

"SPOOKSVILLE"

- A short story

Ronald Petrie never understood the shock demonstrated by black folks when he never reacted to his name. He had seen the Dick Van Dyke Show in reruns, the show having run during his father's generation. When he watched, he never saw the humor, everyone's ha-ha humor, comparing him and his name to Rob Petrie, Dick Van Dyke's character on the show. Unbeknownst to anyone, he loved the character, silently watched, marveling at Rob's suburban lifestyle, buying a split level home after college, learning to skip like Rob, marrying his Mary – who happened to be white – with the same body build of the real Mary – same hairdo and skin tone. Only his Mary was a mean twit, the opposite of Mary Petrie. Sure she was white. She had to be white. Now far removed from Syracuse, New York, his home town; college in the city, New York University, an internship with the New York Times, when the Times still owned the Boston Globe. He worked for the Times for ten years, prior to his transfer to the Globe. The Times sold the Globe, a few years after he transferred, 2013. Ron elected to stay with the Globe.

He and his colleague Richard started early, pushing into Mississippi, running behind time, talking little, both wondering whether they had enough material; staying in Alabama for a day-and-a half, now only seventy five miles from the Mississippi border. Ron was the passenger today. They had taken a month off from their regular assignment to travel south to obtain material for feature articles for their new paper. Diversity, Black Lives Matter, White Lives Matter, neo-Nazis, the new South, the old South, race in America, disagreeing with others'

analysis of race in America, agreeing with some; they however believed in their heart of hearts that theirs was a fresh look on race. “Who better to tell this new story of America, than they - ‘Millennials of Color’”... - The sales pitch to management, stated in the affirmative, never intended to be a question. Writing and reporting along the way - so far, so good – their initial reporting receiving rave reviews. They spent the previous evening hovered over a cell phone talking with their agent, negotiating a book deal, television and speaking engagements, a testament to their hard work. They were the new voices on the horizon; telling a seemingly age-old tale of America and race.

Two weeks, a full fourteen days, in Virginia, there for the marches in Charlottesville, another ten in North Carolina, before crossing over into South Carolina for a week. Three days ago they received a call from their editor informing them, “You guys are short on time, in fact out of time.” He ultimately agreed to extend the trip, “for an additional week, no more. “No more! I expect the last installment in my cue on the same day you arrive back in Boston. Be safe. Don’t disappoint. Enjoy your travels!” Keith’s words were said rapidly, in the affirmative, carried along with a Boston accent, in succession, without a break, never waiting for an answer, not allowing an answer, before hanging up. Richard, his colleague, pushed the end call button, replying at the same time, “Oh well, that’s that. We got a week.”

Both Ronald and Richard were born in 1975; Ron, his preferred name, of course, in the northeast, never admitting Syracuse, saying “the City instead. Richard Jabari Smith a native of St. Louis, Missouri. Well not St. Louis exactly, Richard’s family lived in Webster Grove, situated west of St. Louis, a little more than 11 miles away from downtown St. Louis, named after the New England politician Daniel Webster and listed as one of the most affluent communities in Missouri, 90% White, a little over 6 percent African American, 1.5 percent

Asian, with the remaining number distributed among “others”. He too - always easier to say he was from St. Louis - even though his family seldom ventured into the heart of the City for anything other than baseball games at Busch.

Richard left St. Louis for Boston at 18 to attend school. His attendance at a prestigious institution has long taken the air out of the room, depriving cousins, nephews, nieces – any of the students in the family of his generation – of oxygen in the room. Richard used to be disturbed by being made over. Time, constant reminders and blinders now in place caused a metamorphosis to take place. He now believed he was special, different, smarter than most. None of the cousins, relatives his age, spoke to him anymore. He didn’t call them. They didn’t call him. When first cousin Susan, on his father’s side, saw the first piece online of his and Ron’s examination of Race in America, she made sure she didn’t click on the article, incapable of reading the story. The lack of contact with relatives, the cousins’ adverse position mattered not to Richard. Now at a good place in life, with the Globe for ten years, vested in the pension plan, invested in the market, dating a television reporter out of New York, looking to buy property in the next few years. Now this, a major project, book, television, anticipated prestige, notoriety; life couldn’t be better.

The sun seemed different this morning. More brilliant, welcoming them as they passed the sign on the side of the road, “Welcome to Mississippi: It’s Like Coming Home.”

Act 1 – “Naw...”

