

STEVE DAVENPORT

# Black Guy, Bald Guy

THE SCREEN TEST WAS GREAT, THEY SAY, You two were made for this project. Just perfect together. Shared center, lyrically contrasted contours, ever-changing boundaries. And range? Like the open sea. Absolutely global and all to the good.

We can make you two fit any setting, any century, anywhere. Globe's going to love you. We see comedy, tragedy, dramedy, documentary, docu-dramedy. All of it. Everything. We'll invent new forms. Fill them with you, the two of you, together.

The shared thing, between you, the thing and the thing, thesis and antithesis. The this and the that, all of it going and flowing in the back-and-forthing, the buddy synthesis thing. Fruitful as all get-out.

The possibilities, copious. The canvas, capacious. The material, substantial and significant. The way? Deep memory with heart. The goal? Historical correction. We will get things right. Failing that, we will provide opportunities for socio-emotional reconstitution via revenge enactments.

The result? Crazy buzz, network backing for a season's worth of episodes, star power based on social responsibility driven by ethics and charisma. Translation? Future developments forever developing. You two come aboard and we're talking serious cha-ching.

Black Guy looks at Bald Guy. Bald Guy looks at Black Guy. They wrinkle their brows. They shrug their shoulders. They wink at their agent, who holds out the papers for them to sign. They smile. They sign.

Black Guy hits Bald Guy on the arm. "We will right wrongs."

Bald Guy says, "Carlos Santana will be our guide!"

"That guitar of his better be made by Gatling," Black Guy says.

What they sign is a contract that calls for them to do a two-hour pilot about a couple of buddies who travel through time and space to address, with force when necessary, bad moments in history. They imagine there will be a machine of some sort. Maybe with a conical nose for burrowing back through the decades and centuries like time's a calendar pad. Or maybe the outer shell of the machine simply spins faster and faster, Black Guy and Bald Guy calmly trading quips in the stabilized inner compart-

ment, while everything, machine and man, disappears into a new space in another time.

All they know for sure is that they will both be travelers and neither will be the other's sidekick. Everything depends on it. Equal partners. None of that tired thesis and antithesis. They will be shared purpose. Both and. Death to the sidekick.

As their agent is about to leave for a meeting with the head writers, Black Guy repeats what is for him and Bald Guy the key point.

"Neither of us drives. The wheel confers power on the hands touching it."

"Usually does," Bald Guy adds.

Black Guy turns to Bald Guy. "Usually. Really? Now that's helpful at a time like this. Why don't you, all by yourself, go and grease the rails for the train carrying same-old?"

Bald Guy lifts an arm, opens his hand. "What if the wheel were positioned at the center of a spherical time machine?"

"Guys," the agent says.

"How does that erase power relations," Black Guy asks. "Or equally distribute them?"

Closing his eyes Bald Guy says, "I'm feeling something here."

"Wait a minute." Black Guy touches the ring finger of his right hand to his forehead. He can't know it then, but it will become one of his signature gestures.

"Guys."

"What if the wheel were made of meat," Bald Guy asks. "Or vegetable matter? A rhizome with super-powerful consciousness? Like it could bend forks and shit with its mind?"

Black Guy looks at him. "Whoa, cowboy. How about the wheel's just a wheel, but the pilot seat, center of power, is gone?"

"The wheel's floating," Bald Guy says. "No beginning, no end. I feel it spinning."

"Park your freaky pony for a second, will you? Simplify. We share the seat of power. Four hands on the wheel. How about a doughnut couch? Wheel in the middle?"

"Guys, if you."

"Yes," Bald Guy says. "Yes. Like a stabilized doughnut couch around a big wheel in the center of a spherical gyroscopic time machine cutting a mean path straight to the heart of stuff that needs fixing. I like the way we think. Carlos Santana!"

Black Guy looks at Bald Guy. “What does that even mean? Carlos Santana?”

“Guys,” Agent says, “It’s simpler than that.”

Black Guy looks at Agent. Bald Guy looks at Agent, too.

“The writers have already solved the seat of power. No time machine. At all.”

They look at Agent.

Agent looks at them.

