

## *Buck Dance*

By Kris Broughton

It was four little words, just four little words, that got the whole thing started. The stranger at the airport didn't answer me right away because he was staring at a common Hartsfield scene - a well-dressed, middle-aged white woman preening and primping herself by the rear of a Lincoln Continental limousine. The black skycap removing her bags from the trunk was practically buck dancing while he shimmied and swayed towards the curbside baggage check-in with her luggage.

I'd gotten out of my cab at the Atlanta airport three minutes earlier. Heavy rain from the dark clouds that had been hovering all morning had begun to sting the pavement like a hailstorm. Spotting the stranger, another tall black man walking towards the entrance, I'd thrown up my hand, and he had beckoned me to share his umbrella.

"Thanks." I said to him as I tried to match his cadence.

"No problem." said the stranger.

When we reached the massive eaves over the entrance to the airport, the stranger began to shake excess water from the damp canvas. The way his head was turned to the side, I thought he was watching the droplets from his umbrella spritz the sidewalk.

"What's shakin, my man?" I'd said to him as I started for the electronic doors.

If I'd gotten a perfunctory "nothing much", or even just a simple nod from the stranger, he would have been history. But it was the awkward *silence*, the total lack of acknowledgement *from a brother*, that irritated me enough to make me stop and take a look over his shoulder.

I saw a skycap grinning broadly at a middle - aged white woman as he placed her last bag on the check-in counter. We both heard the woman cackle at the skycap as she handed him a crisp five-dollar bill.

For all the progress we *thought* we had made, some things, especially in the south, never seemed to change. As the stranger turned his head towards me, I knew before he opened his mouth what he was going to say.

"What's shakin? I'll tell you what's shakin." roared the stranger as he wound the strap around his folded umbrella. "Why does that skycap have to shake his ass and do the damn bugaloo just to get that lady's luggage out of her car? Listen to him - I can still hear him saying 'thank you ma'am' and she's already inside."

“He's just trying to making sure he gets a good tip.” As I watched the rain continued to pour from the black sky, the stranger scowled at me.

“Tip? He's out here dancing a jig for a couple of bucks?” retorted the stranger.

Here I was, just out of an early morning meeting downtown, and I was already getting my shit checked by Mr. Oreo Double Stuff. We walked into the terminal with the “dancing a jig” phrase still hanging in the air between us.

“I'll bet you fifty dollars that whatever airport you're in, you'll see another black man just like him, just trying to make some money.” I started to reach for my wallet.

“Only in the South do black people have to act like damn morons. You don't see kind of stuff at LAX.” The stranger’s tone rubbed me the wrong way.

“So you're going to L.A.?”

“Irvine,” the stranger flatly stated.

“Well, it looks like we're both going to be stuck right here in Atlanta for a while. The weather station says everything headed west is at least an hour an a half behind schedule right now.”

“Damn! I hate getting stuck in Phoenix!” The stranger howled. His whole body bristled. It didn't look like anything was going his way today. He seemed to be fumbling around for his wallet, probably for his hospitality suite membership card. Frequent fliers like him usually holed up in the private hospitality suites maintained by major airlines when flights were delayed or canceled.

But airports can make for strange bedfellows. Maybe it’s the possibility, however remote, that you won’t make it back down in one piece, that causes otherwise rational human beings to seek fellowship in the company of people they wouldn’t ordinarily give the time of day. Maybe that’s why I did what I did next.

“Looks like you could use a break, buddy. Care to join me for a drink?” I asked. By now we had come to the heart of the baggage terminal.

The stranger looked at his watch and paused for a second to consider his options. “Why not?” He then pulled out his cell phone, and pushed the “off” button. “Looks like I'm out of pocket for awhile.” He seemed to de-bristle right before my eyes from road warrior to human being. “By the way, I'm Marvin.” he said, sticking out his hand. “Marvin Baxter.”

“I'm Joe Kasper.”

“Joe, let me check my new flight arrival time. I'll be right back.”

I watched his black cap-toed shoes tattooing the carpet. Custom tailored two-button sack suit, off the rack button cuff shirt, non-descript tie, no name watch – it was these things, combined with the easy confidence in his walk that made me think blueblood. As he returned, the upturned end of his rudy, narrow nostrils confirmed it.

“So Marvin, you're gonna tell me that you're it, you're *the man* in your office?” I said to Marvin as he returned from the bank of flight arrival screens. ”What do you do, anyway?”

