

BAKER ARTIST PORTFOLIO Novel Sample

Excerpt from “Backbeat the Waves”

That summer, I wore a terrycloth white bathrobe every day until it dirtied as brown as the sands of Tatooine. My mother bought it for me when I, quite unexpectedly, asked for a bathrobe, not the typical request from a thirteen-year-old in the summer of Slime, skateboards, and fire-breathing twenty-inch Godzillas. You never wore one before, she said. I shrugged. Besides, it’s June, she said, it’s already hotter than the hinges of hell. I dropped my chin to my chest and rested both hands on my hips, thumbs forward. She sighed, lit a cigarette, and gave me the once-over. Boys your age, she said, it must be total bedlam in there, and she nudged my head as she passed by toward the stairs. If I have a sec before the bar opens, she called back while descending, I’ll run up to Epstein’s and see what they have.

Later that morning, my mother brought back a blue-and-green plaid cotton robe with shiny black lapels.

“Mom, I said plain white, this isn’t plain white at all,” I cried.

“Oh, baby, you’ll look very dashing in this one and it was on sale.”

My body collapsed like a supernova. She gently lifted my chin with a finger curved into a pirate’s hook.

“What’s wrong, Merck?”

“I said white, it has to be white!”

“Voice.” Stern.

My chin anchored itself again on my chest. I tried to growl a low rumbling sigh like Chewbacca, but it came out more like a fake belch.

“Besides, with your aunt and Nixie coming next week I thought you might prefer something a little more, decent.”

I kicked at a dust bunny that gnawed on the side of my Keds. I had forgotten how my aunt and cousin were coming to Pat City to stay with us. Where were they going to sleep in this small place, on the back fire escape? We only had two rooms with Mom in one and Jupie in the other; Jupie who used the fire escape more than the alley door (my mother preferred that we not use the front entrance during bar hours). I slept on the pull-out that sandwiched into a sofa in daytime. I frumped toward the small kitchenette in the back of the apartment.

“Fine, here’s the receipt,” she said, pinching a piece of white paper between middle and forefinger the way she holds a cigarette. “I tried, but go on back to Epstein’s and exchange it. I got to get Clarice going in the kitchen. Before you do anything, mister, get the produce from Mr. Connie when he comes through.”

Soon the old arabber’s call sailed through the back alley. *Holler, holler, holler, till my throat get sore. If it wasn't for the pretty girls, I wouldn't have to holler no more. I say, watermelon! Watermelon! Got 'em red to the rind, lady.* Mr. Connie sung about cantaloupes as if they were lovers, Silver Queen corn as if they were dreams, Brandywine tomatoes as if they were gems. Some summer mornings I would go down to the stables near the pier and help him and the other arabbers groom their horses, hitch up their painted wagons, and load produce off boats from the other side of the bay. Then they fanned out across town with horses named Jughead, Caboose, Miss Shirley, and Sparkle Pearl. Most of the Arabs put straw hats on their horses’ heads with slits in the top for long ears to fit through, but Mr. Connie bobby-pinned an old Elite Gulls cap to his horse, Curveball, matching the weathered one he wore from his days in

the Negro Leagues. *Awberries, redder than wine and just as fine. Awberries!* Bells around the Curveball's necked jangled in time with Mr. Connie's call.

"Morning Mr. Mercury."

"Morning."

"It's been awhile since we've seen you down to the stables."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Can't teach you the trade if you ain't by more regular."

"Don't think I want to be an arabber."

"Hmm," Mr. Connie said, removing his ball cap to reveal coal hair dusted with ash.

"What is it you want to be then?"

"I don't know."

"Better figure her out, you getting big. By your age, I was already perfecting my curveball."

"Guess I'm not that perfect with anything."

"Oh, don't go saying that, Mr. Mercury. Everybody's good at something." Mr. Connie snapped open two brown paper bags and started filling them with corn and tomatoes.

I got the fruit and vegetables my mother wanted and took a timid minute to feed Curveball a sugar cube, the horse's leathery speckled tongue stretching out almost as long as my forearm. *Come dance with the Silver Queen, from Eastern Sho with ears so keen! Come dance! I've got co-horn!* As soon as Mr. Connie and Curveball continued along the alley, I tore up Broadway to Epstein's with the box containing the wrong bathrobe under my arm. Ms. Louise stood in the storefront window dressing a mannequin in a blue waistcoat with tails and red-and-white striped pants, which bunched at the plastic man's ankles like an accordion, his lifeless

hairless crotch announcing neither he or she. Still, for some reason it embarrassed me and I turned my head just as Ms. Louise spotted me and waved, so I worried that she thought I dissed her. I walked the length of the storefront past dolls sharing a picnic, a child mannequin flying a kite hooked by fishing line caught in perpetual wind, and a rainbow of towels stacked in a ROY G BIV arch.

