

I'm Mr. Cleanup. Meaning, that I'm the nigga that cleans up shit in this neighborhood and keeps it looking crispy clean for the residents that walk these streets. I come across as just the average elderly nigga for sure, and that's understandable. There's nothing about me, nothing unique, so to speak, that would make me stand out more than any other resident that strolls these crumbling streets. Nothing except for the fact that I'm the one man that takes his time in the morning to grab an economy-sized garbage bag from his own stock, some of his personal gloves, and sets out each morning to clean up the litter left by all the trailer trash and niggers, alike. Do I talk this way when I speak to my brothers? Of course not, but that's what most of them are. White niggers, black niggers, from what I see this neighborhood is full of them. To the brothers I call the whites trailer trash, and to the whites I unabashedly call the blacks the niggers. But in the end they're all niggers. I'm one of the few actual 'people' that roam these streets.

It's a Monday when I begin my routine for the three thousandth and twelfth day, and as I make my way through tall weeds and brambles between the side of a gas station and a chain-link fence, I notice a white base-head talking to a drug dealer near the double-glass doors that give entrance to store. I try to keep my head down, and pretend not to notice a thing, but even as I keep my eyes on the trash that I'm picking up I can see the exchange as it plays out in my head. It is a routine that is mundane at this point. Dealer checks the street for five-o, slaps the white boy a five that is the exchange for funds, then the white boy strolls away and shakes another man's hand on the way out of the lot, which is where the transfer of product occurs. Of course these men will eventually get caught, because the base-heads always come back here to get their drugs and the dealers always look to get their money. They can't help themselves.

"Dumbasses," I muttered. "Drugs right in front of the gas station. I hope you do get caught with your retarded asses." I picked up a pair of dirty female underwear and shoved it into the economy-sized garbage bag, tossed in a few Twinkies wrappers, pop cans, liquor bottles, and used condoms, before coming across a pair of dirty *male* underwear. I shoved those in too.

I continued to clean and the exchanges continued to happen. In about twenty minutes I had a bag half full of garbage and was ready to head elsewhere to continue my self-imposed clean up duties. Before I headed out of the weeds however I found the front page of a newspaper lying on the ground, fluttering in the breeze. I picked it up and read the headline.

MAN KILLED IN DRUG DEAL GONE WRONG

Now this always amused me. I pick up the front pages of newspapers often and when I see this shit I think, ‘now how do they know that?’ It seems like half the time they just make the shit up to grab attention. They probably found no drugs on the man—no drugs no drug deal—but if they were fortunate found some unregistered gun. That still didn’t prove that a drug deal was involved, and if the drugs were found on the man that didn’t prove anyone was trying to steal drugs from him. Where’s the proof? All the stories I read are pretty much duplicates of the others. Now to me that’s some lazy-ass writing. This murder, like so many of the other supposed drug related murders, was unsolved, but that was because the police weren’t looking that hard. And why should they? To a white police man, who gives a fuck about one nigger killing another?

I shoved the newspaper into the bag and walked away from the weeds along the side of the store.

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When I wasn’t cleaning up trash I spent time at the slot machines inside of the same gas station where the drug dealers sold dope. You would think I was in Vegas with this shit. Except it smells in here, it’s dirty, and they’re no higher rollers or old ladies with retirement savings or 401ks to blow. No, instead there are people on blow, with false hopes of using these slot machines as the means of earning a retirement savings. I play to pass the time. Yeah, I have my own savings, and if I didn’t have such a

history with this shitty part of the city, I'd be wetting my feet on the beaches of South Padre and tanning skin not in need of darkening.

But if I wasn't cleaning this part of the city, who would?

"Don't got money to blow, nigga," one man said, and took a seat next to me. "I don't got money to blow." But he had B.O. to spare, enough B.O. to drown the sperm population of China. Yes. That means take the roughly half a billion males and multiple them by trillions. *Trillions, nigga!* His B.O. could've drowned a whale. So I've dubbed him the B.O. man and this man wore a black-wife beater and had missing teeth because what the hell else would someone like this look like. You think he'd come waltzing in here with a grill of pearly whites, a one thousand dollar tailored suit and twinkling platinum cuff-links as a metaphorical cherry on top? No, that existed in dreams. The man looked at me.

"What's up brother?"

"Still breathing, blood," I responded.

