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It was eleven-thirty at night on ground-hog day in Harlem. It was bitter cold, and the Harlem ground hogs, as the warm-blooded Harlem citizens are called during the cold winter months, were snug in their holes.

All except one.

On the dark crosstown street off Convent Avenue, bordering the estate of the convent from which the avenue derives its name, a man was taking a wheel from a car parked in the shadow of the convent wall. He was wearing dark-brown coveralls, a woolen-lined army fatigue jacket and a fur-lined, dark-plaid hunter's cap.

He had the inside wheel jacked up on the slanting street, making the car tilt dangerously. But he was unconcerned. He worked swiftly, without light. In the almost black dark, his face was imperceptible. At certain angles the whites of his eyes twinkled like luminous crescents stirred by the wind. His breath made pale white geysers, coming from his unseen face.

He leaned the wheel against the side of the car, lowered the axle to the pavement, glanced briefly up and down the street and began jacking up the outside wheel.

He had the wheel jacked up and the dust cap off and was fitting his wrench to a lug, when the lights of a car, turning into the street from Convent Avenue, caused him to jump back into the shadows.

The car approached and passed, not going fast, not going slow.

His eyes popped. He knew he was sober. He hadn't been drinking any whisky and he hadn't been smoking any weed. But he didn't believe what he saw. It was a mirage; but this was not the desert, and he was not dying of thirst. In fact he was cold enough for his guts to freeze; and the only thing he wanted to drink was hot rum and lemon.

He saw a Cadillac pass, the likes of which he had never seen. And his business was cars.

This Cadillac looked as though it were made of solid gold. All except the top, which was some kind of light, shining fabric. It looked big enough to cross the ocean, if it could swim. It lit up the black-dark street like a passing bonfire.

The instrument panel gave off strange blue light. It was just strong enough to illuminate the three persons occupying the front seat.

The man driving wore a coonskin Davy Crockett cap, with a big bushy tail. Beside him sat the beauty queen of Africa with eyes like frostbitten plums and a smile showing blue-dyed teeth in a black-painted skeleton's head.

The joker's heart gave a lurch. There was something shockingly familiar about that face. But it was impossible for his own true Sassafras to be riding about in a brand-new Caddy with two strange men at this hour of the night. So his gaze switched quickly to the third party, who was wearing a black Homburg and a white silk scarf and had a small, bearded face like some kind of amateur magician.

In the soft, blue-tinted light they looked like things that couldn't happen, not even in Harlem on ground-hog night.

He looked at the license of the big gold car to steady himself. It was a dealer's license. He felt a momentary reassurance. Must be a publicity gag.

All of a sudden a woman came out of nowhere. He had just time enough to see that she was an old woman dressed in solid black, her silver-white hair shining briefly in the headlights before she was hit by the golden Cadillac and knocked down.

He felt his scalp crawl and his kinky hair stand straight up beneath his fur-lined cap. He wondered if he was dreaming.

But the Cadillac took on speed. That was no dream. That was the thing to do. Just what he would have done if he had run over an old woman on a dark, deserted street.

He hadn't seen the Cadillac actually run over the old woman. But there she lay and there it went. So it must have run over her. It made sense.

Anyway, he wasn't flipping his lid. Now the question was – should he get this other wheel or should he scam with the one he had? He had an order for two. He needed the money. That little chippie he was so crazy about had told him the palm needed greasing. She didn't say palm, but it meant the same thing: money – the one lubrication for love.

If the old lady wasn't dead, she was past caring. And it wouldn't take him but ninety seconds to have this wheel off . . .

He was starting to bend over to his task when the next sight froze him. The old lady had moved. He noticed it at first out of the corners of his eyes; then his head jerked up.

She was getting up. She had her two hands on the pavement and one knee up, and she was pushing to her feet. He could hear her laughing to herself. He felt the goose pimples breaking out down his back, and his scalp began to crawl like a battlefield of lice. If this kept up, his black kinky hair was going to turn out white as bleached cotton and straight as the beard of Jesus Christ.

He was watching the old lady, his brain trying to absorb the impact of what his eyes were registering, when the second car turned the corner. He didn't see it until it went past.

It was a big black sedan with the lights off, traveling at a hip-tightening clip, and it made a sound like someone blowing suddenly in his ear.

The old lady had got both feet planted and was standing bent over, bear-fashion, with all four feet and hands on the ground, just about to straighten up, when the big black sedan hit her in the rump.

He never knew how he saw it; the street was black dark, the old lady was dressed in black, the car was black. But he saw it. Either with his eyes or with his mind.