“Each episode you’re in a different time, a different space. No explanation. You just are. It becomes a convention the audience expects.”

“No time machine,” Black Guy says. “Huh.”

“Simple as that,” Agent nods.

“Not a second wasted on repetitive set up,” Bald Guy says. “Simple is the new cool.”

“Nor a dollar on what might have been memorable special effects,” Black Guy says.

“All the easier,” Agent says, “to get right to the action. In media res.”

Black Guy thinks about it and nods. “All the better for moving the bad moment into the crosshatches quickly enough that viewers don’t have a chance to switch channels. Entertaining, educational, even funny as long as it’s real. Like what might have happened if these two avenging, bad-ass buddies with finely developed senses of humor and fists of fury had been around? Before Booth can go for Lincoln, they get him falling-down drunk, slather him with blackberry jelly, and tie him to a tree not three feet from the largest colony of red ants this side of Australia. If red ants don’t make sense historically or geographically, then a black bear with a bad leg and a sweet tooth.”

“Fuck him up royally,” Bald Guy says. “I like the way you think.”

“That could all happen,” Black Guy says, “in the first two minutes, which would give us plenty of time to raise Lincoln’s consciousness a notch or two. Point out some inconsistencies between his image as the Great Emancipator and the reality of his politics. Let him know we know and we’re watching.”

“Exactly,” Agent says. “A time machine would fuck that up. Distract folks. You want it to seem believable, like you’re from the time period, contemporaneous angels of retribution, when you sabotage the filming of *Birth of a Nation*, burn the set down or whatever it is they’re planning for the pilot.”

“I’ve never seen it,” Bald Guy says. “Dude’s name’s Griffith? I got fam-

ily with that name.”

“You don’t want to see it,” Black Guy says. “Unless you’re a film historian.”

Bald Guy’s looking at his hand-held. “Damn. That’s a lot of minutes for a silent movie.”

“And you don’t need to,” Agent says. “They’ll give you a thumbnail sketch, but if the script’s right, you won’t need it. They’re talking prime-time slot, you know.”

“I don’t know,” Black Guy says. “Much as I’d like to kick his ass for making such racist tripe, we might end up selling copies.”

“Risk and reward, yes?” Agent nods to the door. “I’m late for the meeting. Got to go.”

“No pain, no gain,” Bald Guy adds. “Tell them to write a scene for Margaret Mitchell, will you? Says here she would have been a teenager when that movie came out. Or better, we could strap the southern belle to the Liberty Bell and—”

“Earth to Dude.” Black Guy points to the door. “She’s gone. Maybe we should just trust the writers. Give minimal input, stand firm on the principle of no sidekick, let them do what they do about the rest.”

“Didn’t somebody write *Birth*?”

“Sure,” Black Guy says. “Why don’t you know this stuff? Thomas Dixon in a way. It was an adaptation of his novel, *The Clansman*.”

“There’s an excellent argument for trust the writers,” Bald Guy says.

Black Guy smiles.

Bald Guy doffs an imaginary hat with the flourish of a musketeer and tips his head.

“Good point,” Black Guy says. “Still, let’s let them do what they do. Down the road, if all goes well, we’ll have more say.”

“Leverage,” Bald Guy says.

Black Guy doffs an imaginary hat of his own. “The money we take will be equal,” he says, “to the truth we make.” He bows.

“Carlos Santana!”

Black Guy straightens up. “The Beatles, man. Sort of.”

Bald Guy plays his air guitar.

“You think you look like Santana right now?”

Eyes closed, Bald Guy plays on.

“You think the writers are going to hear you say his name often enough that they’re going to talk him into a cameo?”

“I would die,” Bald Guy says, “if that happened.”

Black Guy exhales. "Be still my heart."



"THIS AIN'T MISSISSIPPI," Black Guy says to the bartender. Bartender shrugs and walks a few steps away to wipe glasses with his long white towel.

Black Guy surveys the room before looking down again for the extra napkin, the one someone put there while he left to take a piss. Bartender says he saw nothing. Bald Guy, who was talking to the sexy twins, also saw nothing.

