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## **Are We There Yet**

*by Stephon Senegal*

I sit here. Puzzled by the way they describe me, or at least my people. I have always been uncomfortable with certain labels. The compulsory monikers that guide our daily. Equally perplexing is the modern scholar's assimilation. They do so easily, the Negro ones. Maybe they know something different from the books they read or the "battles" they fought. Maybe I simply need to read more. Nonetheless, those labels guide our dealings in the mundane and the perilous. In war and pandemic, those labels find permanence. Guiding sympathy and directing vehemence. There is something to these labels and marks. They are so ingrained, nearly indiscernible from, and now synonymous with. An unnerving judgement of a people hidden discretely in their lines of statutes. Catalogued in annals of twisted scripture and dubious regulation. Such is the case with race.

I sat there. On one of those trains, the underground city ones. Juggling with a loosened zipper on my tool bag. My tools are important. I am an artist. People gaze upon that simple little butter knife in my bag amongst all the other heavy gear and dismiss it. The assumption is: its placement is accidental. Maybe a stray from a hastily eaten lunch. Not the first choice if invited to a gunfight, but butter knives are unique things. Different handles and shapes, metals even, bronze, copper, iron, or not. More importantly, the grooves from one to the next differ quite drastically, microscopically speaking. Those little grooves on the tip take on purpose when moving and shaping clay. Rounded or sharpened tip, the grooves matter, a secret sauce.

Middle of the day, relatively sunny, a slight east coast chill. I stood as the train began to near the next station. Having addressed the loose zipper and secured my favored tool. A call comes through. The train is still in the tunnel, so the voice is somewhat muffled, choppy signal. I instruct the person on the other line to hold for a second. Reception should be restored soon. Glancing at the blue dry sky as the train surfaces, I peep back at my phone. Its mom. Her voice was worried. As she began to speak, I could hear the trepidation in her voice. The weather in Lafayette was rainy that day. This by itself was not surprising, but the severity for that time of year was. Louisiana had just got out of a dangerous hurricane season, so excessive flooding now might be considered abnormal. My childhood was littered with hurricanes. I remember enjoying them. Children are not always aware of how danger lulls and lurks. A plotting whirlwind. Announcing its presence but not its victim. Burdensome for those charged with my safety but I remember those nights fondly. My Grandma would be cooking. The house smelled like sausage and rice, thickly seasoned, strangely soothing. The darkness. You could barely, but the blue flame under the pot would show her grandeur just so. I am smiling now, as I smiled then. No electricity, only the pounding rain and wind, the clang in the pot. My mom would be close, somewhere in the kitchen, mostly at the table. She might be staring into the night or lending a hand when needed. Dimly lit by the aroma of burning wax. We would all talk, sharing our longings and compassions. Long nights navigating recycled romances, repeating trice told stories and weaving new ones. Things would get bad, but not that bad.

Today was different. Her sentences were rushed. You could hear her tears. I told her to calm down. I asked that she speak clearly so I could assess the situation. She began with a simple ominous statement, "Da water pass the carport". I felt her concern and even shared some, but could not show any. I needed to know the extent, the details of what they were facing. It was important to remain composed. The fact is, I was in the Bronx and they were in southern Louisiana. She called me though. Her fear was that the house would start to flood and they would have no way of getting out. As she peered outside, she noted that neither the streets nor the ditches were visible. In the background, my sister screamed and insisted that they get on the road immediately or they would get stuck. She began to cry, my mother yelled back. Distressed, she did not know what to do and she begged her daughter to stop crying so she could think. "Calm down mom", I asked her firmly and then again. She continued briefly, tearful, slighted angered, pause and then she did. After a series of questions, I was able to assess a couple of things. Even if the water went in, it would not continue to raise at the earlier rate. During her frantic declarations She had already mentioned that things had eased a little. The rain had been a slow continuous drizzle for a while now. I told her that she should stay. Simply, they would be better in a house with an inch of water than out in the streets with a couple yards and no cover. There were only two directions to go if you left the house and in both cases the terrain dips. "Mom, listen", I began as the crying in the background continued. I told her that regardless of how stressful things seemed that they should stay put and not attempt to drive. I told her I would call her in one hour to check on the water level and would determine next steps after that hour.

