

THEY HAD TO MEET IN NEW YORK  
by Dr. Louis D. Mitchell

If you have a taste for the fact that people need each other, that the need is more often than not our means of trying to bring order out of chaos, something that happened to young Melvin Jacobs Freeman will interest you. The young man from a little town in the South--Whiteville in Columbus County, North Carolina--experienced a particular chaos, which is an extension of an idea into its own imperfection, and we shall always wonder how it affected him. Let us explain.

It was a strange feeling that fell over young Melvin Jacobs Freeman when he arrived in New York City one Friday morning in autumn. Mel, as his family and friends--who were generally his relatives back in North Carolina--used to call him, had a random meeting, though some might have called it an act of chance, with George Mason whom they called Baff.

Mel had been passing long hours in a Greyhound bus in something of a half comatose state of mind. The elderly heavy set woman next to him seated on the aisle was going to New York City to visit her sister's grandchildren. She was from Fayetteville, not far from Mel's home in Columbus County. Mel could not quite understand the details of the woman's adventures since she didn't know all of the children's names, none of their ages, and they were really the children of the lady's sister's

second husband, except for five of them. Mel remained baffled by the entire idea from the beginning to the end of their extensive conversation. In truth, from Washington, D.C., where they met and became fast sitting partners, to New York City was one long monologue after another in which the history and future of this fat woman's family was divulged. Mel was glad to have rid himself of her in New York.

At Port Authority bus terminal, they parted without a single word of goodbye from the portly woman. She had seen six little children waiving at her from the distance and dashed off to greet them. Mel stood by himself rather awkwardly pulling at a loose button on his jacket. It was then that he met George Mason, or Baff. It all seemed accidental to Mel. It would have been intended if the people were like they were in Whiteville, friendly, kind, and helpful. Mel looked up. It seemed to him that the man who stood in front of him was almost seven feet tall. It might have been that Mel himself was only slightly over five feet. The man had one of those bleak pallid complexions which would have been almost reddish in the South where some fair skins react to the blazing heat of the sun. Mel looked up at him again. His dark eyes seemed unnaturally small at such a distance. He was so startled by this man's height and size that he almost magnetically bumped into him. He muttered an almost self-conscious apology. "I beg your pardon," he drawled. Mel immediately gained his composure and walked away. He looked over his left shoulder and was certain that he was being followed.



For the past nineteen years of his life, Melvin Jacobs Freeman had not had the easiest of lives back home in Columbus County. It might have been more correct to say that things have never gone well for this short wirey young man with curly dark hair, hazel eyes, and an olive complexion. His memories were of ridicule and constant advice about how to improve himself. "Don' worry, honey," Miss Lolley would say down at St. James Baptist Church or up at Rehobeth when he rode up there for service, "someday things will be mighty diff'rnt when ya gits yo' growth, when ya becomes a man like the res' of them thar ol' Freemans you's relation of. Ah sees ya go ta church right nice like, nothin' like yo' ol' Uncle Rossie Mitchell, no nothin' like yo' sorry ol' Aunt Lucy Spaulding neither. Ya ain't very handsome, son, but ya comes by that right natural like. Your ol' Momma ain't never won no beauty contes' nohow, and your ol' Poppa was not only the sorriest rascal in Columbus County, he would'a won a competition fur bein' the ugliest and the meanest man in th' whole State. Sure would'a, son. But ya knows ya cain't he'p yo' kinfolks. Ya couldn't he'p bein' that double-dealin' sorry Daws Freeman's oldes' son if ya'd tried."

"Come on, little boy," Aunt Carrie Spaulding would say as she, who was short herself, would bend over and pinch his left cheek, "Son, ya ain't so very bad. Lawd knows, you's got ta grow some. The Lawd's too good ta let you stay this height when ya becomes a man. It jes' won' be right on no account. No sirree. You cain't he'p it 'cause you's got that ol' Spaulding

chin. Ya gits it from yo' grandpa Uncle Richard Spaulding who done lef' these parts down here ta go up thar in New York ta join sin and corruption, and gamblin' and drinkin' and loose women, and sleepin' all day, and not workin', and gittin' on Welfare, and all them thar other ways that them that folks up thar does. Honey, it's a sin befo' the Lawd the way our folks goes ta seed when they gits up thar and 'way from our good churches such as Sandy Plains an' St. James, an' Rehobeth. Ah mus' admit that we's got some sorry ones here that don' go ta the Lawd's house on Sunday, or fur prayer meetin', or for no times never. But them up thar in New York City might git off ta some one a' th' few houses a' God up thar in th' North. Honey, Ah thinks you's made a' better stuff than that, sho' do. Ya gits off ta church accordin' ta m' little book a' other people's sins. Miss Lolley does approve of yo', son, but she's done told me that she worried all 'bout yo' size and yo' teeney height. Ya cain't even reach yo' Momma's kitchen cabinets, and Lawd knows how yo' father has complained how ya cain't he'p him when th' men and boys are workin' 'bout th' house or in th' fields. You's jes' too weak and puny like. Ain't it a shame, such a shame, Lawd have mercy, child, you's got ta have a place sommers here on this earth a' ours."