Two content reporters, masters of their world, watching the miles peel away. Thirty miles from Starkville, Mississippi, home of the Mississippi State University, content until they saw what they saw; much like a mirage, appearing on the side of the road, water clouds vaporizing upward – asphalt – the surrounding air – levitating, circling, engulfing the road sign, seeing what they didn’t believe they saw, Welcome to Spooksville Mississippi Population 13, eliciting from both, a raw, “naw”. Not quite southern “naws” - yet said in unison - invoking the same cultural meaning, even though neither identified with anything southern, making this journey with noses out-of-sort, attributing the race issues as a Southern issue only, having said out loud more their true beliefs, “the backwardness of the South.” None of this ever was put in their reporting though, forever objectively fair. They thought. They said. Among themselves, in hotel rooms, over dinner, when driving past towns and cities, during their trip down the eastern seaboard, and across the heart of Old Dixie, over breakfast this morning. Entering into Mississippi, seeing the welcoming invitation; bringing with them who they were, their histories, and well-worn presumptions.

Now settled in their adopted city, Richard a resident of Boston proper, living downtown, enjoying the City’s sophistication, educational institutions; the urbane presence of the northeast. Both never remembered Bostonians rocking school buses protesting the integration of schools (1974); Bill Russell – the City’s basketball god - calling the city out for being “a flea market of racism” (1970); ignoring their adopted home has been called one of the most racist cities in America by athletes from America’s game, baseball. They were both season ticket holders, anguishing over when they missed Red Sox’s games.

Turning around, moving from 75 miles an hour to a practical stop, turning in the middle of the road, moving in the opposite directions, seeing nothing but hate.

“Spooksville, good Goddamn, what kind of shit is this!”

Passing the sign, turning again, the middle of the road, ignoring horns, signs of danger, pulling off on the side of the road, seeing again what they saw, “Welcome to Spooksville Population 13.” Exiting as fast as they stopped, moving to the front of the sign, to its side, circling, moving back in measured paces, never taking their eyes off the prize – I mean – sign.

“Do you believe this shit?” – Ron said.

“No I don’t! - Richard said, moving closer, toward the sign making sure he wasn’t seeing things. Touching, kicking, holding the sign with both hands, moving his right leg back and striking. The I-beam, aluminum posts, did what high-grade aluminum posts do, remained in place; striking back, propelling force and energy back through Richard’s leg, telling the brain, *striking metal with force was not a wise act*. Slightly different from the feeling he experienced when six; testing fire, telling classmates he wasn’t afraid, “fire wouldn’t burn him”, “couldn’t hurt him”, extending the right arm only; suffering second degree burns, up and down the arm, reaching within six inches of the upper torso. Boys will be boys, they say. This time he struck as hard as he could, screamed loud, moved away proclaiming, “The sign’s real.”

“It’s real!” It’s fucking real!!! – Richard repeated, believing, not believing.

“Maybe it’s a joke.

“Joke, what do you mean a joke? That’s a sign and it hurts!” Jumping around, stumbling about in the gravel on the side of the road, put in place by the State Highway Department. Holding the right leg, hopping on the left; looking down at the blood spatters, on the right shoe,

on both pant legs; he also had a cut on the top portion of his foot. Richard sat down to examine his foot. Ron moved back toward the car to retrieve the camera.

Richard began to rant, “Spook is a derogatory racial term. I know that, and the last marker I saw said we were in Mississippi. Damn, what’s wrong these people!” An affirmative *these people* was his, long divorced and never really associating with his southern heritage. Ignoring before the War of the States, the failed compromise was named after Missouri, which wanted admission into union in 1820, as a slave state. Mattered not – the words spoken were “these people”. Sitting, caring for his foot, listening to Ron click, picture after picture of the sign, the surrounding area, neither realizing there was someone standing behind them.

“You folks need to be careful.”

The voice startled both of them, causing Ron to move rapidly from one place to another, moving behind the sign post, peeking out and around, not covered, a partial obstruction, at best; eyes bucked, holding onto one too many Gone with the Wind moments, Django Unchained memories, Mississippi Burning dreams. Startled, standing in place, not moving, not running, stuck in place. Richard fell over, a tumbling movement, jagged movement from a sitting position, with the right leg crooked over the left, off-balanced; vulnerable, striking the side of his head against the simmering hot, white gravel, Mississippi gravel, causing his glasses to spill off and onto the side of the road – rolling into the bushes. Tittering back the other way, immediately self-correcting, correcting the unexpected plunge, while the synapses of brain and body refused to work properly – telling him to run, propelling him nowhere, except further down the embankment, leading with by face - now bloodied - not his feet.

The stranger no longer was concerned with their driving, now concerned with their aberrant behavior, “Gentlemen, are you alright? Can I help you?”

“We are reporters from the Boston Globe, is this town really named, Spooksville?” – said Ron, as Richard retrieved his glasses, pulled himself out of the weeds, correcting his posture, while trying to look normal, looking back at the stranger at the same time.

“As surely, as I am black.”

