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W.T.

In 1964, W.T. and I worked for the same auto dealership, Alfa Romeo, Fiat, Mercedes Benz, Peugeot, Renault, and used cars. I ran the parts department. W.T. cleaned cars, fixed minor mechanical problems, changed tires, and kept the shop and lot clean. We knew some of the same people, and we went to some of the same parties.

He talked about “my people,” and I didn’t say anything, but one day he said, “your people,” and I said, “No, you can’t do that. ‘My people,’ that’s all right, because that’s claiming all black people as yours and yourself as one of them, and you can do that all you want. But you say ‘your people,’ and you’re saying all white people are mine and me theirs, and I’m not willing to go along with that. I’m not responsible for their actions or beliefs or misuse of power just because I’m approximately the same color they are. You don’t have the right to lump me in with them on the basis of color. If I’m without sin, I can’t be convicted for my father’s sins, or I’ve misjudged you, myself, and our understanding of each other.”

W.T. said, “We could make you an honorary black.”

“I could dye my skin. But I’m not one of your people, unless your people includes everybody, any more than I am one of my people if my people is just all white people. I am of the people. All the people.”

“What about me? Am I of all the people?”

“I think so. Here’s something I hadn’t thought of. Are you of the people if you don’t want to be? Because my first response would have been, of course. Everybody is one of the people, whether they know they are or not. But maybe you don’t have to join if you don’t want to. I don’t know how that part of it works.”

“I’m going to keep on with being one of my people. THE people, that’s too many of the ones who’ve been wiping out my people.”

“Here’s an ethnic joke for you, W.T. It comes from the time before weapons were available everywhere. White guy and a black guy talking. White guy says, ‘What I don’t understand about you black people, how come you’re always cutting on people?’ Black guy says, ‘Well, you white folks won’t sell us any guns.’”

“Now, anybody can buy just about any kind of weapon. Look around. Is anybody not shooting, and if somebody isn’t shooting, is it by skin color that they decide not to shoot?”

A guy comes in to buy a wheel bearing for a Mercedes Benz 220, and W.T. goes back to work on the car he’s detailing. The guy has to walk right past W.T., and he says, “How’s it going, boy?” He might have said “boy” if it was me he was talking to. It could be coincidence; he could be clear in his mind that W.T. is a man in the best sense of the word, and he could be so free that he calls his white co-workers “boy” and simply extends the same camaraderie to W.T.

But I don’t think so. I wish that’s the way it was. I’m sure W.T. knows it isn’t.

W.T. says, “Doin jus fine, sir. Jus great.” He turns and picks up a broom and sweeps the concrete floor, which doesn’t need sweeping.

He doesn’t look like tall, strong W.T.. Loose-jointed, stoop-shouldered, he sweeps away from us. Every time he turns toward the man, he smiles a big, slack smile and stays involved with his broom. He doesn’t look directly at the man, even though the man’s back is to him.

The man concentrates on the book showing what one mechanism of a Mercedes Benz looks like if you take it apart and suspend the parts in air.

W.T. does a soft-shoe shuffle with his broom through sunshine in the big south doors, standing open to Sacramento Valley summer. He catches my eye and bows. He dances out of the shop, through the open doors, and

loses himself among 157 used cars waiting for buyers.

The man points to the parts he wants and never sees W.T.'s dance. I find the parts on the shelves, dust them off, sell them.

I keep thinking about W.T.'s performance, especially the shucking and jiving. What made it funny was that it wasn't W.T. He would not shuck and jive. He might back up and leave, but he wouldn't shuck and jive and bow down to a white man.

The thought comes, *How the hell would I know?* There's a lot of time in W.T.'s life I know nothing about. Maybe that's what he was calling to my attention with the sweeping routine. Both the humorous juxtaposition of this image with what W.T. really is, and the unfunny thought, you could get to a place, just because of the color of your skin, where this kind of routine might be your only road to survival.

It reminds me of when I worked at the Chevrolet dealership, and a black man, MacHenry, worked there. His persona was entirely different from W.T.'s. The role that W.T. played for my edification there in the shop, MacHenry played all the time at work.

His response, no matter what the greeting, was, "Jus fine. Yessir, jus fine," and he'd get involved in his work so his back was to you, and you were out of his environment.

"Looks like it's raining cats and dogs out there, MacHenry."

"Jus fine. Yessir. Jus fine."

The fender needs some more attention, and he dives into it. Maybe he's laughing about what he's doing to my mind. Probably not. He's more than twenty years older than W.T.

