

I Ain't Black and You Ain't White

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His name was Jimmy but most folks in the Boston area usually just called him 'the big man.'

He spread 320 pounds over a frame of six feet and two inches. Although he did not play 'nose tackle' for the New England Patriots, he certainly looked as though he could.

Flashing a watermelon smile that ran from ear to ear, he was gentle most of the time, unless you called him an African American.

"I have never been to Africa - but I am an American," he'd say in a quiet voice that sounded like the distant, first rumble of a thunder storm. He spoke in a way that assured you that you didn't want the storm to get any closer.

We met at work; both being out of our regular jobs. I walked a picket line by day. My union had struck the Ironworks where I was employed, after the company tried to reduce our pay and take away a few holidays, including Veterans Day.

The 'Big Man' was on lay-off from his bus driving job in the Boston transit system.

We took temporary jobs as 'order pickers' in a mail order clothing company warehouse. Random circumstances that would prove fortuitous for me paired the two of us together - the giant dark-skinned man and the short, graying light-skinned man.

Each day we were given a long list of merchandise that had been ordered by customers, which had to be physically retrieved from various locations in the four-floor, sprawling warehouse of one million square feet.

Slinging old time, canvas paperboy delivery bags over our shoulders, Jimmy

and I would scamper up and down the floors like ants on a hill, picking our orders and delivering them to a conveyor belt that sent them on to the packing department.

We liked each other immediately. Making the work into a friendly challenge, we raced to the item locations as fast as possible, stuffing our newspaper bags full, far more quickly than any of the other workers.

We carried two bags each, draped crosswise over our shoulders, so that we could retrieve twice as many items as the 'pickers' who used only one.

After building an extravagant lead over the rest of the crew, we would frequently retire to the darkest corner of the highest floor and sit down for ten or fifteen minutes to talk about life and such.

"Hey 'Bee', why do you think there's racial problems today?" - Jimmy asked me during one of our early chats. He had nick-named me 'Bee', because 'B' it's the first letter of my name - Brad.

"It is all about color," he continued, without waiting for a response. "Some white people don't like black people. You know what I mean?"

"Course I do Jimmy. Don't I see it every day? And don't I see too that some black people don't like white people?"

"That ain't it Bee. Everybody's wrong. I ain't black and you ain't white! Come on over to the stock racks where the light is strong. I want to show you how the whole world has got this thing all fouled up."

We walked to a massive structure of steel bars configured into racks for storage of clothing cartons. Long rows of tilted rolling racks held thousands of cases of various items of apparel. The boxes were fed into the system from the back. Gravity slid them down the rollers to the front, as needed.

Jimmy walked to a location that contained a line of cartons of ladies' blouses.

From his order picking sheet, he noted that he needed to take 14 pieces of the item. There were only three left in the lead box. He took the three, and then tossed the empty box on a conveyor belt leading to a cardboard collector.

The next case slid down into the front position. Deftly, Jimmy fingered open his box-cutter, cut away the top of the fresh case, and took 11 more blouses to complete his order.

He held up one of the blouses for me to look at.

"What's that say Bee?"

"It says 'Alfani handkerchief-hem women's Blouse, size 10'," I replied.

"The color Bee! What does it say for the color?"

"It says black Jim. Black."

"Okay Bee. It says black. Now watch this. I am going to put this black blouse on my black arm. Now what do you see?"

"I see you are wearing a short sleeve shirt and that you have a black blouse draped over your bare arm. That's it. That's all I see."

"The color Bee! The blouse is black but it does not look the same as my arm. My arm is not black, it is brown. So, the point is, I am not black. I am brown."

I wasn't really sure where my big pal was going with the conversation but he was animated, flushed, and excited; so I just watched and didn't say anything for a while.

Jimmy looked at his order sheet and went to another clothing location. He pulled six blouses of a different color from a carton, stuffed five of them in his newspaper delivery bag and waved the sixth one in my face.

