

THE EDGE OF WHITENESS

(An Excerpt)

By Joe Montaperto

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www.JoeMontaperto.com

The rain had stopped – but it was damp and cold as a bitch. The instant I hit the street, doubts about what I was going to be able to accomplish tonight began swirling around my head, like the invoking winds blowing down the nape of my neck. I shudder and quickly zipper all the way up.

The warm, satisfied feeling that had enveloped me while I was lying in my bed had now disappeared as I observed the vapor from my breath, and began trudging down Third Ave. A stabbing tinge of sadness, of being alone – separated – curled around me. I hesitate, gazing back at my house, and stop for a second.

How was I going to do this mural?! I really had no idea of what I was going to do! Panic sets in. Na-Na and I had never even talked about it really. I mean, I made this big bravado speech and everything... what if I – we – got busted? How were we going to finish this in only three nights anyway?! And, to be honest, I was still kind of afraid to be alone in a room with him for any extended period of time. Especially with nobody at all around. Maybe I should turn back now. I keep going, though, more scared of not showing up than anything else.

Na –Na was there as advertised, standing in front of Roselle High, toothpick in mouth, twirling his umbrella and thrusting it forward in the night air as if stabbing imaginary people, I presume.

“Yo, champ.”

“Hey whassup, Na-Na?”

“Damn, my man be *fierce* an’ shit last night.”

I smiled, trying to play cool, but now my curiosity is really aroused.

“What the fuck happened last night, man?”

He studied me for a few seconds, I guess he was trying to figure out if I was kidding or not. Then he shakes his head, chuckles, and clucks his tongue as he picks up this *huge* boom box and knapsack.

We head towards the parking lot, to the green fire exit door on the side, I look at Na-Na, wondering what his plans were, and he pulls out this *tremendous* set of keys from his coat pocket. Where he got them – who knows. Feeling our way into the darkness of the hall, he flicks on his gold plated lighter, and we bound stealthily up the stairwell, our footsteps echoing like Goliath into the empty midnight hour.

The spooky glow of the shadows cast by Na-Na’s flame infused me with a strange type of giddiness; I’m imagining I’m in one of those “Adventures of Johnny Quest” cartoons I used to watch on Saturday mornings. Exploring some ancient, forbidden underground temple in Egypt, or some crazy place like that. Suddenly, I get this uncontrollable impulse to yell out in that Indian kid Hajji’s accent.

“Johnny, Johnny – Race - Dr. Quest – *look* – it is the sacred jewel of the mythical Monkey God, Babaganush!” One glance at Na-Na, though, and I resisted that urge.

Who was that kid Hajji anyway – and why was he always following

around Dr. Quest, Johnny, and Race Banyon?

We marched our way through the second floor corridor, till we finally reach the object of our illicit journey – Mr. Silverstein’s art classroom. Na-Na opened that door with another one from his magic set of keys, we switch on the lights – and it’s all right there in front of us now. Gazing up at that wall above the closet in the back, the wonder of it all just stone hits me. This was to be the canvas that would fuel our revolutionary hunger. Whoa.

Inexplicably, in the next second, pangs of fear and anxiety with all the force of a typhoon crash through me, obliterating the exhilaration that had filled me on the way up here. Now the wall seems to me a towering monolith of epic impossibility.

This is gonna take like Michelangelo type of talent! Who am *I* to even *attempt* to immortalize Esperanza like this? She is *so* beautiful. I don’t know if Na-Na reads the panic expressing itself in the sudden paleness of my face. Maybe he does. Maybe he doesn’t. He sets up his boom box on one of the tables.

“Yo, Strong, check it out, man. This be *Hawaiian*, man – this be the *shit* for creatin’.”

He torches up the monster spliff he’s got in his hand, takes in a couple of major hits, and passes it off to me. I grab it warily, remembering last night when I nearly hacked to death. Man, I’m already feeling super *uncool* right now, I don’t need to sink even further in esteem. I close my

eyes and pull in a toke. Fuck it.