It could be grim to be the only black where twenty whites work, in a part of town where blacks only pass through. It could be simpler to play the easiest role possible and get out every week with his paycheck in his pocket and his skin and mind in one piece.

There aren't any black mechanics in the shop. No black people in the office. No black car salesmen.

There's just the one black detail man.

At the Dodge dealership, across town, there's one black. He details cars, gets them ready for delivery. Same thing at the Ford dealership. One. Same job. At the Cadillac-Buick dealership, they have two black men detailing cars and one black body and fender man. The body and fender shop is in a separate building, at the back of the lot.

I quit the place W.T. and I worked and went to work in the woods. I saw W.T. enough to keep up on changes in each other's lives.

One hot July afternoon, when I'd driven down the mountain for supplies and to try to take care of legal business, 5:15 on the hot sidewalk, W.T. stepped in front of me and extended his hand. "Man," he said, "I was wondering if I'd ever see you again."

I grabbed his hand, "I'm glad you did, W.T.; I'm glad you did."

He said, "Let me buy you a beer in this cool, shady bar right down the block."

"I will. That sounds good."

Before we finished our beer and hit the hot pavement again, W.T. said, "Come to this party I'm going to tonight. Lots of good people there. You know a lot of 'em. Tell me where you'll be, and I'll come and get you about eight."

I did. He did. I saw people I hadn't seen in a long time, and I got into some good catching-up conversations, but I wasn't doing much drinking by then, and I had a lot on my mind. I drifted to the edge of the party.

W.T. came to tell me, "When you get ready to go, I'll give you a ride back."

"Thanks, W.T. I think I'll walk. It's cooling down. Nice evening."

"Sure is. Let's go sit in the back yard a while before you walk away in the night."

We walked into deep shadows of the night in the backyard, where no street lights and little starlight penetrated. We sat on a low-growing limb of an ancient

black oak that started its growth before any European came to this part of the continent. A stream ran in the darkest shadows, singing its way through summer. We smelled the oak and its growing leaves, the grass, and the clay dirt under the grass.

W.T. asked me, "You ever get to see your kids?"

"No, but I put a lawyer to work on it. Maybe he'll be able to do something."

"Man, nothing's worth breaking up your family for."

"I know. But I didn't do it."

"I know. I said the same thing to your wife, but her head is somewhere else entirely."

"My ex-wife."

"Yeah. Your ex-wife."

W.T. still had the same job. He still lived in the same house. He still had the same wife. He owned the house. I said, "W.T., you've given your wife plenty of cause to break up your marriage, if she wanted to see it and do something about it."

"She doesn't, though. She wants to hold our family together, too. She don't ask too many questions, and I don't ask her too many questions either. I do what I want to do, but if any of it got close to breaking up my family, I'd back up and change how I live."

"Sounds like you just don't have the stomach for chaos."

He laughed. "You got that right. No room for chaos, no time for chaos."

We sat for a while, saying nothing. Then he said, "It depends what you're aiming for. This world, it don't mean that much. We're here a little while, and when we go, we take nothing with us. Why fight it? Make a smooth and easy ride of it."

"Good advice. I'm having trouble just keeping food, shelter, and transportation going. I have a good contract for the summer, but lawyer's fees and debts and court-ordered financial settlements and the uneven division of property has me jumping for bucks. Breaking up a marriage is an expensive operation."

W.T. said, "I know that, too."

After a while, he said, "You got a long way to go, start over and try again, make some money and build you a life. Me, I'm at the top of where I'm going. I detail cars; I do a good job of it, and I don't mind the work. I'll probably do that job the rest of my life.

"It's relaxing, not having much ambition. Don't matter what changes everybody says have come, most of the jobs around here are still closed to me. So why should I worry about getting ahead of where I am? Why should I spend any time trying to improve my situation? I spend that time and energy getting the best out of this life I have."

This thought drifted through my mind: *I never was shooting for anything different from what W.T. is talking about, a smooth, hassle-free life. But I never was as clear as he is about what it was I was shooting for and how to get there.*

I'm no more clear about where I'm going, now I've started over. There are so many dreams mixed up in it, always have been so many strange dreams. Maybe I never was in control of any of it, whatever my aims might have been.

We sat in the dark. Then I said, "Going to hit the road, W.T."

He said, "Yeah. I want to see what the people inside are doing."

Each of us went his way, off into the party that night, off into the world.