He saw the old lady flying through the air, arms and legs spread out, black garments spread out in the wind like a nuclear-powered vampire full of fresh virgin's blood. She was flying in an oblique line to the left; the black car was streaking straight ahead; and her snow-white hair was flying off to the right and rising, like a homing pigeon headed for the nest.

Furthermore, in the front seat of the black sedan were the dark silhouettes of three uniformed cops.

Now this joker had seen the face of violence in many make-ups. The quick, insensate leap across the river Styx was no news to him. He was not naive about the grisly jokes of death.

But what he saw now scrambled his brains. His head was running in all four directions; but his feet were just standing there like a yokel in a carnival harem. He turned around a couple of times as though he were looking for something. For what he didn't know.

Then he saw the car wheel leaning against the side of the jacked-up car. The wheel had a whitewall tire.

He grabbed the wheel and started running toward Convent Avenue. But the wheel was too heavy, so he put it down and began rolling it like a kid does a hoop.

That stretch of Convent Avenue goes down a steep hill toward

125th Street. When he came into Convent Avenue he turned the wheel down the hill. The wheel bounced over the curb and increased speed as it went down the hill. He kept up with it until it came to the next crossing. The wheel dropped from the curb and crossed the street. He stumbled slightly, and the wheel gained on him. When the wheel hit the next curb it bounced high in the air, and when it came down it went away like a super-charged sports car.

He looked down the hill and saw two cops standing beneath a street lamp at the intersection of 126th or 127th Street. He put on the brakes and skidded to a stop, made a circle and went up the cross street he had passed. He disappeared into the night.

The wheel kept on down the street and knocked the legs out from underneath the two cops, knocked down a lady coming from the supermarket with a bag full of groceries, swerved out into the street, passed through the traffic of 125th Street without touching a thing, bounced over the sidewalk and crashed through the street-level door of a tenement facing the start of Convent Avenue.

A heavy-set, middle-aged man wearing a felt skull cap, old mended sweater, corduroy pants and felt slippers, was emerging from the back apartment when the wheel crashed into the back wall of the hallway. He gave it a look, then did a double take. He looked about quickly, and, seeing no one, grabbed it, ducked back into his apartment and locked the door. It wasn't every day manna fell from heaven.

Roman Hill was driving the Cadillac. His thick, muscular shoulders, developed from handling a two-mule plough in the Alabama cotton fields, were hunched inside of his greasy leather jacket as though he were reining the four horsemen of the Apocalypse of St John the Divine.

‘Watch out!’ Sassafras screamed. It was enough to raise the dead.

‘Huh!’ Air gushed from his mouth, and he gripped the wheel in his big, horny hands hard enough to break it.

He didn’t see the old lady. It was the scream that did it. When he first saw the old lady she was caught in the left headlamp as though she had come out of the ground. His cocked gray eyes tried to leave his head in opposite directions.

‘Look out!’ he shouted as he tromped on the brake.

His two passengers sailed forward against the instrument panel, and he bumped his chest against the steering wheel.

The old lady disappeared.

‘My God, where she at?’ he asked in a panic-stricken voice.

‘You hit her!’ Sassafras exclaimed.

‘Step on it!’ Mister Baron cried.

‘Huh?’ Roman’s slack, tan face looked stupid from shock.

‘Let’s go, for God’s sake,’ Mister Baron urged. ‘You’ve killed her. You don’t want to stay here and get caught, do you?’

'Bleeding Jesus!' Roman muttered stupidly, and stepped on the gas.

The Cadillac took off as though it had been spurred in the cylinders.

'Stop!' Sassafras screamed again. 'You ain't done nothing.'

The Cadillac slowed.

'Don't listen to this woman, fool,' Mister Baron shouted. 'You'll get one to twenty years in jail.'

'Why come?' Sassafras argued in a high keening voice. She had a long, oval face with under-developed features and coal-black skin; and her sloe eyes glittered like glass. 'She walked right out in front of him; I'll swear to it.'

'You're crazy, woman,' Mister Baron hissed. 'He hasn't got any driver's license; he hasn't got any insurance; he hasn't even got the car registered. They'd put him in jail just for driving it; and, for running over a woman and killing her, they'll lock him in Sing Sing and throw away the key.'

'Of all the mother-raping luck,' Roman said hoarsely as realization began penetrating his shock. 'Here I is, ain't driven my new car a half hour, and done already run over some woman and killed her stone dead.'

His forehead knotted in a tight frown and he sounded as though he might cry. But the Cadillac took off again with determination.

'Let's go back and see,' Sassafras begged. 'I didn't feel no bump.'

