

Sissyneck

by Dale Marlowe

Kyle has studied Mr. Jackson's habits. Out by 6 am, in by 2 pm. He always says good morning or good afternoon to the staff; he's so careful about referring to the time of day properly that once, during a midday return to retrieve a deposition transcript, he wished the bellman good-noon. On Fridays he leaves a ten-dollar bill on the bed that Kyle takes as a gesture of appreciation for keeping the room clean.

Mr. Jackson carries a soft brown briefcase. The girls at the desk say he's a big-shot lawyer. He has more shoes than someone with mostly neutral colored suits has a right to, and he lines them up in ordered rows on the floor and the closet's top shelf: browns of subtle, varying shades, blacks with and without buckles; slip-ons, lace-ups, all shined. Grey, black and deep-purple suits crowd the rod, their jacket shoulders so wide they abut the closet door.

Kyle draws his cart into Mr. Jackson's room. It's not the only room he's used in the past couple of weeks, but it's his favorite. There's an exotic quality to the scent here, a mix of musk and toiletries hinting at Mr. Jackson's meticulous grooming. Kyle likes to think Mr. Big-Shot Attorney takes great care each morning to sculpt himself into a likeness of the confidence that defines him.

He sits at the foot of the king-sized bed, atop a floral patterned comforter. All the beds on this floor have the same dreadful, busy bedspread, in a print that Minnie Pearl might have worn. The rooms themselves are no better, no newer. Maple furniture, bronze fixtures, bronze trim. Underfoot pale green carpet spans wall to wall, dotted with little red diamonds, good for hiding spills and stains. Rustic watercolors hang on the walls. Furniture, carpet, bedspreads, paintings—all diluted pastels. Spring without end, amen.

Kyle unlaces his black boots and removes them. He leans back, unbuttons his black canvas pants and slides them down. He flexes his ankles. The pants drop in a heap at the foot of the bed. He grabs the neck of his white polo and pulls it off. Socks next, then T-shirt.

He drops his underwear to his feet, then takes a towel and a small green bottle of multi-purpose gel from the service cart. Just the things a boy needs to get clean.

In the bathroom, Kyle leans into the shower and turns the water on; a stream patters the tub, flicking at the edge of the shower-curtain. He yanks the curtain across the tub to let the steam build. His pink silhouette moves in the misted glass: a ghost. Plastic tubes and bottles litter the counter-top around the porcelain wash basin—a tin of pomade, Crest, Old-Spice, Tend-Skin with aloe for shaving bumps, Baby Oil.

After three long days without a shower, Kyle's ripe. He can smell himself—an odor of fried bologna sprinkled with brown sugar and plain old ass. The crust of half a week's work is hard on his skin; his hair is slathered to his scalp like he's styled it with lard. Minuscule pieces of cotton from his socks, underwear and T-shirts lodge between his toes, his buttocks, in his armpits—little balls of fabric, sticky with sweat, dried stiff from his body heat.

Kyle places the towel on the toilet-lid but keeps the shower-gel in hand. He moves the curtain and steps in. The water hits him below the navel. He wets his hair. Worth leaving Slocum County for water pressure alone. He steps back from the jet and squeezes the plastic gel bottle. The liquid oozes into his palm.

He rubs his hands over his body: face, chest, stomach, arms, underarms, genitals, legs, buttocks, the skin between his toes. He massages the shower-gel into his scalp and steps into the stream again, letting the water beat his skull. The lather drains into his eyes, the wrinkles around his mouth, behind his ears. The pulsing droning water quiets his mind. Good to be clean.

When Mr. Jackson sweeps the curtain aside, Kyle reels against the wall. He screams once, loud and short, like a frightened girl, then goes quiet, blinking at the giant lawyer through soap-soaked eyes. He holds out his hands to shield himself from a blow. But there is no strike. He cups his hands over his crotch.

“O God. I was—”

Mr. Jackson holds out the towel.

"Here."

"I can't hardly see." Kyle takes the towel and presses it to his face.

"I can," says Mr. Jackson, crossing his arms. His stare traces Kyle's body. Kyle lowers the towel over his privates.

"I didn't mean no harm—"

Mr. Jackson's nod says he's expecting more in the way of an explanation. Kyle says nothing. Mr. Jackson turns the water off and instructs him to finish drying. He walks into the room, slamming the bathroom door. Kyle stands wet and pitiful, a drenched mutt. He dries, cinches the towel around his waist and steps from the tub. Deep breath, and he opens the bathroom door.

