

I Ain't Black and You Ain't White

By Bill Russo

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His name was Jimmy but most folks in the Boston area usually just called him 'the big man.'

He spread 320 pounds over a frame of six feet and two inches. Although he did not play 'nose tackle' for the New England Patriots, he certainly looked as though he could.

Flashing a watermelon smile that ran from ear to ear, he was gentle most of the time, unless you called him an African American.

"I have never been to Africa - but I am an American," he'd say in a quiet voice that sounded like the distant, first rumble of a thunder storm. He spoke in a way that assured you that you didn't want the storm to get any closer.

We met at work; both being out of our regular jobs. I walked a picket line by day. My union had struck the Ironworks where I was employed, after the company tried to reduce our pay and take away a few holidays, including Veterans Day.

The 'Big Man' was on lay-off from his bus driving job in the Boston transit system.

We took temporary jobs as 'order pickers' in a mail order clothing company warehouse. Random circumstances that would prove fortuitous for me paired the two of us together - the giant dark-skinned man and the short, graying light-skinned man.

Each day we were given a long list of merchandise that had been ordered by customers, which had to be physically retrieved from various locations in the four-floor, sprawling warehouse of one million square feet.

Slinging old time, canvas paperboy delivery bags over our shoulders, Jimmy

and I would scamper up and down the floors like ants on a hill, picking our orders and delivering them to a conveyor belt that sent them on to the packing department.

We liked each other immediately. Making the work into a friendly challenge, we raced to the item locations as fast as possible, stuffing our newspaper bags full, far more quickly than any of the other workers.

We carried two bags each, draped crosswise over our shoulders, so that we could retrieve twice as many items as the 'pickers' who used only one.

After building an extravagant lead over the rest of the crew, we would frequently retire to the darkest corner of the highest floor and sit down for ten or fifteen minutes to talk about life and such.

"Hey 'Bee', why do you think there's racial problems today?" - Jimmy asked me during one of our early chats. He had nick-named me 'Bee', because 'B' it's the first letter of my name - Brad.

"It is all about color," he continued, without waiting for a response. "Some white people don't like black people. You know what I mean?"

"Course I do Jimmy. Don't I see it every day? And don't I see too that some black people don't like white people?"

"That ain't it Bee. Everybody's wrong. I ain't black and you ain't white! Come on over to the stock racks where the light is strong. I want to show you how the whole world has got this thing all fouled up."

We walked to a massive structure of steel bars configured into racks for storage of clothing cartons. Long rows of tilted rolling racks held thousands of cases of various items of apparel. The boxes were fed into the system from the back. Gravity slid them down the rollers to the front, as needed.

Jimmy walked to a location that contained a line of cartons of ladies' blouses.

From his order picking sheet, he noted that he needed to take 14 pieces of the item. There were only three left in the lead box. He took the three, and then tossed the empty box on a conveyor belt leading to a cardboard collector.

The next case slid down into the front position. Deftly, Jimmy fingered open his box-cutter, cut away the top of the fresh case, and took 11 more blouses to complete his order.

He held up one of the blouses for me to look at.

"What's that say Bee?"

"It says 'Alfani handkerchief-hem women's Blouse, size 10'," I replied.

"The color Bee! What does it say for the color?"

"It says black Jim. Black."

"Okay Bee. It says black. Now watch this. I am going to put this black blouse on my black arm. Now what do you see?"

"I see you are wearing a short sleeve shirt and that you have a black blouse draped over your bare arm. That's it. That's all I see."

"The color Bee! The blouse is black but it does not look the same as my arm. My arm is not black, it is brown. So, the point is, I am not black. I am brown."

I wasn't really sure where my big pal was going with the conversation but he was animated, flushed, and excited; so I just watched and didn't say anything for a while.

Jimmy looked at his order sheet and went to another clothing location. He pulled six blouses of a different color from a carton, stuffed five of them in his newspaper delivery bag and waved the sixth one in my face.

"What color is this, Bee?"

"The label says it's white Jim."

"That's right my friend. The label says it is white. Now I am going to put this on your arm and let's see if the color of this blouse matches your arm."

