Assiduity Nine

by J. Mykell Collinz

Don and I return to Rasheed's room on the top floor of the middle house where Uzma sits waiting to speak her piece.

I'm feeling blessed listening to their enthusiastic chatter. It's like the world is opening up to me again, allowing me to experience a rush of youthful energy. Everything is coming together at the right time, seemingly on its own.

"If it makes you guys happy, do it," Uzma says: "But remember this, we need to build our Noah's Ark before the flood comes, our urban farm community, not a movie set for a documentary film, which I believe is a big waste of time and energy. Michael Moore is famous and he made a lot of money but he didn't really change anything."

"Here's a good reason to do the doc," Rasheed says: "We need to portray people caring for themselves, working together, building a refuge, riding the storm out, a Noah's Ark, as Uzma suggests. We're a ragtag group, a mixed collection of misfits. Our main claim to fame is poverty, surviving without cash, living the life on garbage and trash."

"And homegrown stash," Don chimes in.

"Hush, child," Rasheed says: "Let's keep that our little secret. It's still a federal rap you know."

"Just don't get in our way, John," Uzma says: "Plus, we stay living in these three houses."

"I'm cool with that for now," I say: "I'll be coming around making closer inspections on the wiring, pluming, heating, roof, stuff like that, maybe do some repairs or modifications, but it can be done over time with minimum disruption."

"Now that that's settled, I have things to do," she replies: "If you want to walk around the neighborhood, John, Don or Rasheed can take you. I'll talk to all of you all latter."

With Uzma gone from the room, I make eye contact with the two young men.

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"In answer to a previous question," I say: "Our next step, script the whole film from beginning to end."

"Okay, here's how I see it," Rasheed responds, exhaling a stream of marijuana smoke: "We're on our own. Government at every level is being privatized by transnational corporations. It's pay to play or go away. They were tearing down empty houses in this neighborhood to prevent squatters from living in them. We put a stop to that. The remaining empty houses are now being used by our people, people who are interested in staying alive through subsistence farming and cooperative living."

"How's that working out so far?" I interject.

"We're making progress but we still need support from outside input. It's not going to happen overnight."

"Outside input? Like what?"

"It varies. Uzma's mother and father, Kula and Leif, they still have connections supporting them and their interests. That's why these three houses are in such good condition. They once belonged to the progressive philanthropists who still give them money. Other than that, we try to stay legal, try not to hurt nobody, but there are many ways for us to hustle the economic underbelly. Outside input would be greatly enhanced, of course, if you could create legal jobs for us building a movie studio and film production lot."

"Tell me about the ways you hustle?"

"First you need to understand what we're facing. This is a city filled with gangs. Black, white, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, whatever, it's constant gang wars going down. We manage to avoid most of it, mainly because no one wants to mess with us. We're armed and dangerous. And we have some dangerous allies, several biker clubs in adjacent areas which serve as buffer zones between us and worst parts of the city. The bikers appreciate how we protect their back door by keeping our neighborhood under control."

"No police or city government?"

"They're busy with other things," Rasheed replies, reaching to pass the joint."

"Yeah, like going bankrupt," Don chimes in, reaching to receive it: "And then getting privatized."

"You guys ready to get moving?" I say: "Let's walk around the neighborhood and map out a spot. I'd like to purchase properties close by the block I already own. Unfortunately, that will alert the real estate market. They'll know something is brewing."

"Why not just use the land, do what we want with it?" Don interjects: "We already have it."

"We need to change our thinking here," I respond: "We're not going to build a lucrative business on property we don't legally own. Face it, this whole neighborhood will see a flurry of business activity once we get up and running. It's just waiting to happen. The money is there. We'll need to use it wisely, of course, but, if we do it right, there's no reason why we can't be successful."

Rasheed rises from his chair, and says: "Hey, if you got the money, I got the time."

"I'm with you," Don responds, rolling sideways on the couch before pushing his large body upward.

I'm exhilarated by the possibilities swirling in my imagination.