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# Dragon Slayers

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JERALD WALKER

### *Dragon Slayers*

I was at a Christmas party with a man who wanted me to hate him. I should hate *all* whites, he felt, for what they have done to me. I thought hard about what whites have done to me. I was forty, old enough to have accumulated a few unpleasant racial encounters, but nothing of any significance came to mind. The man was astonished at this response. “How about *slavery*?” he asked. I explained, as politely as I could, that I had not been a slave. “But you *feel* its effects,” he snapped. “Racism, discrimination, and prejudice will *always* be a problem for you in this country. White people,” he insisted, “are your *oppressors*.” I glanced around the room, just as one of my oppressors happened by. She was holding a tray of canapés. She offered me one. I asked the man if, as a form of reparations, I should take two.

It was mid-way through my third year in academia. I had survived mountains of papers, apathetic students, cantankerous colleagues, boring meetings, sleep deprivation, and two stalkers, and now I was up against a man who had been mysteriously transported from 1962. He even looked the part, with lavish sideburns and solid, black-rimmed glasses. He wasn’t an academic, but rather the spouse of one. In fact, he had no job at all, a dual act of defiance, he felt, against a patriarchal and capitalistic society. He was a fun person to talk with, especially if, like me, you enjoyed driving white liberals up the wall. And the surest way to do that, if you were black, was to deny them the chance to pity you.

He’d spotted me thirty minutes earlier while I stood alone at the dining room table, grazing on various appetizers. My wife Brenda had drifted off somewhere, and the room buzzed with pockets of conversation and laughter. The man joined me. I accepted his offer of a gin and tonic. We talked local politics for a moment, or rather he talked and I listened, because it wasn’t something I knew much about, before moving on to football, our kids, and finally my classes. He was particularly interested in my African American Literature course. “Did you have any black students?” he inquired.

"We started with two," I said, "but ended with twenty-eight." I let his puzzled expression linger until I'd eaten a stuffed mushroom. "Everyone who takes the course has to agree to be black for the duration of the semester."

"Really?" he asked, laughing. "What do they do, smear their faces with burnt cork?"

"Not a bad idea," I said. "But for now, they simply have to think like blacks, but in a way different from what they probably expect." I told him that black literature is often approached as records of oppression, but that my students don't focus on white cruelty, but rather its flip side: black courage. "After all," I continued, "slaves and their immediate descendants were by and large heroic, not pathetic, or I wouldn't be standing here."

The man was outraged. "You're letting whites off the hook," he said. "You're absolving them of responsibility, of the obligation to atone for past and present wrongs..." He went on in this vein for a good while, and I am pleased to say that I goaded him until he stormed across the room and stood with his wife who, after he'd spoken with her, glanced in my direction to see, no doubt, a traitor to the black race. That was unfortunate. I'd like to think I betray whites, too.

More precisely, it's the belief that blacks are primarily victims that I betray, a common view held by both races. I, too, held it for many years. When I was in my early twenties and making my first crude attempts at writing fiction, I'd sit at my word processor and pound out stories brimming with blacks who understood only anger and pain. My settings were always ghettos, because that was what I knew, and the plots centered on hardship and suffering, because I knew that, too. And I also knew this: white society was responsible for the existence of this miserable world, and it was my duty, as a black artist, to make this clear. Three of these stories gained me acceptance into the Iowa Writers' Workshop. It was there that my awakening occurred.

My first course was with Frank Conroy, the program's director. He was brutally honest and harbored a militant obsession with clarity. Most of the two-hour long classes were spent with him shredding the stories and our egos. We squirmed in our seats and wiped our brows as he did his infamous line-by-line, zeroing in on words and phrases that confused the work's meaning or failed to

make unequivocal sense. It was the most intense and best writing class that I'd ever had. I went into the second semester confident that my prose had improved, and that the most difficult course was behind me.