Jimmy slung the plastic wrapped blouse over my bare, outstretched arm and flashed a broad crescent smile.

"No match! Do you see what I am saying, Bee? You are not white. That blouse is white. A piece of paper is white. You are not. You are kind of orange. Perhaps I could call you a light brown when you have a summer tan, but for sure, you are not white."

And so it was that on that day, my whole idea of the color of people and of race, changed. Jimmy was right. There are no black people and there are no white people. People are just different shades of the same color.

I was either orange or perhaps sometimes summer-brown, while Jim was medium to dark brown.

The whole color thing didn't matter to me anyway. I always thought that I could like or dislike anybody regardless of race - but I had thought in terms of race. I did used to think that there were 'black people' and there were 'white people'.

Over the months that we worked together, Jim and I became fast friends and we called each-other brother.

'Brother' was not a term that the 'Big Man' used often or loosely - as a pair of unfortunate 'gentlemen' were soon to find out.

During the time Jimmy and I were employed, business at the warehouse was bustling. The company, which sold discount women's fashions by mail order, was having its best year.

They usually had annual revenues of about 700 million dollars, but were on pace for their first billion dollar year.

A pre-Christmas rush in early October brought in so many orders that the company was forced to hire hundreds of additional temporary workers to try to stay on schedule.

The labor market in Massachusetts was tight at the time and it was difficult for the firm to hire enough help. When the supply of day workers from firms like Kelly Services and similar employment agencies dried up: in desperation, the company turned to questionable sources.

Busloads of workers were brought in. One employment group specialized in 'under-age' Asian children. Another brought in scores of illegal immigrants from Mexico.

Watchdog groups acted quickly and routed out the more flagrant abuses of the dubious 'employment agencies', but there remained a group of a hundred or so people who would look much more at home on a wanted poster, than in a place of business.

By this time, Jimmy and I had each been made a 'Lead Operator' which was a higher paying position than order-picker, one level below a supervisor.

Our industriousness had been noticed by upper management, and when we were promoted one of the managers said that the main reason we got our raise and our new job was because they noticed that we were 'Russian Twins'.

"What do you mean by calling us Russian," thundered Jimmy. "I don't mind being called Bee's twin; but I am an American and I don't..."

"Hold on Big Man," laughed the 'Process Manager'. "All us managers call you guys the Russian twins because of the way you are always rushing about when you do your work. We are not calling you the Russian twins like the country - we are saying 'The Rushing Twins' meaning fast workers.

"That's okay then," Jimmy allowed. "You are right. That's what we are. You can call us 'The Rushin' Twins.'"

The main part of our new job as 'lead operators' was to be in charge of the questionable daily workers. The ones that did little actual work, spending way too much time in the bathroom, and sometimes coming back smelling of liquor after the thirty minute lunch break. The company was so busy, that they were willing to overlook almost anything just to get more bodies on board.

When Jimmy and I began working at the warehouse, there were about 1,000 employees. At the height of the rush that Christmas, there were more than 2,500 on the payroll.

The people we were in charge of had to write their names on a sign-in sheet at the beginning of the day. The agency that sent them was paid a set figure by the company, based on the number of names on the sign-in sheet. At the end of the week the company paid the agency and the agency paid the workers.

"Hey Jimmy. I am pretty sure that I saw a couple of guys signing in twice."

"I don't know Bee," he responded, "It's just their first day and maybe some of them were confused. We'll watch them more closely tomorrow."

The next day we did scrutinize them much more carefully and we were positive that at least ten of the men had signed in and then turned around and got in line a second time and signed in under a different name.

By the third day we had a head count of 100 men and a signature count of 115. That meant that the company was paying for 115 workers but was only getting 100.

None of the temporary workers spoke English and we didn't speak a word of their language.

We brought our information to management and for two days the company investigated the situation, hiring bilingual private detectives to sort the thing out.

It was finally determined that their employment agency was attempting to make extra money by instructing some of the men to sign in twice.

Ultimately, the whole agency and all of its workers were terminated. Jimmy and I were given a bonus of \$200 and a paid day off!