The room is freezing. Mr. Jackson sits at a table by the window, outlined in the light of mid-day, legs crossed at the knees. His wrist is bent backward, a menthol cigarette vertical between his index and middle fingers. White shirt open at the collar. Grey silk tie, loose knot. A silver blazer drapes his chair back.

"Sit," he says.

Kyle sits on the bed, facing Mr. Jackson. His clothes rest beside him on the bed, folded and stacked, shirt on socks, underwear on T-shirt, pants on underwear. Kyle touches the pile with his finger. "I'm sorry about using your shower, please don't tell nobody."

"What's your name?"

"Kyle Nash."

"Kyle Nash, why are you showering in my room?"

Kyle looks into his lap.

"I was getting ripe. I ain't showered in a few days."

"Your clothes could get up and clean by themselves."

Kyle nipples stiffen. He reaches for his shirt. "Nice of you to fold them."

"I don't like messes—don't put those on. They need laundered."

"Ain't got nothing else to wear."

"Why not shower at your place?"

"Ain't got one."

"A friend's place."

"No friends, neither. Not here."

"An empty room?"

"Booked solid for two weeks."

Mr. Jackson pauses, takes a drag. "It has been busy. Kyle, your accent is pronounced. Where are you from?"

"Out east, near Virginia."

"What brings you to Lexington?"

There are so many reasons, all piled together, that they've become a big mess that's more feeling than justification. Kyle has no words for the feeling, and it floats over all his other thoughts like a storm-cloud, complicated and nameless. "Ain't got slightest," Kyle admits.

Leaning out of the shadow, Mr. Jackson gestures at Kyle with the first two fingers of his right hand, like he's about to throw the cigarette across the room. He takes a breath, as if to speak, but instead of speaking, he stands and walks to the bureau. From the bureau, Mr. Jackson retrieves a red sweatshirt and a pair of blue soccer shorts. He throws them on the bed, then picks up the phone and leans against the bureau, twirling the phone cord around his finger. Kyle takes the clothes into the bathroom to change, but doesn't close the door. He removes the towel and hangs it over the curtain rod.

"This is 217. Send up two filet. I think green beans will be appropriate. Uh-huh. Bill it to the room. Can you connect me with the concierge? Thank you." Kyle hears him suck on the cigarette, then: "The tickets were fine, thank you. Can you do me a favor? I have some laundry. A pair of slacks and a shirt. Can you send someone? I've got room service coming. Kill two birds, perhaps? Yeah. That'd be great."

When Kyle returns, Mr. Jackson is at the table again. His clothes are too big for Kyle, but anything is better than prancing around in that towel.

"You may wear those until your things are laundered. I've ordered lunch."

"I couldn't eat with a guest. There's rules."

"Rules? Please. Sit."

Kyle sits. Mr. Jackson tamps his cigarette into an ashtray on the desk. "What's it like? Slocum County."

"You ain't been?. Mr. Jackson shakes his head; no, he hasin't.

"Hills, mostly. I say it's pretty ugly—mountains pretty, people's ugly."

"I'm sure the people are lovely."

Kyle rubs his nose on the sleeve of the sweatshirt. "We lived up in Ebb Holler. I had a trailer. Ain't like you think. It was nice. Pathfinder double-wide. I got it after the flood. You can't tell it was sunk, except for a brown ring six feet up. Real faint. I thought it looked like a decorator border. Didn't even mold."

"Why leave?"

"I didn't get along." Kyle sucks his bottom lip under the top row of his teeth. "I'm not like them. I like to read watch movies on the classics channel. Mr. Riddle let me splice his satellite dish. On the Waterfront, I liked that. Any them old movies. Funnyface—"

Mr. Jackson nods. "Audrey Hepburn."

"Gorgeous." The word dallies in Kyle's mouth. "I got books from the Slocum County library—Beats, Jesse Stuart, Faulkner—Ms. Blevins, the librarian, said I'm her best customer. That's what I am I guess."

"You work?"

"Daddy got killed in the mines. I got Social Security, but they cut it off at eighteen."

"Your mother?"

"Tonya had me after she got out of the reformatory. Took to oxys when I was in high school."

"You call your mother by her first name?"

"We're more like brother and sister."

"You finish school?"

Kyle shakes his head. "They called me names. Kicked out for fighting."

Mr. Jackson rises to a rap on the door. He motions for Kyle to hand him the dirty clothes. Mr. Jackson negotiates an exchange of food for soiled clothing. Kyle knows the voice; nervous, he crosses

his arms and stares through the sheers at cars crawling Route 27.

