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The voice from the sound truck said:

‘Each family, no matter how big it is, will be asked to put up one thousand dollars. You will get your transportation free, five acres of fertile land in Africa, a mule and a plow and all the seed you need, free. Cows, pigs and chickens cost extra, but at the minimum. No profit on this deal.’

A sea of dark faces wavered before the speaker’s long table, rapturous and intent.

‘Ain’t it wonderful, honey?’ said a big black woman with eyes like stars. ‘We’re going back to Africa.’

Her tall lean husband shook his head in awe. ‘After all these four hundred years.’

‘Here I is been cooking in white folk’s kitchens for more than thirty years. Lord, can it be true?’ A stooped old woman voiced a lingering doubt.

The smooth brown speaker with the honest eyes and earnest face heard her. ‘It’s true all right,’ he said. ‘Just step right up and give us the particulars and deposit your thousand dollars and you’ll have a place on the first boat going over.’

A grumpy old man with a head of white hair shuffled forward to fill out a form and deposit his thousand dollars, muttering to himself, ‘It sure took long enough.’

The two pretty black girls taking applications looked up with dazzling smiles.

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'Look how long it took the Jews to get out of Egypt,' one said.

'The hand of God is slow but sure,' said the other.

It was a big night in the lives of all these assembled colored people. Now at last, after months of flaming denunciations of the injustice and hypocrisy of white people, hurled from the pulpit of his church; after months of eulogy heaped upon the holy land of Africa, young Reverend Deke O'Malley was at last putting words into action. Tonight he was signing up the people to go on his three ships back to Africa. Huge hand-drawings of the ships stood in prominent view behind the speaker's table, appearing to have the size and design of the *SS Queen Elizabeth*. Before them stood Reverend O'Malley, his tall lithe body clad in dark summer worsted, his fresh handsome face exuding benign authority and inspiring total confidence, flanked by his secretaries and the two young men most active in recruiting applicants.

A vacant lot in the 'Valley' of Harlem near the railroad tracks, where slum tenements had been razed for a new housing development, had been taken over for the occasion. More than a thousand people milled about the patches of old, uneven concrete amid the baked, cindery earth littered with stones, piles of rubbish, dog droppings, broken glass, scattered rags and clusters of stinkweed.

The hot summer night was lit by flashes of sheet lightning, threatening rain, and the air was oppressive with dust, density and motor fumes. Stink drifted from the surrounding slums, now more overcrowded than ever due to the relocation of families from the site of the new buildings to be erected to relieve the overcrowding. But nothing troubled the jubilation of these dark people filled with faith and hope.

The meeting was well organized. The speaker's table stood at one end, draped with a banner reading: BACK TO

AFRICA – LAST CHANCE!!! Behind it, beside the drawings of the ships, stood an armored truck, its back doors open, flanked by two black guards wearing khaki uniforms and side arms. To the other side stood the sound truck with amplifiers atop. Tee-shirted young men in tight-fitting jeans roamed about with solemn, unsmiling expressions, swelled with a sense of importance ready to eject any doubters.

But for many of these true-believers it was also a picnic. Bottles of wine, beer and whisky were passed about. Here and there a soul-brother cut a dance step. White teeth flashed in black, laughing faces. Eyes spoke. Bodies promised. They were all charged with anticipation.

A pit had been dug in the center of the lot, housing a charcoal fire covered with an iron grill. Rows of pork ribs were slowly cooking on the grill, dripping fat into the hot coals with a sizzling of pungent smoke, turned from time to time by four 'hook-men' with long iron hooks. A white-uniformed chef with a long-handled ladle basted the ribs with hot sauce as they cooked, supervising the turning, his tall white chef's cap bobbing over his sweating black face. Two matronly women clad in white nurses' uniforms sat at a kitchen table, placing the cooked ribs into paper plates, adding bread and potato salad, and selling them for one dollar a serving.

The tempting, tantalizing smell of barbecued ribs rose in the air above the stink. Shirt-sleeved men, thinly clad women and half-naked children jostled each other good-naturedly, eating the spicy meat and dropping the bones underfoot.

