

Peter Scamardo – “A Fateful Meeting”

James Jones trudged through the thick snow along the sidewalk, struggling to find the strength to move his legs up and down with every step. The dark skinned man in his mid-thirties was no foreigner to snow. Having grown up on the streets of Detroit he had seen his fair share of people fight their way through blocks of the frozen rain to reach their destination. However he never grew accustomed to it, or learned to enjoy it.

Growing up Jones often saw other kids playing in the snow and thought they were crazy. He never understood their desire to get wet and cold. His parents told frightening stories about cousin's getting frostbite so he feared being in the snow for long periods of time. Jones was a good son who listened to his parents. They spoke with a thick Arkansas accent, his mother had a noticeable twang to her voice, but his was a little less pronounced. Ultimately however this meant they knew jack about snow let alone how one got frostbite.

A gust of wind suddenly hit Jones and more flakes of snow stuck to his face. He had been in Madison, Wisconsin for barely an hour and the twelve degree weather with blistering wind was starting to become too much for him. Looking up he finally saw his destination, the Smithson Resort & Lounge. This high quality building acted both as a restaurant and as a place for people to relax and get out of the snow. The resort was highly recommended to him when he was making travel plans. Now experiencing the rough winter conditions Jones understood the appeal of the place.

The freezing weather and winds made the door stick and Jones struggled to open it before he burst through the door. In the distance he saw a large fireplace brightly burning, the fire was so large he could feel the warmth from across the room. He saw several tables available both for dining and socializing. There was not a single white man in the room. Jones was not surprised at

this scene. Officially the city of Madison was not segregated. But both sides of the city were still separated even if it was not by law. That is what made the lounge so special. It was for blacks only yet it was one of the highest quality places in the entire city. James noticed by the fireplace there were several large wooly chairs placed right in front of the fire with no current occupants. He immediately made a move to grab one for himself before someone else noticed the conveniently located empty seat. Before he reached the chair the clerk at the entrance stopped him to take his three layers of coats and register his name. The clerk invited him to take a seat anywhere in the room and explained an attendant would soon come by to ask if he needed anything. He smiled at the clerk and without anything holding him back Jones dashed to the chair he had eyed by the fireplace.

Jones sunk comfortably into the chair the moment he sat down. He groaned pleasantly as he could finally relax after fighting through the snow to get to the lounge. Even though he had just arrived he could tell the place was everything he expected. As promised an attendant came over, gave him a menu and asked him if he would like to order a drink. He decided on a glass of Guinness. He had always wanted to try a Guinness but never had a chance until now. Guinness was an Irish beer and on his block at home the Irish did their best to keep the blacks away from their local pubs. Jones thought nothing of it but he wanted to try it. As for food he needed more time to contemplate.

The glass of dark beer with foam frothing at the top was soon in his hands and slowly made its way down his throat. It was soothing but Jones found it difficult to drink as he kept sinking into the chair. He did not fight this comforting position and he relaxed as his body fit deeply into the soft cushions. Just as he thought he might doze off, out the corner of his left eye he noticed an old man watching him. The man had thinning hair, a gray beard, a red coat, and

mention a portly stomach. Jones smiled to himself as he thought the man looked like a black St. Nicholas. But Jones could not understand why the old man was staring at him. He tried looking away hoping the man would stop staring but instead when Jones looked back, the man was up from his seat and approaching him.

The old man was taller than Jones thought he was, probably stood over 6'2. The man came right up to Jones and asked,

“Mind if I join you?” The question caught Jones off guard. Jones really wanted nothing more than to just sit by the fire and enjoy his excursion. But there was no reason not to allow the old man to sit next to him.

“By all means.” The old man then pulled the seat adjacent to Jones closer to the fire before sitting down. He too took a moment to pleasantly gasp at the warmth of the fire and the comfort of the cushions, then extended his hand saying,

“Ned Long.” Jones extended his hand in return to greet his new acquaintance,

“James Jones.”

“So what brings you to Madison, Mr. Jones?”

“Vacation. Wanted to get away from the big city.”

“Hum. I’m here for work, came down here to burn some time before a meeting.”

