

“Mi Casa, Su Casa” (August 2004)

A suburban, collegiate young man (hereafter SCM) has a very good reason to find pulp fiction attractive. Having spent the majority of his life under his parents’ rule, it must be a pleasure for him to engross himself within an imaginary world where people much different from his parents reign. But however much he might admire his heroes, he must wonder from time to time what these natural denizens of the urban jungle, these professional killers, would think of him if they were somehow to meet. I will be looking at *Pulp Fiction* as if it were an SCM’s daydream, a daydream in which such an encounter is staged as part of an attempt to conceive of a “space” wherein both he and his pulp-fiction heroes might respectfully, amiably—and most importantly—*plausibly* be imagined co-existing with one another.

When we first encounter Vincent and Jules they are conversing in a way that is easy to imagine as being both familiar and appealing to an SCM. SCMs can readily identify with Vincent as he recounts his first European experience to Jules. They can easily be imagined as being fascinated by Amsterdam drug-culture, as enjoying hearing how the Quarter Pounder’s name was altered so that it would be better received in France. But though SCMs are likely to find much of the conversation recognizable—it isn’t much different from what you’d hear in a college dorm—dearly these two men are not to be found in a dorm near you. They are the urban jungle’s warriors, its professional killers, and it is appropriate that we hear the song “Jungle Fever” just before we meet them and that it continues to play in the background as we listen in on their conversation. They are the sort of formidable, undomesticated men SCMs would like, at least in some respects, to resemble. They the sort of men SCMs would especially love to call friends.

We soon find out that a group of associates of Vincent and Jules’ boss, Marsellus Wallace, have betrayed him, and that they have been dispatched to deal with them. When the two enter the traitorous group’s apartment we encounter the first insertion of the SCM into the film. Because both Vincent and Jules agree they should have been equipped with shotguns for the assignment, his appearance surprises us: we certainly were not expecting to discover that the associates of Marsellus’s are, as Jules correctly IDs them, kids: Vincent and Jules come across as simply too competent to warrant being concerned by college boys. Though neither show any sign they were expecting to encounter anyone different, Jules indirectly has us attending to

how poorly they pass as associates. He repeatedly asks Brett what country he is from, a question Brett has trouble answering. He also notices that these kids, by dining on hamburgers, are not eating what they should be eating for breakfast. Since Vincent and Jules were just discussing burgers, very likely the reason they are shown eating them is because it links them to their heroes. That is, the intruding burgers are really *mostly* the SCM's interjected hope that his own familiarity with junk-food pop culture is sufficient to make his largely unadulterated real-life identity congruent with that of his pulp-fiction heroes'.

But even though *Pulp Fiction* is the SCM's daydream, the insecure, inexperienced SCM simply cannot convince himself he would matter to Vincent and Jules, who up to this point are shown as seasoned professionals. The SCM has trespassed into a situation he does not belong in, in a world he fabricated but dearly doesn't (yet) belong to. It is equally implausible that he would be an associate of gangster bosses as it is that he would be in the possession of a briefcase packed with beaming golden riches. Though the kids have gotten hold of something they shouldn't have, the SCM's inability to credit this scenario as plausible ensures they don't get away with it. Jules pretends to execute biblical justice; but as he efficaciously disposes of the kids, what he most truly executes is *poetic* justice. And after being punished for his trespass, the SCM pulp-fiction reader makes sure to retract and then to reconstitute his daydream so that it now reflects pulp-fiction normalcy: with the insertion of Butch, the aging but renown boxer, the next scene manifests someone a gangster boss in a pulp-fiction story would be near-expected to be seen doing business with.

The SCM's first reaction to the humiliation is to stage a retreat, but the experience has him crave revenge. He therefore is eventually drawn to restage the encounter in such a way that *Vincent and Jules* become the ones punished for entering a world that *they* dearly don't belong to. After Vincent accidentally shoots the young black man Marvin, Jules calls his friend, Jimmy, in hopes of finding sanctuary. Jimmy is a young man who lives in a well-kept suburban home, and who, despite being called a "partner" of Jules's, certainly gives every appearance of being someone who works at a day job (as he says, "storin dead niggers ain't [his] [. . .] business"). Jimmie's world is one populated by soccer moms, not gangster mobs. And just as Jules was the one who called attention to the SCM's incongruent appearance in the pulp-fiction universe, with his declaring, "This is the Valley, Vincent—Marsellus don't got no friendly places in the Valley," he acknowledges his own trespass into the suburban world.

