

*A True Tale from The City*

*Cuffed*

"STOP OR I'LL SHOOT."

*That farmer sure gets uptight over a couple of 'borrowed' watermelons.*

"STOP OR I'LL SHOOT."

*That isn't Ol' Man Pfeiffer threatening us. It's the devil collecting souls. Run, Wiley, run!*

I emerge from the whirlpool of a nightmare, tangled in a sea of sheets.

"MOVE AND YOU'RE DEAD."

Whoa. This isn't part of my dream. I open my eyes to the faint glimmer of city night filtering through my bedroom's tinted glass door. 4:00 a.m. is glowing red on the face of my alarm clock.

Crunch. Is someone out there? Damn, none of the doors have dead bolts. Having worked non-stop trying to get this house restored and back on the market, I've been remiss about beefing up security. I try rolling out of bed only to find myself caught up in the curl of a full wave mattress, I grasp the side board and give a heave upward—much like a swimmer might after a furious crawl from diving raft to lakeside dock.

I hit the floor and slide on my belly to the closet hideout of my Winchester 97 only to find the firearm's empty case. Then I remember; Wiley, self-anointed electrician and part owner of this fixer-upper, borrowed it to get the drop on a pair of dope dealers and their client who had gathered on the curb in front of our house. There is something disconcerting about his basso voice grunting: "Move on," and the metallic chambering of a shell being pumped into the breech of a twelve gauge shotgun.

The neighbor's porch suddenly sheds light. I cautiously inch my slider open to see a crowd forming. A noise startles me, then the sound of footfalls rounding the corner of the house. A flash of light glints off steel. I hear the click-click of the Winchester and a familiar voice croaking: "Put 'em up, mother stickers." Somehow, I'm out the door fast enough to prevent a cop, who has a suspect spread-eagled on the ground in front of him, from blowing Wiley away with his sidearm.

A few of the neighbors are gathered in our front yard. Someone points at me, and then starts to giggle, a pajama-clad little boy says: "Mommy, dat man don't have no clothes on!"

As I scamper inside for a robe, I hear old Mr. Ennis from across the street say to his wife: "Takes a lot of balls to stand naked in front of a police officer when he's got his gun out."

I hear the gravely haw-haw of Wiley's laughter when Mrs. Ennis replies: "I dun seen that flasher's equipment, don't look like nothin' special to me."

"Your chin's red," Wiley says, grinning, when I get back outdoors. "Are you just partly embarrassed by your bald-ass performance?"

"Rug burn." I sputter, the wooly frizz of carpet coagulating in my mouth.

A paddy wagon pulls up—siren whooping, twin beacons flashing: *Look what we caught, Look what we caught*. The invitation rousts all but the bedridden, drowning out the slap-slap of car tires hitting the expansion joints of the I-280 overpass. Several motorcycles roar down Randolph Street, adding their ‘catch me if you can’ rumble to the predawn cacophony. Roosters begin crowing in adjacent backyards, trying to get a rise out of the sun. Quickly, the uniformed occupants of the paddy wagon collect their trophy and leave. The remaining officer sends the crowd home reassuring the latecomers they can sleep secure whenever he works the late watch.

During lulls in traffic, I hear the faint slow-boat drone of a foghorn, sounding lonely in its monotone. The misty air is a vessel, ferrying the fragrance of dying hydrangeas past wilted baskets of fuchsia, both neglected commodities of an inattentive gardener.

"Officer, what's your name?" I ask, he tells me, and I promptly forget; only to wonder later; did he actually say Telly Savalas?

Then he says: "The street better knows me as Sergeant Kojack, not because I'm a bald-headed sucker, but for being relentless. I chased that druggie scumbag for hours. I catch people unawares, sometimes in the act, I jump out from behind trees; I'm practically invisible." If he bothered to view his waistline, I'm sure he would find his prattle hard to swallow.

Wiley and I agree to help look for the chunk of crack cocaine that Kojack insists the perp tossed in our yard during the bust. So, at 5:00 a.m. in the morning, we're on our hands and knees virtually raking through grass with our hands. When my fingers encounter a pile of dog shit, I stop searching and go inside to wash in the bathroom. When I come back outside I find that Kojack and Wiley have also stopped the hunt.

Kojack says: "Maybe I was wrong about the perp tossing something—he had handfuls of drug bindles in his pockets—we have the evidence we need for conviction. I just hate the thought of a kid maybe finding the chunk, the one I thought I saw him fling into your yard. Last month a toddler in the Bayview picked up a loose rock of coke from the floor of a butcher shop and stuck it in his mouth; now a lonely old lady is crying her eyes out over a grandbaby she'll no longer get to hug."

