

## BAD PEOPLE

I swear, would you look at this, me black and blue all over with half my body in a cast. Somebody said a ambulance from Tachikawa Air Base was coming to get me. They'll wanna know what happened but I sure as heck can't tell them. I can't remember a single solitary thing about the accident. All I know is what these people here told me. They say a policeman saved my life.

According to them, the man crawled up under my jeep while it was on fire to pull me out. And then he flag down one of them charcoal-burning taxi cabs they have over here in Japan and got me to this little hospital just in time. One of the nurses can speak a little English – she's the one that filled me in. She said a Doctor Yamamoto worked all night to save my right leg. It was broke-up pretty bad. Still hurts that way, too.

To tell the truth, the whole thing is kinda strange. All I been able to do this morning is lay here and think about home. For some reason my mind keeps running back to late one afternoon eight years ago, when I was just a little kid, before I joined the air force, and all.

I can still remember everything about that day, just as clear as anything. It was just before Pearl Harbor happened. Of course, in them days everybody's mind was on Germany. But from that day on, when folks in that corner of the Colleton County Lowcountry talked about the war, it was mostly to tell stories about how two Jap spies got lost in our little community. That's when I first heard that there was a whole race of people who was bad, every last one of them, women, children . . . *everybody*. And they was colored, too!

Actually, it turned out later that them two wasn't spies after all. They worked for the Jap Embassy and was just trying to drive back to Washington after a holiday in Florida. That was all. But nobody ever wanted to change the story.

Anyhow, it was the third of that August, an evening when one of them great big dog-day suns plop down on the horizon, fat and rusty red. "Stuffed full of stale blood," Quail used to say – Quail was my best friend and partner in everything I did in them days and he was always cracking something funny like that.

Well, like I started to say, it was on that afternoon that me and Quail went fishing at Chub Creek. The Chub fed into a finger of the Snuggedy Swamp, dropping down a good forty foot between our little pea-patch farm and town. A stretch of built-up causeway carried the road across the swamp with a concrete bridge over the creek. The fishing hole was right down there by the bridge.

Like usual, we didn't waste any time getting our lines in the water. But, like usual, too, we pretty soon got tired of just sitting there without a bite – that and swatting at bluebottle flies that didn't seem to know the difference between us and a dead cooter stretched out on a half-sunk log. So, the way we sometimes did, we got into a spirited argument meant for the entertainment of the only other folks fishing that afternoon, Maudy Williams and one of her little girls.

Quail started in where we'd left off in a earlier discussion, saying, "He don't look like no Barnacle Bill the Sailor to me, I don't care what you say, Lucius."

"You ain't never seen Barnacle Bill or any other sailor, Quail Jackson," I said. "How you know what a sailor looks like? I'm telling you, my Uncle Edgel is a soldier in the navy, and that's a fact. You just ask Reverend Taylor. He'll tell you."

My momma's brother, Uncle Edgel, was on leave and visiting with us at the time. And Quail lived just across the highway from our place with his granddaddy, Reverend Taylor, pastor of the Ebenezer Church of Color.

"Lucius, you ignorant or somethin'? Soldiers ain't never in the navy. They only in the army."

"Oh yeah? You might be a year older than me Quail Jackson, but I'm just as smart as you ever been and I say anybody fights in a war is a soldier, even if they in the navy, even if it ain't no war on."

"Humph! Well, if you so smart, Lucius, how come you ain't caught no fish yet?"

"Un-huh, and that's twice as many as you done caught. Ain't it?"

It was a good show, we thought, and deserved at least a comment. But Maudy Williams just stared at us without so much as a smile. So we congratulated ourselves by whooping and hollering, and doing a little jig. Then, I made a snooty remark about how some folks couldn't appreciate first-class humor.

That didn't get a rise neither. So we went back to fishing, jerking our lines from the slick surface of that creek for the umpteenth time. And just like always, it seemed, they was robbed of bait. And without the bait to hold them down, them hooks would dance like crazy under the chunks of corncob we used for floats – "like sulfur butterflies in heat," Quail use to say. Of course that kinda commotion always chased mosquito hawks into a scatter and got Leopard frogs to jumping every which-a-way.

Maudy frowned again. We could tell she'd had enough. She just puffed up and said, "You youngerns make so much ruckus I don't see how nobody gonna catch a fish. How come you don't go play in yo' granddaddy's back yard?"

I just stared at the full bucket of flopping brim and catfish at her feet and give a overly loud sigh. Then I tried to act like my feelings was hurt and picked up our can of mud-puppy bait. “Let’s go on back home,” I told Quail. “This place done fished out.” But just to declare our manly presence one more time, we stomped through a mud hole before climbing the path back up on the causeway.