Black Guy's blood's beginning to boil. It was right there, not two inches from the drink he won't touch now. Probably spit in it, the jackass who left the napkin with the word on it.

Black Guy looks down. The napkin's gone.

"Where the fuck's the napkin?" Black Guy yells.

"Cut," the director says. "What do you mean where is it? Who cares where it is? Pretend it's there. You're the actor. Besides, we're not going to show a bad word on a napkin. This isn't cable."

"I told you I need to see the word, that word, if I'm going to nail this scene."

"Somebody get the diva a napkin and a pen."

"I'm not writing the word," Black Guy says.

"You going method on me, Diva? Somebody get a piece of paper, write the word on it, and place it gingerly beside Diva's drink."

"Don't call me that. And not a piece of paper. A bar napkin. Like the one that was beside my drink."

"Deee-vuh. Deee-vuh. Deee-vuh," Bald Guy chants.

"Props! The meter's running. Angelique, are you not the set dresser?"

"I'm not writing that word," Angelique says.

"I'll write the word."

If Black Guy hadn't turned in time, he wouldn't know which of the twins spoke. Although they're fairly new to the acting game, their story is well known. Austrians born in Austin to academics hired away from the University of Vienna to teach at the University of Texas, the twins were shuttled back and forth between their parents and their maternal grandmother in Graz. By the time they were twenty, they had made their name in international competition in the biathlon under the Austrian flag, but it was their identical beauty, gestures, bearing, voices, clothes, the

impossibility of telling them apart or looking away, that earned them the nickname that stuck, The Twin, and made them instantly identifiable and easy to market as actresses. And they played along. Still successful on the biathlon circuit, they pick up bit parts and guest shots on television when and where they can. This week, on the set of Black Guy and Bald Guy.

When Black Guy sees one of them stand, he assumes she's the one who spoke. Bald Guy's right. The Twin Project, his name for a short set of very specific goals, is worth significant effort. The Twin are a candidate for the Eighth Wonder, a category the buddies reserve for women of the highest order. They've yet to declare a winner, but damn. In this scene The Twin are identically dressed in period costume, early 1960s, very Jackie Kennedy, which means the only difference that Black Guy can discern is one's sitting, one's not. Problem is, this episode, set on the sixth anniversary of Emmett Till's murder, is special, and Black Guy's determined to get it right.

It's August 29, 1961. There's a new administration. With hope comes inevitable frustration. And in the style of Black Guy and Bald Guy, something will set it off. And that something will, in most episodes, lead to a scene that, if written well, balances an articulation of a race wrong, usually but not always from the mouth of Black Guy, and an act of retribution, often achieved through the fantasy of violent justice brought by heroic individuals. Black Guy loves the script this week, how it includes Emmett Till with small gestures that speak loudly, and wants to do his part. Still, with all of that on his mind, the woman walking toward him, like the one sitting down, is a traffic-stopper.

She reaches behind the bar, pulls out a stack of napkins, and writes something on one.

"Is this the word?"

Black Guy looks down. He sees neat block letters.

SKIN.

"No." He notices her nails are clipped short. All that shooting and skiing, he guesses.

She writes another word.

NECK.

"What did she write?," Bald Guy asks. "Did she write what I think she wrote?"

Black Guy shoots Bald Guy a look.

"Let me guess. Spook?"

Black Guy turns. "Back off."

She picks up a new napkin.

“Darky?” Bald Guy slaps the bar. “You got to admit that’s a funny one.”

She pushes it forward.

MISCEGENATION.

“High PFH factor. Potential For Humor,” Bald Guy says. “In case anyone’s wondering. Listening.”

“People,” the director shouts. “How about high WTD factor. Work To Do.”

Black Guy looks at her. “No.”

She slides two more toward him.

BODY.

BODY.

“Am I getting warm?”

“2-to-1 odds he’s getting warm,” Bald Guy says to her. “Did you just write something naughty?”

She smiles at Bald Guy, writes another word, and slides the napkin to Black Guy.

Black Guy tenses and says, “Let’s do it.”

“This ain’t Mississippi,” Black Guy barks at the bartender, who shrugs and wipes spots off glasses with a clean bar towel.