A startling burst of wind violently tugs at dried fingerlings of a potted fern, thirsty victims of the same gardener who is responsible for the wilted hydrangeas and fuchsia. "That wind gust feels like the breath of doom." Wiley exclaims with a shudder. "Sergeant, we bought this house to flip an' maybe make a profit. How we gonna do that when all a sudden our neighborhood's a drug emporium?"

"Well boys, you're new here. Queen Bee runs this corridor. Either you make peace with her, or you leave; it's as simple as that."

"Where do I find this Queen Bee?" I ask.

"That's easy bub," says Kojack. "She's got a spread at the head of Broad Street you can't miss."

It's now four in the afternoon, Wiley finds me in the back yard trying to resuscitate the potted fern and says: "I fired Tyrone earlier today."

"Why?"

"He come around at high noon runnin' gas powered mowers, blowers and weed-whackers. Woke me up before I got my eight straight, anything less is a cat nap." Wiley arches his back and yawns. He licks his finger and smoothes a stray hair while he is talking.

"How's he supposed to do the gardening?"

"Quietly, and for what he gets paid, it should be done by hand."

"Whoa—hold on a sec, I'm surprised at your attitude, we both use power equipment in our line of work."

Undaunted, Wiley continues; "The other thing, is he refuses to water."

"With the drought and rationing," I say, "We get penalized big time for using more than our allotment."

"That's just the point, I drug the neighbor's hose over and that ethical little twerp still wouldn't water."

"C'mon, Wiley, what's the real issue here?"

"I caught the dude smokin' dope—he denied it, said it was a roll-your-own clove cigarette. I also found discarded roaches near the hydrangeas earlier today when we were helping Kojack out. I palmed them and put 'em in my pocket—we don't need dopers workin' here and putting us in jeopardy with the law."

"It's up to you to find us a clean and sober gardener. When I finish with this fern, I'm going to walk down the boulevard to Broad Street and pay my respects to Queen Bee, care to join me?"

"Motormen don't walk." Wiley snaps. "Especially in this neighborhood. We'll take my bike, I haven't had it out since my wreck and I'm aching to ride. By the way, I don't think we should have assisted that cop this morning."

"Why? We've nothing to hide."

"Cooperating with the authorities can turn around and bite you in the ass; mark my words, you'll see. They know where we live and I'm guessing they'll be a lot more visible in the 'hood, even though this street is a dead end in more ways than one. Another thing, did you hear them roosters crowing before sun-up? That racket reminded me of when we were kids sneaking past Ol' Man Pfeiffer's chicken coop—on our way to raiding his melon patch."

Wiley cranks up his Harley, then starts fussing with its carburetor, I walk. On my way down Randolph, I find my neighborhood becoming as wasted as the dealers who do their jittery dance trying to attract a customer. On previous journeys, I didn't fear the street. Now I feel the sear of hostile glances and hear the mindless babble of panhandlers. Doorways of buildings, especially those near intersections, reek of urine.

I'm overcome by a wave of buyer's remorse; did greed lead me to invest here? I step into the street, the curb is littered with broken bottles and trash is leaching onto the sidewalk. Am I obligated to help turn this around? I feel like a carpetbagger, taking advantage, making a profit, and then moving on. Meanwhile, my neighbors are going to have the fight of their lives, if they choose to battle in an attempt to take back their neighborhood. Graffiti is scrawled everywhere; inviting turf war. Street signs, buildings, even businesses are a jangle of spray painted symbols and felt pen markings. The closest thing to graffiti I have seen, previous to living in The City, is the yellow stab of dog piss on newly fallen snow.

I remember as a kid my father's rage after spying an animal high siding our hedge on three legs. Eventually my hometown enacted a leash ordinance. Being that the constable was an older gentleman who couldn't capture the bowl of his pipe while attempting to get it lit, the townsfolk united and collectively policed the bowel and urinary meanderings of their pets.

Could a program of mentoring at-risk youth work here? I ponder this as I step to avoid glass shards as lethal as prison yard shanks. My elderly neighbors are captives in their own homes, afraid even to venture out in daylight. Two of the smaller groceries, storefront shops really, have already been shuttered, having lost their bread and butter customers. Could we band together and fight the drug culture?