Above the din of transistor radios broadcasting the night's baseball games, and the bursts of laughter, the sudden shrieks, the other loud voices, came the blaring voice of Reverend Deke O'Malley from the sound truck: 'Africa is our native land and we are going back. No more picking cotton for the white folks and living on fatback and corn pone . . .'

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‘Yea, baby, yea.’

‘See that sign,’ Reverend O’Malley shouted, pointing to a large wooden sign against the wire fence which proclaimed that the low-rent housing development to be erected on that site would be completed within two and one half years, and listed the prices of the apartments, which no family among those assembled there could afford to pay. ‘Two years you have to wait to move into some boxes – if you can get in, and if you can pay the high rent after you get in. By that time you will be harvesting your second crop in Africa, living in warm sunny houses where the only fire you’ll ever need will be for cooking, where we’ll have our own governments and our own rulers – *black*, like us –’

‘I hear you, baby, I hear you.’

The thousand-dollar subscriptions poured in. The starry-eyed black people were putting their chips on hope. One after another they went forward solemnly and put down their thousand dollars and signed on the dotted line. The armed guards took the money and stacked it carefully into an open safe in the armored truck.

‘How many?’ Reverend O’Malley asked one of his secretaries in a whisper.

‘Eighty-seven,’ she whispered in reply.

‘Tonight might be your last chance,’ Reverend O’Malley said over the amplifiers. ‘Next week I must go elsewhere and give all of our brothers a chance to return to our native land. God said the meek shall inherit the earth; we have been meek long enough; now we shall come into our inheritance.’

‘Amen, Reverend! Amen!’

Sad-eyed Puerto Ricans from nearby Spanish Harlem and the lost and hungry black people from black Harlem who didn’t have the thousand dollars to return to their native land congregated outside the high wire fence, smelling the tantalizing

barbecue, dreaming of the day when they could also go back home in triumph and contentment.

'Who's that man?' one of them asked.

'Child, he's the young Communist Christian preacher who's going to take our folks back to Africa.'

A police cruiser was parked at the curb. Two white cops in the front seat cast sour looks over the assemblage.

'Where you think they got a permit for this meeting?'

'Search me. Lieutenant Anderson said leave them alone.'

'This country is being run by niggers.'

They lit cigarettes and smoked in sullen silence.

Inside the fence, three colored cops patrolled the assemblage, swapping jokes with their soul-brothers, exchanging grins, relaxed and friendly.

During a lull in the speaker's voice, two big colored men in dark rumpled suits approached the speaker's table. Bulges from pistols in shoulder slings showed beneath their coats. The guards of the armored truck became alert. The two young recruiting agents, flanking the table, pushed back their chairs.

But the two big men were polite and smiled easily.

'We're detectives from the D.A.'s office,' one said to O'Malley apologetically, as both presented their identifications. 'We have orders to bring you in for questioning.'

The two young recruiting agents came to their feet, tense and angry.

'These white mothers can't let us alone,' one said. 'Now they're using our brothers against us.'

Reverend O'Malley waved them down and spoke to the detectives, 'Have you got a warrant?'

'No, but it would save you a lot of trouble if you came peacefully.'

The second detective added, 'You can take your time and finish with your people, but I'd advise you to talk to the D.A.'

'All right,' Reverend O'Malley said calmly. 'Later.'

The detectives moved to one side. Everyone relaxed. One of the recruiting agents ordered a serving of barbecue.

For a moment attention was centered on a meat delivery truck which had entered the lot. It had been passed by the zealous volunteers guarding the gate.

'You're just in time, boy,' the black chef called to the white driver as the truck approached. 'We're running out of ribs.'

A flash of lightning spotlighted the grinning faces of the two white men on the front seat.

'Wait 'til we turn around, boss,' the driver's helper called in a southern voice.

The truck went forward towards the speaker's table. Eyes watched it indifferently. The truck turned, backed, gently plowing a path through the milling mob.

Ignoring the slight commotion, Reverend O'Malley continued speaking from the amplifiers: 'These damn southern white folks have worked us like dogs for four hundred years and when we ask them to pay off, they ship us up to the North . . .'

'Ain't it the truth!' a sister shouted.

