

The Detroit Veteran's Hospital

Detective Ezekiel Collins, Zeke to his friends, needed a trophy, something to prove he belonged in the company of the seasoned white detectives and was more than a post-1967 riot, black, political token. The handsome Doctor Balinger would be a great trophy. He was getting close. He should be able to find another clue at the Veteran's Hospital.

Detective Collins looked like the Champ, Sugar Ray Robinson. Cool, confident wouldn't take lip from anybody, black or white. He was middleweight size and fit. When he was promoted to detective a few months ago his hair was processed, lightly pomaded, with a shiny-sharp part. He had a pencil thin mustachio framing his upper lip.

As the investigation progressed, he ditched the process job and grew a short Afro and heavier moustache. "*The Times They Are A Changing*" morphed into, "*Say It Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud.*"

Zeke drove to the Detroit Veteran's Hospital. He parked in front, got out of his car and gazed up at the huge structure. It dwarfed him. It was a monstrous beehive of a building. A large center entrance with two wings on the side. Six hundred beds. Most filled with chain-smoking heavy drinking vets dying of lung cancer or cirrhosis of the liver. He felt surrounded by their misery. He could sense the gloom.

There was more snow on the ground. It was late March but still very cold. Opening day for the Tigers would be in a few weeks. It was always cold on opening day. Detroit expected a lot from the 1968 team.

He entered the hospital. Patients in thin robes and hospital gowns and surgical scrub pants loitered in the lobby. The cigarette smoke produced a thin wispy cloud. The acrid smell of the smoke mixed with the alcohol vapors of a chemical disinfectant. It smelled combustible.

He saw one very thin man put a cigarette in a hole cut in his throat. The man directly sucked the smoke into his throat, expanded his thin chest with puny thoracic muscles then exhaled. The residual smoke poured out of his lungs through the hole in his neck. When the man finished his cigarette he rolled his wheelchair to an attendant who attached him to an oxygen tank.

He'd seen a lot working homicide but this made him nauseated. Equivalent to a bad crime scene. To see the man put the cigarette into a hole in his neck that mixed with the greenish yellow junk oozing out made him shudder. He thought of the ad jingle, "*Winston Tastes Good Like a Cigarette Should.*" But there are no taste buds in the neck.

He looked around for someone in charge. He spied a large man in a long white coat and caught the word "Director" on the front of his lab coat.

He approached the man who started yelling at two ambulance men wheeling an elderly man to admitting.

"Those bastards in the suburbs have done it again."

Collins flashed his Detroit Homicide badge.

"What did they do?" Collins asked. "Can I help?"

"No," the doctor said. "I haven't killed anybody yet, but stick around."

The tall doctor shouted at the orderlies. "Don't admit that man. Put him back in the ambulance and take him back to the hospital he came from, God dammit."

He turned to Collins.

"They bring this guy to us. Can't speak English, which should have been their first clue. They pin a note on him, say he's a vet and he has pneumonia. We have to take any veteran. And he is a vet, but he fought for the Germans in World War One. Get his Heine heine out of this hospital."

"Why don't you keep him? The war's over?"

"He's a victim of the poison mustard gas, but his own men did it to him. Only the German's used poison gas but they couldn't control the wind. The wind blew right back at them, he was wounded and lying in no man's land. Imagine gassing the wounded. What a piece of work is man."

"How do you know so much about him?"

"Because one time they brought him here and he was real sick I couldn't send him back. I treated him. He ran up a huge bill and we didn't get a dime. The private hospitals know it, that's why they sent him to us. Bastards. If he was sick I'd admit him but he's not that bad so he's going back, now. Germans seem to like to use gas. They used a lot more of it in World War Two, on civilians, bastards."

Collins liked this man. He doesn't take any shit and he doesn't forget.

He addressed Collins, "Now Detective, what can I do for you?"

"I need some information on a doctor, a Vietnam vet."

"Most of the doctors that work here at the VA are foreign. The private hospitals won't accept the LBMs."

"LBMs?"

"Little brown men," the doctor said. "They weren't in the service."

"This guy was."

"Those guys in Vietnam were gassed by their own men as well. Something called Agent Orange. We're starting to see lung disease like our poor old Kraut friend there. We're starting to see cancers too. Let's go to medical records. It's ironic the World War One gases cured some cancers. Nitrogen mustard it's used to treat Hodgkin's. Now this Agent Orange doesn't cure cancer, it causes it."

Collins walked with the doctor. The doctor walked the halls looking around. "I feel sorry for these guys, the VA is their last hope. Lots of tragedy here."

"Look at this guy."

The doctor pointed to a black man. He stood on the steps leading from the lobby to the floors of the hospital. He was giving a speech. It turned out to be a sermon.

"He did it all back at Calvary." He clapped his hands and continued, "He did it all."

"Okay, James," the doctor said. "Come down from the steps."

He turned to Zeke and said, "As he gets going, gets in the spirit, he goes further up the steps. He gets going and falls. He knocked himself out last time. He likes to hurt himself, throw himself on the steps. Break ribs. It's a suffering thing."

