



They eyes tell it all: Rietta, Cherry, Armondo and Kendra Payton, while visiting Artquake, appear to be convinced that the rubber ball in the hand of the ventriloquist is doing the talking. (Photo by Richard J. Brown)

Cell Talk

by Asmar Abdul Seifullah
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Recently the Watcher returned to the scene. He was so subtle in his approach that his presence went unobserved by most. Nevertheless the Watcher began his vigil, his eyes focusing on the various happenings on the prison yard. His invisibility greatly improved the post he had taken up to observe the brothers engaged in a game of dominoes. Their laughter was full—so catchingly infectious that even the Watcher's eyes gleamed in the merriment of the moment. The dominoes were shuffled with the dexterity of a Las Vegas dealer, as one particularly dark-skinned brother watched intently. "Get some and leave some but get enough to last you," was chanted by a big red brother, as the dominoes quickly disappeared into the hands of the players.

Thus began another day on the prison recreation yard and the Watcher was contented in his vigil.

Dominoes is the game of Blacks on the Big Yard. They play it seriously and it seems to provide them with some sort of release as they playfully shuck and jive their way through hand after hand. But many a friendship has ended at the table—heads have been busted and lives have been threatened during a session at the domino table.

As the game proceeded the Watcher became aware of another watching the players. The other watcher was a prison guard who seemed to be mesmerized by the banter and jesting of the participants. He was literally transfixed—caught up in the play and a smile around the corners of his mouth. Soon he became aware of the Watcher and their eyes met for a brief moment in recognition. It was apparent to the Watcher that the officer did not fully understand what was happening between them or at the domino table. He observed the Watcher as being just another brother on the sidelines of the game and he saw the game in terms of prison recreation or so it seemed to the Watcher. But through the eyes of the Watcher the game was an age-old ritual of "laughing to keep from crying."

With every turn of emotion the officer's face changed. At one point he was on the verge of interrupting the game as two brothers fiercely argued over a particular play.

Suddenly the Watcher understood that the officer had probably never witnessed Blacks in this particular ritual. That he had never been as close to Black people as he was at that very moment. They were laughing and jiving and this reinforced something inside of him—his sense of security oozed from him. He ac-

tually believed that these people were happy and his role as overseer was strengthened, as he stood and watched their emotions color the situation. He couldn't see their frustration... their anger and pain was hidden from his view. To him they were just a group of Blacks enjoying a game of dominoes.

It can't be disputed that they weren't enjoying themselves. But the point is that it was a false song they sung, it had no melody and the beat wasn't constant or fluid. They were just filling time, "laughing to keep from crying."

It's difficult to say whether anybody present clearly understood their actions or the implications involved. The brothers gave no thought to being viewed as happily contented inmates because they were practicing the art of survival. Yes, their survival depended on their ability to laugh, to jive, to cool-walk through a maze of prison days and nights. If they didn't they would have to confront the reality of their confinement.

Many of us, both outside and inside these walls spend our time surviving through our laughter. We don't want to see the roaches and rats that inhabit our homes. We don't want to see the bars and walls that block out the sun. We don't want to see our overseers and the way they smile when we smile. Our lives are so harsh that the least bit of laughter that escapes from our mouths is able to soothe us. Our laughter drugs us, it debilitates us to the point where we have become afraid to face our circumstances.

On the streets when things get tough we go to the club—behind these walls when things get tough we go to the domino table. There is nothing wrong with recreation but it shouldn't be used as a source of escaping our responsibilities. It must not drug us or make us drunk, it should renew us, strengthen us for the struggle to come. The society we live in has had us laughing when we should have been screaming our indignation. We've been laughing and our laughter doesn't even belong to us—it belongs to the people who laugh when we laugh. The good-times are upon us, we've become passive and domesticated when we should have become as aggressive as the people who oppress us.

The only laughter that should exist in Black people's lives is the laughter of plotting. We must plot and scheme like old Nat Turner, we must not laugh our way into another 300 years of servitude. Remember that somebody is watching you and recording your laughter with cynical affirmation.

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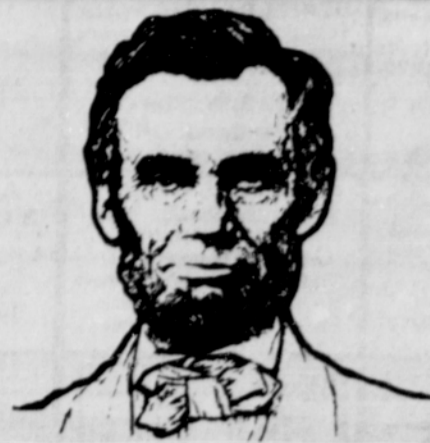
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