My way included getting busted up by a drunk driver. The drunk driver had nothing beyond enough money for his next couple of beers. I had no insurance, money, or property. For more than two years, I couldn't work. I kept trimming what I owned until I had the pack on my back, my sleeping bag, a few things stored, no vehicle, and no home.

I loved every day. I lived, and I loved living.

I also wanted back on board. I wanted a home and a vehicle, a base to work from. I wanted to do things I couldn't store at my brother's place or manage from a pack. I worked every day to improve my stamina, to

gain strength.

My brother told me about a job I might be able to do, enough physical work to keep loosened up, some desk work to get me off my feet part of the time, flexible hours so I could punch out early when I couldn't make it through the day.

I swore off hitchhiking last time I caught a ride with a drunk, but there was no way I could get to the place to see about the job other than thumbing five-hundred miles up the highway.

A sunny, warm spring day, a good day to be traveling, I got a ride twenty miles up the road, into open range land north of town. Nothing but the highway, the shoulder of the road, the barbed wire fence, flowers and green grass growing by the highway. I walked a ways. I sat by the road a while.

A gold-colored chevy went by and pulled off the road ahead of me. I should have recognized that car immediately, but my mind was someplace else, and I didn't, until W.T. got out and walked back toward me. I walked to meet him. We shook hands, and he said, "Nobody else in this world I'd stop and give a ride to this day, but I couldn't pass you by."

We put my pack in the trunk, then got in. Another guy in the front. Two guys in the back. I know one of them, A.D., against the far window. The other guy scoots to the center, and I get in beside him and shut the door.

W.T. introduces me to the other two guys, says, "I know you and A.D. know each other." He checks his rear view mirror for traffic and pulls onto the highway. W.T. looks at me in the mirror, says, "What you up to this sunny day, heading north?"

"Going up to see about a job, W.T. Trying to find a way to climb back on board the supply train everybody else is riding on."

"Hard to do without it. I heard you was having a hard time of it."

A.D. says, "You don't lack courage. One puny white boy climbing in with four mean niggers."

A huge man, A.D. has put people in the hospital and spent time behind bars because of it.

W.T. says, "One mean nigger. In with one mean nigger and three black gentlemen. And the mean nigger is behaving real good today, because he's riding in a black gentleman's car, and he isn't drunk or drugged up, and he promised to stay on good behavior, and he keeps his promises. And this is not a white boy. He is a man, just like you and me. Anybody could take him to pieces with one hand, 'cause he been busted up pretty bad, but nobody will, 'cause he's safe in this world, in my car. He's one of the people."

"He ain't one of our people."

"He is one of **the** people. All the people."

A.D. doesn't change the way he's looking at me, but he says, "We going up the road a hundred and twenty miles and pick up another brother. Then we heading south about four hundred miles to the funeral of another brother who blowed hisself away down in the city, and we going to carry his coffin to his grave and bury him. He got hisself into some living he couldn't keep up with til he took his revolver and blowed hisself away.

"What he left his wife, he left her the apartment, without no rent paid on it, and he left the revolver, without no more bullets for it, and he left her three little childrens without no Daddy. We going to bury George, because he was one of our people. And we going to pay the rent and buy some groceries for his wife and childrens, because they our people. A month, maybe two months, she got to figure out what she going to do, cause what we can help her with won't last."

He sat back in the seat and looked ahead of him and out the side window at trees and pastures and rock hillsides and cars and trucks going by in the other lane.

I felt like I had an ache, an illness deep in my gut that I wanted to vomit up, but it wouldn't break loose and come up, and inside some black gentleman's polished, very clean car is no place to vomit anyway, so I just rode along looking at the country on my side

of the car.

Thirty-five miles up the road, A.D. said, "White boy?" I watched the green grass, white oak trees and hills my side of the highway.

"Okay. You right. No more white boy, black boy stuff. You tell me your name. I used to know it, but I forgot. Okay, I got that. I thought that was it, but I didn't remember for sure. You reach over here and shake my hand, and then we know each other, people of the same people."

I reached before I could think about it. It was the only possibility other than opening the door and taking a flying leap at sixty-five miles an hour. Biggest hand I ever saw. Not really black. Dark brown and blue, dark blue, and purple, with a lighter colored, tan-pink palm. My hand disappeared. Enfolded within. Safely. Gently. We shook hands firmly, but only firmly.

I let out a long breath I didn't know I had taken in. I sat back. A.D. smiled at me, and I smiled at him, and we cruised on north, sixty-five miles an hour.