'And these damn northern white folks don't want us -' But he never finished. He broke off in mid-sentence at the sight of two masked white men stepping from the back of the meat delivery truck with two black deadly-looking submachine guns in their hands. 'Unh!!!' he grunted as though someone had hit him in the stomach.

For the brief instant following, silence reigned. The scene became a tableau of suspended motion. Eyes were riveted on the black holes of death at the front ends of the machine guns. Muscles became paralysed. Brains stopped thinking.

Then a voice that sounded as though it had come from the backwoods of Mississippi said thickly: 'Everybody freeze an' nobody'll git hurt.'

The black men guarding the armored truck raised their hands in reflex action. Black faces broke out with a rash of white eyes. Reverend Deke O'Malley slid quickly beneath the table. The two big colored detectives froze as ordered.

But the young recruiting agent at the left end of the table, who was taking a bite of barbecue, saw his dream vanishing and reached towards his hip pocket for his pistol.

There was a burst from a machine gun. A mixture of teeth, barbecued pork ribs, and human brains flew through the air like macabre birds. A woman screamed. The young man, with half a head gone, sank down out of sight.

The Mississippi voice said furiously: 'Goddamn stupid mother-raper!'

The softer southern voice of the gunner said defensively, 'He was drawing.'

'Mother-rape it! Git the money, let's git going.' The big heavy white man with his black mask slowly moved the black-holed muzzle of his submachine gun over the crowd like the nozzle of a fire hose, saying, 'Doan git daid.'

Bodies remained rigid, eyes riveted, necks frozen, heads stationary, but there was a general movement away from the gun as though the earth itself were moving. Behind, among the people at the rear, panic began exploding like Chinese firecrackers.

The driver's helper got out from the front seat, waving another submachine gun, and the black people melted away.

The two sullen cops in the police cruiser jumped out and rushed to the fence, trying to see what was happening. But all they could see was a strange milling movement of black people.

The three colored cops inside, pistols drawn, were struggling forward against a tide of human flesh, but being slowly washed away.

The second machine-gunner, who had fired the burst, slung

his gun over his shoulder, rushed towards the armored truck and began scooping money into a 'gunny-sack'.

'Merciful Jesus,' a woman wailed.

The black guards backed away, arms elevated, and let the white men take the money. Deke remained unseen beneath the table. All that was seen of the dead young man were some teeth still bleeding on the table, before the horrified eyes of the two young secretaries. The colored detectives hadn't breathed.

Outside the fence the cops rushed back to their cruiser. The motor caught, roared; the siren coughed, groaned, began screaming as the car went into a U-turn in the middle of the block heading back towards the gate.

The colored cops on the inside began shooting into the air, trying to clear a path, but only increased the pandemonium. A black tidal wave went over them as from a hurricane.

The white machine-gunner got all of the money – all \$87,000 – and jumped into the back of the delivery truck. The motor roared. The other machine-gunner followed the first and slammed shut the back door. The driver's helper climbed in just as the car took off.

The police cruiser came in through the gate, siren screaming, as though black people were invisible. A fat black man flew through the air like an over-inflated football. A fender bumped a woman's bottom and started her spinning like a whirling dervish. People scattered, split, diving, jumping, running to get out of the cruiser's path, colliding and knocking one another down.

But a path was made for the rapidly accelerating meat delivery truck. The cops looked at the driver and his helper as they passed. The two white men looked back, exchanging white looks. The cops went ahead, looking for colored criminals. The white machine-gunners got away.

The two black guards climbed into the front seat of the armored truck. The two colored detectives jumped on the

running-boards, pistols in their hands. Deke came out from underneath the table and climbed into the back, beside the empty safe. The motor came instantly to life, sounding for all the world like a big Cadillac engine with four hundred horsepower. The armored truck backed, filled, pointed towards the gate, then hesitated.

‘You want I should follow them?’ the driver asked.

‘Get ’em, goddammit. Run ’em down!’ one of the colored detectives grated.

The driver hesitated a moment longer. ‘They’re armed for bear.’

‘Bear ass!’ the detective shouted. ‘They’re getting away, mother!’

There was a glimpse of gray paint as the meat delivery truck went past a taxi on Lexington Avenue, headed north.