“Morning Merck,” said Mr. Epstein from behind the register when I walked in. A bell above the door jingled. “What’s the good word?” he always asked.

“Nothing,” I always replied, wanting to counter with something more clever like “gnarly,” “copasetic,” or “zoinks,” but never able to think quick enough. “Where are your bathrobes?”

“Back and to the left between men’s and the other bathroom items. Your mother was in earlier for one.”

“I have an exchange.”

“No problem, just bring it to me when you find what you want.”

I zigged through a maze of tabletops and shelves stocked with hairdryers, socks, bleach, work boots, transistor radios, curlers, aspirin, Noxzema, Bromo Seltzer, model railroad gear, walkie talkies, kickballs, corn dishes with corn stickers, random mugs and dishes, and collectible mirrors with the names of rock-n-roll bands like Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, and Grateful Dead. In the back of the store, I found another version of the blue-and-green plaid bathrobe that my mother picked out, along with burgundy silk robes, quilted robes in gold and black, moss green nylon tricot with celery green piping, and terrycloth robes in vivid stripes like sticks of gum advertised by that psychedelic zebra: “Tickle your tongue with Fruit Stripe Gum.” Cherry stripe. Lemon stripe. Orange stripe. Lime stripe. Not one plain white robe. Then, over in women’s, I

saw it: as simple as a pillar of salt and large enough to fit me comfortably, something a grandmother would wear, too long but otherwise perfect with matching belt. A rose embroidered over the left breast could be easily fixed. I took it and the box to the front counter where a fan oscillated breeze across American flags on pointed sticks, white-plumed pens like the one used to sign the Declaration, and a note on the register reminding customers that the state sales tax was now five percent.

“Now let’s see here,” Mr. Epstein said. He took the blue-and-green plaid monstrosity out of the box and hesitated while comparing it to what I brought to the counter. It looked as if he weighed a peacock in one hand with a polar bear in the other. “I take it this robe is for you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But this robe is for women, Merck, see even it ties with right side over left, like a lady’s.”

“Um, what I mean is it’s for her, my mother. I don’t need a bathrobe, so I want to exchange it for one she needs.”

“Why that’s mighty sweet, but this is way too big for Donna. Let me help you pick out...”

“No, no!”

Mr. Epstein stopped in his tracks before emerging from behind the counter. He smoothed his moustache with a finger.

“I mean, she likes them that way, baggy, like a blanket.”

“Well, okay, we can exchange it, but you keep the new receipt just the same and come back again if you need to.”

Mr. Epstein rung up the bathrobe and gave me back \$4.50 since it was cheaper. “Don’t shy from bringing it back, we’re open through the weekend but not on Monday for the holiday.”

I thanked Mr. Epstein and dashed out, averting my eyes from half-naked Uncle Sam in the window with Ms. Louise kneeling before him, her cheek pressed against lustrous crotch while she fiddled with the striped pants’ waistband. Officer Bert stood on the corner with his cap pushed high on his forehead arguing with Sal the Bookie. Gus the barber swept hair into the gutter that caught a current of hydrant water down toward the harbor. Stevedores streamed into Quaker Cove for food and beer on their lunch-break from unloading stacks of aluminum ingots, bales of steel wire, and slabs of scrap iron. Deckhands working the tugs dowsed handkerchiefs in pails of water then tied them around their necks. A blue haze lingered that shrouded points across the harbor in a gauzy film. Folks crowded Broadway back down toward the cove’s pier and the bar, most of them I knew, but I did not stop to say hello to anyone. I needed to get back to the small apartment over the bar where we lived.

