

US AND THEM ©

By JK Savoy

A short story adapted from my novel, Somewhere In Brooklyn

“Hey son, do you mind if we look around your establishment?” I had returned from buying supplies at the Leaf & Bean coffee and tea store when two uniformed envoys of New York's finest sauntered into my industrial trash festooned coffee house, September's Child. But hey, folks in Park Slope considered the tiny place to be a work of ‘trash to treasure’ art. Okay, I'll accept their critique as a positive, it got me from one day to the next back in those the wild and crazy days of Brooklyn back in the 1970s. At least these cops came as they were, in uniform, unlike the others in their baggy war surplus army jackets hiding their piece. “Would you fellas like a cup of coffee?” I asked. Having been raised in my parent's diner business, I learned early on to offer a cop free coffee as soon as he walks in.

“Coffee would be fine; black for both of us. Hey, that hippie music seems to be flying all around the joint. I don't see any speakers, so where's that sound coming from, kiddo?” asked a dazed and confused officer as his and his partner's eyes fluttered as they heard, “*Up, up, up an' down, down, down; and in the end, it's only round an' round an' round an' round...*” Unable to fixate on the source of the otherworldly melody of “Dark Side of The Moon” as it embraced them within the softly lit room in quadraphonic, their heads followed the sound as they gazed upward.

“It comes from up there; from inside those used coffee bags bulging from the ceiling.” I said, “The amp and turntable are under the bar. Relax and enjoy your coffee. If you have questions, just ask, I'll be drinking my brew while I do my wood carving, if you don't mind.”

Because of all of the cop paraphernalia hanging from their

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belts, they found it impossible to sit on the stuffed coffee bag floor pillows, so they plopped on a recently discarded park bench under the fur-scrap covered wall. They went on to check what they were there to check, appearing less concerned and more relaxed than when they arrived. As their fingers slowly stroked the cup's gritty sand finish, they slowly sipped the Jamaican Blue Mountain blend, while their other senses took refuge in September's Child's ethereal ambiance.

The reverberating lyrics to "Us and Them" encircled the walls, slowing the frenetic movement of their eyes as the mellow message of Pink Floyd captivated their spirits. Their eyes fluttered and their heads slowly lowered as if they were beginning to realize that after all, we're all only ordinary men who have the need to get in touch our better selves, if only during the timeline of an album side. I went about carving a large eye into the cable reel I salvaged with the other ten from the city dump: In between stuffed coffee bags, the reels had become tables for September's Child. My friend and martial arts teacher, Rico blended into a corner: He was the eternal watcher, though always remaining unseen.

"Every Good Boy Deserves Favour" dropped to the turntable. The Moody Blues' blistering chords melded with the less than dazzling blast of a police siren. Two panicked cops broke from their reveries and raced for the door. Heads hanging low, two of New York's Finest, snared by a wiggling finger at the end of their sergeant's arm, meandered to his car's swung open door to the noose awaiting them.

"Yo, Rico, did they call this an establishment?"

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“Hey bro, they can call it what they want, as long as their cuffs stay hangin’ on their belts, a cot an’ three baloneys on white a day ain’t in our future.”

“Why do we never get an answer when we’re knocking at the door?” Blasted from the tiny room’s speakers as I lay back on the floor pillows and reflected, ‘At what point did I stop knocking, kicked the door down and realized that any answer worth hearing may lie in the question itself?’ Truth is, this slapped together hippie went from a fancy boardroom to a twelve-by-twelve storefront with one errant flick of the lip. Hell yeah, what a strange trip it’s been! Just as it takes a pinhead to pop a balloon, all too often a knucklehead needs a hammer to the head to see what an asshole he’s been. From this asshole’s facetious wisecrack to his mercenary boss: *“A lie can only be justified by the truth it creates,”* to the day I betrayed my fellow member of the board by perjuring myself in a court of law, with the reward of ascending to my victim’s position in the company, I’m living in that dumbass truth I created. Though asshole surely fits me, turncoat is glove tight. C’est la vie, Hell is what we make it! Moving on ...