“You’re bullshitting me. You live in the south, in a town called Spooksville, Mississippi, a black woman and you seem okay, not pissed!” Said by Ron, standing twenty feet away, not moving out from behind the column, while Richard adjusted his glasses, fifteen feet to his left, still in the ditch, looking over, trying to focus; examining the stranger, wondering whether she was black at all; seeing the evaporation he saw earlier moving about and around her feet, up and out of her skirt. Black, black she wasn’t. More grey than black, looking like his mother’s sister, down in Houston, who came to visit when he was a small child. “Too much chemo,” she said, “They kill you to heal you.” She too was grey/black, black/grey, taking on the appearance of being bleached, “melanin sapping procedures they were”, she said then. This mattered not, no one moved, staying in place, electing to talk from afar.

“Pissed for what, know everyone in town. Thirteen of us, kin in one way or the other, you know what I mean?” Periodically, the traffic would come by in bunches, one, two, three cars. The force of the wind blew, similar to a stormy day, even though there were no storms in the area, in the horizon. The sun continued to shine brightly, illuminating, birthing and giving life. Intense bright, blinding, permitting them to see this grey/black – black/grey woman, possessing a white undertone, standing 5’9”/5’10” within feet of them. Wearing a green straw hat, with a red ribbon/band; exceedingly white gloves, motioning with both hands as she talked, within mere feet of them both, talking to them as if they were crazy – did this stranger.

She could be black. Why does she have on gloves? These people in the south are strange, both thought, thoughts filling craniums, different from the previously uttered naws.

“Car trouble...?”

“No ma’am, no car trouble.”

“Needed to pee?”

“No, didn’t need to pee?”

“I saw you pass by, turn in the middle of the road, driving plum crazy, turning dangerously in the middle of the road again, and abruptly stopping. You folks intend on moving to Spooksville?”

“Who on earth has the nerve to call a town Spooksville?”

“My cousin, cousin did, use to live over in Macon, Georgia. He came back. Well, ‘came back,’ ain’t quit the right, proper way of saying what he did. See I been practicing the ‘ain’t(s),’ getting better though. Let’s say, ‘he moved back.’ No, still not right. ‘He migrated’ – better, better, – ‘over to Mississippi,’ and like any good explorer, a Manifest Destiny kind of guy, he was that kind of guy, he named a town after him.”

“You’re bullshitting me?”

“No, sir, I wouldn’t bullshit you; incapable of doing that, shitting, no that didn’t come out right, again, sorry. I think I am still upset you fools almost killed yourself when you made the unsafe lane change.”

“This cousin...”

“No, sir, cousin, cousin...”

“What’s a cousin, cousin?”

“Well see, he is my cousin, not my cousin. He bees white. I bees black.” The stranger, crooked her head to the side, still talking to them, appearing to talk to herself, or to someone else, saying, “been practicing the be(s) too, still haven’t got it right; people think I am talking about bees and not ‘be doing something’”. Richard or Ron remained in place, never moving, not to shake the stranger’s hand, not to hear clearer, mitigating the road noise, flat out stayed in place, one in front of the other, looking, listening; never really understanding what they were listening to, what they were witnessing.

The stranger told them her name. They never heard her. She was much older than she looked; in an opposite kind of way. She was black, she got that right. She told them the other twelve townspeople were white; she got that right. She then explained, “Well not really, white/white, a paper-mache-ist color, similar to too much glue, not enough paper, or vice versa, I don’t which, never really able to figure it out, glue/paper.” She held both hands out from her side, similar to a cross. Water dripped out from her sleeve, falling down, evaporating before hitting the ground. So the sun shone; so they saw. “More glue than paper, more paper than glue – don’t know; molted, layered, with no pivot, start and stop points, causing the appendages to be indistinguishable, disjointed.” She told them this. She then laughed. Her faults were not as bad; she said something about not cracking. They didn’t hear her. Occupied; anchored in place, incapable of listening – not at that time at least.

Richard corrected his posture, raised his hand, like in church, wanting to ask a question.

“Yes, sir..?”

“I studied the Road Atlas and didn’t see on the map a town name Spooksville. Also, I checked my phone last night, not on Google Maps, no town named Spooksville.”

“Sir whose fault is that...? You trust those people? They didn’t tell you what they were doing with your data, did they? No siree; didn’t tell you a damn thing. They never mentioned they knew the Russians were involved in the election, didn’t hear that either until after everything hit the fan? You trust them.... ? That’s what the sign says! We have been here for at least 200 years?”

“What?”

“You want to meet the other town folks?”

Richard and Ron spoke in unison, blurting out, answering the question, “No!”

Their inquisitive reporting-selves somehow disappeared; a fundamental character change; remaining in place, not asking questions, no longer wanting to explore the difference in people, incapable of upholding the unwritten reporter’s creed, making other peoples’ business their own. No timed moments of silence to elicit information. No pretending to not know the answer to get the subject to talk. Nothing, stupefying behavior from those two, blurting no, standing in place, refusing to move an inch in either direction, forgetting professional tenets.

“I think we should be getting on down the road.” Said in unison, causing confusion for both, still locked in place, unable to move, remaining shocked by their synchronized unanimity

“See, I’m a Spook...”