Entering the bar’s alley door I leaped up the backstairs without greeting Clarice, who paused from flipping burgers on a flat grill to say “Good day, Mr. Merck.” Upstairs, I took pinking shears from my mother’s sewing kit to shorten the robe by about twenty inches. I pictured the size of the fire-breathing Godzilla advertised on TV as my guide and chewed into the terrycloth leaving behind a shark-toothed edge. I slipped on the robe and pulled at the dangling threads left by the crummy hem job, snipping off a few strands with the pinking shears. Still the edges frayed. Standing on tiptoes to fully see myself in the bathroom mirror, I saw that the robe’s edge was a few inches higher on one side, so I returned to the kitchen table to even it up. Terrycloth pellets dusted the floor around me like snow. Back in the bathroom I re-evaluated my workmanship and decided, despite a straggly edge, job complete. I cinched the

belt tight around my waist below my belly and bloused the lapels so that I did not look so fat. I thought some Liquid Paper might cover the pink rose, but that could wait. More important matters remained.

I dug through Uncle Jules's old army footlocker that I used for a toy chest, chucking aside a Slinky bent out of shape, hardened chunks of Silly Putty, a one-armed Steve Austin doll, random Lite-Brite pegs, a Vida Blue baseball glove, several torn and punctured ViewMaster reels, Evel Knievel mask from last Halloween. Checkers and marbles rattled to the bottom of the chest as I dug deeper until I found the yellow Wiffle Ball bat I stowed after the sewer sucked down the last of our wiffle balls. I held it aloft the way I imagined King Arthur lifted Excalibur, sliced the air with it like Zorro, and regarded it with the awe Luke Skywalker felt the first time he flipped on his light saber. Then the wheels started to turn: I ran to the kitchenette and emptied the junk drawer onto the Formica table, found electrical tape, and fetched the flashlight from under the sink. I emptied the flashlight's batteries, which rolled off the table onto the floor, and jammed the handle end of the Wiffle Ball bat into the empty cylinder. Holding the two pieces tight under my arm, I taped them together with several revolutions of black tape. With first test, a gentle ballestra and riposte, the Wiffle Ball bat wiggled inside the shaft of the flashlight, so more electrical tape went around and around.

Vern, vem, vem! Vern vern! Vem!

My light saber sizzled.

"Use the Force, Merck," I heard while slipping the light saber into one of the bathrobe's beltloops where it hung well. "Your father's light saber," Alec Guinness's voice continued.

"This is the weapon of a Jedi Knight."

I whipped it out—vern vern!—clutched the handle with both hands, and tore through the apartment with a battle cry somewhere between a rebel yell and a screaming Indian. The pillows on Jupie’s bed did not stand a chance. I whacked tubular crevices into paisley pillow cases. I dismembered a shirt from the corner clothes tree. Then I stabbed my sister’s Kiss poster right in Paul Stanley’s star eye, but the backswing when I went after Gene Simmons sent Jupie’s bedside lamp crashing to the floor. The complete swell of attack deflated by a broken light fixture. I ran back toward the kitchenette hoping to find Elmer’s glue among the junk-drawer contents still strewn across the table, but a Darth Vader shadow rose from the stairs.

“Mercy sakes, what’s all the racket up here?” my mother said. “What are you wearing?”

An image focused like a projection on a pearlescent screen affixed to the inside of my skull: Mercury Widdershins, rusty-haired and “big-boned,” splitting a woman’s bathrobe slashed so that it fell between bottom of shorts and tops of tube socks, wielding a yellow plastic stick. Red glow on face did not emit from a light saber. I handed her the four dollars change and felt guilty for bogarting the fifty cents.

“This one was cheaper than the one you got.”

“What did...why did you...I don’t,” she squeaked half-blurts of sentences like R2-D2. She tugged off an earring and massaged her earlobe.

“I was just...”

“Perfectly good robe ruined.”

“It’s like what...”

“I know what it’s like. Should’ve never let Uncle Jules take you to that stupid movie.”

“But...”

“Save it mister,” she interrupted. “Lunch crowd is thinning, we’ll talk about this later. Clean that mess in the kitchen and put my pinking shears back where you found them before you decide to alter the curtains.”

A sigh parted the staircase into which my mother disappeared. As soon as she left, I felt that screaming Indian well up inside me again. Shoulders straightened. Chest puffed. Eyes squinted. I leaned back and raised my light saber to my shoulder, posed like a Shaolin monk on “Kung Fu Theater.” That summer, I vowed, the universe would shudder at the might of this knight. Suited up, armed, and possessed by a mission, I only lacked one thing: a nemesis.

That, and the Elmer’s glue to fix Jupie’s busted lamp.