As Rico held a copy of Don Juan by Carlos Castaneda closer to his face, I recalled when, about a month earlier I asked, “Officer, can I take this stuff with me?” to a bewildered armed cop at the city dump. I was referring to a steamer trunk, bags of sheepskin scrap and a bunch of battered wooden wine boxes. The dude was guarding garbage with a gun at his hip and a look of dedication to the rules of the city dump in his eyes. So, I thought it was best that I ask permission.

“Who gives a damn? Take all the garbage you want, but don’t

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try to bring any of that shit back, me boy!” said his sergeant while he and the officer laughed at me.

‘Who ought to be laughing at whom?’ I thought, ‘I’m a completely free man loading my car with junk. Every day, they clock in and out so they can protect and serve garbage with a gun?’

As part of my severance package, I had the use of a company Cadillac for a two week stretch, so I made frequent excursions to the city dump to gather materials for my newfound form of self-expression. From the store to the junkyard with plaster and debris; then from the junkyard back to the store with the material that would articulate my newly realized creative spirit. The premise for my quest was: Only liberated office and industrial trash would qualify to adorn September’s Child’s empty space. If my choices of materials were to convey my newfound physical and spiritual essence; might my self-portrait to be disclose the nature of what I may, one day, come to be? Was I obsessed with that store, or had I become obsessed with that store's obsession with me? The thrust of my life was to manifest what had been mesmerizing me.

There was a curious energy within that tiny place which cultivated my newly found sense of creativity. My eyes followed my hands while my mind became a monitor of the results. At one point, I had worked three days straight without any sleep. It was as if September’s Child was bringing forth its form with me as its willing device. Since I’d work all night, my sleep patterns, changed. I was becoming a nocturnal creature. Some of my neighbors complained about the noise, especially after midnight, so I didn't saw wood or hammer then. That would be when I would carve tiny details with an Exacto knife into the cable reels or write in a blank antiquarian journal I found in the store’s

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basement.

I rented a truck to transport a load of huge packing crates. I broke them down and nailed the boards to the floor in the same order they were in when whole. I joined piece after piece until the entire floor looked like the bottom while the lower walls resembled the sides of a huge open wood crate. I sealed their original 'Fragile' or 'This End Up' markings, with matte polyurethane to blend with the silky texture of the brick walls. The store's after-hours club bar was covered with 'urethaned packing crate wood. A large cable reel end piece served as a counter extension; its opposite end of their reel became a wall hanging with embedded stones spelling "September's Child." A massive beam above the counter lent balance to it all with curved nails each holding a sand covered earthen mug. Everything was done in muted tones in order to blend with the shadowing effect of candlelight. The store's ceiling was completely covered with large burlap coffee bags stapled to it. The lone bathroom's floor, ceiling and walls were adorned with labeled ends of fruit and wine crates: Their brand names and logos sealed in urethane.

All of the liberated materials would retain their corporate names and brandings. For them it would be inescapable. The burlap bags on the ceiling hung loosely to give the look of being stuffed with coffee or seasonings. Shrouded within four of the bags were quadrophonic speakers. My tape deck, amplifier and turntable were set below the bar bringing sound to the burlap shrouded speakers.

I stripped my eighteenth-century steamer trunk to its bare wood and metal then 'urethaned it. Since the glass panels were long ago removed, both of the store's windows had been boarded up with plywood. I stapled all of the sheepskins over one. In order to cover

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up the one on the other side of the door, I fashioned a loft bed and a small sitting area beneath it from scrap wooden beams and planks I found at an abandoned construction site.

Chimneystacks that rose from the basement of the adjoining apartment house and bar would give heat to my store's brick walls. Winter was on its way. In order for the soft essence of the liberated trash to stand out, four fifteen-watt bulbs hung from the ceiling. They were shrouded by scrap fruit baskets serving as shades.