We continued to walk, slower now, towards the Atrium, a newer area of the airport that housed the kind of bars and restaurants I was looking for.

“I'm a bond attorney. I'm with a small firm out of Century City,” said Marvin.

“So why are you on the brother about making a living? Would you have struggled through law school if it only paid you a teacher's salary?”

“Come on, man.” said Marvin. “I've got two kids. Besides, my wife only works part time.”

“So you hustle to get your clients like everybody else, right?” I replied.

“But it's like he's almost begging for the money.”

“You've never been nice to your clients?” I continued.

I should have stopped there. But there was something about Marvin I didn't like. Maybe it was the way his hardened eyes had taken the measure of a man he didn't even know. Or maybe, just maybe, it was the patrician way his narrow shoulders rounded ever so slightly at the top, that made me want to stick it to him just a little bit. “Come on, you're a bond attorney.” I continued. “Where did you take the city's financial people last night? Morton's? Or Bones?”

Marvin's bristled-ness threatened to reappear. “Our large clients need special attention.”

“But not if she's wearing a fur coat and has a dog named Chi Chi, according to you.”

“That lady didn't have on a fur coat!” cried Marvin.

“You know what I mean.”

The corridor was beginning to fill with stranded travelers looking for a comfortable refuge as more and more flight cancellations were announced over the p.a. system.

“Hey, catch the guy behind you.” I said to Marvin.

“Excuse me, sir.” Marvin called out to the passing figure of a black man in a navy blue uniform.

They both turned their heads, and Marvin found himself looking into the eyes of the very same skycap we had just seen outside. Marvin looked back at me with a frown, but I spread my broad shoulders and glared at him as I approached the skycap.

“Excuse me, sir.” I repeated to the skycap. He turned completely around and stopped. “Man, you look beat. Let us get you a cup of coffee.”

The skycap froze. *Why are you talking to me?* was written all over his face. “Can I help you?” he said.

Here his diction was crisp, with none of the lazy vowels we had heard outside on the curb. It was as if he had walked off the stage at the end of a play, and now he was going to go wipe off the blackface and put on his street clothes to head home.

“My friend and I...” I said, looking at Marvin. “...are going to be stuck here for a couple of hours. We saw you outside in the rain, and figured you could use a cup of coffee.”

“I’m just getting off, man.” said the skycap. “I’ve been on my feet since 5 o’clock this morning.”

“I just got here by cab, and it was wall to wall traffic all the way.” I replied. “Something about a tractor trailer overturned on Interstate 20. The guy on the radio said traffic was backed up for miles.”

“These damn interstates in Atlanta! They’re always slow whenever we get a heavy rain, but this is ridiculous.” The skycap looked at Marvin and then he looked at me. Our eyes met. My eyebrows bobbed as I dipped my head towards the bar, and he was hooked.

On the way to the nearest lounge, we passed through a sparkling marble atrium. A violinist was tuning his instrument on the *faux* patio at Ruby Tuesday’s. Marvin was silent behind us as I queried the skycap.

“Are you originally from Atlanta?”

“No, I came here from Selma.” the skycap informed.

“Selma, Alabama?”

“Yea, man”

“Had to get the hell out of there, eh?” I said.

“Had to go where I could make some money,” said the skycap.

In some ways we were alike. We were two small town southern men, who had ventured out into the world to seek our fortune. But, although we were both hustlers deep down, the skycap didn't look like he had ever had enough guts to be able to draw his line in the sand. He hadn't been able to see what I had discovered – that sometimes the mountain *does* come to Mohammed.

At the stainless steel railing of the lounge I turned to see if Marvin was still with us. The drinks in the plush hospitality suite were free, and the staff probably knew which newspapers he preferred - I wouldn't have blamed him if he changed his mind. But when I looked back, he was right there.

“You're from Selma, right. So how do you think an Uncle Tom acts?” I asked the skycap. “What kind of stuff does he do?”

“An Uncle Tom, did you say? What kind of question is that?” said the skycap.

I looked over at Marvin.

“Me and my lawyer friend here were just talking about the things people will do to earn a living.”

The skycap stopped to push his cap back onto his forehead and I saw a few grey hairs in the side burns that framed the smooth brown of his unlined skin. He was a living Buddha, with a look on his face that suggested either mental illness or heavy contemplation. Whatever it was, it didn't look like I was going to get an answer to my question.