We were starting to enjoy being 'lead operators', but when we returned from our day off, we encountered a whole new crop of temporary workers who looked even scarier than the batch that was fired!

We were told to see Tommy Jones, the manager of the stock department, who informed us that he had just received eight semi-trailers loaded to the gills.

“We gotta get these trailers unloaded and their contents put into 'picking' locations by the end of our shift,” said the manager.

"Tommy, that's about 4,000 cartons that we will have to unload. Besides that, we'll also have to cut off the tops of the boxes so that the order pickers can take their items from open cases," I complained.

"And we have to traipse all over the four floors of the warehouse to put those cases away," added Jimmy. "How many guys are we going to have?"

"I will give you 10 of those new temps that we got today."

"Tom, it can't be done. Even experienced stock people would have trouble getting this job completed," I reminded him.

"We got no choice boys. These are back-orders. The customers have been waiting for over a week for these items to be shipped. They have to be in the stock locations by the end of the second shift today. The third shift will pick

the orders and they will be packed by tomorrow's first shift. This job has been given to us by none other than the President of the company himself. Get it done!"

"Give us some more guys!" we said in unison.

"Can't! We are undermanned everywhere. Your guys are waiting for you by the unloading docks. Get going!"

We departed in a huff, leaving Mr. Tommy Jones to mull over a selection of the finest profanity we were able to muster on short notice.

Jimmy cast a hard gaze over the crop of new guys.

"They look like Hell's Angels rejects," he whispered to me. "Each man has a grubby three day growth of beard, greasy hair down to the shoulders, earrings, a dirty shirt, ragged sneakers and torn dungarees."

"And what's with their arms Jim? Every one of 'em has so many ugly tattoos that you can't even see the skin. It looks like they've got gangrene from the wrist to the shoulder!"

"The last time I saw tattoos as horrible as those, was in a rat trap house near the Boston Naval Shipyard where some old guy with dirty needles was inking up drunken sailors on shore leave," Jimmy added.

"Well the last time I saw tattoos that bad was in the 'freak show' at the Brockton Fair," I added. "They had a guy barking out in front of a tent. He was touting an act he called 'Lydia the beautiful tattooed Lady'. For 25 cents you could go in and look at Lydia. The barker said that on Lydia's body, you'd see Paris, you'd see France, but you would not see Lydia's underpants, cause she wasn't wearing any!"

"That sounds interesting Bee. Did you go in and see her?"

"Yes I did Jimmy. Yes, I did! And boy was it bad! First off, she was old

enough to be the grandmother of my grandfather. The ink was so old that it must have come from a quill! All the artwork had run together and you couldn't tell the pictures from the liver spots!"

"Tattoos are illegal in Massachusetts," Jim remembered, so can these guys even work here?"

"These guys themselves are probably illegal Jimmy. But I guess we got no choice but to try and get our work done. Do you want to take the stock floors or be in charge of unloading the trucks?"

Jim said he'd rather work on the stock floors so I took six of the 'temps' to begin the unloading and cutting the tops off the boxes.

Jimmy took charge of the other four and put one man on each floor to put the boxes into the stock racks. An hour into the shift, at 4:30 P.M., things were going well. My crew was making rapid progress unloading the first truck. The forklift operators took the pallets of cartons that we built and sent them to the proper floors where Jimmy's guys were making excellent time inserting them into the racks.

We had a fifteen minute break at six o'clock and afterwards the crew went back to work in a timely manner and continued their surprisingly good job performance.

When they came back at 8:30 after a thirty minute break, things were different. Their dinner break consisted of a liquid lunch in the parking lot. One of the crew bragged to another that he had two beers and five shots in twenty minutes while sitting in the bus that brought the workers.

The four guys that were supposed to be unloading trucks, made a bed for themselves out of the cartons they were unloading and laid down to take a nap.

The two men who were supposed to be cutting the tops of the cartons began stacking boxes brick-like until they had built a make-shift table. Then they

sat down on some boxes and began a card game.

"Okay men; enough of that. Get back to work or punch out." I advised them.

"Okay Whitey, We'll punch out alright," growled one of them. "We'll punch you out," he threatened.

