

BUFFALO SOLDIER

They called him “Buffalo Soldier,” in the army, but that was back in 1950, when he served in Korea. He was in grave’s registration during the long winter of 1951, when it was so cold the frozen dead were stacked like cordwood. He’d never fired a shot in anger, yet he was a prideful man and considered it an honor to carry a warrior’s name. He was eighty now, with hair white as ginned cotton. Time had slowed his once purposeful gait and dimmed the eyes that, according to the still valid Georgia driver’s license he carried, now required corrective lenses whenever he drove his twelve-year old Cadillac Eldorado down to the local Piggly Wiggly.

He had the blood sugar too, but he diligently kept up with his yard work and kept the sidewalk clear of hickory nuts dropped from trees older than him. To please his wife, Miss Cora, before she passed five years earlier, he’d whitewashed the trunks of every hickory fronting their modest home. He’d even whitewashed the tractor tire in the front yard where he grew his petunias, as well as the evenly spaced rocks that circumscribed the yard like a French Foreign Legion outpost.

The neighborhood had declined since Miss Cora’s death, to be dominated by what she would have called “the wrong element.” At night, gunshots were heard often enough for him to have kept a family heirloom under his bed pillow – a six-round single shot .38 caliber Colt dating back to the Spanish-American War.

His only companion since Miss Cora’s passing was the apricot poodle she’d named Queenie. She was Miss Cora’s dog – fiercely loyal, and indifferent to any attempt to befriend her. However she allowed him to feed her, often from his own plate, and he

allowed her to accompany him on his daily walks until arthritis sidelined her. He once considered giving her away, but that would have been like giving away a piece of Miss Cora.

Due to a ten-year age differential he always called her Miss Cora, whereas she called him by his given name; William, and William was a heathen. Rather than attend the Guiding Light Baptist church where Miss Cora played the organ, he “communed with the Lord” from a flat-bottomed scow while bass fishing on the well-stocked pond of a friend. Out there electric blue dragonflies and a pair of mute swans spoke to his spirit while he soaked up a hot Georgia sun and drank Cuban rum straight from the bottle.

He had gone to the mall the day before, intending to purchase a new coverlet for his bed, when he happened to pass a sporting goods outlet. There was a sale on sneakers, and these caught his eye. Coal black with yellow and white slashes on the sides, they seemed to speak to him. And with the eye-catching image of a basketball player whose name meant nothing to him impressed on each tongue, he asked to try them on. Miss Cora would have skinned him alive, had she known he’d paid one hundred and twenty dollars for them. But wearing them made William feel young again, and less mindful of a body already twisted by arthritis and age.

He was sober, unarmed, and wearing the new sneakers on the day he set off alone on his afternoon walk, past the whitewashed hickory trees and rocks that lined the sidewalk in front of his modest two bedroom home with its single bathtub and the detached garage out back where he kept his ruby red Eldorado.

Because he habitually timed his walk he checked his watch – a rose-tone Bulova celebrating fifty years of perfect attendance as a mechanic with Georgia Power & Light.

The case carried the engraved inscription: **CONGRATULATIONS
BUFFALO SOLDIER ON A PERFECT 50 YEARS. FROM
YOUR FRIENDS AT GP&L.**

He was thirty minutes into his timed walk when he found his thoughts returning to when Miss Cora was alive. A serial worrier, she'd insisted that he carry an index card with his name, address, and telephone number printed on it. A precaution should he become lost or disabled, and he carried the card now, out of respect to her memory.

He was passing an exuberant basketball game being played by a group of young black males in the driveway of a HUD home across the street when he stubbed a toe on an unseen crack and fell headlong onto the gritty sidewalk. He had never fallen before in his life. His initial reaction was one of embarrassment, followed by the sting of pain and the growing fear he might have broken something. His gold-framed eyeglasses were bent and lay within an arm's reach but missing a lens. He tasted blood from biting his lip and his palms were skinned. He guessed so were his knees and elbows.

As he lay there, feeling betrayed by his own body and realizing he could no longer take a simple walk for granted anymore, a bicycle slowly rolled into his limited field of vision, followed by a second. They stopped next to him with both riders' feet planted firmly on the fractured sidewalk as they balanced themselves. They also wore sneakers, unblemished chalk-white sneakers that gave him an unexpectedly warm feeling of shared interests.

“What ‘cha doin’ down there, Gran-paw?” one asked. “Doin’ the breast stroke?”

“I tripped and fell.”

“Hear that? The second one said. “Gran-paw tripped and fell.”

