy the hell out of it. His one complaint was that the hotel hadn’t given him a fizzy drink to wash down all that fatty fat and greasy grease. He had to settle for rust-flavored water from the room’s squeaky faucet. He named the faucet Bernie.

Lying, sated and relaxed, so very, very relaxed, on his soft, floating bed, watching the water-stained sky, with the wormy red clouds that composed a message that made him giggle, he searched for a care in the world but found only none.

What a day!

What a meal!

What a giggle!

What a *mhhrymmmbrrgh* . . .

Hello Lilly. Hello Lilly. Hello Lilly. Hello Lilly. Hello Lilly. Hellolilly. Hallolilly. Hallolillya. Hallulilya. Hallelulija.

“HAL-LE-LUJAH!”

The Reverend paced betwixt somebody’s bare, spreadeagled feet, whipping himself up into a gale-force sermon. The toes of the feet wiggled tentatively, as though movement had been denied them for some time.

Wait a minute, those toes feel a lot like mine.

Stewart had come to on what felt like a concrete slab. In reality, it was

an upturned spa bath resting on six layers of railway sleepers. He was groggy, nauseated. The Colonel must have slipped an extra herb into his secret recipe.

Where am I?

Exposed pipes and bare concrete walls suggested the hotel basement.

He tried to sit up, but his head was a wrecker's ball, and his wrists and ankles were roped to metal posts bolted to the floor.

He was stark, staring naked.

Gold-leafed Bible brushing against a cold water pipe, the Reverend said, "We're havin' us a full Gospel meetin' tonight, people! Can I have me an amen?!"

"Amen!" shouted every POC Stewart had encountered since his arrival and some he hadn't. Standing on each side of the Reverend, they salivated at the very model of a sedentary lifestyle laid out before them. Black Hannibal pumped his fist. Let's eat!

"W-what's going on here?" Stewart asked. *Shit, my achin' head.*
"Why am I tied down and . . . what've you done with my clothes?"

The Reverend looked to Heaven by way of the ceiling. "Praise Jee-zuss! Oh Hal-le-lujah! Thank you, Lord, for meetin' the needs of your people!" He gestured to Stewart. "We praise your name for this manifest blessin' uh! This rich bounty uh! This glorious feast uh! I say, this glorious feast, Lord God Almighty!"

Glorious feast? What glorious feast? And why was he pointing at me when he said it?

The Reverend nodded at Frizzy. Frizzy nodded back, then switched on the self-igniting burner of a camping stove. A pert blue flame materialized with a disquieting click. She showered a fry pan in olive oil, put it on the burner. An exhaust fan whirred above.

"What are you gonna do to me?" Stewart asked. "If anything happens to me . . . I'm a famous writer. People, important, powerful people, are gonna come looking for me. You understand?"

No, Stewart, how could these poor primitive darkies possibly understand that?

Will you shut the fuck up?! Now is not the time for a fucking guilt trip!

He flinched as something scuttled up his leg. A hand! It belonged to the kid. Smirking, the kid explored the upper reaches of Stewart's thigh, squeezing here and there, in search of tenderness. He found plenty.

"GET YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF ME, YOU FUCKING—!" Stewart came this —> <— close to committing the unpardonable sin. The good news was he'd shouted loudly enough to make the kid back off. The kid but not the kid's smirk. That stayed put.

"Untie me!" Stewart cried as he fought his bonds and lost. "Untie me or I'll call the cops!" The basement rang with laughter. "Please, just untie meeeee . . ." His voice trailed off, led by a numbing sense of hopelessness.

The Reverend glanced at a trio of provocatively clad girls. "Is that a heavenly choir I hear?" Seasoned Gospel singers, they began to ooh and mmm in perfect harmony.

He opened his Bible, on the front cover of which, printed in large gold-embossed letters, was THE NEW BLACK HEBREW BIBLE, and read from it with Pentecostal fervor. "And the Lord spake unto Moses, sayin', tell Pharaoh to let my niggas go! For they have I loved above all the peoples of the Earth! For they have I made a royal priesthood uh! A holy nation uh! A peculiar people uh! Yea, tell that highfalutin honky he better give them Hebrews all their money or I'll kick his highfalutin ass! Yea, tell him to open up his store house of gold and silver and sparklin' jewels! Oh yes, them sparklin' jewels! And hand that booty, that tutti frutti, to them flayed, back-broken darkies who built the towerin' pillar in the midst of his land! The one they'll be talkin' about for years to come, in books and Hollywood movies! Oh how them cracker boys will be talkin'!"