Mr. Jackson brings a big tray of food. He returns to his place before the window and motions to the chair before the desk, telling Kyle to join him. The tray looks nice: two silver domes stretch across the plates and in the middle of the tray; two wine glasses beside an uncorked bottle of red wine. Kyle smells butter on the green beans and charcoal on the filet. Pangs grip his stomach, each a vise. For the first time since getting busted today, he remembers he hasn't eaten since yesterday. Mr. Jackson unrolls his napkin and uncovers his plate. Kyle uncovers his, too. He sees his steak.

"Bon Appetit," Mr. Jackson says.

"Mine's got a toothpick in it."

"You can take that out."

Kyle points at the filet with his fork. Through a mouthful of green beans and steak he says: "Wrapped in bacon. That's neat."

"Wine?"

"That all we got? Then I'll have some."

He pours Kyle's glass half-full, then fills his own.

"Mr. Jackson—"

"Marion. I insist."

"Don't seem right, but okay. Marion. Reckon you ain't telling?"

"Difficult fact pattern. You've been cleaning my room, with access to my things, for two months. You know me better than some of my colleagues and clients, but we've never spoken at any length before now. You know what kind of deodorant I use. You know my schedule—don't you? I see you every morning as I depart. You know when I return. You never expected to get caught. You're always sincere. That's what I look for. Sincerity. Rare thing, that, truly, in a person. That and gentleness. You're sincere and gentle. You've not stolen from me, though you could have. You're friendly and honest. You leave the room spotless."

Marion's voice sounds like sap looks. Kyle blushes. He's not sure why. Marion shrugs, looking at Kyle over the rim of his wine-glass.

"I've tried to leave a little token now and then. I was angry when I came back today. But, on reflection, you were using my shower for a

good reason. Not having a shower of your own is a good reason to use someone else's."

"Been living in my Pontiac." Kyle says it before he can stop himself. "Ain't had a job long enough to rent an apartment."

Marion raises the napkin, covers his mouth, and clears his throat. "You sleep there, too? In your car?"

"It's near campus. Cops see me all curled up in the back seat think I'm sleeping off a drunk. Ain't bothered me yet. I move the car in the morning. I been pulling it off."

"You came here without money?"

"I had some."

Marion looks relieved.

"But it's all used up. I bought gas with it."

Strain returns to Marion's face.

"How long have you been at this?"

"Two months this coming Wednesday. I'm saving most of my checks. I'll be okay soon as I get first and last months rent."

Marion attends his steak. Kyle sips the wine. Grimace: his taste-buds haggle with the hot-dry Cabernet. Marion seems concerned with something he can't, or won't, say. He cuts his green beans into successively smaller pieces. Kyle feels vulnerable, almost more than when he stood naked. Nobody knew about the car. He pushes a pallid sliver of fat around the plate with his knife.

"I grew up in Atlanta," Marion says.

"I seen the Olympics on my splice," Kyle says. "Atlanta looks nice. I ain't been."

"You never saw Tuxedo Park on your satellite."

Marion makes a cross of his cutlery, leans back, crosses his legs, and lights another cigarette. "I didn't fit in either. I didn't go for sports or gangs or hanging out on the corner. That didn't feel real. I'm big. Among my community we feel pressure to act a certain way. Everybody wants to know why you're not playing ball. People have expectations, and if you don't act to suit those expectations, people sometimes react in a negative way."

"My cousins and all them was most times up on Tuck's Branch, drinking, screwing and smoking pot."

"You understand. I was intellectual, for one. My cousins called that acting white, but it is not. I liked music—not just hip-hop, though I enjoy it and there's a place for that. Classical, too, and Jazz. Art—I used to ride a bus to the museum. Haunted the place. The guards and docents knew me. They knew my name. They'd say 'Hey, Big M.' I felt real when they did that. Someone knew me. You get it? Me. An aficionado, pee-wee expert on Kouros sculptures. They knew my habits. Not some idea stitched together from the misbehavior of boys they'd known."

"You feel like they're the only ones who know you. Like Mr. Riddle."

Marion takes a long drag. "Tuxedo Park? Pressure. There was a role they wanted me to take, but when I got alone I was real. Now, lying's a sin. They love that sin shit back in the country. I've got rural family myself. Crazy in the hell and sin scene, all of them; but the only thing I believe to be sin is dishonesty. It's a shame, too. The only way to survive when they hand you some role, to which you are unsuited, often as soon as you're born, is lie, lie, lie." Marion punctuates the repetition with chops at the table. "I got a scholarship. Kissed the brothers on that corner goodbye. Found places where Marion Jackson could be himself, not his mamma's baby or some big lazy brother thinking he was too good to ball. People like you, like me, must flee such environments. Even if you must drive across Kentucky, with no money, and sleep in your car. Otherwise we must continue to lie. Lying kills. It will kill you, Kyle."