Zeke observed the man.

"He's a preacher?"

"He's a lot of things," the doctor said. "Just ask him. Talk to him while I try to get one of the Kaiser's soldiers out of an American VA hospital."

The doctor spoke to James. "James follow me to my office. Bring Mary with you. I want you to talk to this man."

James came down the steps. He had his arms around an imaginary person, obviously shorter. He talked to the invisible person as he walked toward Detective Collins.

The doctor played along with the charade.

"You three can sit in my office."

Zeke sat behind the doctor's cluttered desk. There was an ashtray, filled with cigarette butts. He picked it up. It was the top of a human skull.

The preacher sat in front of him. He pulled up a chair next to him and beckoned the imaginary person to sit.

"My name is Detective Ezekiel Collins."

"Detective?"

"Detroit Homicide."

"Bullshit. There hasn't been a black peace officer of any consequence since Ben Turpin patrolled the Black Bottom with his cast iron breast plates and pearl handled pimp guns."

"I've been a Detective for six months now, ever since the riots."

"1943 Belle Isle?"

"No, 1967, Twelfth Street and Clairmont."

Zeke realized the man didn't know the year, barely knew the century. Zeke wanted the doctor to get back. Crazy people bothered him--you never knew what they would do and they were strong as hell. You didn't want to shoot them. Sometimes you had to. They were safer in mental hospitals. Thank God they had them. Zeke changed the subject.

"What's your name?"

The Reverend stood at attention. "James R. Putnam." He saluted.

"I'm captured. James R. Putnam, 99th Fighter Squadron. The Red Tailed Angels. Shot down over Germany. It's World War Two and I'm in a German prison camp and it's my duty to escape."

"No, Mr. Putnam. This is not Germany. This is Detroit. You're not captured. You're a patient in a hospital."

"Tuskegee Veteran's Hospital?"

"No this is the Detroit Veterans hospital."

James saluted. "Can my wife stay with me?"

"I can't see her. There's nobody here but you and me."

"Very funny detective. My wife's right there, sitting in the chair."

James motioned and talked at the chair.

"They wouldn't let her stay with me when I was at the Tuskegee hospital. But that was Alabama. Things are much better for us in Detroit."

"Yeah right," Zeke thought. "Tell that to the forty-three that died in July."

"Mary stays with me. We were separated once, twenty years ago, and I couldn't stand it. I went crazy, right Mary?"

"That's right," he answered for her.

"It's okay, Mary, you can stay here," Zeke said. "Okay now Jimmy?"

"James," he said.

"What?"

“The name is James. Jimmy is a fool’s name, like Jim Crow. And there ain’t no Jim Crow in me, right, Mary?”

“Indeed not,” he said for Mary.

“They’ve abolished those black Jim Crow laws.”

“And,” he said, “refer to me as a gentleman of color, not black. I used to get into fights when people called me black or worse.”

He whispered in my ear, so Mary wouldn’t hear. “Don’t call Mary black or colored. She’s octoroon and don’t say high yellow. Octoroon she thinks it’s the perfect mix for a female.”

“Were you really in the army?”

“Air Force.”

“Air Force?”

“I flew planes for the United States of America. I flew fighter escorts. The Germans would see the blood red paint on the tail of my plane, and they’d scatter like crazy bees. Nobody messed with the Tuskegee Airmen. We escorted two hundred missions and didn’t lose a plane. Flew wing tip to wing tip like crosses. Big flying crosses and we crucified them. The white pilots loved us in the air, hated us on the ground.”

“Hold it,” Zeke said. “You were a Tuskegee Airman? The black pilots?”

“We were all gentlemen of color.”

“Pilots?”

“As God is always my witness.”

He continued with war stories: “Sank a German destroyer with my machine guns. No bombs, no torpedoes. The planes they gave us were shit. Got the Distinguished Flying Cross.”

James stood and walked across the room. His feet smacked on the floor as if he were wearing skin divers flippers.

The doctor came back.

“There’s no patient like no patient,” he said. “I got rid of the Heine. Hey, James, hey, Mary.”

“Hello doc. Is he really a detective?”

“Yes sir. James will you go back to your room. I need to speak to him.”

“Come on Mary.” James left the room.

“Was he really a Tuskegee airman?” Collins asked.

“I didn’t believe him at first but it looks like he’s telling the truth.”

“How do you know?”

“I went to the university library and did a search on The Tuskegee Airmen. I read books and old newspaper clippings. I obtained rosters, lists of the dead and wounded, there was a James Putnam.”

“Damn. Those guys were the best of the best. Our next mayor will most likely be Coleman Young and he was a Tuskegee Airman. What happened to Mr. Putnam’s mind?”

“I’ll get to that. His story gets worse,” the doctor said. “I went to the hospital records room to pull James’ charts. I had a hunch. I could find nothing to add to his history but there was an autopsy report of a Mary Putnam. Mary’s autopsy showed that of a thirty-year-old mulatto female who died of a ruptured aortic heart valve. The autopsy

was done by doctors from the Public Health Service, not the staff of the VA. That was odd. The feds should never have been involved unless something big was going on.”

