Ain’t They All Alike

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by Dave Ernst

English & Speech, Jr.

Hiya, Whitey. What's for lunch?

"Hey, he ain’t sayin’ nothin’. Somethin’ wrong, Whitey?"

Four slender youths circled the table where Aubrey sat, alone, staring at the tray of cold food in front of him.

"Hey, boy, I said what’s for lunch?"

"The same thing as you had. The same everybody gets."

"Hey, Whitey, you’re right." One of the four had picked up the egg salad sandwich. "Tastes the same as we got."

"Hey, careful, you knocked Whitey’s books on the floor."
The biggest of the group quieted the others, and sprawled across the table. He stuck his scarred face less than five inches from Aubrey’s. "You got it today, Whitey?" He was breathing heavily through his wide nostrils.

Aubrey was afraid to look away, but neither could he look into the black eyes of his tormentor. He let his own eyes go out of focus, and slowly shook his head.

"Aw, that’s too bad."

"You know I haven’t got any money."

"But you didn’t have none yesterday, neither. Ain’t your old lady been out whorin’ this week?"

Aubrey didn’t move.

"What kind you want, Whitey, chocolate or vanilla?"

Aubrey looked at the milk stains on his shirt from the day before.

"I think Whitey needs some chocolate." One by one, each of the four boys poured a half-pint carton of milk onto Aubrey’s head. He closed his eyes as he felt the cool liquid seep through his close-cropped, kinky hair, and drip down his forehead.
“If you had an Afro like mine, it wouldn’t run down and mess up your shirt like that, boy.”
“You better go clean up, nigger.”
Aubrey picked up his books and ran down the hall toward the washroom. As he searched for some paper towels, he looked in the cracked mirror and saw a teacher leaning against the wall behind him, nervously smoking a cigarette.
“Aren’t you supposed to be the lunch monitor?” Aubrey had forced the words through his swollen throat. The man slipped silently out the door.
Aubrey found a roll that still had some toilet paper on it, and cleaned himself as best he could. Since he had to eat during the last shift, he only had two more classes left. He waited a couple of minutes past the sound of the bell starting the next period. Carefully, he sneaked in the back door of the classroom. Nobody noticed.
He restrained himself from raising his hand a few times, as the class pondered the simple questions that Mr. Barton read from the back of the history book. He was afraid that if he answered someone might turn around and look at him.
Aubrey watched the minute hand of the clock painfully toward the top of the hour. Scanning the room, he counted only about twenty-five in attendance. And there were just two or three black faces in the group. He watched the white teacher pace repeatedly across the front of the room, droning on about the election of 1860. Occasionally, Aubrey watched him glance at the empty desks in the first four rows, as if he couldn’t figure out why half the class almost always stayed away.
Mr. Barton tried to force-feed the apathetic bodies that reclined in the stiff chairs. Aubrey had spent twenty minutes with the book the night before, and he knew that nothing would be said that hadn’t been mentioned in those few pages that had been assigned for the week. Shutting off the sounds of the teacher, and the mumbling and whispering that filled the back of the room, his eyes began wandering over the markings that were knifed into the desk top. “Niggers suck.” “Wash-2 terms Adams-1 Jeff-2.” “Nancy-EL7-2119.” “Honkies suck.” “Nig . . .”
“What?”
The whole class was turned eagerly staring at him.

"How many times do I have to ask you, Mr. Otis?"

"Ask me . . . what?"

"Who ran for vice-president under Lincoln?"

"It was . . ." He shifted on the hard chair. His wet shirt was sticking to his perspiring body, and the clamminess made him feel sick to his stomach. He tried to respond, but the answer floated just beyond his grasp, floated among the blue eyes that were mocking him.

"Do you know who Mr. Lincoln was?"

"Well, yes, I . . ."

Shrill laughter filled the room.

"Let's see you blush, Aubrey." Somebody in front was prodding the rest of the class. "You really oughta know who Lincoln was."

"Now class." Mr. Barton was clearing his throat. "Hey, now. Let's hold it down a little."

"Boy, what happened to your shirt?"

Aubrey scooped up his books and worked himself free from the desk. Suddenly, there was silence, except for the thud of his hurried footsteps on the wooden floor. As he reached the door, he heard someone say, "Ain't they all . . ." The rest was muffled by renewed laughter.