“Do you have any dignity, ma’am ...?” A damn Negro living in the south calling yourself a Spook! Words said by Richard, while Ron turned his head at an angle, pretending not to look at this stranger, even though he never took his eyes off her. He held in his hands the camera, fumbling with it, moving it back and forth, shaking it; gently striking the camera’s casing. When the stranger approached, startling him he had turned quickly; taking at least one picture wildly. The camera was pointed in the direction of the stranger when the shot was taken.

Nothing appeared in the cue. No picture. No distorted image, nothing. Ron was sure he engaged the camera; nothing.

“No, sir, no shame, there is no shame in being a Spook. Family tradition – well my being a Spook and all - and telling the truth, we try not to lie, no need to ... You said you fellows are reporters, if you want to try and take my picture, give it your best shot.”

Ron didn't move, fumbling still, confused. Richard volunteered, moving out of place, reaching, speaking at the same time, “I'll take the picture from this angle, better light,” Ron gave him the camera. Richard aimed, shot; aimed, shot; aimed and shot. The camera made the appropriate sounds – whizzling – whizzling - whizzling – saying it was working, telling him he was taking pictures. When he looked there was nothing on the screen, except a distorted shot, appearing to take a picture of the side of the road, a fuzzy shot, a distorted images appearing to be encased by water, steam, similar to the water rising from the roadway they had seen earlier. He readjusted the camera, checked the battery, aimed and shot, aimed and shot, aimed and shot.

“You let these damn people call you a spook?” – asked Ron.

When he asked the question, vapors poured from under and down the left leg, of this stranger, moving out and about, glistening like the waters of the great Mississippi flooding the deltas, only this wasn't the great Mississippi. They knew not what they were seeing.

“I'm a Spook. Flat out crazy, old, black-ass Spook, born and raised in Delaware, transitioned down here sixty years ago ... well transitioned may not be the proper way of describing ... how bout came here ... better, don't you think so? I was a physician in Delaware, came down here, now referred to as a Spook. I like being a Spook better, more relaxing, more descriptive of what I am, who I am; more honest, direct, a feeling of being more grounded ... if grounded is the right word. When I was physician, patients always wanted me to guess, and lie.

... ‘How I look doctor?’ ... ‘Think I am going to live?’ All I could do is treat them within the best of my ability as a medical doctor. I wanted so much to say, ‘you look sick’ ... ‘how in the hell I know, you may fall over and die tomorrow, tonight, now, who knows?’ I didn’t say what I wanted to say, never said what I wanted to say... lied ... lied ... lied ... until the end ... well, not ‘to the end’, may not be the right way of saying it, cause nothing never ends” So the stranger rattled, ad nauseam.

“Why doesn’t the camera work Ron”, Richard asked, perplexed, handing the camera back at the same time.

“I don’t know. I took pictures of the sign – at least I think I did. I took a shot of her. I think I did. It’s not working.”

When they turned to look back the stranger wasn’t there, gone. Richard looked at Ron. Ron looked at Richard. They said nothing. They gave no indication what the other was thinking. They didn’t need to say or do anything, they ran. They ran as fast as they could to the car. Faster than the Pearl River when it invaded Jackson during Hurricane Camille, faster than George Wallace – in the neighboring state – stepping out of the school house doors when the United States Marshalls arrived (forgetting he told everyone, segregation forever), faster than the Southern politicians moving from one party to another (immediately after the passage of the Civil Rights Act) – that fast. Amos answering Andy fast; Andy answering Amos fast – that fast - actions which can only be described in words meaning speed, quickness, set out in minute measurements of time. As fast as one is made a liar, getting on a carnival ride attesting, bragging of fearlessness, reverting in form, every muscles crying in fear, not caring he/she looked foolishness, fearful, scared, screaming loud and hard, causing ones heart to hurt. Larry, Curley and Moe reactions, fidgety, flighty, unpredictable movements; fighting themselves, fighting

unseen spirits, reaching trying to move their souls back inside their bodies; throwing gear back and over, profuse sweating, doing what they saying they didn't need to do - peeing – in unison – swearing to themselves, to others, confused by what they saw, what they heard, why both of them were wet between their legs. Spilling in, grabbing the doors handles, pulling as fast as possible, starting the engine, wishing they could be like Fred and Barney, not at all like Mike, and stick their feet on the ground and move the hell away; fundamentally disturbed by a smallish, grey/black woman, not looking anything like her true age, with a penchant for repeating herself, saying she didn't want to lie, a statement made over, and over again while they looked and listened in amazement at her self-hatred, calling herself a Spook. *These wayward, backward ass Negroes down south are surely fully disappointing and full of astonishing surprises.* So they thought. So they believed.

Act 2 – Boo...