The big engine of the armored truck roared; the truck jumped. The police cruiser wheeled to head it off. A woman wild with fright ran in front of it. The car slewed to miss her and ran head-on into the barbecue pit. Steam rose from the bursted radiator pouring on to the hot coals. A sudden flash of lightning lit the wild stampede of running people, seen through the cloud of steam.

‘Great Godamighty, the earth’s busted open,’ a voice cried.

‘An’ let out all hell,’ came the reply.

‘Halt or I’ll shoot,’ a cop cried, climbing from the smoking ruins.

It was the same as talking to the lightning.

The armored truck bulldozed a path to the gate, urged on by a voice shouting, ‘Go get ’em, go get ’em.’

It turned into Lexington on screaming tyres. The off-side detective fell off to the street, but they didn’t stop for him. A roll of thunder blended with the motor sound as the big engine gathered speed, and another police cruiser fell in behind.

O'Malley tapped on the window separating the front seat from the rear compartment and passed an automatic rifle and a sawed-off shotgun to the guard. The remaining detective on the inside running-board was squatting low, holding on with his left hand and gripping a Colt .45 automatic in his right.

The armored truck was going faster than any armored truck ever seen before or since. The red light showed at 125th Street and a big diesel truck was coming from the west. The armored truck went through the red and passed in front of that big truck as close as a barber's shave.

A joker standing on the corner shouted jubilantly,

'Gawawwwed damn! Them mothers got it.'

The police cruiser stopped for the truck to pass.

'And gone!' the joker added.

The driver urged greater speed from the big laboring motor, 'Get your ass to moving.' But the meat delivery truck had got out of sight. The scream of the police siren was fading in the past.

The meat delivery truck turned left on 137th Street. In turning the back door was flung open and a bale of cotton slid slowly from the clutching hands of the two white machine-gunners and fell into the street. The truck dragged to a screaming sidewise stop and began backing up. But at that moment the armored truck came roaring around the corner like destiny coming on. The meat delivery truck reversed directions without a break in motion and took off again as though it had wings.

From inside the delivery truck came a red burst of machine-gun fire and the bullet-proof windshield of the armored truck was suddenly filled with stars, partly obscuring the driver's vision. He narrowly missed the bale of cotton, thinking he must have d.t.'s.

The guard was trying to get the muzzle of his rifle through a gun slot in the windshield when another burst of machine-gun

fire came from the delivery truck and its back doors were slammed shut. No one noticed the detective on the running-board of the armored truck suddenly disappear. One moment he was there, the next he was gone.

The colored people on the tenement stoops, seeking relief from the hot night, began running over one another to get indoors. Some dove into the basement entrances beneath the stairs.

One loudmouthed comic shouted from the safety below the level of the sidewalk, 'Harlem Hospital straight ahead.'

From across the street another loudmouth shouted back, 'Morgue comes first.'

The meat delivery truck was gaining on the armored truck. It must have been powered to keep meat fresh from Texas.

From far behind came the faint sound of the scream of the siren from the police cruiser, seeming to cry, 'Wait for me!'

Lightning flashed. Before the sound of thunder was heard, rain came down in torrents.

‘Well, kiss my foot if it isn’t Jones,’ Lieutenant Anderson exclaimed, rising from behind the captain’s desk to extend his hand to his ace detectives. Slang sounded as phony as a copper’s smile coming from his lips, but the warm smile lighting his thin pale face and the twinkle in his deep-set blue eyes squared it. ‘Welcome home.’

Grave Digger Jones squeezed the small white hand in his own big, calloused paw and grinned. ‘You need to get out in the sun, Lieutenant, ’fore someone takes you for a ghost,’ he said as though continuing a conversation from the night before instead of a six months’ interim.

The lieutenant eased back into his seat and stared at Grave Digger appraisingly. The upward glow from the green-shaded desk lamp gave his face a gangrenous hue.

‘Same old Jones,’ he said. ‘We’ve been missing you, man.’

‘Can’t keep a good man down,’ Coffin Ed Johnson said from behind.