He watched them lay their bicycles down in the condom and syringe littered dirt bordering the sidewalk. “‘Spouse you boys could lend me a hand getting up?’” he asked.

“We ain’t in the gettin’ up business, Gran-paw.”

“Check out Gran-paw’s kicks,” the second one said.

I see ‘em. Fuckin’ Air Jordan’s.”

“Sweet. Them’d go for a buck fifty on the street.”

“They look to be my size,” the first boy said. “Get ‘em for me, bro.”

“Get ‘em yerself, bro. I got my eye on Gran-paw’s Timex.”

William tried getting up but his back rebelled. *Maybe a pulled muscle.* “Don’t do something you’ll be sorry for, boys.”

“We already sorry,” ain’t we?” the first boy said, and circled around to wrest the Air Jordan’s from William’s feet. Then the second boy knelt to strip the Bulova off William’s wrist. He groaned and prayed someone would come; a passing car, or better yet, a cop. But no one did. Meanwhile sunlight fell through a canopy of hickory leaves and dappled the sidewalk where he lay sprawled, while the rising song of cicadas filled the torpid afternoon air.

“That watch means a lot to me,” William said. “Please don’t take it.” He felt himself being rolled to his side and gritted his teeth while a rough hand searched his pockets.

“You Will-yam?” the first boy asked. He had found the index card.

“Yes.”

“This here where your cribs’ at?”

“Yes. Help me there. I have money. Let me keep the watch. I’ll give you money to buy a better one.”

“Naw,” the second boy said, slipping the Bulova over his thin wrist. “This’ll do me jes’ fine.”

The first boy tied the Air Jordan’s shoelaces together and slung them over the handlebars. “We dig chattin, with y’all, Will-yam,” he said, “But we got to be gettin’ along.”

William watched them ride off and knowing that neither boy could have been more than fifteen. The first boy was dark with acne. The second boy had skin like milk chocolate. Like him.

William struggled to his feet but the effort made him dizzy – and again when he stooped to retrieve the broken eyeglasses. He slipped them into his shirt pocket and hobbled for home in his stocking feet. When he reached the whitewashed hickory trees and rocks and the tractor tire, he knew he was home and turned in.

He unlocked the front door, let himself into the house, and went into the kitchen where he always kept a bottle of Captain Morgan in the pantry. There was no sign of Queenie, but the meatloaf and gravy treat he’d left in her bowl was gone. He splashed three fingers of rum into a Dixie cup and swallowed it in a single gulp. He considered calling the police, but all they’d do was to file another misdemeanor report and that would be that.

With a deep sigh he rinsed his abraded hands with hydrogen peroxide before falling into the same bed he’d shared with Miss Cora for fifty-three years. To his surprise

he was now sharing it with Queenie. William wondered how she'd been able to climb onto the bed unaided, until concluding that Miss Cora must have had a hand in it. He was further convinced of it when Queenie licked his injured hand.

The wind came up while he slept, shaking hard-shelled hickory nuts loose from the trees overlooking the house and yard and onto a tin roof with the hollow sound of Buffalo Soldiers crossing the prairie on horseback. He didn't wake until night had stolen the day and the bedroom had gone dark with Queenie still nestled protectively at his side. He was reconsidering a call to the police, but first he needed to use the toilet, as even old men have their priorities.

He switched on his bedside reading lamp and hobbled to the bathroom to review his face the light of a mirrored medicine chest. *It could have been much worse*; he thought. When he returned to the bedroom he discovered Queenie sitting on his pillow with the Colt clenched in her jaws. The idea that she could have accidentally uncovered it was quickly dismissed. *First Queenie had somehow gotten onto the bed unaided, where she lay waiting to comfort him for reasons she couldn't have possibly understood. Now this. Surely Miss Cora was trying to tell him something.* And then he knew what he had to do.

With the Colt tucked securely in the waistband of his Sans-a-belt slacks and a roll of twenty dollar bills in his pocket, William guided the Eldorado along darkened streets, squinting through his broken eyeglasses on the way back to where he was set upon by the two boys. But he didn't stop there. Instead he drove on, never more than fifteen miles an hour and hoping all along that he'd find them on their bicycles.

Here and there he could see drug deals going down in the shadows. A black hooker wearing a low cut blouse, heels, and red-satin hot pants stood under a corner streetlight. When she waved at him he rolled to a stop next to her and powered down the opposite window. *Maybe she'd seen them.*

“Lookin’ to party, pops?” she asked with a suggestive smile.