Randomly, I decided to take a workshop with James Alan McPherson. During the break before classes resumed, I read for the first time his books *Hue and Cry* and *Elbow Room*. The impact his writing had on me was profound. He, too, chronicled the lives of African Americans, and he had done it in short story form, my genre of choice; this was the model I'd been searching for. I read the stories over and over again, convinced that I had found my literary father.

The contrast between Conroy and McPherson could not have been more stark. Conroy was tall, white, and boisterous; McPherson was short, black, and shy. Conroy cursed, yelled, laughed, and joked, McPherson rarely spoke at all, and when he did his voice was so quiet you often couldn't hear him. The students dominated his workshops. I was disappointed. McPherson was a Pulitzer Prize winner, after all, the first African American to receive that honor for fiction. He was the recipient of a MacArthur "Genius" grant, as well as countless other awards. I wanted his wisdom. I wanted his insight. He gave it mid-semester, when it was time to workshop my first story.

"Before we begin today," he said, "I'd like to make a few comments." This was new; he'd never prefaced a story before. A smile crept on my face as I allowed myself to imagine him praising me for my depiction of a den of heroin addicts, for this was not easy to do, requiring, among other things, an intimate knowledge of heroin addicts and a certain flair for profanity.

"Are you all familiar with gangster rap?" McPherson asked. We were, despite the fact that, besides me, all of the students were white and mostly middle- to upper-class. While we each nodded our familiarity with the genre, McPherson reached into a shopping bag he'd brought and removed a magazine. He opened it to a pre-marked page, on which was a picture of a rapper, cloaked in jewelry and guns and leaning against the hood of a squad car. Behind him was a sprawling slum. "This person raps about the ghetto," McPherson said, "but he doesn't live in the ghetto. He lives in a wealthy white suburb with his wife and daughter. His daughter

attends a predominantly white, private school. That's what this article is about." He closed the magazine and returned it to the bag. "What some gangster rappers are doing is using black stereotypes because white people eat that stuff up. But these images are false, they're dishonest. Some rappers are selling out their race for personal gain." He paused again, this time to hold up my story. "That's what this writer is doing with his work." He sat my story back on the table. "Okay, that's all I have to say. You can discuss it now."

For a few seconds, the only sound in the room was of my labored breathing. And then someone said, "McPherson's right. The story is garbage."

"Complete rubbish," said another.

And so it went from there.

I did not sleep that night. At 8 a.m., when I could hold out no longer, I called McPherson at home and demanded a conference. He agreed to meet me in his office in ten minutes.

He was there when I arrived, sitting behind his desk. The desk was bare except for a copy of my story, and the office was bare except for the desk and two chairs. The built-in bookshelves held nothing, and nothing hung on the walls. There was no dressing on the window, no telephone, and no computer. It might have been the janitor's office, a place to catch a few winks while the mopped floors dried. And McPherson might have been the janitor. His blue shirt was a mass of wrinkles and his eyes were bloodshot. His trademark hat, a straw, beige Kango, seemed to rest at an odd angle on his head; from beneath it a single, long braid had worked its way free and dangled rebelliously behind his right ear. He noticed me staring at it and poked it back into concealment.

"Are you okay?" he asked. His voice was gentle, full of concern. "You sounded like a crazy man on the phone."

"Well, I'm *not* a crazy man." I reached forward to tap my finger on my story and proceeded to rant and rave as only a crazy man could. "I did *not* make this stuff up," I insisted. "I'm *from* the ghetto." I went through the characters, one by one, citing various relatives on whom they were based, and I mentioned that, just the week before, my younger brother had been shot in the back while in McDonald's. I told him I had another brother who was in and out of prison, a heroin-addict sister-in-law, that I had once been arrested for car theft (falsely, but that was beside the point), and that many, many of

my friends were presently still living in the miserable community in which I'd been raised. "You misread my story," I said in conclusion, "and you misread *me*." I leaned back and folded my arms across my chest, waiting for his apology. Instead, I watched as he sprang from his chair and hurried from the room. He turned left into the hall, and a moment later he passed going right, with Frank Conroy calling after him, and then they passed left again, now with Connie Brothers, the program's administrator, in tow, and after two more passes this awful parade came to an end somewhere out of view. Now Connie stood before me, looking as nauseous as I felt. "Jim is the kindest soul on this earth," she said quietly. "Why, why would you insult him?"