Mel's mother would pat her little oldest child on the head sometimes, try to console him, and then explain why the teachers at Farmer's Union High School would not mean what they said about his being the smallest boy they had ever graduated from that



school in many a year. Joyce Freeman would then go into the next room, close the door, and cry about having produced such a peculiar child.

When Mel was twelve years old, his father demanded that he stay home from school very often to help with the crops. The Freemans were poor, and their land was not the best in Columbus County. In those days children were borne to help till the fields, feed the animals, and help with the chores in general. Mel was trying to stop Milly the old mule from rubbing its side against the house. It was the wall of the room where his little brother, Georgey, was sleeping. Milly turned on Mel and kicked him severely. From that day on, the boy limped when he walked and never seemed to grow much more. His right knee was never the same as those who could run and catch and ride and hunt. At his father's funeral up at Rehobeth Church, Mel decided to leave Columbus County and go forth to New York City to try his fortunes there. He was all of eighteen then.

Pete Young, Ronnie Spaulding, and Callie Moore, his one and only sweetheart, waited with him at the bus station. "We thinks yo' doin' th' right thing," Ronnie said as if he were the spokesman. "Don' furget ta write an' send us yo' address and telephone number when yo' gits settled," said Callie with feminine concern. "We'll be thinkin' all 'bout ya," added Pete, "but we are yo' friends an' fam'ly an' we have ta stay ta keep th' homefires burnin' somehow."

The large bus approached and the scents of autumn were every-

where under the autumn skies of Columbus County. Mel looked up and shaded his eyes from the radiant sunlight and thought deeply and plaintively as he scanned the flat colorful land of his birth and ancestors. It was this soil that produced him and now he was leaving it, leaving it for something new and perhaps never to see it again.

Callie kissed Mel before he mounted the bus. She was the last to say goodbye. She handed him a package and said, "It's a present from us. We don' want ya ever to forgit us back here. Remember us when ya uses it."

The bus slowly moved northward, and Mel thought of all that had happened to him so far and wondered about what would be next in this saga of peculiarly unfolding events that had so far made up his life's history. Before the hefty woman got on at Washington, Mel had already opened his well-wrapped package. He knew that Callie must have done it. She was always good at Christmas time when package-wrapping was in order. He pulled out of a beautiful cardboard box a richly decorated black wallet. He smelled it and concluded that it had to be leather, pure leather at that. On the upper side it had brilliantly tooled the words, "Whiteville, North Carolina." Mel was grateful, of course, but it was, he thought, one of the ugliest wallets he had ever seen in his entire short life. Besides, it was not the one he had seen just last week in the Main Street shop when he was looking for things to take with him. He was with Callie, and maybe she did not quite get his hint. Perhaps his present feeling was



mixed with a sense of disappointment in not finally getting that beautiful piece of Italian leather he had picked up in his hands so covetously that afternoon. He knew he ought to have bought it then, but thought it was too expensive. Well, he was stuck with what he had and there was no changing that. Every time he had to pay for something, he would always have to face that ugliest of ugly wallets. It would always read, "Whiteville, North Carolina," words about a place he intrinsically hated. He would, in this way, always be reminded of his past. But then, he thought at moments that it was also a reminder of a most kind gesture from his loyal friends and family at the bus station, who sincerely came to wish him well on his journey into a new life.

Mel took out his old wallet while concluding that it was certainly time to get a new one anyway. He consoled himself a bit as he transferred his one hundred dollar bill. He kept nothing else from the old wallet. He was about to begin his new, his real life, the life that people would remember him for. There was no need for any old identification. He would be going into a city where there were many kinds of people, black and white, rich and poor, kind and rough, and tall and short. He would find his place among them all and lose his identity of being small and lame.

He saw New York for the first time at night. It was beautifully awesome, dazzling, flickering, and bejeweled with exciting colors of every variety. They all sparkled above and among buildings that stood immovable, stark as giants with moon beams

on their faces. "Here it all is," he said looking about him, "and, here I am." He smiled from ear to ear but stopped smiling when he reached the Port Authority bus terminal waiting room. He had already bumped into that tall man. He had already noticed that the giant was following him. He was not sure, but he was reasonably certain. The waiting room was wide and high, filled with echoes of moaning people and the rhythmic sound of gushing water from restrooms. People floated by him like boats back on Lake Waccamaw. Others sat slumped over books or newspapers, or over tightly clutched bags, almost asleep, surely oblivious to the world that rushed by them. Telephones tinkled as people called loved ones or business places or restaurants for reservations, or hotels for sleeping quarters. Others called their families or lewd loves for some sort of polluted joy to pass the boring hours away in lonely affection. People here were going places, although he could not tell where, or they were waiting to go somewhere. They had come here from other places, and like the long roads that striped America, they had met here at this crossroads of a million private lives. It was here that the unwanted met the purposeful, the great met the small, the big met the little.