“Really? Where you from?”

“Chicago. Though my parents are from New Orleans.”

“I had my suspicion, you still have a bit of an accent.”

“I don’t want to forget where my family came from.”

“Understandable. Can’t really control mine if you know what I mean.”

“That I do.”

Jones took advantage of the gap between sentences to sip another drink from his glass. His body was now completely warm and the drink was soothing to him as it traveled down his throat. Old Mr. Long watched as the younger black man drank from the glass of Guinness until it was half empty. Jones then took the glass away from his lips and let it rest in his hand on the arm rest. As he glanced at his drink, Long asked,

“So were you there on the fourth?” The question caught Jones off guard. He turned his gaze to the older man to answer. Jones knew exactly what he was talking about, the whole country knew what he meant. April 4th, the day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and the day numerous riots by the black community broke out around the nation. Looking closely at Long, Jones now noticed the old man had several scars, old ones by the amount of scar tissue on them, all over his arms and one across his left cheek.

“I beg your pardon?” said Jones. Long then straightened up his posture to respond, then extended a finger toward Jones’ neck saying,

“That scar going down your neck. Did you get that on the fourth?” As the old man questioned him, Jones put his hand up to his neck and felt the wound in question.

“No sir. I was there on the fourth. But I didn’t get this here scar that day.”

“When then?”

“Oh, I would say twenty five years ago.” The older man leaned back with a knowing look,

“Where are you from boy?”

“Detroit sir.”

“Say no more then. I know what happened there twenty five years ago.”

“Yeah, I’ll never forget it. I followed my dad when he heard the rumors of that girl and her baby they said was thrown into the river. My pops was a strong man, worked in the motor industry, a riveter. He told me he would have enlisted in the Army if he could have found a station that would have taken him. Anyway, he had seen the cruelty of his people first hand as they adjusted to life in the north. That day he had simply had enough. Something about the thought of a child being murdered just ate at him.”

“And to think it was all just a rumor.”

“Exactly. So much death those three days all because of lies. Lies and a bunch of stupid kids at Belle Isle. My dad didn’t know it but I followed him when he went off to join the fray. I recognized a couple of his friends who were there and a couple of my pals were also there. I tell you, no one went there looking to talk peacefully. They wanted a fight. If I’d have known that I’d have stayed home. My friends and I got out of there as quickly as we could once the fighting started. It took us more than two hours to get back to our homes.

“There was so much fighting on nearly every street that we had no idea how to get home. That’s how I got the scar. We got jumped by a couple of low life’s wanting to attack the first person they saw. The cut wasn’t deep but it stung like hell. My friends were able to get me out of there before anything else happened. My mom scolded me for being out there when we got home but my wound was small compared to the other people’s ordeals. So many bloody people in the streets, people getting stabbed, beaten with clubs, it was insane. Damn military didn’t do much to help either when they got there, half the people killed were by the national guards hands. I’ll never forget those three days.”

“There we were fighting a war and they still wanted to fight themselves.”

“Isn’t that the truth. Sorry for going on like that. I get emotional when that day’s brought up.”

“My apologies.”

“No don’t, it’s not your fault. It was just a traumatic experience. I honestly thought my dad was going to die that day.”

“You didn’t fear for your own life?”

“Oddly enough no that thought never came to me. I was more worried for those around me. That’s why I was so angered when I learned what started it. It’s sickening. It’s also partially why I’m here. The King riots, even though they were small in Detroit in comparison, brought back too many bad memories I just needed to get away for a while.”

Jones took a few moments to sit in silence. After a short time, the Detroit native downed his glass of Guinness and then quickly called the nearest waiter to request a refill. He glanced back at Long, and curiously studied the old man’s scars.

“So I assume you have a story to tell as well.”

“That I do.”

“Were you in Chicago during the King riots?”

“Thankfully no, I was out that day. Though I was disgusted to hear about them. ‘The Day Chicago Burned’ they called it.”

“It was terrible to hear about, especially what happened in Harlem. Here was Dr. King, the man who single handedly led the fight for our rights, assassinated and instead of a day of mourning, people went against all his talk of peaceful protests and acted like animals in the streets. They took advantage of what this great man did as an excuse to start a fight.”