Moving rapidly onto the roadway, almost causing another wreck, not caring, flooring the rental, NASCAR style, reckless; blowing anxieties out as rapidly as they entered, panting, hyperventilating, sweating profusely; filling the space with fear; sowing confusion. The only thing was clear - the need to move from one place to another, fast. Then they heard - “I thought you young men might want to reconsider meeting everyone else, being you’re reporters and all.” Sitting in the middle of the back seat she was, not smiling, nor frowning, even though the camera was tossed through and through. If they hadn’t screamed so loud; if they had not been so self-absorbed, they would have seen the camera situated between the crack of the seat and the crack of her posterior, not favoring one Gluteal (buttock) over the other, absolutely dead center. Their resulting sounds emitted, universal in all cultures, the sound of unbridled fear.

“There are only 13 of us; won’t take long. You can interview all 13. I am not sure about taking pictures; some of my kin don’t like taking pictures, something about the camera does not do them justice ... Make a turn up here on the left.”

Ron turned around, asking, “How did you get in here? I never saw you get in the car.”

“I just did.”

“You just did. I never saw to enter the damn car, what are you?”

“I am a Spook.”

“Stop saying that!!!”

Richard, in the meantime, missed the turn. He didn’t see a place to turn. He had no intention of making a turn. A preoccupied soul, having a difficult time driving; the right eye was giving him problems, twitching uncontrollably. The rental moved aimlessly, partly on, partly off the roadway, the beginning of a self-controlled, self-driving vehicle. Richard was too busy to

notice what the car was doing; rubbing; looking down, looking back in the rear view mirror, staring, causing the stranger to grow concerned for their safety.

“You may want to be careful, unsafe speed, unsafe lane change, not giving full attention to the road. You may not be leaving Spooksville if you kill your fool-selves.” Even though the stranger’s words were directed toward Richard, Ron replied instead. “We’re not from here crazy witch. If we die, I expect our relatives will have our remains buried elsewhere.” Ron now was no longer afraid. He was still perplexed, not afraid. Concerned, insistent, wanting to know what was happening. His reporter self, returned. Richard continued his contained plight; holding onto the wheel with one hand, the other over the right eye, peering back, seeing under different light what he could not see on the side of the road. He saw clean through their visitor’s eyes, a clear channel to the back to the spine. He saw images, people, alone the walls, standing, hanging onto veins, others spewed about, not appearing dead or alive, littering the pathway to her spin.

“First of all, I’m not a witch. Second of all – if that’s the right way of saying it, you too are reporters, is that right? Never mind. ... Your relatives may well bury your physical being somewhere else, true that. They don’t get your soul, your spirit.”

“What are you talking about, you the fool who calls herself a Spook?”

Richard eye suddenly calmed, no longer jumping. The car stopped itself; pulling over, sliding into place, now a finished prototype, before the best technologies companies in the world, causing Richard to emit a wooooo-eeeeee. Richard moved both hands off the wheel, knowing he didn’t cause the car to do what it did. He extended both hands upward and outward, toward the windshield and screamed, “Wooooo-eeeeee, wooooo-eeeeee, wooooo-eeeeee, wooooo-eeeeee, wooooo-eeeeee ... help me Lord.” His exultation would have pleased his Mother, she forever discouraged by his wandering away from the church. Not today. He may have, possibly, could

have said the Lord's name in vain; proclaimed Jesus his salvation, begged for forgiveness for all his sins. "Help me Jesus!" The boy acted like the old folks use to say, "Like he saw a ghost." The new possessed, self-driving rental moved from one place to place, slowed, angled to the side of the ride; turned the wheel back toward the roadway; locked the steering wheel before silencing the engine. The stranger stayed on cue, in an inviting, Chamber of Commerce way. "Welcome to Spooksville. We need to turn around. We passed the road a little bit down the road."

Ron screamed, "I didn't see an off ramp. I see didn't a road."

"How could you. You've been turned around talking me the whole time. Not paying attention, talking too much; not looking, never listening. You folks are reporters. You want to tell the story, or be the story. You die here, you stay and two others spirits are freed. You folks got to be careful when driving through these parts. That's what got me, not being careful. I don't regret it though, love Spooksville. ... The number always has to remain thirteen. So if you are foolish and die, two have to go, simple math, even though this is my favorite subject to talk about ... two leave, you substitute. I'm too young to leave ... done by age." The stranger chuckled when she said "too young". She hiked her skirt, covering her eyes, laughed again, when she said, "done by age". A chuckle Richard had heard before, he didn't know where, otherworldly, surreal like. The stranger continued, "So, you need to be careful coming through these parts."

"What are you talking about", both said in unison.

"Turn around."

"We are not turning around!"

"Oh come on, turn around."

“We don’t want to visit the others.”

“No, look they are coming to meet you. The whole town, all 12, turn around and look the other way ...! ‘I’m so excited and I just can’t hide it!’” She began clapping both hands – off beat, erratic, bouncing to some other tune, she couldn’t dance, didn’t have a lick of rhythm; moving to a self-assured, Carlton kind of beat, inside of her head, a beat no one else heard, laughing, laughing to herself, at her own jokes, an off-putting, ghostly appreciation of contemporary music. “I’m about to lose control and I think I like it.”