It occurred to Stewart that The New Black Hebrew Bible differed somewhat from the King James Version.

"Can I have me an amen?" the Reverend said.

"AMEN!" his congregation responded.

"Can I have me a glory, glory?"

"GLORY, GLORY!"

He burst into song and marched on the spot. "Oh when the saints!"

"Oh when the saints!" the congregation burst back, clapping smartly. They hopped and jiggled as the Negro spiritual rollicked on.

The black fan sat aloof in a corner. He was leafing through the pubic-

haired edition of *Paradise Redux*, which Stewart had so kindly, so graciously signed for him. If only the black fan would look his way, remember that good deed, and convince the singing, dancing mob—*group*—that he was their friend, a friend who for years had supported African-American causes, especially in the area of literacy, then surely, *surely* they'd free him and grant him the honor of singing and dancing with them—fully clothed.

Suddenly, miraculously, the black fan looked at him and smiled.

Yes! Oh thank goodness! Thank goodness!

On a mission, the black fan jumped up, crossed the basement to where Stewart lay, stooped down, pushed open a box cutter blade, and sliced open the sole of his left foot. A rich stream of claret raced out. Stewart bellowed in pain. "What the fuck?!"

With a dive-bombing point of his finger, the black fan drew Frizzy's attention to all the blood going to waste. She nipped over, caught the falling drops in the fry pan. They set off tiny explosions in the sizzling oil.

Up went the Reverend's hands in praise. "For the blood is the life! Oh listen to it snap, crackle, and pop! Thank you, Lord Jee-zuss!"

"You're not getting away with this," Stewart groaned.

The chunky teen stepped forward, chunky fists clenched in chunky rage. "Ain't nuthin' for us to get away with, white boy! We ain't done nuthin' wrong!"

"Cutting my foot open isn't nothing! Look. Please. Get something to stop the bleeding. Please. Hurreeeeeee."

Loud laughter ran Stewart's pleas through a wood chipper.

"Like the Hebrews of old," said the Reverend, "the Hebrews of today have been held down by the milky-faced workers of iniquity!" He paced back and forth like a caged landlord. "Hear me now, God of Israel! It's time for your people to retake the Promised Land! To reclaim that which was stolen from them! The goods uh! The chattels uh! The knowledge uh! The wisdom uh! Deliver it into our hands now, heavenly Father! Pressed down, shaken together, and runnin' out all over! Oh hal-le-lujah!"

He got it now, Stewart did. The town was a death trap where visitors were relieved of their lives and belongings as part of some insane scheme to exact biblical revenge. It was like a plot out of one of his novels—one

of his lesser novels. He chuckled. How could he not? The sheer lunacy of his predicament insisted on it.

Black Hannibal chuckled himself as he embedded a butcher knife in Stewart's upper leg. Blood geysered out of the wound. Screaming in pain, Stewart convulsed like a mental patient undergoing electric shock therapy. Everyone who wasn't him cackled.

His vital work hampered by Stewart's thrashing about, Black Hannibal beckoned for assistance. The kid and his three homies answered the call.

"Hold," Black Hannibal said.

The struggling was stymied.

Black Hannibal proceeded to cut a remarkably even rectangle in Stewart's upper leg, then peeled it off like a giant Band-Aid. Stewart narrated the process with howls of agony. Thick gooey strings, the color of a deep-red cherry, dripped off the strip of flesh as Black Hannibal showed it off to his delighted confederates.

Molten KFC erupted from Stewart's mouth. He gagged on the tart spew.

Growing impatient, Frizzy held the fry pan out to Black Hannibal, gave it a slight shake. "The meat. The meat." He dropped it in the bloody oil. It crackled like an eye-fillet steak.

"Blessed Lord," the Reverend said, head bowed in prayer, "may this burnin' flesh be a sweet savor unto thee. May its flavorsome smoke rise up to your throne of grace and bring us down a blessin' we can scarcely contain."

The kid hustled up to Frizzy, paper plate at the ready. "I want me some."