Black Guy looks around the room to see who put the napkin there. You leave for a minute or two and bam! It happens. The thing. Bartender says he saw nothing. Same with Bald Guy, who surely saw nothing since he was giving all of his attention to the attractive, identically dressed women sitting alone at a table in the back. He and Black Guy had planned it. They asked the bartender what the two women were drinking. Vodka martinis. They ordered the drinks. Black Guy left for the john. The plan was for Bald Guy to bring the twin martinis to the women, ask if they’re also twins, act surprised, say he’s a twin too, and when they ask where his twin is, point to Black Guy as he returns to the bar. Their response would predict the rest of the evening.

Now it’s the napkin that’s doing the predicting. Someone’s left him a note. He’s looking for the person. A single word, a fighting word, on a bar napkin right there by his glass of beer. It’s 1961, dammit. This ain’t Mississippi. This is Los Angeles. Folks re-invent themselves out here. Black Guy clenches his jaw. He knows he’s being watched. He knows it’s not time to say anything. He’s not touching the note or the beer. He orders another,

which he notices the bartender is slow to draw. White bartender. White patrons would expect no less.

When he turns with his beer, he bumps into a retreating Bald Guy.

“Whoa, cousin.”

The women are indeed identical, down to their matching Jackie Kennedy outfits. Even their smiles, both of which are directed at him, are mirror images.

“Cousin?” Black Guy asks as he nods his head and shakes the hands of The Twin.

“They didn’t buy the twin routine. Seems they accept only the identical variety,” Bald Guy answers. The women laugh, not at exactly the same time but in the same basic way.

In the five minutes it takes the four of them to flirt their way through introductions and empty pleasantries to another order of drinks, two small groups of people walk out. Black Guy feels the coldness, the disapproval, and he thinks maybe he hears the word, the one on the napkin, the one Emmett Till must have heard two, three hundred times that night. Black Guy reaches out to touch a dangling earring and whistles just loud enough for anyone who’s listening in. And who isn’t at that moment? The bar’s as quiet as an open casket.

“Those earrings look like they cost an arm and a leg,” Black Guy says. “Are you two actresses?”

The one who’s giving every indication that she’s leaving with Bald Guy answers with a question. “Are you two actors?”

“Do we look familiar?” the one next to him asks.

Black Guy looks at her, then at the one snuggling into Bald Guy, then back at the one beside him. “I like to think we’re warriors. But yes, you look like someone I’ve kissed before.”

“Really? Where?”

“On the mouth.” He touches her neck. Black hands. White skin.

“You know what I mean,” she says.

“A year ago today. Fifth anniversary of a horrible event.”

Black Guy drains his beer in one big gulp and picks up the napkin with the word on it. “It’s spelled -er, not -ar. And there are two g’s, not one. You could at least learn to spell.”

“Was it a good kiss?”

“It was a necessary kiss. A group of us got together, black, white, walked into a Chicago bar, Oak Park, white bar like this one.” He looks at Bartender, who’s looking at him. “We paired off, guy, gal, black, white,



and protested the Mississippi solution with a long open-mouthed kiss, one per couple, and walked out. We jumped on the EL, repeated our performance at maybe three other white spots in the city. Didn't even make the paper."

"You need to leave. You two. Right now," Bartender says. "No kissing in this bar. Not on my shift."

Black Guy points to Bald Guy and the twin he's kissing on the neck as she finishes her drink. "What about those two?"

Bartender says nothing.

"I asked you a question, Mississippi. Did you put the napkin by my drink?"

"What's wrong with Mississippi?" Bartender's coming around the bar now. "My daddy's from around Biloxi and my mother's from Jackson."

"My best guess then is your daddy's a racist ass-wipe and your mama's a frigid cunt."

"Cut!," yells the director. "Goddammit, Black Guy. This is TV. You can't talk like that."

At ten o'clock the director's finally got what he wants. Without looking around, Black Guy knows Bald Guy's already gone, that he and his half of The Twin snuck off the set the second they were no longer needed. Something about his getting a skiing lesson from a pro.