“My special blend a’ herbs and spices.” Na-Na says, the smoke still cascading out of his mouth.

To my great surprise, this stuff goes down *easy*. Nothing like last night. No burning my throat or chest this time. No, this is a distinct and different flavor and feeling.

We just sit there in the night silence, me and Na-Na, handing off to each other, puffing totally mellow, no laughing, no coughing.

“Yo, Strong – what we was talking ‘bout – les’ get to work, man.”

With that, we break the tranquillity of the moment and start busily setting up the two small ladders Silverstein’s got in the back of the room.

I climb up and perch myself on the top. Just me and that wall now. The wall is more wide than high; more so than I had figured it to be. Maybe Silverstein was right all along – maybe I didn’t have a clear sense of perspective. No way can I do the portrait of Esperanza standing up like I had imagined it.

I close my eyes now; just letting go, thoughts and various images drifting in and out of my consciousness. No concrete focus yet though, it’s all fluid. I feel the weight of the pencils and charcoal in my hands as the minutes clock by. The strike of a match redirects my thoughts, as I hear Na-Na climb off down his ladder, and the click of a cassette tape being inserted into the boom box’s tape player follows. The whir of the mechanism as it starts up, and the smoke from a Kool wafts through the

air, circling my nostrils, igniting a new set of images circulating through the screen of my memory. It transports me back to the smoke of Esperanza's Virginia Slim, when we were standing outside in front of Tijeras de Oro, the day I finally had dragged up the courage to ask her out. She gave me her number. That was the last time I saw her. The Dentyne gum she was chewing, the roar of the motors and black smoke exploding from the tailpipes of the buses as they sped by. That carries me back to the first day I ever saw her – a nasty, sopping boiler of a day in late August. Had to be at *least* 100 degrees. Relentless sun driving through the polluted haze; even the flies buzzing you from the nearby dog shit on the curb are dragging ass. I see this *insanely* breathtaking girl in this Puerto Rican beauty salon, and I halt mid-step, staring in incredulousness. Daaaamn! Their air conditioner must be broken because all the beautician ladies are plopped down on the chairs, the ones who don't have customers ... flushed, fanning themselves furiously with take out menus from the Kim Wah, the Chinese restaurant across the street.

There *she* is – Esperanza – stretched out on one of the small sofa-like waiting chairs...legs curled up a bit behind her, right arm propping up her head in a way that totally accentuates *every* curve. Effortlessly exhaling that Virginia Slim, watching the rings of smoke dissipate into the heavy mugginess... the thing is, the girl is not even *sweating*, she is so ice. How could anyone look so hot on such a miserable day? A shiver like downing a frozen Slurpee shakes me into another memory – a centerfold of

Raquel Welch in LOOK magazine last year. Lying in exactly the same position – except she’s wearing a full-length white mink coat. Shit, I don’t know how many times I fawned devotedly over *that* picture. I still have it in my room, as a matter of fact. BAM! *That’s* what I would do! I would draw Esperanza in that same reclining position – like a double tribute!

I pick up my pencil – no way I’m gonna mess this up with charcoal – and slowly take it to the wall, struggling to keep this snapshot – this essence in my mind - and transfer it to this wall before it fades away, like déjà vu.

Hesitantly, I start putting down the preliminary lines, trying to get the proper shapes, the perspective. I was never great at drawing bodies before, not of this magnitude, this size, anyway. No, I was a face man. It’s daunting. I’m shaky. You know when you instinctively know that you have this really phenomenally great idea, but it’s almost kind of *too* overwhelming? This was it. Please God, don’t let me fuck this up!