Mel stood still in the middle of this gothic structure, lost in its spacious expanse and heights. It was at this very moment that a voice said from above in a surprisingly friendly manner, "Let me help you with that bag. It does seem to be big and heavy for someone your size." Suddenly Mel looked up, and as rapidly



as he turned his head towards the voice, his bag was snatched from his grasp and the thief was disappearing into the distance soon to join the Eighth Avenue crowd. It had all come upon him and had happened as fast as a summer storm back in Columbus County. "Help!" Mel screamed. "Help, help, help, Police, Police!" he shouted, but to no avail.

Across the room someone was beckoning him and grinning at the same time. It was that same tall man who looked so dangerous at a distance. A vision of the calm and peace of Whiteville crossed Mel's mind at this moment, and he wondered if he had made the right decision after all. The placid grace was imposing as he saw fields, and houses, and trees, and streams, and plenty of food everywhere, and lots of tobacco. But all of these sweet visions before the continuing onrush of moaning and the rush of a busy, uncaring bus terminal where people met only for a moment in order to part. The hum of the contrapuntal mixture of human voices and mechanical movements washed over everything, and Mel was truly frightened by the new experience. He wondered if this was worth his escape from his childhood miseries and his continual reminders of them. He knew that people never forget other people's frailties, but there seemed to be no consolation in being where people did not know his defects.

He decided to leave the waiting room, concluding that he would never see that suitcase again. The neon lights of a large coffee shop attracted him as he crossed the floor and went to the north side of the station. He darted in and out of the tide

of people, which flowed in all directions. He moved as rapidly as he could, trying to rid himself of that tall man who still seemed to be following him. He wondered if people always followed other people in this huge city. He thought that people would hardly have enough energy to find their destinations here in New York, much less try and follow someone else.

As Mel neared the coffeeshop, he could see through the glass windows that stretched the whole length of the store. He could see several stools lined up along the counter like soldiers standing in rows, waiting for drill. He knew that if he could only get inside he would be safe, at least for the moment. It was an inviting sanctuary. The noise faded as Mel smothered his face in his arms on the counter. The tall man that followed him was apparently lost. He felt secure for the first time since getting off the bus.

"Get out, get out!" Mel abruptly lifted his head and caught sight of a large man who stood behind the counter in front of him. "Get out of here, Goddammit, you can't sleep here. Go take your drunk little body somewhere else. This place is for eating and not sleeping."

Mel did not know what to say. His head was spinning now. He stammered and finally managed to ask for a cup of coffee. The counterman mumbled something in another language--Mel couldn't understand it--and moved towards the end of the store to wait on someone else. Mel looked around and saw in the distance through the glass that same tall man approaching him. Mel thought he saw



a look of triumph on his thin face. A wide grin gathered around those dark small eyes. He opened the door, and the smile increased as he walked into his trap. The tall man sat down next to Mel. "Everyone of us has a guardian angel, young feller," said George Mason as his grin turned into a sardonic chuckle. "I'm yours, or don't you know that by now?"

The counterman returned and slid a cup of coffee towards Mel. He turned to the new companion of the young man from the South, and said, "Hello there, Georgie, what do ya want?"

"My name is Baff," the tall fellow replied. "It seems hard for you Puerto Rican guys to say it right. Only my mother calls me George, and sometimes she gives me the full works by saying, 'George F. Mason.' My friends, like you and this little guy next to me, ought to call me Baff."

"Well, hello, Baff, then," said the counterman with some effort, "what do you want? Carrumba, you don't change."

"Coffee," said Baff.

"Right, you got it," replied the counterman. He turned towards Mel and said, "That'll be fifty cents."

Mel snapped his hand to his hip pocket in order to prove he was no drunk and that he could pay. "Forget it," said Baff placing his hand on Mel's shoulder. He pushed some coins across the counter, looked down at Mel, and said somewhat sarcastically, "This one's on me."

"I couldn't accept that," Mel said, a bit startled.

"You will," Baff rejoined. The counterman came back again,

took the money and re-filled Mel's cup. A brief silence ensued which seemed like a year, but Mel kept his composure, wondering what was to transpire next. After some sips and slumps and playings with spoon and napkin, Baff turned to Mel and said, "You are obviously from out of town. Your accent even sounds a little southern. Am I right?" he questioned.

"Well, yes you're right. I guess it's easy to tell."

"And what may I ask do they call you?" asked Baff.