Both guys picked up their box-cutters and got up, advancing on me with the knives in attack position.

"Knock off the bull shit and get back to work!" I shouted, with my anger somehow supplanting the fear that I should have been feeling.

"Stop now and GET BACK TO WORK OR GET OUT!", I said and raised myself up to my full height of five feet and seven and one quarter inches.

The two men kept marching forward; glaring at me, their mustaches curling like ominous exclamation points on their sneering mouths.

They weren't huge men, but they were bigger than me; and still they kept creeping towards me waving the razor sharp box knives in the air.

Beginning to realize the bad spot I was in, I tried again...."Cut the crap and get back to work right now or else!" I warned them, in as deep and commanding voice as I could muster.

Even before I finished shouting, they dropped their hands to their sides and wheeled about. Quickly and without a word they went back to their job, leaving me a little bit shaken but proud of myself for my unarmed stand against two men with knives.

I turned around to make a quick check of the stock floors and noticed Jimmy, about 10 feet behind me. He had a box knife in each hand.

It soon became apparent that what had stopped the attack on me, was not my own actions - but Jimmy standing silently while brandishing a pair of box

cutters.

"It doesn't matter that I was there to back you up Bee," Jimmy said. "What matters is that you stood up to them. That word will get around. You won't have any more trouble with anybody in here after tonight."

Jim was right. I never did have trouble ever again with any workers of any nationality. And that temporary warehouse job I took? It's more than 20 years now that I have been working there temporarily.

Fifteen years Jimmy had, before he left us. He didn't quit. He lost his life in what should have been the prime of it.

It's hard to believe anything could ever have physically hurt my huge friend. But in the end he was struck down by something so small that it takes many thousands of them to make an inch - a blood cell.

Jim succumbed to Sickle Cell disease, an inherited disorder of the blood cells that primarily affects people from Africa or those living in other countries who are of African origin.

I miss Jim a lot, most of all when we get new temporary workers. I especially like it when I get a group of young black men and women.

Sometimes I catch them saying something about the 'white' boss.

"Who you calling 'white'?" - I say to the whole group in general.

They look at me with puzzled expressions. Their mouths drop open when I appropriate Jimmy's old speech and say.....

"I ain't white and you ain't black. I want you guys and ladies to walk over to that first clothing rack and I am going to teach you something about color."

I reach into a box of ladies blouses and take one out and drape it over my arm.

“What color is that blouse?”

They all answer together -“White.”

“That's right,” I tell them. “Now is that blouse the same color as my arm?”

“No. Your arm is kinda orange,” replies one of the taller young men.

“Yes and in the summer time it gets a little brown.”

After I selected a black garment and draped it over the tall youth's arm, the entire group was smiling and I knew that Jimmy's old routine had won them over.

I concluded with: “A wise man, a friend of mine, once told me that among people, there is no black or white – only different shades.....”

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The age of 65 isn't creeping up on me...it's leaping up. I have only a few months left before retirement. I really haven't done much with my life and I don't feel like I have accomplished much. Lately I have been feeling pretty low. But I overheard something that changed everything.

Last night at work, I saw a ‘Lead Operator’ named John Whipple training a group of temporary employees. John is a brown man. He was put in charge of a group of 'white' workers.

When I saw him putting a black blouse on his arm and later a white garment on the workers arms, I was gratified to see everybody smiling and nodding approval when John spoke his final words, “A wise man, a friend of mine, once told me that among people, there is no black or white – only different shades.....”

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Perhaps, in our small way, Jimmy and I did make a difference.

The End

Bill Russo, retired on Cape Cod, was educated in Boston at the Huntington School and at Gram College in Kenmore Square. He was editor of several newspapers in Massachusetts as well as a former disc jockey, news writer/presenter, and broadcaster for various outlets in New England.

His sighting of a swamp creature just before the turn of the century, led to appearances in the Bridgewater Triangle Documentary Film, America's Bermuda Triangle, and on Destination America's Monsters and Mysteries series.

In addition to his radio and newspaper work, he held management positions in logistics and warehousing as well as a stint as an ironworker and President of Boston Local 501 of the Shopmen's Ironworkers Union.

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