

thrice great hermes

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by stanley lieber

taking up his assigned seat in mr. anderson's class, vidya gradually fell in with a new crowd. loud, illiterate, stridently devoted to high school athletics—so far, not much different than anyone else attending the school—his new friends were distinguished primarily by the fact that they were, much like vidya himself, the targets of constant, nonsensical abuse. joining in with this new crew—mom had referred to them as "colored boys"—somehow intensified vidya's own status as punching bag for the upperclassmen and for the less careful adults who concerned themselves with matters of tradition and seamliness.

mr. anderson had asked him lots of questions about the music. vidya dutifully played him some tracks. the older man had seemed sincerely interested, but it was clear that the english teacher in him wasn't ready for these kinds of lyrics. at least no one had told his mom what he had been listening to. mr. anderson, visibly appalled, had put on a brave face and let the subject drop.

james was his point of entry with the colored boys, co-signing for vidya's uncanny ability to make anyone, mostly anyone, laugh. it was the first time after kindergarten, where vidya himself had laughed out loud at the absurdity of his classmates' comprehensive ignorance of the world, that he had belonged to a large group of friends. this happy and hilarious situation was befuddling in the extreme. where had they all suddenly come from?

answer: kingston, jamaica.

in an unlikely arrangement, a national content provider had acquired the remnants of his town's crumbling gilded age resort hotel—a story in itself—and had conspired to sponsor immigration into the area of cheap labor from the caribbean. the workers, naturally, had brought their families along with them, or in some cases had produced additional offspring once they arrived. all of these children, once they reached the mandatory age, would attend vidya's school. this was how the presence of non-whites in the community had been explained to him by critter's dad, clearly inebriated, taking a break from long soliloquies about his three tours of duty in vietnam.

the economics of the resort hotel, situated as it was in the middle of nowhere, made little sense when one considered the narrow roads, the expense of freight both to and from its remote location, the relative dearth of local color and culture, but it remained a substantial employer of the local population, immigrant or otherwise. in fact, the surveillance vendor who had recently fired vidya also serviced a contract with the hotel. fiber optic lines snaked in and out of the guest rooms, wiring the whole building for networked audio and video surveillance. other businesses in town enjoyed similar custom.

from his new friends vidya had learned his way around the grounds. service entrances, service tunnels, private elevators, hidden doors, locked cabinets, crawlspaces, sealed storage facilities, forgotten access points to the roof. many days, vidya didn't even bother going to school. just as the abandoned structure in the woods had proven superior isolation, the hotel was a better place to sit and read than the school's library, with its multimedia displays and its teaching assistant staff sword fighting with newspaper sticks. most of the rooms were empty. most of the staff didn't care.

aw, little of this was true. none of these kids were really his friends. only rarely would any of them deign to talk to him. vidya wondered what their home countries had been like. he wondered why they seemed so happy to have moved here, to this wretched shithole he hated with all of his being, with every pixel of his after-image.

vidya turned himself to face himself.

what did he really want?

he wadded up the piece of paper and threw it on the ground.