I spotted a table with a clear view of the lobby and pointed Marvin and the skycap in that direction as I looked for a server.

“Marvin, the only thing that matters in life is the power of money. You do what you got to do to get it.” I said to Marvin and the skycap as I pointed towards a table at the far end of the lounge.

“Show me.” said Marvin.

“That's easy.” I walked to the bar and leaned over the mahogany edge. “Hey, my man.” I said to the bartender. “Don't you take Amex here?” I tried to remember his name as his familiar brown thumb and stump of a forefinger whisked my card away. “I want you to put every drink ordered in this bar for the next hour on my tab. The only catch is, you've got to point me out to all the benefactors. Okay?”

I turned to Marvin and the skycap.

“So what do you guys want?”

“Tanqueray and cranberry juice.” Marvin automatically recited, as if by rote.

“And for you?” I glanced at the skycap, who seemed to be a little more relaxed now that he knew we didn’t really want anything from him.

“Well, I was going to get some coffee, but I guess I’ll have a Coke.” As far as I knew, in Atlanta people drank Coke instead of coffee for breakfast.

“And a Johnny Walker Red straight up for me.” The bartender shuffled to the glass rack to prepare our drinks.

“What the hell do you do for a living, Joe?” said Marvin as he whisked invisible crumbs from the seat of the chair facing the bar.

“I’m a trader.”

“You work on the Street? I’ve got some friends at Salomon Brothers.” said Marvin.

“No, I’m not that kind of trader.”

“What do you trade then?”

“A little of this, for a little of that.” I said.

“What? What the hell are ‘this’ and ‘that’?” demanded Marvin.

The skycap looked at me, his folded hands atop the table, one eyebrow cocked as he drew his head in closer. I looked at both of them for a second and then lowered my voice.

“Have you ever gone into your bank, and seen a guy sitting at the managers desk in a real nice suit – *but it wasn’t a business suit?* The kind of guy who carries one of those very expensive, very thin briefcases – *but it’s not a business briefcase?* The kind of guy who gets the bank’s staff clicking and clacking like their lives depended on it? *I’m that guy.*”

By the time the bartender sat down our drinks, the first new customer had approached the bar. The bartender kept pointing to our table as he leaned over the bar to repeat what he had already said to the woman twice.

The lady, heavily tanned with tennis legs and a face like Boom Boom Mancini, walked slowly over to our table. She stopped advancing when the skycap and Marvin turned to look.

“Come on. It’s okay, ma’am. We won’t bite.”

“Do I have to join you guys?”

“All you have to do is answer one simple question. You can stay if you like.”

“Can't beat that, can I?” The woman sat her carry on bag on the floor. She tipped the chair, looped the handle under the front leg, and then rested the chair on all fours. “Shoot.”

“What makes a black man an Uncle Tom? Is it his actions?” I began. “Or is being an Uncle Tom just another role that black people act out daily to get along with *you*?”

Boom Boom removed her full glass from her lips and sat it on the table. “Sounds like I need to buy my own drink today. What was that question again?”

“We're trying to figure out...” I paused as I looked at Marvin, who seemed to have withdrawn into himself “...why some black people will ‘put on a happy face’ for white people who have something they want.”

The skycap began to fidget in his seat.

“That's human nature, Mr. -” Boom Boom waited for my name.

I told her to call me Joe and then continued. “Think about this - this bartender, with all the people he sees day in and day out, remembers me whenever I come in here. Why? Because when I walk through that door, he can count on going home with at least \$50 extra dollars in his pocket. He doesn't give a damn about how much conversation I make. You can get free conversation all day long, am I right?” I turned to the bartender. He was puttering around the tables near us, rearranging the salt and pepper shakers as he listened to our conversation.

“Something on your mind?” I questioned the bartender, again, when he didn't answer. “Come on, you're my man around here. So what's up?”

“I'll tell you what's up,” he grumbled, looking at Boom Boom. “When Dr. King died black people started dreaming in sunshine, cause there wasn't supposed to be no reason to hide our pride no more. Can you see where I'm coming from?” He stared right at Boom Boom. “We wasn't supposed to have no reason to feel bad about being black,” he repeated as the woman shook her head up and down.

”So what's the black program dealing twenty-five years later? We got a damn air-conditioned gravehouse on Auburn Avenue, rooms full of dead air and dead - ass negroes. Nobody wants us, don't want no niggers, blacks, afro- americans, no Asiatic black man, nothing black, to be no different than we always were.” The bartender returned to Marvin and me-- ”So I don't give a damn about no ‘have a Coke and a smile’ nigger Toms.”