"Nigga, just gonna see if he could get paid right quick." There was a woman standing behind him that looked like she'd sharpened her nails and tried to grate cheese off her face once a day. It hurt my already-old and sore eyes to look at. I pulled the lever on my machine and didn't get shit that matched. A pineapple, pear, and gold coin. Ain't get shit, just like the infrastructure budget for this part of Houston TX.

For the next thirty minutes my nose hairs shriveled as they endured their punishment. I provided the reprieve. It was time for me to fucking leave. I stood up from the chair with nothing gained and headed out of the store to pick up some more trash before I headed home for the day. When I stepped outside a white lady with chicken bones for legs and arms was making a deal with the same drug dealer I had seen earlier. She had less tact than the last base-head and failed to keep her money concealed as she attempted to hand it off to the drug-dealer under the guise of a hand-slap. She was all shaky. This upset the drug dealer.

“What you still cleaning for? You were out here earlier. You ain’t done yet.” It was a dark-skinned, pretty black girl that had said this. If I was younger I might’ve been able to look past the stupid question, maybe notice the smooth chocolate legs that extended from the too-short red jean shorts she wore. But I was well into the Viagra stage of my existence and what would’ve normally been a distinctive twinge in the groin region of my pants had been reduced to a fraction of a shiver.

“I clean here every day. Someone gots to do it.”

“Stuff be going down around this time, old man. You sure you want to be out here cleaning right now?”

I looked up at this girl, my eyebrows raised almost high enough to touch the top of my hairline. “Tell me, how long have you lived here?”

“My whole life. How about you?”

“My whole life as well. I was living back in the days where the white police beating up a black man wasn’t just a common thing, but a way of life, what you kids call trendy. I’ve seen this neighborhood, little girl. Seen it back when I was your age, seen it when I was younger. And I’ve seen all walks of life walk through.” The girl looked over her shoulder, as if there was someone near the front of the store that she was waiting for. This irritated me, but I did my best not to let it show, and crumbled more ash-dry newspapers into near dust with my arthritis ridden hands. “Tell me, how old are you?”

“Twenty-three,” she said, her brow slightly furrowed. “Why?”

“We live in two different worlds,” I said and turned away from her and went back to my work. The girl walked off and in fifteen minutes night had fallen. The customers began to increase, and both sloppy and slick transfers of funds and product were on full display.

Now the cops cruised by here every now and again, so when they showed up it was no surprise to me, no surprise to the store owner, and certainly—at least you’d think so—no surprise to the drug dealers. The owners and workers of the gas station were never the ones who sent the cops over, in fact, the long-running rumor was that the owners had a deal running with the neighborhood’s best known dealers. In

short, they call no cops and they receive protection from any bullshit any customers or gang-members might bring along. Yes, trouble was a common occurrence to the store owners who relied purely on the law for protection. Broken windows, kids and teenagers looting, hood-rats and base heads scrapping outside the store whether the parking lot was sunbaked or if a cop was parked to pump gas. Yeah, stupid motherfuckers around here.

I went home at ten o'clock that morning, right around the time a drug dealer named DQ, punched a base-head named Marcus in the face. It was a sad sight (I felt not an ounce of pity) because he was frail, as most base-heads were, and when he went down to the ground he went down hard. He lay there for a while knocked out, while some residents that had been walking by recorded him, wondering if he was dead.

"I didn't see the nigga get hit," a boy in a red hat said. "Damn, look at his eyes, they all half open and the pupil of one's not even visible."

And that was the point that I decided it was best for me to leave. When I made it home I ate a plate of baked chicken with the skin peeled off and swallowed a couple of pills for my arthritis and my blood pressure. So many things in my life could result in high blood pressure, let me tell you. Cops, roach infestations, air-conditioning malfunction, sex binges—not me by the more youthful assholes who lived above me and kept me awake at night—bad dreams, bad eating, and, oh, so much more. Now it was time for TV. I used to hate Fox News and all of their bullshit, but since finding out that they weren't a real news network, my distaste had turned to CNN. They were a wannabe Fox News, giving my president bullshit. But I watched a half hour of each station anyway and went to bed. I had to get my news from somewhere.

I woke up the next morning and turned my bedside TV to the local morning news, and the story was about a dealer that had gone missing. This one wasn't just shot dead in the street, like the others, this dealer was one that I knew, one that I had seen a good number of times at the corner store where I frequently clean up trash.