For an instant, I saw myself at twelve, looking at a closed front door, behind which was my first love, who had just dumped me and left me standing on her porch trying, unsuccessfully, not to cry.

Connie magically produced a tissue and handed it to me. She rubbed my shoulders while I rambled incoherently, something about sleep deprivation and McPherson being my father. "It's okay, sweetie," Connie said. "I'll talk to him."

McPherson returned momentarily. I apologized. He told me it was okay, that workshops can make people uptight and sensitive. It had been difficult for him, too, he explained, when he was a student there in the seventies. There was a lull in the conversation before he said, "So, where're your people from?"

He still doesn't believe me, I thought. I mumbled, "Chicago."

"No, no. That's where they *are*. Where are they *from*?"

"Oh, sorry. Arkansas."

"Mine are from Georgia," he said. He smiled and added, "That place is a *motherfucker*."

The essence of black America was conveyed in that response, a toughness of spirit, humor laced with tragedy, but at that moment all I saw was the man who had rejected my vision. Defeated, I thanked him for agreeing to meet with me as I rose to leave. He stood and shook my hand. As I was walking out the door, he called my name. I turned to face him.

"Stereotypes are valuable," he said. "But *only* if you use them to your advantage. They present your readers with something they'll recognize, and it pulls them into what appears to be familiar terri-

tory, a comfort zone. But once they're in, you have to move them beyond the stereotype. You have to show them what's real."

"What's real?" I asked.

Without hesitation, he said, "You."

It was one of those things that you instantly recognize as profound, and then, because you don't quite understand it, try to forget as quickly as you can. It was also one of those things that you cannot forget. And so it roamed freely in my subconscious, occasionally coming into sharp focus to remind me of its presence, but I allowed myself to be consumed by it no more than I would a housefly. For about a year. And then I went to see him again.

"I was wondering," I said, "if you wouldn't mind supervising an independent project."

"That depends," he responded, "on what you'd like to study."

"Me," I said. "I want to study me."

We started with black folklore and history. Next we moved on to blues and jazz, and then we covered a broad range of black literature and culture. We studied black intellectuals and philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, activists, filmmakers, and ex-cons. For four years, we dissected nearly every aspect of black life and thought, and, in the process, a theme emerged that had been there all along: *life is a motherfucker; living it anyway, and sometimes laughing in the process, is where humanity is won.*

And this is what I learned about me: I had become my own stereotype, a character in one of my short stories who insisted on seeing himself primarily as a repository of pain and defeat, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The very people with whom I had been raised and had dedicated myself to rendering in prose had become victims of my myopia. My stories showed people being affected by drug addiction, racism, poverty, murder, crime, violence, but they said nothing about the spirit that, despite being confronted with what often amounted to certain defeat, would continue to struggle and aspire for something better. That old slave song, "We Shall Overcome," pretty much says it all.

The coursework I conducted with McPherson ultimately contributed to a doctorate in Interdisciplinary Studies. McPherson served as my dissertation chair. I knew, when I started my academic career, that I owed him a debt to teach black literature in a certain way. "Less time needs to be spent on the dragons," he told me once, "and

more on our ability to forge swords for battle, and the skill with which we've used them."

The man at the Christmas party, of course, would rather that I talk about the dragons. And at first, when students take my class, they are surprised, even a bit disappointed, to see the course will not head in that direction. But by the end of the semester, they have been invariably uplifted by the heroic nature of African Americans, in part, perhaps, because it is the nature found in us all. Sometimes, students thank me for this approach. On occasion, they ask me where I got the idea. I tell them I got it from my father.