'You wouldn't feel any bump in this car,' Mister Baron said. 'It could run over a railroad tie and you wouldn't feel it.'

'He's right, honey,' Roman agreed. 'Ain't nothing but to high-tail it now.'

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The big black Buick without lights cut in front of the Cadillac and a cop yelled out the open window: 'Pull up!'

Roman had a notion to try to cut around the Buick and escape, but Mister Baron shrieked, 'Stop – don't dent the fenders.'

Sassafras gave him a scornful look.

All three cops piled out of the Buick and converged on the Cadillac with drawn pistols. One of the cops was white; he and one of the colored cops swung short-barreled .38 caliber police specials; the other had a long flat .38 Colt automatic.

'Get out with your hands up,' one of the colored cops ordered in a hard, hurried voice.

'Right,' the white cop echoed.

'What is this all about, officer?' Mister Baron said haughtily, assuming an indignant attitude.

'Manslaughter,' the colored cop said harshly.

'Hit and run,' the white cop echoed.

'We ain't hit nobody,' Sassafras protested in her keening, nerve-scraping voice.

'Tell it to the judge,' the colored cop said.

The white cop opened the outside door of the Cadillac and jerked Mister Baron from his seat. He handled him roughly, gripping the lapels of his chesterfield coat.

Roman had got out on the other side and was standing holding his hands level with his shoulders.

The white cop jerked Mister Baron out of the way so Sassafras could alight.

'Listen to me for a moment,' Mister Baron said in a low, persuasive voice. 'There hasn't anything happened that can't be settled between the few of us. The woman's not hurt bad. I could see in the rear view mirror that she was getting up.'

Mister Baron was small and effeminate with unusually expressive eyes for a man. They were a strange shade of light

brown, fringed with long, black, curling lashes. But they fitted his girlish, heart-shaped face. His only masculine feature was the small fuzzy mustache and the bebop goatee that looked as though it might have been stuck on his chin with paste.

He was using his eyes now for all they were worth.

‘If you want to be reasonable, this doesn’t have to go to court. And,’ he added, fluttering his lashes, ‘you can benefit in more ways than one – if you know what I mean.’

The three cops exchanged glances.

Sassafras shook herself and looked at Mister Baron with infinite scorn. A small-boned, doll-like girl with a bottom like a duck’s, she was wearing a gray imitation fur coat and a red knitted cap which might have belonged to one of the seven dwarfs.

‘If you’re including me, you’re barking up the wrong tree,’ she said.

‘What’s unusual about you, dear,’ Mister Baron said cattily.

‘How much?’ the white cop asked.

Mister Baron hesitated, appraising the cop. ‘Five hundred,’ he offered tentatively.

‘Well, what about the old lady, if she ain’t dead,’ Sassafras put in. ‘What you going to give her?’

‘Let her lump it,’ Mister Baron said brutally.

‘Put these two squares in the car,’ the white cop said.

One of the colored cops took Sassafras by the arm and steered her to the Buick.

Roman went docilely, still holding his hands shoulder-high. He looked like a joker who’s bet his fortune on a sure thing and lost.

The cop hadn’t troubled to search him. He didn’t search him now. ‘Get in the back,’ he ordered.

Roman began to plead. ‘If you-all will give me just one more chance –’

The cop cut him off. 'I ain't your mammy.'

Roman got in and sat dejectedly, shoulders drooping, head so bowed his chin rested on his chest. Sassafras came in from the other side. She took one look at him and burst out crying.

The cops ignored them and turned toward Mister Baron who stood confronting the white cop in the beam from the Cadillac's lamps.

'Douse those lights,' the white cop said.

A colored cop walked over and turned off the lights.

The white cop cased the street. On the south side, old-fashioned residences with high stone steps, which had been converted into rooming houses or cut up into kitchenettes, were squeezed between apartment houses, built for the overflowing white population in the 1920s, all taken over now by Ham's and Hagar's children.

On the north side was the high, crumbling stone wall of the convent, topped by the skeletons of trees. None of the convent buildings was visible from the street.

Aside from themselves, there was not a person in sight. Nothing moved but grit in the ice-cold wind.

'Five hundred all you got?' the white cop asked Mister Baron.

Mister Baron licked his lips, and his voice began to lilt. 'You and me could talk business,' he whispered.

'Come here,' the white cop said.

Mister Baron walked up close to the white cop as though he were going to nestle in his arms.

The white cop turned him around and closed his windpipe with a half nelson while twisting his right arm behind his back. Mister Baron beat at him futilely with his left hand.