I stood, got off the train and began walking. A half hour had passed. The phone rang. I answered. She screamed into the phone frantically. I could hear her struggling with the door. In the backdrop, my sister shrieked. She mentioned that the truck had went into the ditch and the water was pass the steering wheel. I asked her which direction she turned. Frantically she yelled "left, left!". The phone went silent. As I stopped in the middle of the walkway that day, the noise of the city disappeared. My completed list of tasks before that moment and the ones still left washed away in the hush of contemplation. Those seconds were long, short for the passerby and yet intensely deep for me. I scrolled through to find the number for my uncle. In that moment, I knew that I could have called nearly anyone in my family and they each would have gone. Nonetheless, my consideration was not who would be willing as much as who could actually get to her. Uncle Tiger. As he is affectionately nicknamed, answered the phone. Calmly I said "Brother", "I need you". I explained the present situation, absent the backstory as there was no time to discuss what could have been. After getting an understanding of where they might be, we hung up and he immediately went after them. The next call was to the local police station, not because I thought they would do anything, but simply on the off chance they might. Called her phone twice more to confirm. Nothing. I began to walk again, the sound of the city returned. I understood that I had done what could be done, so I waited.

The screaming became too much for her and they decided to leave the house. They each grabbed what they considered important and left. The vehicle they were driving was a truck, so her rationale that they could get out made sense. As they exited the driveway, she turned left. The sobbing had become a whimper in those brief minutes before. For her the risk seemed worth a minute of peace. The road way was completely flooded as were the farm fields to the left and right. The height of the water obscured the location of the ditches that flanked the fields. As they drove down the first road, they both felt assured in their decision to leave. The water slushed again the door, a little pass the bottom at this point. Higher as they went further down the road. The carpet began to glisten. As the first turn neared another vehicle was coming toward them. Noticing the other car was smaller, she began to move over slightly as the turn started. She assumed that her vehicle being higher would allow her to go where the other vehicle could not. This lone assumption was correct. She allowed the other car to remain in the middle of the road as they both took the turn. Successful. They smiled, albeit briefly, her daughter's sniffing had waned even more. The first turn had caused the trajectory of the vehicle to be ever so slightly off the higher part of the road. There was no way to determine what was straight at that point. They continued to drive, but off center. A minute passed. Without warning, the first tire slipped off the road. Floating into the ditch. Frantically, she attempted to turn and get back onto the road. The front tire having not hit bottom yet began to drift the front of the car out further into the water, the attempted turn to get the car straight put the rear tire in the water as well. The passenger side went in.

The water is not rough. The car glides briefly on one side as it begins to sink. The rain is in no hurry. As the water begins to come into the car. My sister climbs over the middle and reaches for her mother pulling on her blouse. The phone is already in her hand as her daughter clasps her tightly. In that minute she calls. The car continues to float out and she utters one more scream before one side dips completely in and the hand holding the phone goes under. They begin to struggle to open the door. The pressure against the door has increased and gravity has made it a little heavier. She pushes once, it does not budge. "Baby help me" she says to her daughter. Her tears are hidden by the water. They push together, it opens, and the water begins to rush in. My mom gets out first. The water near her shoulders. Her daughter hesitates, neither can swim. My mom begins to slip into a calm resolve and speaks once more for her daughter to come. She steps off the ledge of the seat into her mother's arms. Her head dips briefly under. Slowly they wade to the center of the street where the water is above their waist. Out of the most immediate danger they begin their walk.

The rain is coming down. A slow drizzle at this point. The outside is quiet. There is no noise to drown out, save the occasional snuffle from my sister. Those streets are a known commodity. Most of the neighbors know each other by sight if not personally. The nearest family of color is approximately two miles from my mother's home, the vehicle went down a little over a mile from the house. In the near distance, my sister notices someone standing on their porch. About half a football field from where the truck had went in. They saw. My mother knows they saw. In that moment, she hopes. She hopes that today is different. They begin to motion toward the house and begin to wave. The woman on the porch goes inside. Forty or so seconds later, the woman reemerges. In that second, my mother sighs, relieved. Only a short walk ahead, safety. And then. A male walks onto the porch, a shotgun hanging off of his hip, he walks to sit beside his white wife or sibling. In that moment, my mother's lips tighten. She turns her gaze away and toward the road ahead. There will be no haven there.