We no more than reached the top when a black Chrysler sedan headed towards town come racing past us, right down the middle of the highway. We stopped in our tracks expecting it to crash into something. Nobody drove like that in them parts . . . not way back in them days, anyhow.

Then the driver screeched to a halt and started backing up towards us, fishtailing and almost running off the road. A little man in a pinstripe suit with his hair slicked back like Rudolph Valentino got out of the passenger side and walked right up to us. He had a tiny little book in his hand. And after staring at us for a while, he began jabbering in a high-pitch, unfriendly voice. From time to time he had to check in his book for words. Finally, he stopped and just look straight at me – ‘cause I was white, I guess.

I just stared back.

“What he say?” Quail mumbled, dipping his head toward me without taking his eyes off the stranger.

“I couldn’t make it out. Sounds like he’s asking something though,” I whispered out the corner of my mouth.

“Maybe he lost,” Quail said. “Maybe he don’t know how to get to town.”

Then, we just look straight at each other, nodded, and pointed in the direction the car was headed. "It's right on up that hill, mister," I said, proud to be of assistance, like any young kid would've way back in them days.

We took a step or two backwards when the Chrysler cut back onto the highway and full throttled up past the cemetery.

"Humph, he can't drive no better'n Mister Holly Avant," Quail said. "I'm sho glad we ain't in that car."

I kept watching till it was outa sight. Then I said, "I ain't never seen anybody with squinty eyes like that before. My mamma says it ain't nice to say somebody looks funny but that fella sho 'nough looks funny. They ain't no way around that."

"Mister Holly Avant got squinty eyes when he been drinking too much. And he look funny, too . . . all the time," Quail said. "I ain't never gonna drive if my eyes get squinty."

"You ain't never gonna drive 'cause you ain't got no car, Quail Jackson. That's why."

About that time, we saw Maudy Williams pull in another big catfish and decided to leave. After we walked on a bit, I said, "Maudy ain't no better at fishing than us. She just spends most everyday at the bridge and knows where they hide at, that's all."

"Yeah!" Quail said. He had a habit of jerkin his head up and down real sharp when he wanted to emphasize something. "If we was to know where they hidin' at, we prob'ly could catch more'n she can. Ain't that right, Lucius?"

"S-h-o-o-t, yeah. A whole lot more," I said.

Now don't get me wrong. Maudy Williams was a good woman. She just had it tough trying to raise six kids, mostly by herself. Way back in them days she just didn't have time to put up with two little misbehaving boys like us.

Anyhow, when we was drawing closer to my house – It set up on a bluff overlooking the highway – Quail said, “Lucius, you know,” – he always stroked the top of his head when he was thinking hard about something – “It jus' might be better if we was to dig us a fort in yo' daddy's sandpit instead a playing in my back yard. If Gran'ma Hattie was to see us, she'd jus' make us chop stove wood.”

Grandma Hattie's idea of being useful and our idea of hard labor was about the same thing, so there wasn't no question about what we was gonna do with the rest of that day.

My daddy sold construction sand to the county from a great big pit right there next to the highway. It was another good eight foot on up to our backyard. When we wasn't giggling frogs or fishing, me and Quail played there most every day, pretending we was digging a hole to China, or else building a fort. The coarse yellah sand had a cool, watery smell and it was easy to dig with nothing but your bare hands. It never took long for us to build a two-man fort, complete with corner turrets.

We got in and peeped over the wall with our fishing pole cannons at the ready, looking for the enemy to come down the road. We waited and waited until what seemed like a long time without nothing happening; in them days, there just wasn't much traffic on that highway. So, being the impatient types, we decided to call it quits without firing a single shot. It was almost supertime, anyhow.

With the sun already outa sight, we went through our usual routine, our secret way of saying good-bye after playing together all day. We drop the “tailgates” of our identical coveralls – bought out of the Sears Roebuck catalog – showed our behinds to each other, and took turns with me chanting, “Niggah, niggah, pull the triggah,” and him saying, “Soda crackah, soda crackah, po white trash.” That was always followed by a lot of snickering and the satisfying feeling that we got away with doing something we wasn’t suppose to.

Then Quail trotted across the road, jumped a ditch and cut through a thick stand of pines just this side of Reverend Taylor’s place. I clambered up the hill to the back of our house before realizing that we left our fishing poles in the sandpit. So I slid back down the incline and was retrieving the poles when I heard the rattle of a old pickup truck coming down the road going towards town. Trucks was our favorite targets in them days; we imagined them as being the enemy’s heavy armor.