“Riots, murders, looting, fires, you name it it happened. King did so much for the black community yet here we were acting like animals. Everything he fought for could have been done away with that day.”

“A few decades ago certainly.”

“I suppose after so many years of being put down it was only natural that our first reaction is anger, though that doesn’t calm my frustration.”

The waiter came back with another glass of Guinness for Jones. At that same time a different attendant brought Long a silver mug. Long took a big swig from the mug and sighed when he looked back at Jones. At one point the old man offered Jones a sip, only then did he realize it was vodka and how strong the Russian drink was.

“April Fourth. Terrible day. But that’s not where I got these scars. I got these...it’ll be fifty years next year. God I feel old saying that.”

“Fifty years?”

“The Red Summer, that’s what they called it. Chicago had the worst of it.” A dour look came across Jones’ face as he immediately began recollecting the event in question.

“I was on that beach so many years ago, or at least on the pier. I didn’t know the Williams kid but I knew I must have seen him at some time. It was like you, I was with my friends just enjoying the summer air. We weren’t much for swimming, and perhaps that was for the best. But just the thought you could throw rocks at someone because they drifted into your water, insane. They didn’t know what they were doing, how could they, they didn’t have anything bordering the section. Of all the things to segregate the water was just ridiculous. I will argue people had the right to be incensed at what had happened, but I can’t condone what

happened after it.” In that moment Jones saw the old man travel back in time to that day so many years ago. With every word the images became clearer and his face stretched with emotion.

“Just mindless violence, that’s what it was. The blacks and the Irish had their confrontations from time to time but this day was something else. This wasn’t a grown man, Williams was just a kid. My friends and I knew it could have just as easily been one of us. I’ll say it, they were looking for trouble. They could have swam out to get him to tell Williams to move but they didn’t. Of all the things they threw rocks, rocks! Once the police got there they did nothing to help. They weren’t about to believe our stance on the story that’s for sure. They were just more whites wanting to beat up some blacks. Needless to say I also had a long trek back home to safety. I was used to getting into a scrap. Unfortunately this time I got nicked a few times. Which is what you see here.”

“Another day where people said enough.”

“We all thought enough was said by coming up north. I heard the stories my parents told me of what they experienced. They came north the first chance they got. All they found was a colder hell with slightly more opportunities.”

“It is terrible how these riots have left a mark on our history.”

“Exactly. Our people have been at the whim of someone else for years and the fact these riots are still happening is terrible.”

“We’ve gained so much recently yet these events are only going to give people the thought we’re nothing but animals looking for chaos. It’s a disgrace to King’s legacy and everything he fought for.”

“That is the truth. Violence only begets violence. Legally we may be the white’s equals now but we as a people need to act like we actually want it to happen. I don’t know how much

longer I have left to live but I want to see a bright future when I die. Not for my sake, but for the generations before who fought for what we have.”

“Amen sir.”

Long then looked at his wrist watch and gasped,

“Well I’d better be off if I don’t want to miss this meeting. It was a pleasure getting to speak with you James. I hope you’ll find some comfort during your stay.”

“It was a pleasure meeting you too sir. I’ll do my best.” The two then shook hands and Long departed for the entrance to grab his coat. But the old man called back,

“And Jones! Remember, never forget.” He said this as he pointed to the scar on his cheek,

“Move on but remember your past.” Jones did not know what to say in response but nodded in confirmation understanding the words of wisdom. A chill crept into the lounge as the doors once again opened before quickly slamming shut. Jones sat staring into the fire and knew then in the short time he spoke with Ned Long he would forever value the time they shared together.

Bibliography

- "American Experience: TV's Most-watched History Series." *PBS*. PBS, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.
- Coates, James. "Riots Follow Killing of Martin Luther King Jr." *Chicagotribune.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.
- "Desegregation and Civil Rights." |*Turning Points in Wisconsin History*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.
- History.com Staff. "The Chicago Race Riot of 1919." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, 01 Jan. 2009. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.
- Rivlin, Gary. "The Night Chicago Burned." *Chicago Reader*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.