“It's all a game.” I said.

“Maybe we didn't get everything, but things have changed,” said the skycap solemnly. “My son is going to the University of Georgia on a full scholarship next year. A full academic scholarship.”

“That's awesome!” cheered Boom Boom.

“I remember when Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter integrated the university.” the skycap continued. “But then the Ben Hill blacks always had access, were always going to be the ‘firsts’. Real progress is when someone like me, just a brother slinging bags and hustling for tips everyday, can put his kids in a system where they really have a chance to be somebody.”

“So just how hard would you hustle to make sure your kid has some spending change at this college?” Marvin eyed the skycap, waiting for his answer. The fingers of his right hand danced gracefully along the armrest of his chair as he peered at the rest of us from deep in his chair. I sipped my drink while eyeing the space between him and the skycap.

“Pride don't buy no groceries.” breathed the skycap, breaking the silence.

“Pride doesn't buy any-?” asked Marvin.

“You're listening, but you're not hearing me.” scolded the skycap. He drained his glass of Coca Cola and sat it gingerly on the table. “By the time the freedom fighters left Selma, a lot of black people lost their jobs *and* their retirements. Who was it that helped them to survive? My father used to say, ‘Somebody had to have some money waiting to bail those folks out of jail. It was that shucking and jiving negro who made sure those folks had something to eat. If we all had bucked the system, the civil rights movement would have rotted itself away in jails across the South.’”

Boom Boom looked at me “So, this is a good thing, right? Not challenging the system but trying to work it from the inside?”

“So what the hell does all this have to do with negroes still “tomming” today ?” questioned Marvin. He had begun fumbling around in his pockets for his cell phone, until he remembered that he wasn't taking any calls. To a man used to billing people by the hour, we were wasting his time.

“What does that have to do with it?” I was on a roll now. “We go from slavery to equality in six generations, and what do we have to show for it? Not much. A few Benzes here and there, a whole stack of diplomas all over our walls. But what does that shit mean when we have no money? . So-”

“No money?” stammered Marvin.

“I'm not talking about you. You just might make partner. I'm talking about the mass of *us*, the regular Joes who punch a clock every day.”

Marvin turned to the skycap. "You just work here because you like the job, don't you? You don't really need the money, right?" The undercurrent of sarcasm hung heavy in the air.

The skycap's eyes narrowed. "Of course I need the money. I need every dollar I can get." As he resumed sipping his coffee he kept his eye on Marvin, studying the finely tailored cut of his suit and the thick cap of black, curly hair that crowned his head.

*Why was Marvin on the skycap so hard? I tried to figure him out. The man's got a family, one of his kids is headed off to college, and he's out here busting his ass everyday rain or shine. He's one of us.* I took another good look at Marvin's soft hands, his clear hazel eyes, and I finally saw what the skycap already knew - Marvin was the enemy.

"Hi. The bartender said I got a free drink if I thanked the guy in the plaid blazer." announced a tall, florid man with a shock of black curly hair. His left hand covered his entire glass.

"Hi. This is Joe, and he's going to ask you a trick question." Boom Boom replied with a smile, the ice in her glass tinkling as she leaned back in her chair.

"Okay, so what's the question?" Curly Top barked at me.

"What color is your underwear?"

"You didn't ask me that!" wailed Boom Boom.

"White with blue stripes." deadpanned Curly Top, smiling at Boom Boom's wide face.

"What does his underwear have to do with the Uncle Tom discussion?" The skycap turned his neck to see who was behind him.

"Joe, can you get the bartender? I need another drink." Marvin's eyes were very serious as he pushed his glass in my direction.

"Fly guy number one." I called to the bartender. "Bring everybody another round."

The bartender stepped from behind the bar and strode over to our table. "You're fly guy number one, Mr. K."

"I'll have another Tanqueray and cranberry juice," ordered Marvin.

"You're buying more drinks? Why didn't you say so?" Boom Boom drained her glass. "Another Campari, please."

"I'll have some water this go round." said the skycap.

“I haven't touched mine yet, but I'll take another.” chimed Curly Top, still standing.

“That'll be all, folks?” asked the bartender as he collected empty glasses.

“You forgot me.” I pushed my drink across the table.

