Streetwise

A Joseph Soyinka Mystery

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Extract

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JOSEPH SOYINKA should have known better than to pick an argument with a stranger. One minute you are driving around minding your own business, the next thing you are staring down the barrel of a gun. That's how easy it was to get yourself killed in the South Bronx.

His day had started promisingly enough, as had his ancient Crown Victoria cab, which uncharacteristically purred into life that morning on the first flick of its ignition despite the biting cold at the onset of a New York winter. Then Yomi managed to be ready for school on time, which enabled his father to hit the road early and pickup a business type in a cheap suit as he emerged from his hotel. The trip to La Guardia had been a good fare, delivering a solid tip from the guy who was happy to drop Joseph a little extra green, as long as it was on the receipt and his company was paying. The traffic kept moving and he was soon off the Cross Bronx Expressway and back into the tenements, his home patch. For the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon the fares were steady and he kept on earning. Even the lights seemed

to turn green as he reached them. So how had it suddenly gone so badly wrong?

Joseph had spotted his next fare hailing a cab some way up the street, another businessman in a dark suit and tie, briefcase in hand. Joseph wondered who he had come to see in the South Bronx dressed like that. It had to be another real-estate deal. He pressed down on the accelerator, eager to get the job, but at the last moment an unmarked car pulled in sharply from the opposite side of the road to steal his fare.

'Son of a bitch,' he said aloud, another Americanism he'd picked up lately, and he slammed on the brakes as the beat-up Toyota cut him up, coming way too close to the front fender for comfort.

The businessman climbed in to the unlicensed cab and that would have been the end of it, if it hadn't been for the hot-headed Hispanic guy at the wheel. He'd noticed Joseph's anger and wound down the window, his face contorted with rage. 'What's your fucking problem?' he snarled, before adding an uncomplimentary reference to Joseph's black skin.

Joseph Soyinka had spent a year keeping his nose clean, his mouth shut and his temper at bay. He knew there was little to be gained from a stand-up row in the middle of the street with a man who was barely one step up from a petty criminal, stealing the fares from guys who drove legitimate vehicles and paid for the medallion that hung from their dashboard. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, Joseph would have let it go without a word, but maybe it was the racial slur, or perhaps it was

just one injustice too many, because suddenly he found himself winding down his window.

The cold winter air pinched Joseph's face as he called out, 'I'm trying to earn a living here and you just stole my fare.'

The Hispanic seemed a little stunned that anyone would talk back to him and paused momentarily as if he was sizing up an opponent. Joseph was tall and muscular and he sat high in the cab's front seat. His jet-black hair made him look younger than his forty years and he had the bearing of a man not easily pushed around. Back in Lagos, women had liked him and men had not taken him lightly. In America, where everyone wants to play the gangster, it was a little different. The Hispanic finally settled on 'Fuck you!' then he regained his composure and asked, 'Wanna see something else I stole?' and that's when the gun came out.

The Hispanic had looked from right to left before he pulled the .38, but when he was sure nobody, including his startled passenger, could see what he was carrying, he held it up for Joseph to take a good look at. Though he kept the gun inside the car and pressed it close to his chest, it was pointed straight at Joseph. A look of triumphant glee spread across the guy's unwashed and stubbly face.

Joseph didn't carry a piece, hadn't done so since he left Nigeria in such a hurry barely a year ago. There was nothing he could do. 'Want a closer look asshole?' said the Hispanic, and for a moment Joseph was filled not with fear but an impotent fury. He wanted to get out of his cab, grab the gun and knock some sense into this pre-

tend hard man with it. If the gun went off and took him out before he reached the grinning idiot then fine, all his problems would be over at a stroke. Immediately though he thought of his son and his fury was swiftly replaced by shame. How would Yomi feel if he learned that his father had been gunned down in a stupid row over a twenty-dollar cab fare? Joseph told himself his son had to come first over everything, particularly his father's stupid pride.

Glancing down at the .38 in the guy's hand, Joseph spoke quietly and dismissively. 'Big man with your little gun.'

'What you say?' demanded the Hispanic, who knew he had been insulted but wasn't quite sure how.

It was too late. Joseph had already wound the window back up and he was on his way. The last thing he noticed of the other car was the nervous face of the businessman in the back. Dumb-ass suit now knew the risk he was taking climbing into an unlicensed cab, thought Joseph. He could end up in the projects standing there in his underwear. If he was lucky.

Ten blocks away and Joseph was still brooding about the guy with the gun when his mobile started to trill. It was Cyrus sounding agitated, but there was always drama in Cyrus's life.

'Joseph, it's me,' he said in that unmistakeably deep voice of his, before unnecessarily adding, 'Cyrus. I need to talk to you, my friend, better sooner than later. Can you come by? I got a drop-off near the Impala later.'

Joseph sighed. It's not that he didn't like Cyrus, who

was truly one of life's good guys, but he didn't really have time for this. 'That's not going to be easy, Cyrus. I've not got a free hour today, believe me, not one.'

There was silence on the end of the line then Cyrus said simply, 'Got to see you somehow, Joseph.'

For a moment he thought about refusing, but then Joseph wondered if his friend might really be in trouble. He and Cyrus went way back to the mother country and beyond, into that foreign land of a distant, half-remembered childhood in Nigeria together. Joseph owed him, big time. If it weren't for Cyrus he wouldn't be driving this cab. He might not be working for Donald Trump, but the cab fares put food on the table and a roof over their heads. No one else except Cyrus had given a shit when Joseph arrived in the land of the free, with just his son and a couple of suitcases. Back then, Joseph had no future to speak of and a past that still kept him awake every night, even now. Cyrus had taken them both in until they could find a low-rate apartment of their own, then he got Joseph a job at the same cab company as him. Joseph didn't like to think where he would be right now if it weren't for that. He pulled the cab over at the side of the road so he could speak to his friend without distraction.

'Is it important?' asked Joseph.

'Yeah, man.' Cyrus's deep voice was filled with melancholy.

'Okay, okay,' Joseph relented. 'I'll see if I can get to you at the Impala later, might take me a while though.'

'I'm not going anywhere.' And he could hear the relief in Cyrus's voice.

* * *

Just then there was a loud rap on the side window. Joseph jerked his head towards the rear seat and she climbed in. His passenger was a black woman in her early thirties, neatly dressed and polite, which was a big improvement on his usual fares. Joseph was no longer sure who were the worst; the lowlifes who didn't know any better than to call him 'bro' or 'my nigga,' like they'd just stepped off a shoot for a gangsta-rap video, or the business types. When the guys in suits saw the name Joseph Soyinka on the dashboard ID they immediately treated him like he was none too clever. His last pick-up had mouthed the word 'Air-port' exaggeratedly at him as if he were deaf.

This lady was different. She talked in sentences and added the word "please" at the end. Rare indeed, which was why Joseph was taken aback when he heard her destination was St Mary's, the rehab clinic. She didn't look like a junkie to Joseph but then that was none of his business. At least the place wasn't too far from the Impala. Maybe he could drop by there afterwards.

All of a sudden the lights were against him and Joseph was crawling along, bumper to bumper. Apartment blocks loomed above them on either side, red bricks turned to a dark grey from decades of smog and exhaust fumes. Long, metal fire escapes, like the ones he'd seen in the movies back in Lagos, hung down from the roofs almost to street level, but you had to drag them the last floor, as if they didn't actually want to touch the South Bronx unless they really had to.

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