Twelve paper mache molted images, with no pivot, start, stop points – points of origin - causing their appendages to be indistinguishable, disjointed. She had told them this. She didn’t lie. They never heard her. They saw for themselves, images moving slowly towards the front of the car, sixty, fifty, forty yards away. Not white/white; white/grey maybe; more white than grey. Unable to see faces – that cracking thing – the whites of the eyes extenuated instead, even though the sun beamed directly in the direction of the images, 24 orbits, different coloring in each, defying the sun’s intensity, shining brightly, looking directly at them, piercing them, reaching into their souls – so they felt. Thirty yards away, seeing the same mist in which they saw on the stranger in the back, now a clapping, singing fool, “And I know, I know, I know, I know, I know I want you”. Both recognized the lyrics, naming the tune in five, thinking of the meaning, feeling the stranger’s glee, and unable to take anymore. Twenty yards out, she exulted, “This is so exciting. You get to meet my relatives, the other Spooks!” It was only then they understood. Saw the real story. Gunning the rental, no longer a self-driving, autonomous vehicle, within ten, five yards, inches of the images - through and through - by and by - screaming, crying, dying internally, wishing, wanting, longing to see their loves, the relatives they had ignored, yearning for the familiar. Praying more than they ever prayed before, begging for redemption, reversing

time, growing younger, childhood young, screaming for ‘mammies, daddies’ - driving faster than the rental was capable of driving. The stranger was no present in the back seat. They don’t know when she left. How she left.

They – the reporters - never did get to Starkville, electing to proceed back to Boston. They detoured, travelling to Jackson instead, making the two hours to Jackson in an hour and ten minutes, abandoning the soiled rental curb side, getting on the first plane back east, vowing to walk the rest of the way if they had to, if they weren’t able to fly directly into Boston, if no connecting flights were available. “No we don’t need to rent a car.” “Just put us on the first flight north!” Pushy, pushy they were, thanking the airline hostess, dressed in the spirit of the coming holiday, never smiling at her, refusing to touch her hands, finding none of her jokes funny, wondering whether – out loud – why she was dressed the way she was; green skin, matted hair, not able to determine her nationality ... too much ... too soon.

Act Three – October 30, 2017 – “Happy All Hallows’ Eve ...”

The final story ran on Page 1A, in bold print. Silently working, emailing each their contributions, the article writing itself, never mentioning visiting their experiences on the side of the road. Everyone expected big things to happen. Talk around the newsroom of Pulitzers, a reporter dream. Privately, Ron confessed to Richard he envisioned the structure of the book, and wanted “so much” to win a National Book Award, and possibly, a Pulitzer in literature. Dreaming the impossible, verbalizing his dream, admitting, “I will leave journalism to become a man of letters. Strangely, since they landed back in Boston, they had not discussed any such dreams, caring less, remaining secluded, producing their assignments and returning home; happy to be back, glad the final edition was published; received with rave reviews. They never mentioned to anyone what happened in Mississippi, instead telling the editors they felt they had enough materials to complete the assignment and if necessary would fly into Birmingham (Alabama), or Starkville to tie up any loose ends which may exist in the states of Alabama and Mississippi.

Back for three days – now All Hallows’ Eve – receiving an email from the assistant editor- informing them the editor wanted to meet with them about a scoop they missed, “incidents occurring off Highway 182, outside of Starkville, Mississippi.” They too had heard the rumors, circulated among press colleagues, on the internet, suspected pranksters, possibly Mississippi State students, maybe alt-right, pulling over tourists pretending to be ghosts, scaring the bejabbers out of them, before sending them on their way. Told and retold, now pretty near close to truth, the alleged story, and numbers; thirteen complaints, seven filed by people of color; every one of the complaints by out-of-towners. The assistant editor provided additional information also, information they didn’t know: “The tracking devices imbedded, by the Globe,

in your phones revealed you were in the area in proximity to the incidents.” No one had ever told them about tracking devices. They didn’t know whether to be insulted or not. “If you were in the area, how could you have possibly missed the scoop? A meeting is currently scheduled at 11:00 a.m., please arrange your schedule accordingly. Please bring with you notes, calendars, recordings created during the relevant time period.” Reading, sitting in place, neither bothering to pick up the phone to call the other; situated on opposite ends of the newsroom, never bothering to get up and walk over to compare notes; never discussing how they were going to approach the meeting. Ron looked out the window, glancing over looking at Mary’s picture; Richard stared at his face in the mirror, looking for any signs of injury; seeing none, smiling; reassured, confident. They hadn’t discussed any of what happened with each other, while travelling down Highway 182, careening across the landscape, making their way into Jackson. Never a word when changing clothes, discarding the soiled garments in the dumpster located outside the restroom door. Uttering not a sound, when getting gas, eating lunch, moving from the car to the airport terminal, never, never, never talking; not on the trip back to Boston. Never documenting in email, text, nary a word with significant others, quiet as church mice, keeping to themselves, a cloistered event, forbidden fruits indeed.