“Later I was able to obtain the records of James’ stay at the Tuskegee Veteran’s hospital. The records validated some of his story. He had been a Tuskegee airman, but was released after six weeks because of “bad blood.” “Bad blood” was what they called syphilis. He was sent to the black only Tuskegee Veteran’s Hospital. Bad blood, the Tuskegee Veteran’s Hospital, Public Health Service, ruptured heart valves put it all together. He was one of those six hundred black men in the Tuskegee syphilis study.”

Collins asked, “What was the Tuskegee Syphilis Study?”

“A federal program that was used to study and treat syphilis in Alabama in the 1920’s.”

“What did they treat it with?”

“Salversan, arsenic, it was very toxic and painful treatment but it worked. It cured syphilis before penicillin,” the doctor added. “An evening with Venus a lifetime with Mercury.”

“They didn’t treat the patients?”

“At fist they were treated with the Salversan, the mercury, but the depression hit and there was no money for treatment so they just studied the long term effects of syphilis on humans. They were learning so much that when penicillin was available and cheap they still didn’t treat. The study’s not a secret. All the academicians know about it. It’s in the medical literature. A Henry Ford Hospital doctor is trying to get the study stopped but no one will listen to him. I talked with him. His name is Eisenberg. He told me not to bother trying to stop the study, it’s useless and they are vindictive, they’ll try to destroy your career.”

“We should treat him anyway,” Zeke said.

The doctor shook his head. “I tried. But the Government tracks these men all over the country. You’re not allowed to treat them. It would be a felony. They’re part of a federal study. There’s a comprehensive network, nation wide, that follows theses guys and prevents their treatment.”

“Let’s treat him anyway.”

“I was going to but then I thought better of it.”

“I don’t understand,” Zeke said.

“I don’t want to treat him. His life is as good as it’s ever going to be. It’s too late.

They arrived at medical records.

“Hey Miss Ballard, help this detective out.”

“Sure.”

“I need to look at the records of one of your doctors.”

Collins sat in a plastic chair with steel arms. He lit up.

“Here are your records. You can look at them over there.” She pointed to a row of small cubicles.

She waved the blue-grey smoke cloud that hovered over Collins dispersing it.

She coughed, “Someday they won’t let people smoke in hospitals.”

“Hope not. It’ll be tough on the patients. Especially the vets.” He wanted to tell her about the guy who was smoking through the hole in his neck.

Collins opened the file. Dr. Balinger was a patient in the epilepsy-seizure clinic. So he was telling the truth. It was another dead end.

Collin realized the bigger crime was the failure to treat James Putnam and the six hundred others and their families. Collins wasn't convinced that withholding treatment wasn't in fact equivalent of murder and he was a homicide detective. This wasn't homicide it was genocide.

He returned to the doctor's office.

Collin placed his badge and gun on the doctor's desk.

"Treat the poor bastard."

The doctor was cool. He smiled. He was not intimidated.

His professional cool disturbed Collins.

"Don't you see detective, if we cure him, he loses everything. He will realize he's not a war hero, and that Mary's dead and the syphilis he gave her infected her heart valve and killed her."

Collins remained silent. He wasn't convinced.

"Don't you see? The syphilis bacteria acted like microscopic corkscrews that tunneled out his bad memories, and preserved his good ones. He was lucky in that respect. It gave him delusions of grandeur. Let it be. He lives in a beautiful parallel universe where he is a hero."

"Why is the VA so concerned about not treating him?"

"Money."

"Money? Penicillin is not expensive."

"Yeah, but the government makes a fortune on the VDRL test. They draw the blood from these men every four months and use the syphilis bacteria as the substrate for the VDRL test. Six hundred black men are left untreated and used as the world's source for the bacteria. His blood will be harvested and sent to the research lab. The Venereal Disease Research Lab, hence the name VDRL test. The government makes money every time the test is used. We're talking millions of dollars. Marriage license, army recruits, prisoners, all have to get the test. It makes me sick. Our tax dollars at work, like the Vietnam War. By the way if you know of any kid that wants to get out of going to Vietnam send him to me. I will find something that makes him 4-F."

"Even though you work for the VA?"

"Especially because I work in the VA and see the mess they've created, the human wreckage."

Collin left the VA. Balinger was not their man. He was trying to solve a murder while the government and America's top medical institutions were allowing six hundred black men, not to mention their families, be slowly killed, and murdered in the name of science and the syphilis test money. Collins understood why blacks feared doctors and hospitals.

He walked toward his car. "It was 1968," he thought. "The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, at least they could now eat at lunch counters and share bathrooms with whites. Getting six hundred black men and their families treated for syphilis was a different issue."

Solving one murder did not seem such a big deal compared to what he'd just learned. "Stalin was correct," he thought. "One death is a tragedy, a million a statistic."

He'd return to Detroit Homicide and try to solve one murder, one tragedy. He would leave the statistics, the multiple tragedies to the bureaucrats.

He'd take them one at a time.

It was like getting sober. You had to take it one day at a time.