“You haven't taken more than one sip from your drink.” declared Marvin.

“I want a fresh drink.” I handed my nearly full glass to the bartender. I could feel all the eyes at the table searching my face.

“You need to get this man whatever he wants” the skycap *told* the bartender, and I immediately liked him a lot better than I did before.

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“So what are you guys really talking about here, Joe?” Curly Top pried from the edge of a chair as he had tipped backwards beside Boom Boom.

“The Uncle Tom problem.” Just like he did with his clients, Marvin was helping to keep us focused on the issue at hand.

“I should have figured it was something about race. So who's got the problem with their Uncle Tom?”

“Joe here thinks that it's not just a black problem, it's a problem for everybody.” Boom Boom thought she was now my unofficial translator.

“I didn't say that.” I said.

“Then what the hell have you been saying?” demanded Marvin.

“Well, we all know black men are having so many problems.” said Boom Boom, “that keep them in jail or on drugs so they can't get a job and make some money.”

“Hold it, hold it!” yelled Marvin. “There are four black men in this room right now, and we are all working, we all have at least a high school education-”

“Hey, I got my college degree, too,” said the bartender.

“Sorry about that.” Marvin apologized, before taking another sip of his drink.

The skycap unpursed his lips. “So did I.”

“You went to college?” Boom Boom couldn't believe it.

I leaned forward. "As Marvin was saying, there are four well versed, intelligent, responsible black men in this room who aren't in jail, aren't on crack, and ain't trying to rape you." I said this imagining her thick thighs through the table.

"Oh, you guys are too nice for that," said Boom Boom.

"What you see is not always what you get." I teased. Boom Boom stopped sipping from her drink and the bartender came over and stood behind the skycap.

"A couple of years ago, I was walking back from lunch with two Wall Street jerks, and in the middle of Manhattan this 1970 Nova rumbles up to the light." I said. "It had regular house speakers in the back seat, pumping out this heavy bass beat. The two brothers rolling in it were about thirty. They were slamming quarts of malt liquor, talking loud, yelling at the skirts. One of them hung his arm out of the window and looked dead in my eyes. I said 'Yo, brotherman, what it be like?' and he jerked his head back, yelling, 'Don't forget the neighborhood, Rockefeller.'"

To guys like them, all the Downtown Browns were Rockefellers.

"One of these jerks I was with shook his head as they drove off. 'Look at them, drinking beer in the middle of the day.' The other one started interrogating me. 'Do you know those guys? Why did you talk to *those* guys?'"

These jerks couldn't seem to fathom that we were really the same, those brothers and I. They couldn't understand that there weren't enough of us bunched together in any one social class to ignore all the rest, like they could from their castles in Connecticut."

I looked from Curly Top to Boom Boom, feeling warm under the collar, seeing the ice melt in the bottom of empty glasses. "We're not cardboard cutouts." The words seemed to be sticking to my tongue." Look at us. There's more under these blazers than the labels, right?"

"Well..." said Boom Boom, "since you're not cardboard cutouts, let's get back to this rape thing." The Campari's had taken away her pre-flight jitters and she leaned forward, the tip of her grenadine stained tongue flicking at the bottom of the upper lip.

"What about it?" It looked to me like Boom Boom was having a seventh round surge.

"Well, when you mentioned that rape wasn't on your minds, it sounded as though you think all white women are afraid that all black men are going to be after their goodies."

"Are you afraid?" the bartender asked Boom Boom.

"Of course not."

“You guys gotta drop the sex talk.” Curly Top squirmed. “I haven't seen my wife in almost two weeks.”

“I understand where Joe was coming from earlier with his story about the low-riders,” Marvin added. “And it's not just white guys, it's other blacks too, like the ladies who clean my building. Ever since my second week, when they found out I was a lawyer, they clam up when I come downstairs at night. I make a lot of money, have a nice office, but I know exactly who they are.”

“So what's your point?” said Curly Top. “You guys have made it, and it was hard. Woop de doo. You think I've got it easy because I'm a white guy? The bluebloods guarding the gate will never accept a true southerner like me.”

I watched Curly Top's neck start to turn pink. “Surprise,” I wanted to say to Curly Top. We do the same thing. In our community, it's the Marvin's of the world who guard the gate against the skycaps.

The heat from Marvin's head had unfurled the ends of his curly hair, until the loose black locks shook every time he moved his head. “You mean redneck!” he spat at Curly Top. His narrow, rudy nostrils were flaring, giving his nose the appearance of being larger than it was.

