

# Knocking Down the Tower

By Bill Wolfe

1946—Arlington, VA

“You’ve got the same knack as my Mamma, Clarence. You understand what folks say, don’t you?”

“Ma’am?” Six-year-old Clarence was afraid of his great-grandmother. She was so old and frail, you could see the shape of her bones right through her face! His whole family had been brought up from Texas on a train, just to see her before she died. She’d been born a slave, in 1851. He was meeting cousins and aunts and uncles that he’d heard of, but who lived too far away to visit.

“You understand me, boy. I can tell. Mamma could do it, too. She was born in Old Africa, boy. Your Daddy told you about that?”

“Yes Ma’am, he has.”

“Did he tell you about Mister Lincoln? How Mamma told me that it was foreigners that killed him?”

“Mister Lincoln? Foreigners?”

“I told your Daddy that story since he was a sprout, boy. You make him tell you. I’m too tired, now.”

“Yes Ma’am, I will.”

“Clarence!” His mother’s thin fingers pinched his ear as she pulled him out of the room. “Quit pretending you can understand Granny Faye. She hasn’t spoken a clear word since she had her stroke! You’re scaring the fire out of your cousins.”

“But Mamma, she was talking just fine. She was telling me about Mister—“

“You hush-up, now.” She gave him The Look. “Your cousins are going to think you’re peculiar.”

On the train back home after the funeral, when everybody else was asleep, Clarence asked his father about it.

“That’s witch-talk, boy. It ain’t Christian.” His father’s eyes were distant, and Clarence wasn’t sure that he even believed what he was saying. Not really, anyway. “There ain’t no such thing as folks that can understand any language. Tower of Babel, boy.”

“Now you hush and get some sleep. Don’t you forget that the Preacher says that we are all equal in the Lord’s eyes. Ain’t nobody got a ‘knack’ that others don’t.”

Clarence shifted on the hard bench, trying to find a comfortable position. He thought about his Daddy’s words as he stared-up at the sign on the front of the compartment, the one leading to the car ahead of them on the train. The car with cushions on the seats. He wasn’t really good at reading, but he didn’t have to know his letters to know what that sign meant.

Whites Only

1963—Fort Worth, TX

Clarence sat at the rear loading dock of the Blackstone Hotel. No. Better not let anyone hear him call it that. It was the Hilton, now. He was smoking a Lucky and idly flipping the twenty dollar tip he’d received, between his fingers. The Chinamen had been easy, all they wanted was plain rice offered at every meal, real cream for their tea, and some chopsticks. Their Hong Kong English reminded him of those Londoners who’d been in. They were all smiles and politeness when they were dealing with the staff. But they complained bitterly to each other—in Chinese—over every little thing. They assumed nobody spoke their language, and they were right. But Clarence had found out a long time ago that he could understand anyone, as long as he was close.

Didn’t work for movies, he had to actually hear the person speaking. He’d done a little reading, and he thought he might be hearing people’s thoughts when they spoke. He did his best not to let on, though. He didn’t want folks to think he was peculiar.

As a waiter in one of Fort Worth’s best hotels, he’d heard just about every language in the world, mostly from places he’d barely heard of. But he could always understand.

There were some other guests in the hotel, though. They were talking in a very different language. Like the Chinamen, their English was fine, but they didn’t use it with each other. Some of what they talked about made him anxious, and he didn’t know why.

Why were they putting up hidden cameras around Dealey Plaza, the Texas Book Depository, some movie theater, and in somebody named Oswald’s house? It was like they knew something really bad was about to happen, and they were there to make a movie about it.

He decided not to worry about it. White folks business was none of his. Besides, President Kennedy had spent the night at the Hotel Texas, and some of the night staff were going to go over and hear him speak, before he went on to Dallas.

2010—Washington DC

“There’s a problem in the temporal equations. We’re getting divergent readings and I can’t figure-out the cause. I think we should scrub the mission.”

“Not yet, Carp’ter. Not unless we must.”

“Do we have live feed from the parade route and the White Rights headquarters?”

“Yes, all functions are normal.”

“Let’s review it up in the room. Perhaps they are arguing where to place the device. It has always been called a one-in-a-million success. That small amount of explosive should never have breached the limousine’s armor. Even a one second delay would surely mean failure. If they aren’t in agreement. . .”

As the guests walked away, their elderly waiter stopped re-cleaning the already sparkling utensils just behind their table. He turned and walked quietly from the dining room.

It all made sense to Clarence, now. All of it.

But what could he do? Call the police and say he overheard time-traveling documentary makers talking and the President’s life was in danger. They’d lock him up.

And he’d seen those time travel movies where if you change the past, it just makes things worse.

Did he have the right to mess around with history?

He thought about Lincoln, about Kennedy. He wondered what might have been, if those two lives hadn’t ended as they had.

“I’m not changing history,” he whispered to himself.

“But I’m sure about to change the future.”

There was a phone in the lobby he could use.

The End