Aubrey raced toward the daylight that flooded through the open door at the end of the gloomy hall. Almost all of the students were in their classes, and the few that lingered by their lockers took little notice of what darted past them. All except a group of six or seven that was lounging by one of the radiators. White cigarette smoke against the grimy walls caught Aubrey's eye. And a familiar voice snapped him to a halt.

"Where you runnin' to, boy?"

Aubrey just stared into the darkness.

"I said where you goin'?"

"Wait, man," he heard someone say. One of the group lumbered to his feet, towering over Aubrey. "This boy has places to go. We should not stop him." The voice was starting to break into laughter. "Please, Mr. Negro, do not let us stop you." All the others joined in the taunting as the leader of the informal chorus bowed from the waist.

Aubrey stepped slowly backward as the sounds of their
mocking echoed through the hall. With his shoulders brushing against peeling paint, he edged away from the taunting until his hand found the cold metal of the door latch. Forcing it open, he escaped into the grey afternoon.

Panting sharply, he slowed to a walk when he reached the street. He hurried along the sidewalk, shivering, as the chilled wind bounced an empty beer can alongside. But he welcomed the stinging cold of the brisk March afternoon. He could concentrate on feeling uncomfortable.

Slamming the door to the tiny apartment brought him back from the retreat of his senses. He leaned back against the rough wood, not wanting ever to open it again. One quick look told him that his mother still had not come home. The same empty bottle leaned drunkenly against the leg of the old sofa. The same number of cigarette butts overflowed the edges of the ash tray and spilled onto the blanket that served as a slip cover. No more dirty dishes had been added to the stack that dominated the top of the kitchen stove. It was rare that she stayed out more than two nights at a time.

Aubrey spent a long time sitting on the overstuffed sofa, watching the wind rip at the paper that covered the window. It had grown dark before he got up to hunt in the ice box for something to eat. Taking out a long roll of bologna, he grabbed the butcher knife that rested in the sink. Viciously, he hacked at the cold meat, slicing off what he wanted, and popping the pieces into his mouth as they fell from the knife. He laid the knife down for a moment, then seized it again, and cut the entire roll into thin slices. Slowly, he passed his fingers over the scars in the table where the sharp knife had gouged the surface. He then scooped up the slices and stepped into the front room, where he contentedly finished his supper.

An hour later he was hungry again, and went back to the kitchen. Picking up the knife from the table, he renewed his hunt through the ice box, picking through the cans that filled the shelves. Nothing. He slammed the door, stormed back to the other room, and yanked open the top drawer of the bureau that squatted in the corner by the sofa. Slashing through years of rent receipts and old insurance policies, he felt the cold metal of the pistol that his mother had kept for
as long as Aubrey could remember. He let the knife drop to
the floor, but cradled the gun in his hand. Picking up the
books that he had discarded when he had come home, he
went to his room to prepare for the next day’s classes.

The books were closed after a few minutes, and Aubrey
lay on the sagging bed, listening to the wind pound against
the groaning walls. He tried to shut his eyes, but the creak­
ing of the springs filled the room for the rest of the night.
Daylight had not yet begun to appear over the haze of
the city when he pulled himself to his feet. Groping in the
black room, he collected all of the things that he had when
he had fled from the school the afternoon before. Then, he
carefully tucked the pistol into his pants pocket.

The click of the door latch reverberated down the de­
serted hallway, and the hinges gave forth an eerie squeak.
Still tightly clutching his books, he climbed the stairs to the
back of the gym balcony that overlooked the main entrance.
From there he watched the trickle of students that began
filling the bleak corridor. Soon, the gun began to burn in
his pocket, and his shirt stuck to his perspiring skin. And
then he saw them. Four of them came in together.

“Stop. Hold it.”
“What the . . . Hey, it’s Whitey.”
“I said shut up.” His echoing voice was attracting a
crowd. They stared up at him, and then looked at each
other.
“It was Hannibal Hamlin, and you didn’t know it.
Nobody knew it. But I knew it.”
“Hey, boy, you been smokin’?” Everybody laughed,
until he drew the gun.
“Jesus Christ, Whitey. You won’t use that thing. Even
if you know how.”
“I told you to shut up. Don’t you see this? It’s mine.
Don’t you see it?” He tried to hold the gun still. “This is
it,” he screamed. “This is the thing.”
Two teachers crept up behind him. When they grabbed
his arm, the pistol discharged, and the bullet exploded into
the plaster above their heads.
The crowd was growing as they led him down the
stairs. He didn’t look up.
“Way to go, Whitey.”
Laughter filled the air as they took him out the door.