"What color is this, Bee?"

"The label says it's white Jim."

"That's right my friend. The label says it is white. Now I am going to put this on your arm and let's see if the color of this blouse matches your arm."

Jimmy slung the plastic wrapped blouse over my bare, outstretched arm and flashed a broad crescent smile.

"No match! Do you see what I am saying, Bee? You are not white. That blouse is white. A piece of paper is white. You are not. You are kind of orange. Perhaps I could call you a light brown when you have a summer tan, but for sure, you are not white."

And so it was that on that day, my whole idea of the color of people and of race, changed. Jimmy was right. There are no black people and there are no white people. People are just different shades of the same color.

I was either orange or perhaps sometimes summer-brown, while Jim was medium to dark brown.

The whole color thing didn't matter to me anyway. I always thought that I could like or dislike anybody regardless of race - but I had thought in terms of race. I did used to think that there were 'black people' and there were 'white people'.

Over the months that we worked together, Jim and I became fast friends and we called each-other brother.

'Brother' was not a term that the 'Big Man' used often or loosely - as a pair of unfortunate 'gentlemen' were soon to find out.

During the time Jimmy and I were employed, business at the warehouse was bustling. The company, which sold discount women's fashions by mail order, was having its best year.

They usually had annual revenues of about 700 million dollars, but were on pace for their first billion dollar year.

A pre-Christmas rush in early October brought in so many orders that the company was forced to hire hundreds of additional temporary workers to try to stay on schedule.

The labor market in Massachusetts was tight at the time and it was difficult for the firm to hire enough help. When the supply of day workers from firms like Kelly Services and similar employment agencies dried up: in desperation, the company turned to questionable sources.

Busloads of workers were brought in. One employment group specialized in 'under-age' Asian children. Another brought in scores of illegal immigrants from Mexico.

Watchdog groups acted quickly and routed out the more flagrant abuses of the dubious 'employment agencies', but there remained a group of a hundred or so people who would look much more at home on a wanted poster, than in a place of business.

By this time, Jimmy and I had each been made a 'Lead Operator' which was a higher paying position than order-picker, one level below a supervisor.

Our industriousness had been noticed by upper management, and when we were promoted one of the managers said that the main reason we got our raise and our new job was because they noticed that we were 'Russian Twins'.

"What do you mean by calling us Russian," thundered Jimmy. "I don't mind being called Bee's twin; but I am an American and I don't..."

"Hold on Big Man," laughed the 'Process Manager'. "All us managers call you guys the Russian twins because of the way you are always rushing about when you do your work. We are not calling you the Russian twins like the country - we are saying 'The Rushing Twins' meaning fast workers.

"That's okay then," Jimmy allowed. "You are right. That's what we are. You can call us 'The Rushin' Twins.'"

The main part of our new job as 'lead operators' was to be in charge of the questionable daily workers. The ones that did little actual work, spending way too much time in the bathroom, and sometimes coming back smelling of liquor after the thirty minute lunch break. The company was so busy, that they were willing to overlook almost anything just to get more bodies on board.

When Jimmy and I began working at the warehouse, there were about 1,000 employees. At the height of the rush that Christmas, there were more than 2,500 on the payroll.

The people we were in charge of had to write their names on a sign-in sheet at the beginning of the day. The agency that sent them was paid a set figure by the company, based on the number of names on the sign-in sheet. At the end of the week the company paid the agency and the agency paid the workers.

"Hey Jimmy. I am pretty sure that I saw a couple of guys signing in twice."

"I don't know Bee," he responded, "It's just their first day and maybe some of them were confused. We'll watch them more closely tomorrow."

The next day we did scrutinize them much more carefully and we were positive that at least ten of the men had signed in and then turned around and got in line a second time and signed in under a different name.

By the third day we had a head count of 100 men and a signature count of 115. That meant that the company was paying for 115 workers but was only getting 100.

None of the temporary workers spoke English and we didn't speak a word of their language.

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