A colored cop closed in and drew a plaited leather sap. The other cop lifted Mister Baron's Homburg, and the first cop sapped him back of the ear. Mister Baron gave a low soft sigh

and went liquid. The white cop lowered him to the street, and the colored cop put the Homburg over Mister Baron's face.

The white cop went through Mister Baron's pockets with rapid efficiency. He found two scented white silk handkerchiefs, a case of miscellaneous keys, a diamond engagement ring stuck tightly about a plastic tube of lipstick, an ivory comb containing strands of Mister Baron's long wavy hair, a black rubber object shaped like a banana attached to an elastic band, and a package of one-hundred-dollar bills wrapped in greasy brown paper.

He grunted. The colored cops watched him with silent concentration. He put the package of bills into his side coat pocket and stuffed the remaining items back into Mister Baron's side overcoat pocket.

'Leave him here?' a colored cop asked.

'Naw, let's put him in the car,' the white cop said.

'We'd better get going,' the other cop urged. 'We're wasting too much time.'

'No need to hurry now,' the white cop said. 'We got it made.'

Without replying, the two colored cops picked up Mister Baron and carried him toward the Buick, while the white cop held the back door open.

Neither Roman nor Sassafras had seen a thing.

'What's happened to him?' Sassafras stopped crying long enough to ask.

'He fainted,' the white cop said. 'Get over.'

She moved toward the middle, and they propped Mister Baron in the corner of the seat.

'Hey, boy,' the white cop called to Roman.

Roman looked around.

'I'm going to impound your car, and my partners are going to stay here until the ambulance comes and then bring you to

the station. And I don't want any trouble out of you folks; you understand?'

'Yassuh,' Roman said dully, as though the world had come to an end.

'All right,' the white cop said. 'Just let this be a lesson; you can't buy justice.'

'It weren't him,' Sassafras said.

'You just keep him quiet if you know what's good for you,' the cop said, and slammed the door.

He walked unhurriedly back to the Cadillac. One of the colored cops was sitting behind the wheel, the other sitting beside him. The white cop sat on the outside and slammed the door.

The cop driving started the motor and began easing off without turning on the lights. The big golden Cadillac crept silently around the back end of the Buick and had started past before Sassafras noticed it.

'Look, they is taking our car,' she cried.

Roman was too dejected to look up. 'He's impounding it,' he muttered.

'It ain't just him; it's all of them,' she said.

Roman's cocked eyes came up in a startled face. 'Why you reckon they is doing that?' he asked stupidly.

'I bet my life they is stealing it,' she said.

Roman jumped as though a time bomb had gone off in his pants. 'Stealing my car!' he shouted, his hard, cable-like muscles coming into violent life.

He had the door open and was out on the pavement and pursuing the golden Cadillac before she could start screaming. She opened her mouth and let loose a scream that caused windows to pop open all up and down the street.

Roman was the only one who didn't hear her. His big, muscle-bound body was rolling as he ran, as though the sloping black

pavement were the deck of a ship caught in a storm at sea. He was tugging at something stuck down his pants leg, beneath his leather jacket. Finally he came out with a big, rusty .45 caliber revolver, but before he had a chance to fire it the Cadillac had turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

A joker on a motorcycle with a sidecar was pulling out from the curb when the big Cadillac suddenly bore down on him and the driver switched on the lights. He did a quick turn back toward the curb. From the corners of his eyes he saw a golden Cadillac pass at a blinding speed. The silhouettes of three cops occupying the front seat flashed briefly across his vision. His brain did a double take and flipped.

This joker had seen this Cadillac a short time before. At that time the occupants had been two civilians and a woman. There couldn't be but one Cadillac like that in Harlem, he was sure. If there was such a Cadillac. If he wasn't just blowing his top.

This joker was wearing dark-brown coveralls, a woolen-lined army fatigue jacket and a fur-lined, dark-plaid hunter's cap. There wasn't but one joker looking like this outside on this bitter cold night.

'No, it ain't true,' the joker said to himself. 'Either I ain't me or what I seen ain't that.'

While he was trying to figure out which was which a big black sedan screamed around the corner with its bright lights splitting open the black-dark night.

It was a Buick sedan, and it looked familiar. But not nearly so familiar as the woman he'd seen a short time before in the golden Cadillac. However, now the freak with the coonskin cap who had been driving the Cadillac was driving the Buick.

All of it was so crazy it was reassuring. He bent over the handlebars of his motorcycle and began laughing as though he had gone crazy himself.

Chester Himes

‘Haw haw haw.’ He laughed, and then began talking to himself. ‘Whatever it is I is dreaming, one thing is for sure – ain’t none of it true.’