“I’m looking for two boys,” he said. “They’d be no more’n fifteen, sixteen tops. One very dark, the other light-skinned and baby-faced.”

“I kin fix you up, hon, but I’d have to take my cut first.”

“I’m not looking for that kind of party, miss. These boys were on bicycles. Maybe you’ve seen them around.”

“Whut’s in it for me if I did?”

William reached into his pocket for the roll of twenties. They added up to three hundred dollars. He peeled one off and held it up. “This...if you can tell me where to find them.”

“Shit, I kin do better’n that. One goes by Russell. The other one I ain’t sure, but he was wearing black sneaks las’ time I seen him.”

“And where was that?” he asked after handing over the twenty.

“Gimmie another Jackson an’ I’ll tell you ‘zactly.”

William thumbed off another twenty and gave it to her.

She grinned and tucked both bills between her breasts. “They wuz shootin’ hoops over at the other one’s house. You’ll find ‘em two blocks yonder an’ a half block over.”

When she pointed the streetlight caught a glint of rose-tone on her left wrist.

William recognized his Bulova. “That’s my watch you’re wearing.”

“Say what?”

“It was stolen from me this afternoon. I want it back.”

“Wasn’t me took it.”

“It was the boy Russell who stole’ it. How’d you get it?”

“I worked for it,” she said, and backed away.

“Was it Russell you tricked? Or did you do both boys?”

“I don’t need to tell you jack shit, mister.”

William pulled the Colt from his waistband and aimed it at her face. “Give me my watch.”

“You crazy old fool, sittin’ there it that punk-ass ghetto cruiser, lookin’ all cross-eyed an’ half-blind. Shit, that six-shooter must’a belonged to Buffalo fuckin’ Bill hisself.”

“I’ll buy it off you.”

“Ain’t mine to sell, old man. It’s goin’ to my boyfrien’.”

“Your pimp, you mean.” William lowered the gun. “Listen. Be reasonable. I can offer you more than the watch is worth.”

“Which is whut?”

William considered the question while a white Lincoln Navigator with 22 inch chrome dubs and smoked windows drove slowly past, its speakers thumping with gangster rap. “How about two hundred?”

She seemed to think. “How do I know the watch is yours anyways?”

“There’s an inscription on the case. It says congratulations Buffalo Soldier on a perfect fifty years from your friends at G P and L.”

She leaned down to make eye contact. “You a Buffalo Soldier?”

“That’s what they called me in the army. Buffalo Soldier. It carried over to my workplace later on.”

“You shoot buffalos in the army?”

“No. Buffalo Soldiers were black members of the U.S. Army’s 10th Calvary Regiment. They were organized back in 1866. Native Americans called them Buffalo Soldiers because of their wooly hair.”

She twisted the watch around her wrist. “Okay, Buffalo Soldier. Gimmie five hundred an’ you kin have it.”

“I don’t have that much on me.”

“They’s an ATM over at Lacey’s Convenience Store, jes’ down the street.”

He considered the potential risk of withdrawing money in this part of town just as an EMS unit rushed past with strobe lights flashing and its siren echoing off vacant storefronts.

“You got a name, miss?”

“Chantel.”

“Come with me?”

“I ain’t leavin’ my corner, jes’ to chance ridin’ with a half-blind man for five hunnert bucks.”

William discovered Lacey’s to be a squat cinderblock building scrawled with graffiti and iron bars protecting windows covered over with beer and cigarette advertisements and a Georgia Peach Lottery sign. William parked in the vacant lot adjoining Lacey’s. He stepped out, locked the Eldorado, and shuffled into the store.

An Asian clerk smoking a cigarette behind thick Plexiglas gave William a suspicious look as he made his way past unblinking security cameras to the ATM. He fumbled a debit card from his wallet, fed it into the machine, and then punched in his PIN number followed by a withdrawal order for three hundred dollars. When he got back to Chantel's corner he found her negotiating with a white man in a Dodge Ram pickup. William made a wide U-turn to come up behind the pickup. He flashed his high beams to end the transaction and then lowered the passenger-side window as the pickup sped off.

"You get the money, Will-yam?" she asked with a meaningful glance at the Ram's disappearing taillights.

He nodded and held out five twenties. "You get the rest when I get the watch."

Chantel slipped the Bulova over her hand and let it dangle off her index finger. "They's a scratch on the case, but it was that way when I got it."

William took the watch in one hand and gave her the rest of the money with the other. "I'll overlook the scratch."