Richard had problems sleeping. No longer seeing what he saw. He didn’t know what he saw. Believing, never believing the improbable, none of it fitting into a previously narrow view of the world, the universe. You live, you die, that’s it; his belief system, arranged around a hedonistic view on consumption, an habitual shopper, possessing things, most which had never been opened, never used. Since he came back to Boston, he has spent his evenings sorting, arranging, delivering boxes to the Salvation Army, Goodwill; never leaving a name, dropping the boxes off and rapidly exiting the centers. When not sorting, sitting on the side of his bed

thinking, wondering, perplexed how to explain to the doctors the sound in both ears was not a ringing sensation, instead an off-beat, erratic voice, singing the Pointer Sister's song. "I'm can't come off as crazy." Every time he said those words, he saw the stranger, the black/grey, grey/black, black/grey woman, who never said her name, even though she did, "at least I don't remember her telling us her name." Richard's assessment was an honest one; one he simply was not willing to admit to others. He knew he wasn't crazy; craziness was not permitted in his family. He couldn't be crazy.

Ron went home to Mary. Bouncing and skipping into the living room - like Dick Van Dyke - announcing he was home, in much the manner, "Mary I'm home." Mary didn't play along. Staying in the back of the house, smoking a cigar, one-half of her hair curled, the other not - a ritual, a permitted sickness on both of their parts, the bottom portion only, to create the Mary effect. Stopping in mid-curl, saying "shit with this", lighting a cigar, flipping through her phone, laughing out loud, pretending she never heard Ron enter, texting, emailing, posting, was her appointed duty. Matters not, not to Ron at least, he was home, Mary was home. He understood caring wasn't his Mary Petrie's thing, not giving a shit was more in line with her persistent, perfected, unbreakable character trait - it was all about Mary. The man literally loved and accepted Mary's shitty attitude, whole hog.

He didn't tell his Mary. She wouldn't permit him to tell her anyway. Struggled? - Sure he struggled. He knew his telling would elicit Mary's favorite response if she felt he was seeking pitying, "Boo-hoo who gives a rat's ass!"

Bounding, skipping into the house, returning to a house in disarray, thirty days of laundry on the laundry room floor, clean and dirty clothes scattered throughout the bedroom, dishes stacked high, not a clean cup in the house, towels scattered throughout the master bath. Mary's

unfinished breakfast - from the previous morning – sat on the left side of the toilet, before the toilet paper. Mary remained in place, never moved toward her Ron, now with headphones on, waving with an errant finger, a silent, too cool, “hey baby”.

“Honey, did the maid come?”

“No, I told her to take off for the period you were out of town. I paid her for the time she was going to be off, if that’s the question, since you care more about her then you do about me...” Saying words, finishing, not finishing, muttering loud enough for her husband to hear, additional words, “I personally didn’t want to see the witch ...”

“Honey, don’t say that, you know I love you more than I love anyone else. Why are you going there ...?”

“You know I don’t like her. I see how you look at her. She’s an ungrateful cunt!!!”

“Now she’s a cunt. You want to add witch too. What has Josefina done to you?”

Mary being Mary, she played against Mary Petrie’s typecast, only at home - she knew her husband’s Achilles. She took a swig of Jack, blew smoke, stepped over the piles of laundry, remaining recalcitrant, “Whatever, witch, bitch; never have liked the hussy!”

“You want to get someone else?”

“I didn’t say I had any intention of firing her. I said I never liked the hussy.”

This exchange was familiar. Mary had no intentions of firing Josefina, “who was going to do the work”, saying the same words to Josefina, telling her over lunch – forgetting Josefina wasn’t a confidant – admitting how she played Ron, watching all the reruns of the Dick Van Dyke show, then complaining. “He doesn’t treat me right!”

Ron didn’t call and talk to colleagues, family, anyone. Refusing to return emails, texts, calls from those in the profession reaching out, wanting to ask questions, provide suggestions, to

compliment their work – “To do lunch sometime”. His cell was ringing at the time he read about the meeting. He saw it was his agent calling, his fifth call. He didn’t answer.

A complete mess they were, not talking, burrowing in, keeping what occurred to themselves; possessing a little too much male pride, embarrassed about how much they screamed, like little boys - they thought - even though theirs were worse. They didn’t laugh or talk about it to themselves. They sure weren’t going to tell their colleagues. The only exception – they used a communal, shared word, Blackish, to reference the black/grey, grey/black, black/grey visitor; their only reference to the roadway incident, assigning a name, moving on, remaining quiet, never uttering another word since. Otherwise, nothing happened.