So, I’m sketching now, tentatively, delicately, so afraid to blow it, yet so much wanting to express it. I’m in and out of the flow, trying in vain to nail that curve of the shoulder –over and over, but no matter what it’s just not coming. Frustrated and feeling thwarted, I’ve been vaguely aware of the music in the background – until this voice – this AMAZING voice – jolts me out of my self-consciousness, forcing me to put down my pencil. I don’t know if it’s being magnified by the Hawaiian, or what, but her voice just freakin’ BLOWS ME AWAY. It is so real. She practically moans through

this whole song – no words – but she puts it over with such a sense of heartbreak, of such genuine conviction – and realness – that words couldn't portray it. Beautiful. Piercing through some hazy level of my unconscious, the recognition of it's truth lodges in my throat – choking me up. I don't want Na-Na to see me getting all emotional, so I try to hide it, while rhythmically swaying back and forth to the music on the ladder.

Finally, I can't repress myself any longer; I *have* to know who this is!

"Na, man, who *is* this singing?"

"Etta James, my man, Etta James."

At that moment, it flashes through me that another secret door to black culture had just been opened to me, and that in some way it would change me forever. This transcended just *black* music – it was deeper than that. Whatever it was- this is what I wanted my mural to be about! I know it without even being able to put it into words.

Infiltrated. Seduced. Inspired. Listening- listening-listening. Etta James. Man. "I'd Rather Go Blind", "Almost Persuaded", "All I Could Do Was Cry". The songs just go on.

All of a sudden, it just clicks. I'm able to go beyond my perceived limitations, elevate my game – my pencil begins gliding over the wall – smooth, tranquil. Focused. Catching me by surprise, the morning sun peeking in through the classroom window snaps me out of this trance. I look up at the clock - 6:35 in the morning! Six hours had passed! We quickly pack up and I scamper home before my parents awaken.

I sleep most of the rest of that whole day, still feigning sickness and receiving Florence Nightingale visits from my mother.

When I do awaken, I pore over *The Prophet* for a spiritual passage of some type - something that I can use to kind of sum up the idea of the Esperanza portrait. Something uplifting as a testament to beauty - and like - eternity. The rest of my time is spent studying that Raquel Welsh centerfold for artistic - and other purposes.

Na-Na and I meet at the school again that night, me with my LOOK magazine in tow. We go through our herb ritual, he hips me to Al Green, another master of soul, on the boom box, and we get down to business. The business of transforming our creations into a full-scale reality. Me working off the Raquel picture to unleash my Esperanza, he on his scene.

It's six in the morning again, and I extract myself from my labor of love to come down to check out what I've done. A deep feeling of satisfaction runs through me. Not too bad. There are definitely flaws, no doubt, but I could see Esperanza up there - I had caught in pencil, in charcoal, a good deal of what I wanted to.

I exhaled.

I amble over to Na-Na's side of the room, where he, too, is taking a well-deserved break.

"Holy shit, Na-Na!"

My body goes cold - then frosty.

That face. I immediately recognize *that* face - it's the one that was in

my sketchbook the morning after the night at The Savoy- the one I had no recollection of.

Except this one was *way* more vivid.

Deadly vivid.

It's not only that it's that guy's face – but his whole body is crumpled to the ground. With a pencil in his neck. Another guy, a pimp apparently, is standing right over him. Victorious. Like a linebacker – like Dick Butkus standing over a fallen running back after he had just made a game saving stuff at the one-yard line. There's another guy, too, crouching next to him who's jeering at the guy on the ground, or maybe exhorting him to get back up. The thing is, the detail in the fallen guy's face – freakin' *chilling*.

He did it, Na-Na did. He had *captured* that netherworld look of a dude in the last couple of milliseconds of his life – as it's ebbing away. Brutal.

Just as intense is the almost blank, yet satanic smirk on the face of the pimp who had apparently just offed him. He knew he had won, but it was almost like it didn't matter, either.

Na-Na's form was still kind of crude though, I thought. Rough. I definitely had technique up on him. But the thing is, I think he might have totally just *nailed* that expression of the guy – the essence – maybe better than I had done with Esperanza. I feel both a sense of jealousy and admiration running through me at the same time. It was hard to take your eyes off it. This is what happened that night at The Savoy. Whoa.

Spooky.

As I stepped back to take it all in, I was struck by the contrast in our styles. His characters were smaller than my full-length portrait, kind of representative type art – exaggerated features – bodies, muscles. Sort of tribal – African. The same style he had shown me in his sketches before – only even more pronounced. But the whole thing worked somehow.