The other half of The Twin nudges Black Guy as she walks by. "As soon as we get out of this makeup, you want to go get a drink at Frankie and Johnny's? Maybe a bite to eat."

Black Guy pauses before he answers. "It's August 29, you know. Not a good day for me."

"Actually, it's not. When Medgar said 'cut,' the date reverted to today, July 3, which in my book is a good day."

"I can ski," Black Guy says. "I've been skiing since I was a kid. My father would take me every summer when I visited. It's always snowing somewhere in the Alps. I'm half French."

"Can you shoot? Or rather, can you ski, stop, and shoot?"

"I can shoot the shit. Are Frankie and Johnny sweethearts?"

"They were," Twin says. "Until he did her wrong and she got a gun."

"He wasn't happy with a bird in the hand?"

"Apparently not. What makes you happy?"

He looks at the napkins on the bar.

"A good script," he said. "Bird in the hand."

“Who’s the bird?,” she asks.

“Whose hand?,” Black Guy answers.



Dead go the flowers of Coweta County, Georgia, the morning after.

Dead go the voices singing the song of those flowers.

Two men walk along a road at noon. One black. One bald. Black Guy’s carrying a couple of fishing poles, Bald Guy a bag of catfish. It’s April 24, 1899. The men have been down to the water. They will clean, fry, and eat the fish they caught before they leave the county for good. They will figure it out as they go.

Dead goes the gully where the colored flowers grew under the telegraph line that carried the news.

Dead goes the road that carried the mob that carried the man they called boy. Die, boy, die.

Dead go the embers from the fire they built in the field to the north to make their point.

Black Guy and Bald Guy will leave Coweta County for better years and spaces. A better century. They won’t find it for decades, but they don’t know that as they slip off the road into some trees. There they find the path that takes them to their campsite not ten feet from a creek.

Dead goes the time. Today’s not a good time to come or go. Better to hole up in a cave with a month’s supply of food, water, and diversions than to stay on a road around here too long. Right now anyway, given what happened to that poor man.

Whether he did what they said or not.

You want to kill a man? Kill him.

Bam.

Dead go the roads and those who travel them badly.

One of the men gathers twigs to start a small fire. The other finds a flat rock along the creek, a place to sit, packs some chaw in his bottom lip, and sets to cleaning the fish.

The labor divides not by ability. They can both make a fire and coffee, and they’ve both learned enough from the sharp spines of a catfish to know how to clean one in the dark if they have to. They’ve had to.

Dead went Die Boy Die a thousand deaths.

With quick, practiced movements, the man sitting on the flat rock slices through the skin on both sides of the body just below the head.

He's careful cutting around the dorsal fin not to break the backbone. All in due time.

Something in him likes the absence of scales on a catfish, likes the grip and pull of the pliers as the skin gives way, peeling off one side of the body, then the other, down to the tail, reversing like a sock going inside out in shreds. Knife in hand, he slits the fish ass to throat and, his favorite part, cuts through the backbone so he can snap the head off, straight down, entrails sliding out and chasing the head off the side of the rock.

He sees Black Guy watching him.

We'll be gone before the stink, Bald Guy says. Why bury what the critters'll dig up anyway? Easier all around.

Generous of you, Black Guy says.

Bald Guy wasn't generous the night before. Not with details. Fire, knives, and rope was all he said when he got back from town with some hard biscuits, lard, corn meal, and coffee. Sticks of dynamite too. Enough for a post office or a small courthouse.

He left the details out. He didn't say a thing about the knuckles, how they chopped them from the fingers and thumbs they cut from the man's hands while they were putting the rope around his neck. Bald Guy got close enough to see they left the hands. He didn't share that detail.

You got to love the cracker trinity, Black Guy says. Fire, knives, and rope. Fucking overkill. How's that not a major sin? Any one of the three would be enough.

Black Guy, shifting the skillet to get the lard the right degree of hot, turns and kicks at nothing. Whatever happened to the mercy in a well-placed bullet?

F, K, and R. Practically spells fuckers, Bald Guy says as he turns back to the catfish. Get it? F. K. R. Not bad.

You're clever for a bald guy. You point that out, did you, during all that majority advertising?