The Reverend shook a finger at him. "Be anxious for nothin', dear brother. We shall all eat in due course. Praise God!"

Dribbling vomit, Stewart frowned woozily in the Reverend's direction. "You . . . you're no Christian. You're a cannibal. That's what you are. All of you. A bunch of fucking cannibals."

"Cannibals?!" the Reverend said, eyes popping indignantly. He got right in Stewart's dribble. "Listen up, white man, we ain't no cannibals. We don't eat white meat for sustenance. We don't eat white meat for pleasure. We eat white meat to *subsume* lost DNA, DNA purloined a hundred, a

thousand, generations ago. Hearken to my voice now. Your people fed off the black man's blood and sweat, ravishin' his women folk, till his genius became your genius, till his work ethic became your work ethic, till his might and power became your might and power. Oh you know it's true. And then, havin' abducted his princely genetics, there was no stoppin' you. The thievin', blue-eyed destroyer had got himself the smarts to be doin' more thievin', more destroyin' than ever before." He turned his head halfway toward Frizzy. "How's it comin' along, sister?"

"Dishing up."

"Good. Good." He glared at Stewart. "Time to eat. Time to ingest that ancient, divine material locked away in the cells of the white Satan. Oh hal-le-lujah."

Frizzy served the bestselling meat onto a plate, sliced it up, gave a piece each to the first four blacks in line. "Mustard and ketchup," she said, indicating a folding table with said condiments on it.

Dreadlocks was one of the lucky recipients. He flourished a hand mystically over his serving, then gobbled the lot.

A toothy grin.

An epicurean belly rub.

A most excellent repast.

Heavy blood loss had dulled Stewart's pain and softened the shock of seeing himself being masticated. But it did have a downside. Reality was slipping out of his grasp like a conger eel smeared in KY Jelly.

Come back here, reality!

The Reverend's big, round face appeared above him, suspended in the gray, hardened sky, a politically sensible replacement for the moon's antagonistic whiteness. *Why aren't jungle cannibals college professors?* the black man in the moon—the black man who *was* the moon—said. *Because they haven't eaten any!*

Stewart laughed out loud. He was allowed to. It wasn't a racist joke, for a man of color had told it.

No. Please. Not again.

It seemed Black Hannibal had gone to work on Stewart's other leg. The pain wasn't nearly as bad as before, though it still hurt, like pain usually did.

“You black . . . beauty,” Stewart said, glowering. He’d meant to say *bastard* and then *bitch*, but decided that both were unacceptable and went with *beauty* instead. Likening the guy to a famous literary horse? A bit rude, sure, but definitely not racist.

The second cut of him got the fry pan treatment.

How much of me are they planning to eat?

Everything except the bones probably.

Maybe they’ll use those to make a nice, steaming pot of bone broth. Waste not, want not.

He smiled to himself. His flesh and blood might be hitting the road, but his sense of humor was going nowhere.

The Reverend looked at Black Hannibal and gestured to Stewart’s crotch. “The manhood.”

All Black Hannibal’s Kwanzas had come at once. He seized Stewart’s nearest and dearest and pulled it as far as it could be pulled and then a bit farther.

“Don’t do that,” Stewart murmured, groggily. “That’s my penis, not yours.”

With the deftness of a TV chef slicing off a piece of bratwurst, Black Hannibal relieved Stewart of his cock. A burst of pain and a gush of blood marked the separation of man and member. Stewart shuddered, made a choking noise, then quickly settled down as if morphine were singing him a lullaby. His disembodied penis landed in the fry pan with a *plop*. Its modest dimensions got big laughs. Even the Reverend laughed. Some Christian!

The basement grew dim, dark, darker. Light had forsaken the world. Stewart had never seen dark this dark. This dark had substance, mass, weight. This dark was final dark, the burial plot where all creation, all consciousness was laid to rest forever. This dark was the literal end—of everything.

And then there was light.

Just a pinprick of it. But the pinprick was growing. Growing into a . . . a tunnel. No it couldn’t possibly be. Could it? But it was! An honest-to-goodness NDE tunnel! It engulfed the entire basement, filling every nook and cranny with the glorious effulgence of Heaven. Gosh, it was beautiful! And in the midst of the supernal glow there appeared a silhouetted figure

of a man.

