

BOOM! Man

Call him Marvin (not his real name).

I don't think any white person ever knew anything about him. Milton might have, but he never said.

Two people of color claimed to know something. Black Barbara (as opposed to White Barbara) who was a shift supervisor at the DQ said that he lived out in the Light Oak community, in a tool shed behind the house of one relative or another (Brenda wants to say that it was his sister). That makes sense because he had to live within walking distance of the Dairy Queen. He didn't drive and I don't think anyone would have been brave or crazy enough to give him a ride – except maybe Brenda or Frank.

Woody, my karate instructor, said that Marvin had been mixed up with a woman or alcohol (or both, I don't remember) and went crazy. Woody also noted that Marvin had been a successful mechanic and really smart.

Maybe so. But like other white people, I had a more romantic notion. I figured that Marvin had suffered an Apocalypse Now sort of experience in Vietnam. He seemed to be about the right age, perhaps in his mid-forties at the time. And he looked as though he might have been a warrior, especially when he wore the butcher knife in his belt.

Of course, all we knew was what we saw - a tall skinny black man with sharp features who sat by himself, a stack of tattered car magazines laid out on the table in front, talking to himself or the magazines, occasionally making BOOM! noises.

He started coming in the morning and afternoon when there weren't too many people. Even before he said anything, just walking in, he attracted attention – with his peculiar loping stride and glowering indifference to the people around him.

Brenda was the first to spot his other behavioral anomalies. Leaning over, she whispered to me, “Is that man talking to himself?”

I hadn't paid any attention because his voice blended into the general background noise. Heeding her warning not to stare (and thereby be rude) I quickly glanced at the other table. There was a man speaking to no one that I could see. I could not make out the words; he spoke in a low mutter. But I could tell that he seemed angry. I don't remember if he made the BOOM! noise then or later.

After discovering that Milton would not ask him to leave, only, if the BOOMs got too loud, to hold it down, he came at night too.

Neither Brenda nor Frank ever seemed afraid of him; although, I was, especially when he wore the butcher knife in his belt. However after a while I got used to him and looked forward to the reaction of other people.

For example, there was the Sunday afternoon with the church people when both Marvin and Larry, who was also crazy, showed up. Larry (not his real name) used to walk around town in a Superman cape, screaming and jumping, and engaging people in religious conversation. From a distance he resembled a mischievous child, but up close, his face had fine lines and his smile wasn't right. Occasionally, on Sunday afternoons, he was dropped off by a relative at the Dairy Queen. He always ordered two hot dogs, specifying in a loud mechanical voice how they were to be fixed. He arranged the hot dogs side by side, opened his mouth wide like a snake, picked up a hot dog and ate it then did the same thing with the other.

That Sunday, Marvin and the church people were already present when Larry arrived. Marvin was at a corner table, quietly thumbing through his magazines. The church people were laughing. The women wore flowered dresses and the men wore suits. Marvin made his first BOOM! noise just before Larry ate his first hot dog so that by the time the church people turned back from Marvin they got to see Larry with his mouth open. I don't recall exactly what they did then but in my mind's eye there I see dithering activity and expressions of concern.

I was there another time when Marvin had an encounter with church people. It was after Wednesday night service, probably in the summer because the place was packed and customers were lined up out the door. Marvin sat at a table in the middle of the store surrounded by people from Bethel Baptist church. Marvin had his magazines and was muttering but wasn't making BOOM! noises because he knew Milton would not allow that when there was a crowd. We were at the long table in the back not paying any attention when I noticed something unusual. One of the church goers was actually talking to Marvin. Although by this time we exchanged nods with him I had never actually seen him in conversation with anyone other than himself. But there was this earnest pink-faced young man leaning in close to Marvin, seeming to lecture him. I was afraid Marvin might do something, might pull out his knife and slaughter the good people from Bethel. But he just sat there, smiling, tolerant, as if he appreciated the attention.