It was Grave Digger’s first night back on duty since he had been shot up by one of Benny Mason’s hired guns in the caper resulting from the loss of a shipment of heroin. He had been in the hospital for three months fighting a running battle with death, and he had spent three months at home convalescing. Other than for the bullet scars hidden beneath his clothes and the finger-size scar obliterating the hairline at the base of his

skull where the first bullet had burned off the hair, he looked much the same. Same dark brown lumpy face with the slowly smoldering reddish-brown eyes; same big, rugged, loosely knit frame of a day laborer in a steel mill; same dark, battered felt hat worn summer and winter perched on the back of his head; same rusty black alpaca suit showing the bulge of the long-barreled, nickel-plated, brass-lined .38 revolver on a .44 frame made to his own specifications resting in its left-side shoulder sling. As far back as Lieutenant Anderson could remember, both of them, his two ace detectives with their identical big hard-shooting, head-whipping pistols, had always looked like two hog farmers on a weekend in the Big Town.

‘I just hope it hasn’t left you on the quick side,’ Lieutenant Anderson said softly.

Coffin Ed’s acid-scarred face twitched slightly, the patches of grafted skin changing shape. ‘I dig you, Lieutenant,’ he said gruffly. ‘You mean on the quick side like me.’ His jaw knotted as he paused to swallow. ‘Better to be quick than dead.’

The lieutenant turned to stare at him, but Grave Digger looked straight ahead. Four years previous a hoodlum had thrown a glass of acid into Coffin Ed’s face. Afterwards he had earned the reputation of being quick on the trigger.

‘You don’t have to apologize,’ Grave Digger said roughly. ‘You’re not getting paid to get killed.’

In the green light Lieutenant Anderson’s face turned slightly purple. ‘Well, hell,’ he said defensively. ‘I’m on your side. I know what you’re up against here in Harlem. I know your beat. It’s my beat too. But the commissioner feels you’ve killed too many people in this area –’ He held up his hand to ward off an interruption. ‘Hoodlums, I know – dangerous hoodlums – and you killed in self-defence. But you’ve been on the carpet a number of times and a short time ago you had three months’ suspensions. Newspapers have been yapping about police

brutality in Harlem and now various civic bodies have taken up the cry.'

'It's the white men on the force who commit the pointless brutality,' Coffin Ed grated. 'Digger and me ain't trying to play tough.'

'We are tough,' Grave Digger said.

Lieutenant Anderson shifted the papers on the desk and looked down at his hands. 'Yes, I know, but they're going to drop it on you two – if they can. You know that as well as I do. All I'm asking is to play it safe, from the police side. Don't take any chances, don't make any arrests until you have the evidence, don't use force unless in self-defence, and above all don't shoot anyone unless it's the last resort.'

'And let the criminals go,' Coffin Ed said.

'The commissioner feels there must be some other way to curtail crime besides brute force,' the lieutenant said, his blush deepening.

'Well, tell him to come up here and show us,' Coffin Ed said.

The arteries stood out in Grave Digger's swollen neck and his voice came out cotton dry. 'We got the highest crime rate on earth among the colored people in Harlem. And there ain't but three things to do about it: Make the criminals pay for it – you don't want to do that; pay the people enough to live decently – you ain't going to do that; so all that's left is let 'em eat one another up.'

A sudden blast of noise poured in from the booking room – shouts, curses, voices lifted in anger, women screaming, whines of protest, the scuffling of many feet – as a wagon emptied its haul from a raid on a whorehouse where drugs were peddled.

The intercom on the desk spoke suddenly: 'Lieutenant, you're wanted out here on the desk; they've knocked over Big Liz's circus house.'

The lieutenant flicked the switch. 'In a few minutes, and for Christ's sake keep them quiet.'

He then looked from one detective to the other. 'What the hell's going on today? It's only ten o'clock in the evening and judging from the reports it's been going on like this since morning.' He leafed through the reports, reading charges: 'Man kills his wife with an axe for burning his breakfast pork chop . . . man shoots another man demonstrating a recent shooting he had witnessed . . . man stabs another man for spilling beer on his new suit . . . man kills self in a bar playing Russian roulette with a .32 revolver . . . woman stabs man in stomach fourteen times, no reason given . . . woman scalds neighboring woman with pot of boiling water for speaking to her husband . . . man arrested for threatening to blow up subway train because he entered wrong station and couldn't get his token back -'

'All colored citizens,' Coffin Ed interrupted.