Was it . . . was it Jesus?

Had Jesus come to escort him personally into Heaven? Surely not. Heaven would have to have some pretty loose standards to let an unbelieving sinner like him through its gates. Then again, maybe *Paradise Redux* had earned him some brownie points up there, what with its wise, saintly black people seeking to make a strife-torn United States a better, more godly place and all.

Jesus started toward him.

Stewart recalled that Jesus had healed lepers. Some would have had body parts missing. Fingers, toes, noses and, yep, willies too. Maybe, if he asked real nice, Jesus would return his to its rightful place—in its original, uncooked condition.

Say, why is Jesus walking funny?

He moved with nothing like the majestic sweep that Stewart expected Him to. Truth be told, He looked arthritic. His legs carried him reluctantly forward in short, slogging steps, and He—

Hang on a sec. Since when did the King of Kings get around in grease-saturated coveralls?

“Howdy, partner,” Al said.

“Al. What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to save your soul.”

“Save my soul? How do you propose to do that?”

“Just say it.”

“What?”

“Just say it.”

“Say what?”

“Say it.”

“WHAT?”

Al positioned himself at point blank range from Stewart’s ear and snarled, “Nnnnnnigger.”

Stewart shook his head adamantly. “No. Never. *Never.*”

“C’mon, partner, set yourself free. *Nnnnnnigger.*”

“No.”

“Nigger.”

“No.”

“Nigger. Nigger. Nigger. Nigger.”

“No. No. No. No.”

Shocked and dismayed, Al staggered backward as though reeling from a punch to the face. He'd failed to turn Stewart apostate.

Beaming rapturously, Stewart began to descend into a bottomless, impossibly black abyss. He was about to die, but not as a racist.

NOTES

Once upon a time, Stephen King toured small-town America astride a Harley Davidson, dropping into bookshops to promote his then latest novel. Or so I read in an online news article.

The mental motion picture of the beaver-toothed, slightly cross-eyed liberal rolling into some of America's whitest bergs on a throaty hog inspired this story. In fact, I made him—or an analogue of him—the main character. Brenin is Welsh for king, and Stewart is as close as I could get to Stephen without resorting to Stefan or Steven. Fingers crossed he doesn't sue.

King loves white America. He would never dare write or say that, even if his hulking leftist ideology got out of his way long enough for him to recognize it. But his passion for what white Europeans have built on the North American continent burns like an office supplies warehouse in every story he's written that unfolds in a small town. And that would be most of them. Granted, the rich slices of Americana he serves his readers are laced with gruesome violence, sexual duplicity, and demonic goings on, but the towns that host this superfluity of naughtiness typically outlast it. They represent a vital part of America, and his past, that he dearly hopes will abide forever.

Like many liberals, King expects woke, multiracial America to eventually supplant white, conservative America. It already has to a great extent. But he also expects small towns, with their distinctly white European architecture, style of living, and community spirit, to somehow survive in a country where whites are less plentiful than blacks, yellows, and browns. We all know what happened to Detroit when the Cosby family moved in. Imagine their impact on smaller, less populated regions.

History is a bloody testimony to the utter failure of multiracial societies. King is willfully ignorant of this truth. Racial reality for him is much more palatable when it's embodied by the saintly nigger giant, John Coffey, in *The Green Mile*, and the absurdly self-aware Nazi war criminal, Kurt Dussander, in *Apt Pupil*. Neither of whom can be found anywhere beyond his Jew-approved imagination.

I signposted the fate that was in store for poor Stew long before it tied

him down and cut off his reason for loving. Stopover is, after all, a story about how a liberal zealot will blindly keep the faith, even when it suffers a deadly debunking. You, blessed reader, got to see all the signs. So in all honesty did Stew. But he strove to ignore them and would be damned if he ever acted upon them.

Does that have kind of a real-world ring to it?

Not if you're a liberal it doesn't.

Liberalism is the world's most pernicious religious cult. Many of its adherents tend toward self-immolating fanaticism. So while some (white) liberals may see the racial light cast by the West's blazing ruin, others, like Mr. Brenin, will plunge into perdition with their eyes squeezed shut, shoved there by the ethnic enrichment they championed for years.

Ah well.

Christian Identity Australia