



# Video Story Transcript

## Milwaukee B-B-Q

**By: Storyteller Loren Niemi**  
[www.storytelling.org/Niemi/](http://www.storytelling.org/Niemi/)

**Link to YouTube Video:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sB70qkIyVgA>

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Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

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I'm Loren Niemi.

In the summer of 1968, I was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I was working with a bunch of Catholic Worker folks, at a place called Casa Maria. Anti-war, war on poverty, you know. It was all the same black, white, Latino, Irish immigrants, interestingly enough, Jesuits, we were all in it together.

So, this one day, ah, this big, black, teddy bear of a guy, Tommy, comes up to me and he says, "Hey are you interested in some barbecue?"

And I said, "Yeah, I love barbecue. So, so, we get in the car and we drive to this place, a little bit west of 28<sup>th</sup> Street. It's not a good neighborhood. It was, ah, after Martin Luther King's assassination and you could see the effects. Vacant lots of burned out buildings. There was a rundown house just across from where we parked. Ah, kids sitting on the steps, nothing to do, idle, as if the house was collapsing around them. The barbecue joint itself was done in post-Wright architectural style. I mean, you know, bricked up front, little tiny window space up on the top, covered with chain link fence. There was um, ah, this steel plate door with "Barbecue," kind of like graffiti on it.

We walk inside. Inside in the back, there's a pool table, five, six guys shooting pool, drinking beer. Couple of tables back there. Up front there's a counter. There's a menu on a piece of cardboard, "Barbecue, rib tips, chicken, collard greens." A guy standing behind the counter.

I go up. I, I say, "Can I have a half slab of ribs?"

He turns around and looks at me. Looks at me, long and hard he says, "Are you sure you're in the right place?"

I look at him. I look around, "I think so. Ah. I want some BBQ. This is a barbecue place. I think I'm in the right place."

All of a sudden, he, he reaches out with a pair of tongs and he snaps them at me and he says, "Are you sure you are in the right place? Look around. What do you see?"

"Barbecue sign. Beer sign. Some guys in the back, shooting pool."

"Those guys in the back. What color are they?"

There's a moment of hesitation. I'm thinking. OK, so let's say negro. No, definitely not negro. African-American. Well, maybe. But the problem is, is that's really not a color. Black. I guess that's where we're at. So, I go, 'Black.'

And he says, "Ya. And what color are you?"

"Oh, I don't know, tan, pink, white." And he looks at me. And I go, "I'm with him," pointing to Tommy.

And he says, "Oh, he may be in the right place but that doesn't mean you in the right place."

About this time, all the guys in the back had stopped shooting pool. They stopped drinking beer. They're all looking our way.

And Tommy says to me, "Go wait in the car." So, I do. I go outside. I get in the car. I roll down the window. I light up a cigarette. I'm sitting there, I'm smoking. I'm looking and I'm thinking, for the first time in my life, I was the wrong color. For the first time in my life, I was the guy who was in the wrong place. The, you know, the one who didn't belong. Who didn't know what the rules were. Who didn't know who I was or what was expected.

About this time, a, a bus comes by. The driver's white but every face behind him, that, all the windows are black. A car goes by, white guy behind the wheel. I can even, even from where I'm sitting I can see his white knuckles. I can see him staring straight ahead. I know his doors are locked. I know his windows are up. He's riding on fear through the neighborhood. He doesn't know if he's lost or just trying to get out.

And I think to myself, "You know, this is a one-time thing. I mean, I can just walk out of the neighborhood and this will go away. But for those kids, those kids sitting on the stoop across the way this is every day. Every time they walk into a room and the white faces turn to them, you know, and go, 'What are you doing here?' "

About this, about this time, Tommy comes to the car and he gets in and he laugh and he says, "You almost got me in a lot of trouble in there."

"How did I get you in trouble? I'm the guy who wasn't supposed to be there."

"They all wanted to know, what I was doing with a dumb, white honky like you. And I told them I was going to rob you and they all approved."

"Tommy, are you going to rob me?"

"Well, you're paying for the Q." And so, we start the engine. We start to drive away.

We don't get more than a block, when, when a squad car comes the other direction. A squad car comes and he slows down as we pass. He looks at us. A black guy and a white guy in the car together. And he just circles right around and drops in right behind us. And I expect to get lit up at any moment. And Tommy says, "You got any outstanding warrants?"

And I go, "Not that I'm aware of."

And he says, "He's running our plates. You know, you got any trouble, he's stopping us."

I keep looking in the rearview mirror. I keep looking in the rearview mirror. After a couple of blocks, the cop turns off and we drive a little further. We pull into a city park. We're just getting out of the car when another squad car pulls in. The cop in that squad car, he looks at us getting out of the car with our bag of barbecue and he motions, "Move on, move on." So, we get back in the car.

And we start to drive. One mile, two miles, we have to go out into a county park on the edge of the city before, you know, before we can sit down and eat. We don't even get out of the car. We just roll down the windows and let the sound of nature, kind of, filter in, and we have barbecue and collard greens. And we think to ourselves, how long will it be before this is taken for granted?