

## Misdeeds

By Eddie Bell

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The train rolled silently from the depot slowly passing the row houses with lights that seemed to twinkle in the early darkness. As it picked up speed and left the town behind, a lone rider, an unstrung Negro man, sat stiffly in the coach with his eyes open but seeing nothing. The terror he'd witnessed less than an hour ago turned him into something resembling the living dead. The strain beneath his expressionless eyes only told part of the story. In its totality it described lives destructed by wantonness and revenge.

Jason Wainwright had wanted so much for himself before he took to the sportin' life and lost his wife, Pearly, and the comforting love of their three kids. The downward spiral into tragedy began when Pearly and Jason were in the throes of a 'poor people's divorce.' No legal papers had been filed. No judge had issued a decree. But they were apart living almost separate lives, though both held on to a hidden something that neither of them, deep down, really wanted to relinquish.

Coming home one evening from an extended run as a Pullman porter in the luxurious sleeper trains, Jason discovered that his humble five-room dwelling was void. Not a stick of furniture. No Pearly. No kids. And emptied closets. The only thing that remained was a pile of his fancy dress clothes left in a disorderly heap on the bedroom floor.

Jason walked from room to room and then, consumed with despair, slumped to the bare floor – the carpets were gone too - wringing his hands and hopelessly trying to figure out how Pearly could do such a thing. How could she just leave without so much as kiss-my-ass-goodbye? He sat there motionless for a long time and then after a sudden infusion of false bravado, decided that he didn't give a good Goddamn and left his abode without even bothering to close the door behind him. Later, looking

for some sympathy from his Pullman porter brothers, he offered, "Pearly just didn't understand me. I was just having a little fun. That's all."

Jason sought out the railroad as a means to a more prosperous life. One day he up and quit his menial job at Sawyer's Knitting Mill in High Point, North Carolina so that he could pursue employment with the Illinois Central Rail Road and earn some of that 'good Negro money' Pullman porters were known to make. Working the Pullmans as a uniformed porter provided him that and a great deal more - escape from the drudgery of factory work, an upgrade in his social position and greater access to the fast life available to men riding the rails.

Ever since his childhood days Jason heard the tales told by his father's porter friends while sharing a jug of corn liquor in the basement. They extolled the good times and on purpose it seemed left out the indignities they suffered on a daily basis. Like pigs to the slop barrel, Jason dove into his new life as a railroad man and accepted the abuses of employer servitude as just part of the job. The outside pleasures that sucked him in outweighed the negativity of his working conditions, but he found out soon enough that nothing is for free. Jason's greedy lifestyle cost him his family and a lot more.

It didn't take long for the talk of Jason's dalliances travelling the grapevine to reach Pearly's ears. She ignored the gossip as long as she could, but eventually decided living in denial wasn't in her best interest. Not one for arguing, she tried to gently warn Jason that if he didn't change his ways she was going to leave him. Jason, in a state of denial himself, failed to heed his wife's warnings only vowing to do a better job of hiding his trysts with the loose women of his routes.

The day arrived when Pearly finally had enough. Fed up with the deteriorating state of her marriage, she called a moving company, cleaned out the house and returned to her childhood home in Durham.

She made do with whatever domestic work she could find and the "guilt money" that Jason sent on occasion by way of her momma, who still lived in the same old neighborhood. This procedure

was necessary due to Pearly's vow to never to set eyes upon Jason Wainwright again, "not even lying dead in his coffin." Jason considered his largesse as payment in lieu of fatherhood, but Pearly called it as she saw it. "Jason screwed up a good thing and now he's shame-face and trying to buy his forgiveness," she told her mamma. "I ain't studying that no-count, skirt-chasing devilish man. No indeed I'm not!"

If only she had kept her vow.

Jason lied to the fellows that made up the crews working the sleepers making believe that he was satisfied with his situation, but truth be told, he still loved Pearly and missed his kids something awful. But his hurt didn't make him change his ways. In fact, putting his sorrow and pride aside, Jason went about enjoying his newfound freedom with abandon. He shared it with the gals all too happy to share their favors with a sharp dressing, big spending railroad man.

At first, Jason's stopover romances were opportunistic adventures, hit and miss affairs that brought him female enjoyment without wifely demands. He'd slide in and out beds during his layovers between runs always ready for the next lady willing to satisfy his growing sexual appetite. Jason regarded as "the cat's meow" by his paramours, prided himself on his well-endowed manhood that amazed his brethren – the close confines of open showers revealed that he was indeed 'heavy hung' - and added much to his desirability as a sought after lover. His boudoir exploits along the train routes became legendary among the Negroes working his trains. Even some of the white conductors got wind of his exploits.

Things went along this way routinely until he happened upon Amanda Brown, a janitor employed by the railway depot in Charlotte, North Carolina. She wasn't much of a 'looker' in the traditional sense being a big woman with wide hips and a plump behind that swayed whippity tip, whippity tip as she moved prideful, head held high on her strolls through town. Amanda's mostly comely face was partially disfigured by an elongated keloidal scar that ran from her left ear across the

lower part of her cheek. But she had perfect white teeth and succulent lips that she painted a vivid deep red, and a surprisingly narrow waist that accentuated her curvaceous attributes.

Jason would have passed on Amanda except he loved women with oversized breasts and big hips and Amanda rated high in both departments. And he soon discovered she was one woman that he couldn't subdue in the bedroom. A challenge and a role reversal. It was Jason's screams of ecstasy that even the hard of hearing could distinguish from two houses away.