Deep in thought, I nearly miss my turn. Wiley meets me after riding his motorcycle over an adjoining street. Queen Bee occupies three fold-down seats of a bus shelter. She is wearing a yellow and brown striped sack-dress arrangement and sports a turban woven of black felt stacked high atop her head. Strapped across her chest are two shoulder bags, bandolier-style, causing her breasts to jut like the nosepieces of propeller driven aircraft. Two scurvy looking louts laze against a store front, trying not to be obvious they're covering Queen Bee's rear. Wiley dismounts in front of her, while I walk up from her left.

"You all tryin' to blind side me?" Queen Bee spits, a frown begins to stumble its way, across her face, with the grasping hesitation of a toddler learning to walk.

"No. I . . . M-mamba is that you?" I stammer.

"Mamba Botswana!" Wiley chortles, rushing up and hugging her. "I thought you up and died!"

"I'm Queen Bee." She puffs, forcing the Bee through her honeycombed grill of teeth. The slackers suddenly spring to her side. Steely-eyed she glares at them. "Otis, Ruben, these here are ol' friends, git outta my face!" The two move back to their positions.

Hoarsely whispering, Mamba Botswana says, "Don't blow my cover, I gots me a good thin' goin' here."

"Jeez Mamba, we need to talk to you." Wiley mutters. "Can you meet us at the Wok?"

Mamba nods her head and mumbles "Tomorrow night, at seven." Raising her voice, she says, "Y'all leave an' don't come back! It ain't healthy for white boys bein' seen 'round here!"

I notice the foundation she is using on her face is heavily applied—almost like pancake makeup and if I'm not mistaken, a much darker shade than she used in the past. She is also wearing what I call ceremonial gloves—like those worn by the Queen of England—they run up her arms well past her elbows, disappearing into the sleeves of her dress. It seems to me that the season is far too warm for such attire.

We're at the Wild Side Wok. It is a feminist stronghold, and Mamba is royalty. A redwood stump has been yarded in and placed next to the fireplace for her to sit on. The interior is poorly lit, with chairs and tables facing each other in silent confrontation. Wiley proudly points out, to anyone bothering to pay attention, an eight by ten glossy of himself stir-frying a meal atop the roof of this establishment. The framed photograph hangs on a wall near the front entrance. Wiley claims to have received a hefty remuneration from the publishers of a West Coast lifestyle magazine for this composition entitled: *A Wok On The Wild Side*—complete with a stir-fry recipe he plagiarized from a vegan website.



Wiley was the first to make the acquaintance of Mamba when he repaired a transmitter for an off-campus radio station. The studio, located in Berkeley near the University, employed disc jockeys charged with advocating for social change. None were as radical as Mamba. Her ravings could be heard all over campus, inciting rent strikes, riots, fund raisings for progressive politicians; any cause within the black community. Her call-in shows were forums for the oppressed. Mamba Botswana's radio name, or on-air handle, is Black Mamba.

The thing that few of her listeners know is Mamba is Caucasian—actually Polish in heritage. I discovered her ethnicity when she handed me a check for building materials I had purchased. The name listed on the account was Aniela Wysocki, and a person of the same name signed the check.

“Mamba, who is Aniela Wysocki?”

“That's my given name—I've worked hard to keep it from bein' known to people outside the broadcast industry—I trust you'll respect my privacy?”

“It appears to be Eastern European, maybe even Slavic in origin,” I say.

“My parents emigrated to the U.S. from Warsaw before I was born—'nough 'bout this here, I don' like people knowin' my bidness.”

When I first arrived in The City, Mamba Botswana enlisted my woodworking skills for the construction of a platform bed. The day I presented her with drawings featuring the bed I intended to craft, she informed me, while unwrapping a snack cake, that she viewed herself as a human version of a *Hostess Snowball*. “I may be white on the outside, but I'm blessed with a rich chocolate fillin'. It be my soul,” she added as she licked strands of coconut from a spittle-

covered wrapper. "A person can aspire to be anyone or anythin', just remember; a bodies' gotta have compassion—she patted her chest—deep in here."

When I point out that a sweet white filling is at the very center of her treat, she playfully cuffed my ear with a fistful of sticky fingers and said; "You dun caught on to me."

"Mamba, what's this, you calling yourself Queen Bee?" Wiley demands.

"Why honey, I tooks over Oprah Beeman's empire when she give up the ghost—or, should I say, became one."

"What empire?" I ask, getting into the spirit of interrogation.

"Oh, mostly the travelin' game. What's your name again?" She asks.

"Normal," Wiley cuts in. "He's the carpenter who helped you out a couple of years back."

"Oh lordy! I remember now!" She says with a laugh. "You're the dude with only one name, did you come up with another yet?"