Moving into the editor’s office, nodding to each other, taking a seat, listening to him tell them what he had heard in press circles: “Circulating in Starkville, Jackson, Birmingham, a stringer in Savannah ... Charleston ... Boston ... New Yorksame story ... similar complaints, three, four days ago, in rapid succession. Your phones indicate you were in the area, stopped on Highway 182 for at least an hour. You heard and saw nothing?” Providing information in rapid succession, revealing what he knew, little else, ending the exchange with a question, and allowing silence to enter the room, looking for an admission. Both Ron and Richard had been reporters too long, they saw the approach coming before he approached. Never deviating, their eyes, staring straight ahead – into the eyes of the editor – saying in unison, “When were you going to tell us you had a tracker on our phones?” The first time this had occurred since their return – talking in unison. This time the affliction elicited no response from either.

“We were going to tell you. We never got around to it.”

“Why?” – Ron asked.

“For your safety...?” – Less assured words, words muttered in a made-up kind of way, said without talking to the lawyers or Human Resources.

“Safety, any of the other reporters have these secret tracking devices inserted in the phones?” – Richard said, mustering for the first time, professional career challenging, resistance words, feeling black – different - for the first time. Words of protest, sensing a difference, feeling a difference, a different person than the one who left the city over a month ago; sitting in place, thinking on the other side of his brain, wanting to revise their recent submission on race, making the articles more personal. He shocked the editor, who had never seen him so angry, different, indifferent, he not caring about the consequences of his response.

“No, not yet...”, was the initial response, running a hand through a well-kept, grey/brownish mane. Tony Napolitano was a scion of the newspaper industry. He too was a former employee of the Times, electing to remain with the Globe. He fell in love with Boston and the Commonwealth. His mother’s mother was a stringer for the Times; his parents ran a string of small dailies in New England. Collecting himself, realizing he was off-subject, seeing nothing wrong with tracking black reporters and tracking no one else, responding as he was trained to do: “That’s not the purpose of this meeting. What about the story. How did you miss this story?”

On the plane back, Ron removed the camera from the overhead bin, remembering they had taken pictures, at least attempted to take pictures. He discovered none of the pictures taken in Spooksville were there. No pictures of the sign, no identifying pictures of the roadway, the surrounding areas, none of their visitor. He tested the camera on the plane, taking pictures down the aisle and the flight attendants, dressed like fruit, he thought. Their costumes where not fruit at all, they were Fruit of the Loom underwear. He didn’t see the tags sewn on the sides. The

long and short – the camera was functioning. He noticed Richard’s face was no longer bleeding, healed in a matter of hours, no markings, no bruises, blood, cuts, whelps, nothing. He mentioned what he saw. Richard responded, he didn’t care, “I’m happy my eye is no longer jumping.” Richard never told Ron, the singing still played in his head. He figured eventually this too would heal. He rationalized he liked the Pointer Sisters, even though her version was horrendous. Blackish couldn’t sing. Blackish couldn’t dance, totally devoid of rhythm; clapping off beat, singing the same lyrics over and over, followed by surreal laughter. Sitting in place, listening to Napolitano’s talk, hearing the same singing, telling no one, instead realizing the jagged, off-putting voice seemed calming now.

“Any pictures...?” – Ron asked.

“What?”

“Any pictures...?” I’m sure with all of these complaints someone, anyone, probably all of them, had cell phones in their pockets, purses, on or about their bodies and took pictures. We have seen this phenomenon in police cases, haven’t we? We wrote about this in our series.”

“I never thought of that...”

“I suspect the stories are nothing more than a hoax, a good Halloween ‘ha-ha’, like the one eyed man on the railroad track, that damn killing clown – good for Hollywood – not good for those of us who like clowns. Fuck Stephen King!” – Ron intoned.

“Hoax, fake news, maybe...? A good Halloween story, perhaps...? You want us to travel down to Mississippi to report on stupid college kids, too much time on their hands, pranksters? I heard Mississippi State was a party school, much like LSU. What does any of this have to do with our reporting on race in America?” – Richard finally interjected, rubbing the spot

over the right eye, on the side of his face, smiling now. Smiling more than he had since their stopping to see what they saw, smiling more than he has ever smiled in his life.

“I know you don’t want me asking, ‘Why did you guys stop, on the side of the road, for so long outside of Starkville.’” – Napolitano inquired, wanting to get back on subject, control the meeting, the way he was trained.

“I wasn’t feeling well. A bug or something, we pulled over until it passed.” – Richard said, no longer smiling.

“Well okay. I was just wondering.”

“Can we go?” – Words said in unison.

“Yes. ... By the way, coming to the Halloween party tonight?”

“No!” - Words also said in unison.

Turning, moving toward the door, never touching the door handle – seeing it open – exiting. Never closing the door – knowing it was going to close - moving out into the open space, a collective knowledge, now assured their otherworldly experience made sense.