Curly Top's narrow, rudy nostrils were flaring, giving his nose the appearance of being larger than it was. “Who you calling a redneck?” he retorted. The heat from his head had unfurled the ends of his curly hair, until the loose black locks shook every time he moved his head.

“Don't give me that shit about how hard it is for you. There's no damn way you had it as hard as I have, that any of *us* have.” Marvin fumed.

“You don't have to curse at anybody to get them to hear you, son” The skycap's pronouncement sliced through the thick air surrounding Marvin and Curly Top.

The spell had been broken. Marvin's eyes opened wide as he reared his head back. If I could have seen the inside of Marvin's brain, I'm sure it would have been on red alert. *A damn skycap telling him what to do?* His hair was beginning to frizz, and the Tanqueray had tinged his eyes a dull pink.

“I just want Joe to get down to the brass tacks and stop giving us these damn sermons. I want him to show me how I was wrong about you, and what you did at the check-in counter today.” Marvin leered at the skycap.

“Young man, I'll have you know that I do my job as well as anybody else around here, if not better,” snapped the skycap.

“That's just it. I think you do your job a little *too* well.”

“So what don't you think I ought to be doing, *sir*?” The skycap's lips clenched the tail of the "r" in "sir".

Everybody at the table was silent. The bartender had returned with the next round of drinks. He stopped in mid-motion behind Boom Boom, his hand gathering the trickle of condensation and alcohol that wet the sides of her glass. Curly Top sipped his drink and stared straight into the top of his drink.

“I think you need to stand up straight, do your job like a man, and simply hold out your hand when someone offers you a tip. You don't have to shuck and jive, or buck dance like some damn Stepin Fetchit to get your money if you're doing such a good job,” railed Marvin.

“So I'm not a man??” boomed the skycap, “...because I don't stand up straight on my job??”

Curly Top's jaw was tight as he tried to decipher what was really going on here. Boom Boom sat up, her arms wrapped around her elbows. The bartender began to serve the drinks, taking his time to wipe the table before laying each napkin.

“Young man, you think you're a man because you work in an office with white men and their women and you get to wear a suit and tie like they do. You might even be a big-time lawyer, proud of having your own desk in your own office. But somewhere in that building you got a boss, and when you see him coming you always remember all the things you're supposed to be doing that you hadn't got done yet.

You feel funny when out of nowhere he calls your name all of a sudden, don't you, because you have no idea of what he might want. And when its time to get reviewed, you're scared as hell that you might not get your bonus, or even a raise, because he's got that power, and at that moment you will do just about anything to keep this guy off your back, to keep him happy, to try to remind him of all the good things you've done all year.”

Marvin stared hard at the skycap, his jaw slack, his eyes covered by a wet film.

“Am I right?” the skycap continued. “Is that how it works at your job, where men stand tall and act like men? Let me tell you something, son. Your job really ain't all that different from mine. You've got one boss that puts you through the wringer once a week, or maybe once a month. I got fifty bosses a day, and I feel funny too whenever I see one coming. I'm always scared as hell that they don't or won't tip worth a damn, so I got to keep each and everyone of 'em happy the best way I know how.

And the money I make, the crumpled singles and fives and tens I spread out on my dresser every night? They spend just like that check you get by direct deposit.”

There was disbelief in Marvin's eyes. "Yea, right." Marvin got up and walked to the entrance to the bar. He looked up at the flight arrival monitor for a few seconds, and then stalked out of the lounge.

The bartender whipped my old drink off the table and replaced it with a fresh one without changing the napkin.

"Wait a minute. I'm paying for all these drinks. Can I at least get a new napkin?"

"You better keep Joe happy," chuckled Curly Top. "He's the one paying. So he's the boss around here." He looked at Boom Boom and they burst into laughter. The skycap smiled at me.

"You still buying, Joe, or did our friend just end the party?" Curly Top wondered.

"I'm out of here."

Curly Top was already offering to buy Boom Boom another drink before I got the words out of my mouth. I turned to the skycap.

"Hey man, I'm sorry I got you into this mess."

The skycap rubbed his brown fingers across his knuckles and stared into the roughened palm of his hand. I extended my arm across the table and his moist eyes looked into mine as he gripped my hand. That handshake was all that he said, all that I felt in the bones of my hand as I strode to the concourse to catch my next flight.