"They's sump'n you need to know, Will-yam. While you wuz at the ATM, Russell and the other boy came by on their bicycles. They was talkin' 'bout makin' a big score. Since they wuz headed up the street you come down from, maybe you could find 'em up there."

"Thank you, Chantel," William said. *They had his address.* He was nearly home when his headlights caught the two boys riding side by side on their bicycles. He pulled up ahead of them and stopped in the middle of the street. When he lowered his window he could hear them jabbering as they came up behind him.

"You think Will-yam's loaded, Latrell?" Russell said.

“He said he had money at home, din’t he?”

“Yeah, and it should be easy pickin’s, him bein’ all fucked up like he was.”

“Check out the old pimpmobile,” Latrell said when they reached the Eldorado.

“Maybe Chantel’s pimp done come for his watch,” Russell said, and laughed.

William stepped out of the car, pulled the Colt from his waistband, and pointed it directly at Russell. “Maybe he’s already got it,” he said, and raised his arm to show the rose-tone Bulova. Then he turned the gun on Latrell. “Now he wants his Air Jordan’s back.”

“Well what do you know,” Latrell said. “It’s Will-yam. You been doin’ bidness with Chantel tonight, Will-yam?”

William wagged the Colt. “Get off the bicycles, both of you.”

“Better do it,” Russell warned. “With him shakin’ so bad, that cannon could go off an’ kill somebody.”

“Call 9-1-1 on your iPhone,” Latrell said. “Tell ‘em Uncle Ben got loose from the cream of wheat factory an’ is threatenin’ two minors with a gun.”

“Go ahead,” William said. “I was looking to call them myself.”

“He crazy alright,” Russell said, and laid his bike down in the street behind the Eldorado. “Give the bitch his shoes before he gets any crazier.”

Latrell muttered “Shit,” but he got off his bike and kneeled to begin unlacing the Air Jordan’s while William held the Colt on him. When he was done, he pulled them off and threw them at William’s feet.

William picked them up and tossed them into the idling Eldorado. “Now lay your bicycle down next to Russell’s.”

“Wa-choo gonna do now, Will-yam?” Latrell asked, but there was a catch in his voice.

“I’m going to ask you both to step across the street and wait there until I’m gone. And if my place ever gets broken into, the police’ll know who to be looking for.”

Before the two boys had reached the opposite side of the street, William was already behind the wheel and had the transmission jammed in reverse gear. When he stepped on the gas the Eldorado lurched backward and over the two bicycles – flattening them under the rear wheels amid a sudden flash of sparks and sounding like ball bearings caught in a blender.

But William didn’t go directly home. Instead, and dragging two bicycles fused to the Eldorado’s undercarriage, he returned to the corner where Chantel plied her timeless trade. It was late, but she was still there and pacing back and forth. Even with his bad eye he could see she was dragging anchor. She looked up at his approach, seemingly at a loss to understand why he’d come back – never mind that his Eldorado seemed to be shedding bits of itself. William pulled up to the curb and waved her over.

“Can you spare few minutes?”

“I ‘spose. You find them boys?”

“Yes. They had my home address and were on their way there. I owe you.”

“You come back to trick? It’s been a slow night. Might give you a discount.”

“I’m an old man, Chantel. I just thought if you hadn’t eaten, or if you’d like to get off your feet for awhile, maybe you’d like to join me for dinner away from here.”

“That’s kind of you, Will-yam, but I ain’t made my quota yet.”

“Say I make your quota for you. How much would you need?”

“Well, that honky you scared off would’ve put me over the top. He was good for twenty bucks. As for the watch money, that’s goin’ off the books.”

“I’ll cover the quota, but what about my dinner offer?”

“Ain’t no man ax me to dinner before. ‘Sides, I ain’t exactly dressed for eatin’ out.”

“I’d take you to my place, but all I’ve got is some leftover meatloaf.”

“You ain’t got a woman?”

He glanced at the Bulova, as if it could tell him every minute of his loss. “My wife passed five years ago.”

“Buffalo Soldier ain’t laid with a woman since then?”

He shook his head. “I’m not the man I used to be anymore.”

“Ain’t none of us is who we used to be anymore.”

William chuckled. “What about my offer to take you off the street for awhile?”

Chantel rested her forearms on the open windowsill. “Lacey’s open ‘till midnight, Buffalo Soldier. You still got a balance left in that ATM?”

“What do you need?”

“Nuthin’ but man who thinks he ain’t who he used to be, but wants a lasting reminder of when he was.”

