

Assiduity Seven

by J. Mykell Collinz

Uzma dashes up the stairs ahead of me. Big boyish Don with the curly red hair, ruddy skin, and rosy cheeks tags along behind. Student age young adults are moving around on all three floors creating a coeducational college dorm atmosphere. On the top floor we enter a room in the front. A large window overlooks the neighborhood to the southeast.

Rasheed is tall, dark, and handsome, a potential young actor, I feel; yet I can't think of anyone with whom he compares: Will Smith, perhaps. He seems very sure of himself yet eager to understand my point of view and he listens attentively as I explain my vision of the neighborhood's rebirth through residential, small business, and commercial ventures undertaken by local developers, building wealth within the community.

"If that's your turn on, John, carry on, do your thang," he says: "I resist discouragement, whether it be from greedy karma mongering, social anarchy, or revolutionary violence. I revive my enthusiasm through spiritual pursuits, through the music and the herb."

"Any particular religion?" I say.

"No, mon," he replies: "I'm talking about a here and now, active, living spirit. I feel its presence in my life and I see its manifestation in others, calling us together, warning us to overcome the negative forces keeping us apart, like phoney religions, corrupt governments, and blood sucking corporations."

He smiles amiably and presses a key on his laptop computer. Rhythmic instrumental music fills the room with a soft presence: drums, flutes, and horns. Then he fires up a fat joint and fills the room with a cloud of marijuana smoke. He offers the joint to me but I tell him I'm on a strict routine and I've already medicated for the morning.

"I smokem boo all day," he says, swaying in time with the music.

Uzma also passes on the joint, claiming she has work to do first.

Don eagerly accepts Rasheed's offering.

As they talk among themselves, I sink into the comfortable chair and look out the window. It's mostly vacant lots filled with weeds and rubble. The remaining houses are in ramshackle condition. Commercial buildings are empty and dilapidated.

"Like what you see, John?" Rasheed says.

"I don't want to bring you folks down," I say: "But this whole area is up for sale at dirt cheap prices. I'm just one of many who will find these properties to be an attractive investment. You can't build your urban farming community on land for which you do not hold the deeds."

"I doubt there are any others as dumb as you, mister dirt cheap landowner," Don responds.

"Be nice, Donald," Rasheed says: "We're living in this man's house. He actually paid money to legally own it."

"I agree with Don," Uzma says, "No one else but you, John, believes there will be a future rebirth of development dominated by unregulated capitalism, the very economic policies which are responsible for creating the wasteland here, shattering lives, leaving a large population without property or income, with no place else to go. I don't care who holds the deeds, we hold the land, and we intend to keep it. Which includes your block and these three houses. You're a nice guy and all that, it's nothing personal. You can try to evict us. I don't know how far you'll get with that. Anyway, what would you do if we did move out? Who's gonna wanna live here? They'll need a security force the size our militia to fight off the home invaders, gangs marauding through the city at night."

I make eye contact with Uzma: I'm thinking, if these two are an example of your bottom up leadership group, you're not making great progress here; which means, convincing you to play the lead part in my new feature length film is almost a shoe in; which greatly pleases me; and, once again, I'm charmed by the music, the ambiance, the company.

"Your security doesn't impress me, Uzma," I say: "When I rang your bell this morning, you came to the door almost naked. You

didn't seem to be worried about your home being invaded. Or does that only happen at night?"

"We protect this neighborhood, buddy," Don interjects: "Without us, it would be a gangbanger's war zone. Just like it was before we put the clamps on it."

"I admit to being lax this morning, John," Uzma says: "I was exercising when you arrived, distracted by the brilliant morning sunlight which paints the front room with moving patterns of primary colors, the visible spectrum, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet, fading into each other like the bands in a rainbow, a prismatic effect resulting from the many beveled surfaces cut into the fancy glass windows. I would hate to see that colorful morning sunlight blocked by a tall building across the street. A garden park there with no trees will be perfect."

I'm feeling the effects of breathing air filled with marijuana smoke and sandalwood incense. I make eye contact with Rasheed. He's consuming the last of the fat joint, holding it to his puckered lips with a scissors like hemostat.

"If eyes are the window to the soul, John," he says, exhaling smoke: "Your shades are drawn."

"It's my poker face, Rasheed," I say: "I'm getting ready to up the ante. I'm interested in helping with Uzma's plan to build an urban farming community on vacant lots throughout the neighborhood but it needs to be done legally and it needs to pay for itself, maybe even generate a profit eventually through various offshoots."

"You're interested in helping?" Don says, placing two fingers together over his pursed lips, pretending to suppress a giggle.

"What's in it for you?" Rasheed says, leaning closer to hear my reply, a wary smile on his face.

"In order to produce and direct my new screenplay," I say: "I need a location to stage combat scenes and build other sets. Why not, I ask myself, make it a permanent facility, a movie lot with an indoor sound stage using state of the art equipment and procedures. I'm already planning to spend a large portion of the initial cost just to film one movie. Plus, I'll need to train people, including actors, both

men and women, young and old. I could make them into a permanent production company."

"Do that here?" Don interjects: "Hell yeah. You got that kind of money?"

"I know how to get it," I say: "And I know how to use it."

"No way," Uzma says: "That would only marginalize what we've already got going here."

"I'll ante up to stay in the game," Rasheed says: "What's our next move?"

"Give me a few minutes to think about that," I say: "The idea is still new to me, too. It popped into my head while I was looking out your window."

Uzma remains in the room with Rasheed while Don and I go next door to visit the third house.