Kyle feels like Marion's been in his mind, rifling through his thoughts and memories, like a lawyer rifling through a file drawer, locating Kyle's ineffable ideas and calling them by their names. Kyle stands, hands shaking. His knees are so weak that he must concentrate to keep from sitting again; he backs away.

"Thanks for the food," he says. "And for not telling."

"You're uncomfortable. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I think I know where you're coming from."

"You didn't," Kyle lies, grinning, and he laughs nervously, then points at the door. "I—they're probably, downstairs, I didn't clock out. They'll think I took off with the cart."

Kyle offers his hand. Marion stands, clasps it gently. Kyle realizes he's still in Marion's clothes.

"Your clothes," he says.

Leaning across the table, Marion firms his grip and meets Kyle's lips. Kyle sees Marion's face moving toward his and he knows Marion's going to kiss him, but there's a disconnect between his eyes and mind, as if he were in his body but not Controlling it. He's a guest in his own skin. Instead of avoiding the kiss and directing Marion toward his zipper, as he might have done in the dark behind the Slocum County Greyhound station, he lets Marion's mouth to fasten wet, soft and sweet, on his.

It's different, here in the light, with names exchanged and bodies and faces and hands in full view. This is not a desperate, frenzied coupling in an alley behind a dumpster; this is real and electric and alive. Kyle receives Marion's tongue for a moment, but as he does his chest heaves, trembling in lust and self loathing. His penis thickens, but he presses his hand against Marion's chest, pushing him away. Kyle shakes his head and steps toward the door.

"You think you know me, but you don't. You don't know me."

"Kyle. Kyle, wait."

When Marion calls his name again, Kyle's so confused Marion might as well be calling from outside. He thumps barefoot down the hallway. The door slams behind him as he gathers speed. He knows how to run. The elevators at the end of the corridor rush to meet him, growing larger with each stride. Breathless, he presses the down button. It winks orange. A row of back-lit numbers embedded in the stainless steel cornice says the car is on the 18th floor. He needs motion, action, speed. He needs them. Needs them now.

Kyle presses the crash bar on the stairwell door. He descends the stairs two and three at a time, skipping more as his pulse quickens. He holds the banister loose, leaping one landing to another. At the

first floor, he bursts through the emergency exit. Sirens wail. He gasps, filling his lungs fill with brisk autumn air.

Outside: Lexington as usual: numb white people in suits shuffling, their labors' futility camouflaged in smug, self-importance. How can they move in this world, walking and talking but still asleep? Somewhere in this city hillbillies and lawyers are French-kissing, hopeless wives taking lovers, horny teenagers fumbling with one another's bodies, randy husbands dropping two hours pay for a lap-dance, and worse, oh worse, a million telling lies nobody believes about what and who they'll do and what and whom they won't.

Kyle runs faster—his long feet are calloused, and the concrete is kinder than gravel and the mountain mulch to which they're accustomed. He runs and runs and runs, weaving through the crowds as he meets them. There is no time to deal with them. They would run too, were they him.

The hotel recedes, the center city's buildings diminish. Trees dot the hills of the university neighborhood; wet rotting leaves grind underfoot as he darts left, onto Leader. Cresting the hill, his nose fills with a smoky, tease, calling to mind the overwhelming jewel-toned autumn that, by now, will have overtaken the hills. Mountains fill his mind, low and rolling, old as fear, bowing to the season as it washes over, dappling hollows gold, red and brown.

At his Pontiac he thinks for the tiniest moment to flee home to those hills. A dark, terrible place, familiar and comfortable all the same. But that thought vanishes quickly as it comes. He leans over the roof of his Pontiac and rests his head on his arms. Sweat stings his eyes. He meant to sit in his car while catching his wind and ordering his mind, but the impulse to run on pulls him one way, while an urge to crawl into the Pontiac pulls him another. Neither is right.

Lies and false-reasons and make-believe swirl around him like dithering leaves. Kyle decides he will not allow them to settle or pile up and cover this day, these truths, that kiss, not again, nevermore. He pounds the roof of the Pontiac with the side of his fist, and it rumbles like a timpani. He raises his head to light. No sense in

fighting it. He will go back and knock on Marion's door. When it opens he will enter, and once he enters, he will stay.