After that first night in bed with big Amanda Brown, Jason couldn't seem to get enough of this bountiful lady. But each time he visited Amanda she not only extracted some of that 'good Negro money' from him fat wallet, she steadfastly forestalled his advances until he convinced her that his intentions were honorable. Only after this mandatory love-talk would she grant her favors that brought him that crying-for-mercy satisfaction he desired. It wasn't long before Jason abandoned his other gratuitous escapades. Amanda Brown provided everything he needed or so he rationalized at the time.

Jason Wainwright got caught up. He became a man of two minds.

For the sake of clarity it's important to reiterate that since his 'divorce,' Jason, though in the midst of lust with Amanda Brown, had no lesser feelings for Pearly, and in truth, wanted her and his children back. Of course he only allowed himself to realize this during lulls in his Pullman duties especially at night when his assigned coaches were quiet. Only then did his mind drift back to his earlier life. He would regularly devised irrational strategies to achieve a reunited family while simultaneously trying to figure out how to hold onto his demanding lover.

Jason knew that reuniting with Pearly would mean his "big lady," would have to go. A devastating thought for a man who wanted the whole pie all to himself. Doing the right thing would be painful because Amanda had successfully inserted herself into Jason's real and imaginary lives. Though he tried to keep things in perspective and maintain the status quo, his attachment to Amanda grew deeper and pushed him away from making any decisions that removed her from the picture.

And Amanda was clever enough to realize that Jason had a yearning to return to his family-man status and that her gravy train might be in jeopardy. So she took to traveling to other cities to meet him on his runs. He wasn't much in favor of this advancing intrusion, but in Jason's skewed emotional state, he savored in the increased attention. He saw it as Amanda truly wanted him and that was a good feeling. This confused gentleman fought against the well-known truism, "Everything that's good to ya, ain't always good for ya."

A further complication to his dilemma was Amanda's ever demanding obligatory financial outlays meant that nothing much was left to send to his estranged family. Pearly had grown to rely upon the clandestine payments – their origin was only a pretended secret – especially since her oldest boy, Clifford, had developed costly medical problems, and the bills were mounting. "If Jason wasn't spending all his money on that fat good-for-nothing whore he could make things right for me and his kids."

Since Jason's desire for other women had ceased he eventually didn't even bother to let them know when he came to town. His Pullman colleagues noticed the change and ribbed him any chance that they got. "Man you sex-whipped brother" or accused him of being henpecked or at least having "henhouse ways."

Jason amorous adventures with Amanda Brown eventually led to him stretching his layovers an extra day, risking his job and he was running out of excuses to give his bosses. Whenever he convinced himself that he had gotten in too deep she would sense his feelings and be extra, extra nice to him. Amanda committed herself to becoming a necessity to Jason and she had just about achieved her goal. Each time he convinced himself that the time had come to end the relationship he just couldn't bring himself to let sweet Amanda go. Then seemingly out of nowhere disaster struck completely wresting the situation from Jason's control.

The *Chiefton*, Jason's assigned train, had been re-scheduled and brought him to Amanda's city earlier than usual. After he completed his duties in the coaches and reclaimed his overnight bag, Jason caught a cab waiting near the station and the driver took his regular customer straight to her flat. "Save some for next time," the driver kidded. "Can't worry about the next time, good buddy. Tomorrow ain't promised." Jason was in a cocky mood otherwise he would have shut the driver up with one of his 'ain't none of your never mind' retorts.

Jason hurried up the two flights of steps to Amanda's flat and entered the unlocked door without bothering to knock. What he saw when he bounced in immediately unnerved him and the color drained from his ebony face leaving it amazingly pale. His heart tattooed rapidly against his chest. He opened his mouth to speak and his lips moved, but no words came out. There in front of him was Pearly and she had a gun pointed directly at Amanda's chest. The look on Pearly's face showed she fully intended to take Amanda's life. Amanda shook like oak leaves in a fall breeze and Pearly wore her evil like a mask. Her twisted expression was unlike anything Jason ever witnessed especially emanating from his usually mild-tempered wife.

What happened next became a blur in Jason's memory. Seemingly in slow motion the gun moved from Amanda's chest toward him and fired before he had a chance to move. The poorly aimed shot tore through his camel colored Stetson and smashed the window above the door. The next shots that he heard came as he beat a stunned hasty retreat back outside and down the stairs.

Jason didn't stop running until he reached the desolate quarters the Pullman Company provided for off-duty porters about a half mile away. The porters and waiters still there were busy readying themselves to make their next train and pretty much ignored the distressed, panicked Jason.

The human mind is capable of unexplainable actions in states of emergency. This phenomenal capability is what must have enabled Jason Wainwright to go about ordinary business as if the harrowing event that inescapably jarred his life hadn't just occurred. Jason, now mostly alone in the

quarters and irrationally calm, began to re-dress in the uniform he'd taken off only scant minutes before, even though his assigned run wasn't scheduled to depart until the next morning.

Walking in deliberate fashion, Jason followed the same route as the others to the waiting train and climbed aboard. He ignored the puzzled looks from the other porters as he walked passed them moving from car to car. He reached the last coach, a windowed ceiling observation car that was empty and gloomy in the half light. Jason took a seat at far end of the car and sat there alone rigid and stone-faced. The train left the station and the ruined man melted into the darkness of the countryside.

Sometime that night Jason Wainwright ditched the train and was never heard from again, not even by the paymaster who still had his unclaimed paycheck. The following morning the bodies of Amanda Brown and Pearly Wainwright were discovered lying in a combined pool of blood on the floor of Amanda's flat. Pearly's face was frozen in a look of satisfaction and the gun she'd wielded rested snugly against her breast.