Each level toward completion began to set the tone for further inspiration. The store's ambiance was otherworldly. Candle driven shadows that once danced upon the walls of that tiny room lay claim to a position of permanence, having taken form upon introducing themselves to my eager hands. Brands and titles that corporations had stamped upon those objects burst through the 'urethane. I felt a sense of camaraderie with the erstwhile debris, as if we had survived our abandonment and gained a common resurrection within that spot in our universe. The store and its latest mind-sprung trappings became like designer apparel caressing my body.

With polyurethane fumes and sawdust filling the store's space, it became impossible to breathe while working in that tiny area unless the door stayed open. I'd be totally absorbed in my work and turn around only to find some stranger asking something like, "*Whatcha doing, Mister?*" When your intentions aren't stated and your open door is a storefront's, the curious will enter while asking questions. I learned to close off to everyone in order to perform my tasks at hand. In spite of my intransigence, more of them would come around.

There could be anywhere between one and ten passersby

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watching and taking in the music from the loudspeakers. Typically, I said nothing and worked feverishly. If anyone asked me a question about my intentions for the store, I would raise the volume. Depending upon my mood, I might answer them, “*A carpentry shop,*” or “*A crafts store,*” or whatever came to mind. One day I glanced at the coffee bags hanging from the ceiling and answered, “A coffee house.” I was as astonished at my reply, as I was at how quickly word spread.

“Is September's Child the name of your coffee house?” a passerby asked while pointing to the stone-embedded name on the cable reel hanging on the brick wall. A crack from a fruit basket lamp shade had shined a beam of light on to the name. If a person could decipher the name on the cable reel through its jumble of urethaned stones, I would agree to speak with them. So, I shouted, “Yeah! September's Child is the name,” and then said to myself, ‘Hey! That’s a fantastic name for a coffee house!’ I stared at the cable reel as if to convince myself while wondering if it was the name the store had in mind all along. Having had enough human contact for the day, I shut the door, crashed back on the pillows and lit up a live one.

As if caressed by the very essence from all I created surrounding me, my eyelids submitted to the forces of gravity and all that had found its way into my respiratory system and brain as I thought back to what were to be, my final days at my corporate career of a lifetime: “Joe, you damn fool, you look like a werewolf when the full moon brings out his furry side! What’s goin’ on with you, ya dumb ass? And what’s with the earring? Ain’t no other hotshots ‘round here dress like that!” said Zack, my friend and manager of the entirety of the nighttime work crews during my erstwhile tenure back at the building maintenance company,

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as I tied my nascent ponytail back with a scrunchie, exposing what he was not the first to notice.

Hair is an awesome force within us that covers all existing surfaces if nothing's done to curb its growth. Perhaps, due to my ever-growing cynicism and shaggy dog look, the rest of the board of directors allowed me to stay on but moved me laterally within the company. My VP of Operations status had been salvaged only by way of my innate ability to negotiate just about anything, which led to my most recent managerial incarnation: Capitol Maintenance Corp's foremost jobsite trouble shooter!

I began making business calls on my Harley Sportster rather than in the company car. I figured as long as I wasn't taking a client to lunch, what the hell. Though my position within the hierarchy was being threatened by my recent actions, somehow, I didn't really give a shit! My appearance wasn't all that had been changing: Capitol, 'my company,' moved into newer, fancier digs. Big deal, the spirit of the corporation possessed a shiny new corpse. The top executives spared no expense giving themselves the plushest offices money could buy. Although my meteoric rise to upper management had made me preordained to hold a seat on the board, my new office was two floors below the boardroom, next to Zack's, next to the garages. Some price to pay for missing a few haircuts, shaves and oh yeah, those idiotic board meetings.

