

MURDERERS**Full latest version** - 900 WORDS - 6:00 MIN

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I'm eating my favorite bologna sandwich and root beer dinner at Mitchell's Delicatessen before I meet up with my buddy Tony to see "War of the Worlds" at the nearby RKO movie house. It's 1953 and I'm eighteen, living at home, a twelve-minute commuter train ride to my first salaried job working for a weekly newspaper in White Plains. Tonight I'm going see the much-touted red-eyed invaders massacre the Earth's population before taking the late train home.

We're sitting in the dark and I suck the chocolate off my Milk Duds watching rampaging Martians zap and disable Earth's armies until they suddenly all die from the human cold virus. After the movie, we exchange wows and goodnights. Tony walks to his house nearby and I head for the New York Central station on Main Street.

It's the first time I've taken the train home this late, and I'm still a little spooked from the film. I hustle nervously down the deserted street past unlit shops, peering into dark doorways for signs of any leftover Martians. It isn't until I climb the two flights of stairs from the street to the outdoor rail platform above that I feel safe.

The station platform is deserted, silent, dark and chilly for June. Shoulders hunched, hands crammed into my pants pockets, I stand against the cool darkness, then dance a keep-warm shuffle while watching for the train's headlight.

I hear voices from the street below. People are climbing the stairs and the platform door opens. I watch as two men stroll casually onto the platform. I'm standing in a pool of light from one of the bulb fixtures hanging above. The men stand under the next light, twenty feet away.

They are young black men, both wearing long tweed topcoats, which I shrug off as just a fashion look even though it's summertime. The only black person I've known is our housekeeper of ten years, Fannie Mae Mickens, whom I love like an aunt. The men are whispering, their heads close together. I'm a little concerned because now they are staring at me, but I am comforted by their neat clothes and besides, the train is due any minute. Still, I feel vulnerable because it's late and there's no one else around.

I look again up the track for an oncoming headlight but see only distant neighborhood streetlights. When I turn back I am startled to find the two men standing right next to me, one on each side, inches away. I smell the wool of their coats. One is blank-faced, gazing down the platform. The other, who is closer, stares into my eyes. His face is round and now I notice he is very short, which makes him seem younger than I, but he has a slight beard and angry eyes.

I'm caught between thinking I should stand my ground and posture a mean look right back, and wanting to flee down the stairs and wait for the next train.

"Do you have the time?" he asks. It sounds more like a challenge than a question. I begin to raise my left arm to look under my sleeve, but then I remember what Dad once told me: "Don't give a stranger the time if they ask. They might be checking to see if you have a watch to steal." I stop my gesture in mid-air and lower the arm. "Sorry, I don't know the time," I say.

Then his friend raises his chin and slides his right hand into his coat pocket in a very deliberate gesture. The man closest to me puts his left hand into his pocket and presses his stomach against mine. He stares coldly into my eyes and says, "You lookin' for trouble or somthin'?"

Now I'm really frightened. Any tough guy posture I've been working on vanishes. "No, I'm not," I mumble. "Sorry."

He yanks his hand out of his pocket and, with a lightning fast swing of his forearm, slaps me across my face so hard that I see a blue flash. The pain makes me wince and turn away and I spot a train headlight wobbling down the tracks. It's my train. When I look back, both men are walking backwards towards the stairs. The train rumbles into the station, bringing with it noise, light and people. On the ride home, my knees quiver. I don't feel safe until I reach my house and climb into bed. I close my eyes to shut out the whole event and fall asleep.

The next morning, I report to work in our editorial office, with only a lingering thought of last night. Our office receives all the morning local papers so our reporters can troll for stories. I pick up today's copy of The White Plains Reporter Dispatch and read the headline on the front page: "Two Arrested In Shooting Death of Local Merchant." In the photo below, I see them: the two men from the platform. They're in handcuffs, wearing their winter overcoats.

Wide-eyed, I show the paper to Walter, the managing editor. He points out that the police have recovered the weapon. "So I wouldn't mention this unless you want to be tied up in a murder investigation and long trial," he says. "But it's your choice."

My choice is simple: stay as far away from this horrible event as possible. I'm not "lookin" for trouble or sumthin."

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