Quick as a whip, I jump down in our fort and manned a cannon. When that German tank come in range, I let fire. *Ka-boom!* There was a loud explosion, and the truck rumbled off the highway in a blur of dust and rubbery smelling smoke, just in front of me.

Right away, I recognized who it was and nearly peed in my pants. It look like I’d busted a tire on Mr. Bainerd Pound’s pickup. Of course it wasn’t nothing but a regular blowout, but being just a kid, I figured somehow I musta caused it.

Bainerd, his son Postel, and their friend Eustis Box lived over at Lawyers Creek. When they was sober enough, they would operate a shrimp trawler out of St. Helena Sound. Mr. Pound and Postel were big men. Eustis was a runt beside them two. They

say Eustis spent mosta his time bottling the bootleg liquor they was making. And he was a veteran of the First World War. They say he was gassed over there by the Germans. He come back with a few loose screws, if you know what I mean. But all three of them boys was bad news, real trouble.

I duck down soon as I saw who it was and it took a long while to get up enough nerve to peep over the wall again. Bainerd was in his usual foul mood, sitting up in the back of the truck, leaning against the cab, and swigging on a half-pint bottle. The truck was propped up on a cockeyed jack with the tire already off. The whole thing teetered back and forth when Bainerd leaned over for a full bottle and threw his empty one at a pine sapling, smashing it.

“I wish you wouldn’t break them bottles, Bainerd. They ain’t easy to find, you know,” I heard Eustis screeching. They was that close. I was scared to death.

“You shut your mouth, boy, and fix my goddam tire,” Bainerd said. Eustis was doing most of the work with the inner tube while Postel just squat there on the rim. It look like they took the whole wheel off just to put on a new patch.

At about the same time, we all noticed the flickering headlights from a car speeding around the bend, coming from town. I could see right away that it was that same Chrysler me and Quail met up with earlier. It whistle past the truck without slowing down a bit.

“*Who the hell* was that,” Bainerd yelled, swinging around so fast he splashed his self with liquor. I could make out a angry scowl on his face. He was real mad.

“I ain’t never seen ‘em before,” Postel said.

“Well get that tire fixed, asshole, and let’s go find the sonovabitches.”

Eustis just stood there, staring down the road.

I wanted to go home but was too scared to move.

Then, before they could put the wheel back together again, that black sedan come barreling back our way, breezing by before skidding to a halt in the middle of the road, a good fifty feet past the truck. This time, both men got out, one on each side of the car, leaving their doors open. They look just alike, except that the driver had a little Hitler mustache, bushy hair, and clothes that look like he'd been sleeping in them. The other one was the same fella who talked to me and Quail earlier. His hair was still slicked back and, like I said before, he was dressed real sporty, just like Al Capone.

Bainerd got up to his feet in the truck bed. To them two small men, he musta look like a giant standing up there spraddle-legged in the darkness.

The strangers halted right where they was. Then one of 'em reached back inside the car for something.

Bainerd musta figured it to be a hostile move and scrambled for a shotgun at his feet.

The driver jump back behind the wheel and slammed his door shut. The other fella drop the book he just took from the dashboard and pulled out a pistol from a shoulder holster he was wearing.

Postel dove for cover behind the truck and Eustis bolted for the woods.

The little guy with the pistol was swinging his arms in every which-a-way and falling all over his self trying to get back in the Chrysler. He fired off three quick rounds, mostly straight up in the air, and barely made it back in his seat with wheels already spinnin' and spittin' gravel, skipping sideways, just a-begging for some traction.

Bainerd squealed like a stuck pig. He wasn't mad any more. That was easy to see. He lunged hard to one side, in the direction Eustis was running, and pulled both triggers on his double-barreled shotgun, blowing the top out of the pine sapling.

At about the same time, the jack give way and that corner of the truck fell to the ground, like it was looking for a hole to crawl in. Bainerd went head over heels landing flat on his back in the ditch yelling for help.

Pretty soon, Postel peeped out from his hiding place and said, "Looks to me like they done gone, Pa."

Bainerd, who musta been embarrassed, rolled over to his feet, reloaded with shells from under the front seat, and fired twice more down the highway. Of course them fellas was long gone by that time.

A week or so later, I learned that on the same night of that famous shootout, when "*Three American heroes got the best of a carload of Asian spies*," – that's how the *Tidewater Bulletin* told it – a rented Chrysler crashed into a big oak tree halfway between town and Charleston. They said there was two men inside. The story was that nobody seemed in any big hurry to take them to the hospital. So, one died right there where the sheriff stretched him out beside the highway. The other one lost a leg, his right one. They said it was broke-up pretty bad.

Damn, I wish that ambulance would hurry.

THE END