Before their encounter with Jimmie, Jules is shown trying to persuade Vincent how important it is that they use tact when dealing with him. The fact that these professional bullies feel they will need to rely on diplomacy rather than guns to handle the upcoming situation, forewarns us that they are less likely to succeed here than they were before with Brett. Jules fears he might be the one who suffers most in the upcoming encounter with Jimmie—and rightly so, for since he was the one in particular who brutally shamed the SCM, he will be the one upon whom in particular the SCM executes revenge.

After washing their hands and doing their best to appear respectable (a miserable failure: they stand before Jimmie as if two kids who have gone and spoiled their Sunday clothes), they are presumably ready to talk to Jimmie. Jules tries to soothe Jimmie's anger, to handle him. Just like Brett had once tried to pacify Jules by politely asking his name, Jules compliments his coffee. But in neither situation does either one of them—as Jules would say—“talk their way out of this shit.” Brett was punished for an inexcusable trespass; Jules will experience the same—*for the same*—here. In this facsimile of the suburban parental home, Jimmie, not Jules, rules (later he will actually end up responding to Jules's complaints by saying, “My house, my rules”): the SCM understands from his childhood experience of suburbia that therein those connected to a respectable, “decent” way of life are those who are righteous and right (so no bible-quoting here from Jules).

In this SCM daydream it is therefore appropriate in this situation that Jimmie denies Jules control. He curtly tells Jules to “not Jimmie” him, and won't let Jules interrupt him (he snarls, “I'm talkin,” when Jules tries to do so). He then asserts that Jules' intrusion could well cost him his marriage. Just as Jules's shooting of Brett's friend served to terminate Brett's argument and initiated Jules's fiery retort, here Jimmie's accusation stops short Jules's attempts to handle him, and initiates his own verbal harangue. While before Jules bullied Brett by repeatedly asking him, “what does Marsellus look like? Does he look like a bitch?,” Jimmie now bullies Jules by repeatedly asking him if he “notice[d] a sign out front that said, ‘dead nigger storage?’” Just as Jules had forced Brett into muttering monosyllabic answers to his questions, Jules is now limited to the same. And though neither Vincent nor Jules end up being shot, dearly a facsimile of Brett's execution is replayed in this scene, with this time Jules and Vincent ending up the victims. Though Wolf—a gangster concocted so to plausibly be conceived of existing in both domestic and pulp-fiction worlds—is actually the one who sprays Jules and Vincent with the water nozzle/gun,

Jimmie stands at his side, helps direct his spray, and takes evident delight in their discomfort.

Jimmie is no college student, but he is an SCM as he might imagine himself becoming not too long after college. Since his privileging in this scene depends upon his adoption of and respect for domestic, parental mores—that is, the same mores whose influence SCMs are trying to escape from when they read pulp fiction—he is not however someone the SCM really hopes to end up like: becoming like Jimmie would amount to their never having managed to leave their parents' moral universe. The SCM neither wants to be Brett, nor Jimmie. He neither wants to conceive of himself as someone who would readily be bullied by or as someone who might be empowered to bully his pulp-fiction heroes—he wants these heroes as friends! But dearly, convincing himself he could be the sort of person his pulp-fiction hero would like to hang out with will require some imaginative work on his part. He will have to imagine and create a character whose identity is significantly different from his own but who still remains recognizably an SCM. That is, as was required for the American “Quarter Pounder” to be accepted within French culture, to be credible in the pulp-fiction universe, he must make significant amendments to his image.

He makes some—and comes up with Lance, the suburban drug dealer. Though in some respects Lance is very much like Jimmie—they both appear to be about the same age, are married, and live in suburban neighborhoods—drugs and thugs go together much better than did dead niggers and uptight suburbanites. That is, Lance's profession permits him to share the same space as Vincent without either of them seeming out of place. He is a sort of criminal the typical SCM probably believes exists in suburbia, the sort of criminal who might well have school as well as street smarts. Though more recognizable as a real person than Wolf is, he too is proficient in dealing with both suburban and street denizens. The SCM stages an encounter between Lance and Vincent, rather than between Lance and Jules, because Vincent is portrayed as the less threatening, more vulnerable of the two. Unlike Jules (but like SCMs), Vincent can be careless, even inept. After Jules's masterful handling of the kids, for example, Vincent shows well-earned presumption semblancing back into dumsy amateurism, with his accidental shooting of Marvin. In sum, Vincent is selected because he is the pulp-fiction hero who most closely resembles the SCM.