W.T. hums some tune I don't recognize. He pushes a tape into the deck, but he keeps the music low. He says, "They're going to blow the world to hell, and we're all going to die, but I know we'll make it anyway. We're all of us, every one of us going to make it."

A.D. says, "I did two years in the state pen because I put a bullet through a man's shoulder. I meant to put it through his heart, but I was drunk, and he moved just before I pulled the trigger. Way I look at it, I shouldn't have done any time, cause he had a gun in his hand and was thinkin' 'bout my heart, too, but that's the way they did it. Judge said I had a gun when the law says I couldn't have a gun and me a felon. He don't live where I live.

"When they slammed the door on me, I headed down. When I got to the bottom, it was black. Darker than anything in this world. That dark, it wasn't around me. It was inside, and it was there to soak up my life. I had to back away from that dark or die. I wasn't ready to die, so I looked inside my own self, inside my own

mind, you hear what I'm tellin' you? for some way to back up. Inside me was the only place I had to look. There wasn't nobody there to help me look or to give me anywhere else to look.

"I come to this idea that I wasn't really in prison. I knew the idea I kept tryin' to get myself around was right, you hear what I'm sayin'? It seemed like it was more true the more I thought about it, and I had to think about that, or think about dark. Thinking about that idea instead of thinking about dark that kept calling my name and tellin' me dark was the only thing to see, the only thing in the world, the only thing for me to think about, kept me alive. It kept me from going dark inside. Not dark like black and white, but dark and light.

"It took me a long time. When I got back up into the light, it was lighter than anything I ever seen. I thought it'd burn my eyes, but I kept them open, and the light didn't burn. It soaked all through me.

"The day I got out, this thought came up higher in my mind. Inside or outside don't really matter. I seen it clear as sunshine when I walked through that door. The world is a prison. First, I thought the world is a prison for black people. After a while, I seen it clear, and I seen this world is a prison for all the people. It don't have to be. It could be free, a beautiful place for everybody to live, but all the people work together, and we mess it up so it ain't beautiful anymore, you hear what I'm tellin' you?

"As long as there's bosses and we do what they tell us to do, that makes this world a prison for anyone else. As long as we fight between ourselves or try to step up on each other, we work for the bosses and for dark, and then it's a prison for all of us.

"We have to do what I did in the pen. We have to break free inside ourself. We have to find light inside ourself, and we have to keep that light burning by what we do and by what we don't do. I forget and get way out of line and do everything wrong, but I pull up short and start over again and again, as many times as it

takes. What I'm tryin' to live by ain't laws made by people but laws made by the universe, you understand what I'm sayin'?"

W.T. slowed the car. "We got to go east here a few miles and then south again. You can get out here, or you come with us and get some lunch with us, and we put you on the freeway heading north again before we head back down."

"Thanks W.T. I'll get out here and keep heading north. Liable to get dark on me if I take time off, and nobody picks up a hitch hiker in the dark."

He stopped, and I got out. I shook hands with W.T. I shook hands with Elijah. I shook hands with A.D. I shook hands with Freese. Then I shut the door, and they drove away.

Cars roar by. Heavy smell of exhaust fumes hangs in the air. Everybody's in such a hurry. Everybody's so worried. I might be stuck out here in this penitentiary of a world and never get a ride on up the road.

I take a deep breath. Even where exhaust fumes float thick in the air, a man has to breathe something. Then I put my thumb up into the air. A new Ford swerves close to me without slowing down, and I step back. A couple sits close together in the front seat, and the man extends his arm toward me, the back of his hand close to the window on my side, flashes me half a peace sign.

I start laughing. I can't help myself. I laugh, and I think of the four black gentlemen in the very clean, late-model Chevrolet sedan, and I remember W.T. saying, "We're going to make it. Every one of us is going to make it," and I wonder what they're eating for lunch. I wish to the Lord I was with those guys eating lunch, but I know I got to get on up the road, catch a ride on north. I know too, these are my people; I claimed them, all these people in cars going by at sixty-five miles an hour, even the affluent couple in the new Ford, **the** people, and we are, all of the people, we are going to make it, even if they blow the world to hell and it's too late to make it here in this world, and we're

still trying to make it in the face of everything collapsing around us and on us.

That's a sentence too, a term we have to serve until we learn what A.D. said. Light and freedom starts inside us, and we have to stop making prisons for each other and stepping up on each other.

I'm laughing and crying too, and my thumb is up in the exhaust-fummy air, and down inside of me, there's darkness and light, and they're both growing, but right now, for right now at least, the light grows faster.