We packed up and left, both feeling, I'm sure, like we had definitely accomplished something here. One more night to go.

The next night is our last one, and we're back in the art room. Rummaging through his huge ring of keys again, he picks out a distinctive looking gold one, the smallest key in the pack, and heads over to Silverstein's art closet. I'm puzzled, because I know that *nobody* has that key. Silverstein was the only one who had that, and he guarded it like Zell, the Nazi dentist from the movie "The Marathon Man" guarded his diamond stash. Maybe that's what I'll call Silverstein from now on – Zell. Ha, yeah he'd like that – Zell.

Na-Na opens it up – the closet – and I can't believe what I see. More colors than I could ever imagine – some I had never seen or even heard of before. Bright colors.

Tangerine. Sky Blue. Burnt Auburn. Teal. Bright Pink. Just to name a few. Cans and tubes and tubes of brand new paint. What the hell was Zell doing – hoarding paint for his old age or something? This was ridiculous. I look over at Na-Na. He's smiling like he's just scored a pound

of heroin - for free.

We set up everything and hungrily divide up the paint, like we're gangsters from those old Superman TV shows after a bank heist.

"Listen, Peanuts - one for you and one for me, see?"

We do our spliff thing, and I get up on that ladder feeling giddy and free, a myriad of fresh paint at my disposal.

Etta James is again wailing away in the background and everything eventually just morphs into a sea of bright colors. It becomes almost psychedelic, the high from the ganja turning it all into a dreamy ambiance.

In my imagination, I'm one of those hipster artists from like the 1920's or 30's, wearing a beret and hanging in the Cotton Club, or one of those funky speakeasies in Harlem. Great black musicians jamming, the energy is wild, intense, cutting edge. You feel, somehow, like you're either watching history - or making it.

I don't even know where all these images are coming from, maybe from some of those old photos I saw in that jazz book the Professor was showing me a while back.

All I do know is that I am so locked in. What had before just been outlines and forms were now coming to life with depth and clarity, as I mixed the array of paints to get *just* the right shade for Esperanza's skin tone

Again, we work through the whole night, and when dawn hits we know we got to get out of here, because it's Monday morning and the staff

will soon be arriving.

We finish up as best we can – mine all bright colors and flash, a testimony to love and beauty –Na-Na’s recreating the darkness of that night, of that world. Violent, muted colors with brilliant splashes of red creating a metaphorical contrast. Somehow, though, it meshed – the two pieces. The opposites said something, were connected in a sort of profound way. Although it was far from perfect, I mean, I don’t think you can ever be totally satisfied, I believe we both came away with a deep sense of achievement. We had created something meaningful in only about 18 intense hours. Yeah.

I leafed through “The Prophet” which I had brought along with me this time, searching for something to jump out at me that would tie up the significance of the whole thing. I find something interesting under the heading “Speak to us of Beauty”

“Where shall you seek beauty, and how shall you find her, unless she herself be your Way and your Guide?

And how shall you speak of her, except that she be the weaver of your speech?”

I ponder that for a few minutes, letting it soak in and circulate through me. Alas, it doesn’t strike me in a way that really summarizes what I’m trying to say. It just doesn’t hit it. With dawn pouring in, I decide to put down the first words that pop into my head. It’s a phrase that comes from an Etta James tune - one that really touched me.

“At Last, I Found a Dream That I Could Speak To.”

Na-Na writes down:

“By Whatever Means Necessary.”

I didn't know where he got that from, and had no inkling how much I would become connected to it later on.

“Hey Na, man, check it out, should we sign our names?”

He stares at me for a couple of seconds.

“I mean, we'll be totally busted if we do.”

A defiant smirk crosses his face.

“Let's do it.”

We sign, clean up the paint, I snap a few pictures with my mother's Polaroid Instant Camera I had carried with me, and we gas out of there to get maybe an hour of sleep before I returned.