They encounter each other amiably, as friends, in Lance's suburban home. There is an attempt on Vincent's part to maneuver Lance into lowering his prices, and while Lance's response, “you're in my home,” resembles Jimmie's response to one of

Jules's complaints, no one is made to feel subordinate in this scene. For the first time in the daydream we find an encounter between an SCM and a pulp-fiction hero where an attempt to facilitate friendly-relations through sharing possessions is successful. While neither Jules's sharing of Brett's burger, nor Jules and Vincent's partaking of Jimmie's gourmet coffee, helped nurture camaraderie, when Lance suggests to Vincent that they get high together and double-date (Lance essentially offers Trudy to Vincent), Vincent is shown pleased enough with the suggestion he might well have taken him up on it had he not already agreed to show his boss's wife a good time.

When Vincent returns to Lance's home, their friendship is tested: The SCM wants to stage an event that will help him better gauge just how strong and true a friendship might exist between an SCM and a pulp-fiction gangster. Just as Jules did previously, here Vincent calls upon a suburban friend—but to keep Mia from dying. There are some similarities between how Lance reacts to Vincent's request and how Jimmie reacted to Jules's. For instance, just as Jimmie points out there was no "sign saying dead nigger storage" on his lawn, here Lance says that Vincent can't "bring some fucked up pooh-butt to my house." But the person who sold Vincent the drugs responsible for the overdose cannot push suburban propriety and be taken seriously. Vincent easily convinces Lance to assist him in bringing Mia into Lance's home, and the result is that the scene Jimmie feared would end his marriage actually occurs here: a wife watches a body being dragged about her suburban home. But while walking in on such a scene might well have moved Jimmie's wife to file for divorce, we know that human-pin-cushion Jodie is more accustomed to violent permeations of customarily sacred grounds.

Jodie yells at her husband—but she also ends up assisting Vincent and Lance in helping nurse Mia back to consciousness. And though we have a near-corpse and a violent stabbing in this scene, it ends harmoniously rather than in discord. That is, a scene pretty close to one we would find in a pulp-fiction novel occurs here within Lance's suburban home, and it proves much more wild ride than disaster. As Mia recovers, and they breathe a collective sigh of relief, they realize they have shared an experience which brought them—disparate as they still are—closer together as friends. And whereas elsewhere in the film the deliberate repetition of another's words alienates people from one another while racking up the tension (i.e., Jules' "say 'what' one more time—," and Jimmie's "don't fuckin' 'Jimmie me,' man"), Mia's response to Lance's request that she "say something" by saying, "something," feels relaxed, and is easing.

Within his daydream, and in this disorderly suburban home, the SCM has successfully managed to create what postcolonial critics call a “hybrid space,” that is, an “in-between space,” a creative space wherein a “release from [traditional] singular identities” (Macey 192) becomes possible. He has fabricated a situation where an SCM uses what he always imagined he had over his pulp-fiction heroes—book smarts (though he never finds the black medical book, he does guide Vincent through the procedure)—to assist him in directing Vincent’s brawn (Vincent is the one who pounds a needle though Mia’s breastplate), so to make them a congruent pair. Indeed, this scene might serve to help the SCM imagine Lance as a more appropriate friend of Vincent’s than Jules is. Perhaps the fact that the SCM daydreamer essentially divorces the two by having Jules become biblical while keeping Vincent pulp, shows he has grown to think of himself as someone his pulp-fiction hero might actually *prefer* to spend time with. It must be noted, though, that by the end of the daydream Vincent no longer seems as clearly identifiable as a pulp-fiction hero as he was at its beginning. Since he owes his demise to his interest in a pulp-fiction novel, Vincent might himself have become a hybrid—part pulp-fiction hero, part SCM. Perhaps in his daydream the SCM had a premonition of his virtual-reality future and decided it not *so* unlikely he might one day step up from being a pulp-fiction reader to becoming a hero himself. In the 3D-world of tomorrow, he may have intuited, that suitcase full of unadulterated dreams might just be his to keep.

Works Cited

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