"They call me Mel," he almost exploded with the small measure of concern suddenly showed him, "although my name is Melvin." His voice trailed away as his words sounded somewhat childish. His spontaneous enthusiasm embarrassed him.

"Well, well, well," and then another well, said Baff. "I think that this meeting just had to happen. We were made for each other. Just look at us. I'm from New York City, and you're from out of town from the South. I'm tall and you're short. Opposites attract. I was here waiting for you."

"I have to go now," said Mel nervously, "I have things to do."

"Stay where you are, feller, there's no telling what might happen," said Baff. "You might be knocked over out there with all them rushin' people. Besides, you've got 'out of town' written all over you." Then there was silence again as Baff waited for his words to take effect. "You are now looking at a man, a man of some experience, a man who knows, a real man who knows about these things."



"Say, Baff, come on, come on, it's about time," the counterman said.

"Pipe down, will you," Baff replied. "I want to talk to my new friend from out of town. He's small and has to learn how to handle himself in this big, bad city."

"Come on, Baff, I gotta get out of here. My wife wants some Puerto Rican coffee, and I've got a long ride on the subway after that," urged the counterman.

"Well, I know you've left a lot of dishes back there for me to wash. You always do that to me, every time I relieve you, Jose. I get tired of it too." Baff then stood up with one menacing finger down by his side. He seemed to rise forever beside Mel's seat. He dwarfed the North Carolinian, appearing like some grand giant beside some pygmy, like Goliath over David. The tableau was ominous. Baff's thick arm extended and Mel shuddered as it encircled his shoulders. There was nowhere to run. He winced as the arm passed over his body. He felt weak all over, overpowered by a mightier force than he had ever known.

"Take it easy," Baff said. It seemed to be a threat shrouded by words of kindness. "It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you."

Mel could smell the large man's overcoat, filled with the odors of distress, of tobacco, of stale perfume, of sweat, and fatigue. "You little doll, you little rag doll," Baff whispered. "You need to be protected, that's all."

He moved Mel from left to right, forcing him to sit straight,

forcing the positions of his arms and legs. "Like that and like this," he said as he pushed and pulled Mel about as if mending a puppet's limbs after a sudden fall. Baff then stepped back and looked at his prey. Mel took a deep cool breath from the release, and then relaxed. Baff carefully examined his work. "There you are, there you go," he said triumphantly. "Now you look all right, now you don't look like someone who's just asking for it."

For the first time since his arrival in New York City, Mel smiled. In fact, he grinned somewhat happily. "You see," Baff said very proudly after looking his captive over, "you feel more at home already."

"I sure do," Mel drawled.

"Ain't you lucky and glad you met me?" Baff asked, not expecting an answer.

"I sure am," Mel replied.

"Well, now that's over, come on, Baff, and put on your apron and let me get out of here and go home. You've always got something to say. You can't let people alone," said the counterman, Jose.

"Why don't you shut up," Baff said, "and mind your own business. No one asked for your two cents. I've just met a new friend and you have to interfere. Another remark like that one, and I'll serve somebody your blood as katsup on a hamburger."

"You can wipe it off your own apron first. It'll be too hot to hold." rejoined the counterman. He walked to the opposite end of the counter, sat down, and rested as though finished for the day.



"Time to go," Mel snapped with renewed confidence. He jumped down off the stool. "Thanks a lot for the coffee. Much obliged," he drawled with a smile.

"No trouble at all, kid, no trouble at all," Baff waved perfunctorily. "See you around, see you around in the highways and byways of New York City."

"Sure enough," Mel said happily. "I'll be seein' you, I hope. Glad to have met you," he lied. Mel walked away passing through the large glass door and into the distance towards Ninth Avenue, not really sure of his directions. He only knew that he had to put distance between him and Baff.

Baff turned to the counterman and shook his large grayish blond head. "nobody but nobody ever learns. I don't get it," he said as he moved in back of the counter. And then with a deliberate and well-practiced gesture, he pulled from his large coat pocket a brand new black leather wallet. He turned it over in his hands and glanced through its contents. He lookēd at the other counterman, smiled, and read, "'Whiteville, North Carolina.' I must remember to thank that hicktown someday for such a prize."

Mel whistled a jaunty tune as he opened the doors at the Ninth Avenue entrance to the Port Authority building. He wanted a taxi and was told this was the place to get one immediately. He felt more lighthearted now, more delighted that he had come finally to the Big Apple. He patted his coat now with a decided sense of satisfaction. Old newspapers and scraps of trash blown up and dpwn the avenue seemed to avoid him. The whores, pimps, killers,

and beggars stepped out of his way. "Later," he said to himself, "when I get to my cousin's house up in Harlem, I'll go through Baff's wallet and see how things turned out after all. I'll do it later when there aren't so many people around. I think we just had to meet," he concluded.