Every Friday night, Eighth Street in Greenwich Village filled from one end of the block to the next with motorcycles from far and wide. Unless your bike was a Harley, or an antique Indian, it was best to park your alien crotch rocket out of sight. Not intending to become victim to any unwritten anti-U.S. protocols, my compact Sportster sat safe and happily nestled between two all-American Hogs.

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The window of Bing's Bongs was stocked with roach clips from around the world, rolling papers from all over the country and hash pipes created from every material imaginable. I looked beyond all of that because; in the corner of the window there she was, a lovely Sterling silver lady. Her sinewy arms reached upward. Her delicate hands clasped the chain from which she hung. Her face bore a smile, though with the look of yearning. Her legs hung downward then crossed. Her feet flared into a one snort cup.

“Bing, I want that hope spoon; the silver one that’s shaped like a lady.”

“Don't you mean coke spoon, son?”

“Bing, lately, I have only hope.”

While Bing rang up my purchases, a John Pitre’ poster of a giant landmass grabbed my attention. I looked closer and saw that the entire body of land was comprised of fornicating groups, couples and the self-serving in every position imaginable. Their numbers were so great that they were falling into the sea. But that didn't seem to stop them. “Hey, son. Are you sure you didn't pose for that one?” I looked at Bing, and immediately back to the poster. He laughed and said, “No! not that one. Anyone could pose for all that.” When Bing pointed to a different Pitre’ poster, I shouted, “Holy shit!” upon seeing my face, beard and a well-earned look of despair. I was standing among remnants of what had been Manhattan’s Broadway wearing only a loincloth and a scowl while wielding a plumbing pipe as my sole means of defense.

Another John Pitre’ poster depicted the Israeli athletes who were slain at Munich earlier in the year, competing eternally in Olympic Games upon billowing clouds. The grandeur of the other

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posters aside; my eyes had become fixated on what was, by far, his most captivating work: An ancient warrior mounted upon a Pegasus-like stallion. The winged horse's hooves and the warrior's legs were snared by barbed vines reaching from the earth below and attaching themselves to him and his mount.

The rider's face was filled with desperation. His struggle to fly skyward was in vain. Wherever in the store I stood, he seemed to be pleading to me to set him free. The warrior held his other arm out to his comrades, flying upon their steeds toward the setting sun. Their hands held no weapons. A look in their eyes made it perfectly clear to me that their hearts were armed with the dream of better things. I hung the Pegasus poster on my office wall for the times when I'd close off to the reality of barbed vines and submit to thoughts of far better things.

Was my company Cadillac becoming jealous of my Sportster? While keeping bugs from splattering upon my teeth, it must have been putting them into my mind. Driving to a business call, my eyes would be on the road leading to my appointment, but the car would routinely take me to yet another junkyard. Not the kind of junkyard where Cadillacs might discover everlasting rest among their ancestral Cadillacs, but resting places for household and business trash.

The guards always let me in so I could walk around. Who could say no to a young starry-eyed werewolf in a suit driving a Caddy with a mind of its own? Once inside, I rolled up my pants and kicked off my shiny shoes and socks to get a down and dirty feel for the place while wandering among the rubble.

Like a graveyard, a serene silence prevails in junkyards. There's no hierarchy; no climbing to the top by pushing others to the bottom. Gravity alone defines the order of things. All that

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enter settle into their place among all others. Nothing is anything except what it became, junk! I'd imagine a value the refuse formerly had to its owners before attaining worthlessness. What had previously been treasure decomposed equally with what had been long ago deemed as trash.

Creaking cranes opened their steel jaws then deposited the most recently discarded to an ever-growing heap. Between the clatter of the newly departed falling to their resting places, there was a surreal musical ambiance. Among a frenetic sound, like never ending sonar pings, a white tornado of seagulls circled above the piles as if weaving an avenue to eternity. A gentle rain fell in random rhythm upon tin panels. Jets departing Newark Airport lent a rolling rumble as they faded into the clouds. I'd stand in the midst of the debris feeling no difference between us while sharing in the final dignity of the trash before me and beneath my feet.

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