



OMAR M'SAI
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I Can't Breathe

3 Different Stories

I remember the very first job I ever had – the first “paying” job. I was twelve years old. I saw a “help wanted” sign in a bakery shop around the corner from where I lived. So, I took the sign down and talked to the owner. It was 1958.

The owner was a gruff Irishman, but seemed like a nice enough person. He said he wanted somebody to come in after school when the bakery closed, to clean, to sweep, to mop, and whatever other chores he wanted to throw in. I assured him that I knew how to handle a mop, and proceeded to clean up this bakery.

At the end of my shift, I felt pretty confident that I had done an excellent job of sweeping, mopping, and cleaning. The owner had started drinking by this time and seemed only half-pleased with my work, but he grumbled and paid me.

The next day I showed up on time for my shift. The owner was nowhere around, but I knew where my supplies were so I went about sweeping and mopping the floors and cleaning up as I had the day before. Halfway through my shift, the owner, drunk as a sailor, came stumbling into the room where I was, cursing and complaining about what a terrible job I was doing. When I started arguing with him, he immediately accused me of being arrogant. He swore that he was going to teach me a lesson. He lunged at me and nearly caught me by the neck, but I was too quick for him, and he ended up falling on the floor in front of me.

I took advantage of this moment to run around him and out of the bakery. I can still hear him cursing at the top of his lungs and threatening to give me a real thrashing if he ever saw me again.

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Weekend at Rio Nido

This next story takes place in the summer of 1964. I was 18 years of age and working in a record store on Market Street in downtown San Francisco. On one weekend I went with a group of friends to a favorite recreational area known as Rio Nido. This little town, about 73 miles north of San Francisco, was a favorite summertime resort area, with boating, and camping, and lots of drinking, etc. I, along with two black male friends and three white female friends, were all heading up to Rio Nido for a day of boating, picnicking, etc.

The weather had been perfect, and as we emerged onto the beach from a spectacular boat ride up the Russian River, I looked up and noticed a crowd of teenagers coming down the stairs and running in our direction. These were all white kids, drunk and loud, and they seemed as if they were angry about something.

We were quickly surrounded by this bunch of angry and drunk white teenagers who seemed intent on starting a brawl with us. A thick tall kid stepped forward, looked me straight in the eye, and stated, "I heard you said something bad about my mother." He spat at me.

"No," I assured him. "I don't even know your mother," feeling myself at a loss for snappy dialogue.

The crowd was pressing in on us. I braced myself for what appeared to be an inevitable barrage of hits and kicks. Someone shouted, "Let's kill the niggers!" I assumed they were speaking about us....

Suddenly, from out of the blue, I heard a familiar sounding voice say "Omar...is that you?" "Yes," I screamed. "It's me, Omar," not really sure of who I was talking to.

Seconds later a familiar face appeared. It was a young man that I had sold records to, and we had discussed the top tunes of the day. "Jason? Is that you???"

"Damn..." Jason announced, almost in disappointment. "... them ain't no niggers.... that's just Omar..." We started edging towards the stairs. The crowd appeared dazed, confused.... they started mumbling to each other and the owner of the boats came over and started yelling at them. This lynch mob that had intended to do some real damage was now being dispersed by the boat owner who was threatening to call the cops.

We made it to our cars and slipped quietly out of town. No one spoke the entire trip back to San Francisco.

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In 1967 I met Murshid Sam. I was soon initiated by him and spent the next four years attending his classes, his dinners, and his lectures. We had many adventures together, stories that I will recount at another time.

I married and lived in Scotland for several years. On returning with my wife and daughter to the USA, I proceeded to pursue my acting career. I performed locally and managed to get a scholarship to the American Conservatory Theater (ACT). On graduating from ACT, I moved to Los Angeles in hopes of having a lucrative acting career like so many of my friends.

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One night in Hollywood... maybe it was 1978... I was visiting a friend, watching the Academy Awards. At the end of the evening, as I was making it out to my car, and just as I reached the car door, I noticed a squad car pulling up alongside of me. I didn't pay that much attention to the squad car until, as I went to slip into the front seat of my car, I was snatched by the back of my neck, thrown face down on the pavement in front of me, had a boot shoved into the back of

my neck, a gun drawn, cocked, and aimed at my head. A thick southern drawl assured me that if I moved, he would blow my effing brains out.

This was their way of introducing themselves to strangers.

After we ascertained that I had no warrants and I didn't fit the description of whoever might have committed some robberies in the area, I was let go. I was too shaken up to drive, so I went back to visit my friend, big Mike, who was a friend from ACT.

As I recounted to Mike what had happened to me, how I had a gun held to my head, been forced to lie face first on the asphalt, etc., Mike looked at me and stated, without hesitation, "Wow, I am sorry to hear what happened to you, but at least I am glad that they are watching the neighborhood."

That was the last time I spoke to big Mike.

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In coming years there would be more encounters.... some better, some worse.... but always tinged with a bit of drama. I might admit that, as an elder American, I am generally treated well by the police and by society in general.... but there is too often a thin layer of contempt lying just below the surface.

These are neither the worse stories or the best that I had while growing up in the United States, but there is one thing in common about all of these stories.... I manage to walk away from each of them, not everyone is so lucky.....

M'Sai 2020