Anderson ignored it. 'Man sees stranger wearing his own new suit, slashes him with a razor,' he read on. 'Man dressed as Cherokee Indian splits white bartender's skull with homemade tomahawk . . . man arrested on Seventh Avenue for hunting cats with hound dog and shotgun . . . twenty-five men arrested for trying to chase all the white people out of Harlem -'

'It's Independence Day,' Grave Digger interrupted.

'*Independence Day!*' Lieutenant Anderson echoed, taking a long, deep breath. He pushed away the reports and pulled a memo from the corner clip of the blotter. 'Well, here's your assignment - from the captain.'

Grave Digger perched a ham on the edge of the desk and cocked his head; but Coffin Ed backed against the wall into the shadow to hide his face, as was his habit when he expected the unexpected.

'You're to cover Deke O'Hara,' Anderson read.

The two colored detectives stared at him, alert but unquestioning, waiting for him to go on and give the handle to the joke.

‘He was released ten months ago from the federal prison in Atlanta.’

‘As who in Harlem doesn’t know,’ Grave Digger said drily.

‘Many people don’t know that ex-con Deke O’Hara is Reverend Deke O’Malley, leader of the new Back-to-Africa movement.’

‘All right, omit the squares.’

‘He’s on the spot; the syndicate has voted to kill him,’ Anderson said as if imparting information.

‘Bullshit,’ Grave Digger said bluntly. ‘If the syndicate had wanted to kill him, he’d be decomposed by now.’

‘Maybe.’

‘What *maybe*? You could find a dozen punks in Harlem who’d kill him for a C-note.’

‘O’Malley’s not that easy to kill.’

‘Anybody’s easy to kill,’ Coffin Ed stated. ‘That’s why we police wear pistols.’

‘I don’t dig this,’ Grave Digger said, slapping his right thigh absentmindedly. ‘Here’s a rat who stooled on his former policy racketeer bosses, got thirteen indicted by the federal grand jury – even one of us, Lieutenant Brandon over in Brooklyn –’

‘There’s always one black bean,’ Lieutenant Anderson said unwittingly.

Grave Digger stared at him. ‘Damn right,’ he said flatly.

Anderson blushed. ‘I didn’t mean it the way you’re thinking.’

‘I know how you meant it, but you don’t know how I’m thinking.’

‘Well, how are you thinking?’

‘I’m thinking do you know why he did it?’

‘For the reward,’ Anderson said.

‘Yeah, that’s why. This world is full of people who will do

anything for enough money. He thought he was going to get a half million bucks as the ten per cent reward for exposing tax cheats. He told how they'd swindled the government out of over five million in taxes. Seven out of thirteen went to prison; even the rat himself. He was doing so much squealing he confessed he hadn't paid any taxes either. So he got sent down too. He did thirty-one months and now he's out. I don't know how much Judas money he got.'

'About fifty grand,' Lieutenant Anderson said. 'He's put it all in his set-up.'

'Digger and me could use fifty G's, but we're cops. If we squeal it all goes on the old pay cheque,' Coffin Ed said from the shadows.

'Let's not worry about that,' Lieutenant Anderson said impatiently. 'The point is to keep him alive.'

'Yeah, the syndicate's out to kill him, poor little rat,' Grave Digger said. 'I heard all about it. They were saying, "O'Malley may run but he can't hide." O'Malley didn't run and all the hiding he's been doing is behind the Bible. But he isn't dead. So what I would like to know is how all of a sudden he got important enough for a police cover when the syndicate had ten months to make the hit if they had wanted to.'

'Well, for one thing, the people here in Harlem, responsible people, the pastors and race leaders and politicians and such, believe he's doing a lot of good for the community. He paid off the mortgage on an old church and started this new Back-to-Africa movement -'

'The original Back-to-Africa movement denies him,' Coffin Ed interrupted.

'- and people have been pestering the commissioner to give him police protection because of his following. They've convinced the commissioner that there'll be a race riot if any white gunmen from downtown come up here and kill him.'