As he nears the neighborhood where my mother lives, he notices the rise in water level. He also noticed there are no police vehicles in sight. He stops for a moment to consider, but only a moment. Tiger is a retired firefighter. He knows this game and understands rescue protocol and what he is doing is not it. En route to my mother, he calls a couple of his buddies from the station. They inform him that no trucks are going out in that direction. The water is too high. Rescuers understand that a key component of being a rescuer is to avoid having to get recused. I did not need Tiger to prove a thing. In that second, the roads told him that he could not and the experts told him that he should not. But he did. As he began to enter the neighborhood the water reached slightly past his door. He did not notice the wet carpet, why should he. I had already provided him with a suggested route based on the direction they turned when leaving the house. As he continued to drive, he began to hear the engine bubbling. Steady acceleration, slight pressure on the pedal. In situations like this, it is critical to keep the engine going. A pause could easily result in the vehicle becoming inoperable. The drive is slow. He scans the landscape constantly searching for any signs of them or maybe someone that could tell him if they saw anyone.

The walk was slow and difficult. She was recovering from major surgery and the pain was overbearing. Stopping was not an option however. She did not leave the house to save herself. She left to protect her child in the best way she knew how. She struggled, but her walk is. It simply was. They continued to walk in the direction of higher ground towards the main road. Before you reach the main road is the one family of color in this neighborhood. She does not know if they are there, but either way some form of safety for her daughter is that way. As they walk, another person surfaces from their home. The white male walks out, his pockets bulging. There is no handshake here. His head slowly went side to side in response to her muted appeal. His position understood, she continued her walk.

I called him because I knew he would not stop. Regardless of what obstacles lay ahead. As he cleared the first deep waters he began to get to a shallower portion of the road. He neared a turn. This turn would take him past the house of that other Black family. It would also take him directly down the road where I last heard from my mother. As he took the turn the water began to deepen again, its bordering ditches prowling. He continued. This was the road where the Black family lived. He could make out in the distance four bodies. He drove closer.

His phone rings. "Tiger", I uttered as I walked. My mother has just called from another phone. I instructed him that they should be standing in front of a house, white, a small chicken coop adjacent, forty yards from the mailbox, off the street he had turned on. He said he thought he could see them and would call me back shortly to confirm. As he drove closer, he could see that they were indeed out front with a Colored woman and another man who was holding my mother to help her keep balance. They were soaked and barely able to talk. He retrieved them and called once they had exited the flood area.

The whiteman's abhorrence is not organic, but an artifice born of fear. Half a millennium prior, he saw the children born. He noted that his most identifying features waned in the mix. An exchange in exoticism, quieted by the reality of sameness. Willful indulgences humbled by humanness and for some, a very real affection. The latter was discarded, not immediately, but slowly, a drizzle, whiteness eventually drowned in its fear. The dread of impermanence came for the Noah impersonators. That sameness was replaced by a promise of proximity for the Mulatto and passibility for the Octaroon. Our Cultures and identities were drowned in a monolith called Negro. My mother's proximity to whiteness allowed her some reprieve, but not that day. Nonetheless, I remember that afternoon for different reasons.

"Fix this", those were not her words, but this was her meaning. Lofty notions in their infancy require belief. In those minutes she believed, a kind of faith, she had expectations. Pop quiz. Our women demand their men's strength and our impossibility. She did not mean to test me that day. She meant to honor me. She meant to speak on the prowess of our family and my brothers. My uncles. The men who do not ask but instead do. I am humbled by them. They taught lessons with axe handles and swinging belts. Lessons without words. We were brought here against our will, but it was our implausible path that brought to fore our distinctive resolve. Our tribe is not Black, nor our nation Negro, but our will, our love...that is unique. It shapes. A specialized clay, gritty, a thick blackened crude. Unspoken and unmistakable. On that day though, my head tilted slightly back, my chin inched a little higher. I felt a fullness in my belly, not because of blud from a hunt or potatoes from the field, but wholeness. A quiet thud in the gut and throat....an indescribable recognition that our walk, our fight...is undisputable.