"No." I say.

"You bes' keep lookin' hon, you ain't nothin' special like them musicians who become the focus of an adoring public sportin' only one name. I remember you trying to whistle while you worked; you couldn't carry a tune but you toted lumber jus' fine." Mamba smiles.

Wiley continues his questioning, "What about rock cocaine or crystal meth? You involved with that crap?"

"Lord have mercy! That stuff ain't nothin' but trouble; brings down the heat. The travelin' card game's all I care to handle—that and weekend Bunco Tournaments, of course."

"We have a house we been working on and want to list when we're finished." Wiley says. "With all the dope dealing, we're fearful it's gonna be a tough sell."

"We got us a plan to move them homeboys off the street," Mamba says. "We're gonna plant apprentice musicians on every intersection of the 'hood they're sellin' dope on. Remember that cowboy in the Haight, the one with the white Stetson, who stood on the corner of Ashbury with that awful saxophone before his instrument's reed got stuck in his throat an' he choked to death? Our novices will be worse. The rackets gonna be so bad them homies will become deathly ill. This here strategy worked before; when beatniks and smack hit North Beach. Why it even prevailed when Peruvian marchin' powder tangled with Mission Street wannabe Caballeros—you may not remember—this here occurred during the era when that dick-headed, war-mongering, Commander-in-Chief stopped by The City to offer up excuses for his poor performance and spread more of his America, love it or leave it, bullshit!"

"How long will your action take?" I ask.

"'Bout a year, give or take. Tell you boys what, I'll lease that house from you—when you get's it back, them streets will be as genteel as the language used by the President when addressin' members of congress, that is, when he speaks to them directly and not behind their backs."

"It's a deal!" Wiley says, avoiding my look of disbelief.

On our way out the door, I ask: "Do you really believe Mamba and her crew can clean up the streets?"

"Absolutely. When I was a kid, I spent summers at music camp. Man, the squeaks and grunts coming from instruments in the hands of amateurs is something awful." Wiley shakes his

head at his recollections. “Anyhow, I don't see as we have a choice, my mama didn't raise no street sweeper, did yours?”

Once aboard his motorcycle I ask, “What instrument do you play?”

“Oh, I tried out on everything from tambourines to tubas, but the triangle struck a chime. My camp’s director informed me that he never met anyone who could cut corners like me; I have a real talent, but I don’t like to brag.”

Wiley avoids a stop sign by guiding his Harley through a gas station’s driveway, angling his motorcycle over a curb and we begin the downhill run of Head Street. A white BMW convertible is partially blocking our way at the first intersection we encounter. It is obvious the blond-haired driver has just concluded a drug transaction. Two young adult males, with baggy pants slid halfway down their boxers and baseball hats worn backside forward, flip us the bird as we slowly make our way around the sporty luxury car—we’ve had run-ins with these two before. Further down the street I see the flashing lights of a police cruiser and the revolving strobe of a wrecker.

A police officer is directing traffic around the tow vehicle, which is hoisting my pickup truck onto a dolly. I jump off the motorcycle leaving Wiley in charge of garaging his Harley.

“Why are you taking my Chevy?” I ask the cop.

“You’ve parked illegally. You didn’t curb your wheels.”

“You’re towing my vehicle for that puny offence?”

“Mister, this is a public safety issue. I’m not going to argue with you. Go talk to the Captain at Ingleside Precinct if you got a problem.”

“You guys are gonna tow my vehicle, while dope deals are taking place a half-block away?”

“Look fella, I work traffic. You keep at me, I’ll cite you for obstructing an officer.”

“Shit!” Is all I say as I hop up on the dolly and try to unlock the door of my pickup, intent on retrieving a package of saw blades I’d left on the truck’s seat. The traffic cop mutters an expletive before tackling me; seems I never asked his permission to retrieve my personal property.

Wiley shows up as I’m being handcuffed. “They’re hauling me down to the station in Ingleside, get some money together and bail me out. Better still; see if you can get Mamba, er, ah, Queen Bee to intercede, I’m guessing she holds sway with the authorities—it appears The Cities’ finest have anointed her to run interference on this corridor of dope dealers, graffiti artists, and broken dreams.”

“Dude,” Wiley says, “My vote stays with calling this street the avenue of endangered investors.”

Catcalls and whistles erupt from the dope dealer’s corner when the paddy wagon turns onto Head Street, siren screaming and lights flashing. I distinctly hear a voice yell: “What goes around comes around!” as I’m being led to the paddy wagon by its attendant police officers.