Fuck that majority noise. Let's eat and get out of here, Bald Guy says. Ain't no place to be.

Bald Guy didn't say a thing about the skin they peeled from the guy's face while he screamed. He didn't say a thing about how the guy quit screaming when they cut off his dick. He had no visual confirmation of the latter, but his ears heard what they heard. Hard to mistake that for something else. That's when they lit the fire around the big stone the man stood on, still alive but lifeless, a noose loose around his neck.

Bald Guy looks down at his hands, the catfish and the knife they're

holding. The rest is fins and tail. Removal of parts that offend. That easy. Then a rinse of fish meat in creek water and repeat until all four of the big cat are ready for the fire. Routine. By the time he's done with the third and the fourth, the first two are almost ready to eat.

Man, I'd rather clean ten bluegill or bass than take pliers to a single catfish. Black Guy reaches for some more corn meal and salt, adjusts the skillet. Fish without scales ain't a fish exactly, Black Guy says.

Fish is a fish. Bald Guy sticks his knife in the ground a couple of times, wipes it clean with his shirttail.

Black Guy pulls the remaining fish through what's left of the cornmeal and places them side by side in the skillet that's close to smoking.

You're a filthy people, he says. You know that, right? You have a creek there in front of you.

How many times I have to say it? Dirt's better in the long run than water. Water kills a knife.

We got a fire over here that would dry that knife out. Purify it.

Even fire will fail a man, Bald Guy says. He uses his left forefinger to flip and spit the chaw from his jaw. He spits a couple more times, holds the finger up. Then wipes it clean on his shirt tail. So we going to do this then?

He did see the heart. Hard to call it mercy, but at least the man was dead when they put out the fire and took a hatchet to his chest. Bald Guy didn't throw up then. The guy was still hanging by his neck. It was a weird lesson to see how they could break into a man, through his chest, the bony armor, while he's swinging, his dead body resisting. Or maybe he didn't see the heart at all. Maybe all he really saw was the fist push into the chest and pull something out, hold that something in the air for the crowd to see, call that something a heart.

People were pushing into people, barking, howling. Bald Guy heard someone behind him yell to the men up front they should send the heart to the governor, put it on the next train. When the voice attached to the fist raised another fist, this one with a knife big enough to gut a deer, and yelled back we'll send him a slice, that's when Bald Guy threw up.

He wasn't the only one.

Do what? Eat the rest of the fish? Hell, yes. I'm hungry.

The post office. Or courthouse or whatever it is you have on your mind this time. Your turn to choose.

Haven't decided yet. How about a schoolhouse at midnight?

A poor janitor might die, Bald Guy says as he washes down a last

chunk of hot, greasy fish with coffee.

A church at daybreak then?

Which one? Too many to choose from here in the Belt. Plus, same thing. That innocent janitor.

Black Guy eats his last piece of fish. Who says he's innocent? Shit, the best thing that could happen around here is fire. County line to county line.

Dead go the flowers of Coweta County.

Forty days and nights, Black Guy says. Burn, baby, burn. Purify.

Given the size of the crowd yesterday, only some of which were folks rolling in on the train from Atlanta, Bald Guy knows there's a good chance the janitor was there too, knife or rope or match in hand.

Dead go all the roads leading in and out.

Bald Guy wipes his knife on his shirt tail again, inspects it, the knife, sticks it in the ground, inspects it again.

Dead go forgiveness, the sky above, mercy.

Black Guy clears his throat.

Filthy people and sad thing is you're proud of it. Black Guy points to the fire. Purify that knife, brother.

Dead go the general store, the porch, the pickle barrel, and the good old chairs around it.

Purify, Bald Guy spits. Ain't no such thing and you know it.

Here's what I don't know, Black Guy says. Tell me about yesterday's knives. Help me make up my mind.

Dead go a few of the fists and most of the janitor six hours later when Bald Guy lights the long fuse he hid the night before where he bought the coffee, the lard, and the corn meal.

On their way out of Coweta, they set the field on fire. Die, field, die. Bald Guy worked on the melody as they walked. Black Guy worked on the words.