“And that’s what the motherfucker gets,” I muttered under my breath. If you went missing in this neighborhood you were probably dead. Especially if you were a drug dealer. Cases like the one on the TV usually had to do with a drug beef gone wrong, but I suspected that dirty cops often had a part to play. What, you don’t think the cops have the means to make a body disappear?

I sat up on my bed with a grimace and put the remote down on my nightstand. I’d be leaving here soon enough, just had to get up, shower, dress, eat, and grab the stuff I needed to clean after the messes that were so often left in the time I wasn’t cleaning.

That day I walked a good ten blocks, my trash bag in my hand and my gloves on as I picked up trash along the side of the road. Dirty diapers, old wife beaters, half-finished molded Chinese meals smelling like old fish and diarrhea and baking in the sun. I decided I’d make the gas station the last stop. I just wanted to start my day away from the drug dealers and all the bullshit that was happening around the store. Would you believe that I once caught a man and a girl fucking under a tree between the gas station and the chain-link fence where I most commonly pick up trash? This happened at night about a year ago, ten minutes after ten o’clock. I talked some shit to them that night, let me tell you. They ran off. When I think about it now I guessed they were some druggies. That’s something you can make out in someone’s walk, how they talk, and whether they make twitchy, ungraceful movements. I found more than a fair share of dirty syringes in those weeds, some that looked fresher than others, and I would wonder, each time, what would’ve happened if a kid found this before me? I’ve caught men and women sleeping in these weeds, some with a dirty pillows and blankets and some with nothing at all. Either way it was easy to mistake them for a corpse until they moved.

“Don’t hurt me,” one girl had screamed and had hopped up and run off.

When she had jumped up like that it had scared the hell out of me, and as she fled I felt kind of bad for her. I had disturbed her sleep. It made sense that some people slept in this area. It seemed to be secluded if you just glanced. It wasn’t until you stopped and really observed that you noticed how frequently people went in and out of the area. Weather in Houston was often humid and sticky and if you combine that with the bug, trash, and needle ridden section of the weeds you wondered how anyone could

stand to sleep there. I could understand certain reasons initially, mainly that the weeded sections were soft, and as I said it gave a feeling of seclusion when there really was none.

When I finally made it back to Ellis street that night, which was where the convenience store and the infamous section of weeds and brambles were located, I noticed the red and blue flashing lights of the cop cars doing their dance on the oil slicked parking lot. One of the drug dealers was seated on the curb with his hands cuffed behind his back as a couple of cops asked him some questions. I couldn't hear what the cops were asking him but I was pretty sure that it had something to do with drug dealing. What else, right?

This wasn't the best time to clean up the weeded patch. I may have been an older black man, but I was quite aware of how things worked, and sixty-five years of experience had made that more so. I was a target, I was visible. Though, if I'm going to be fair, I stand out far more walking through a white neighborhood than I do here. I moved closer to the cops and the dealer, trying to get within earshot, but remained off to the side. Don't know why the fuck I did this. Old age, I guess. Eventually, I found myself back at the grassy patch cleaning up trash and listening.

"Someone reported suspicious activity," I heard the cop saying to the drug-dealer as he stood over him. "We take the call because of what this area is known for and because you have a little bit of a history with us, Darius. With that history it's safer for us to cuff your hands behind your back."

Darius was known as DQ in the neighborhood, and yes, he was the same one that had knocked out that base-head in the hot ass parking lot.

"I'm just saying, there shouldn't be nothing wrong with just standing around talking to your boys outside a gas station. The owners wasn't complaining."

The cop was smirking because he knew DQ was full of shit like I knew DQ was full of shit. But don't get it mistaken, these cops are often wrong about a lot of black people. That's how cops are nationwide. Yeah, they may get the bad guys, but they also kill the good guys too. I had my face slammed into the cement on a long stretch of lonely road during a drive home from visiting family in Louisiana back in '85. It was one of those situations where I took my beating and just let them take me in and tow

my car, because the alternative would've been to risk getting beat up worse or shot. I had a taillight out that night which caused the whole mess.

"You guys be making me the target and shit," Darius was saying loudly. He was grimacing in pain. "I swear it's like you just be looking to arrest me! And these handcuffs fuckin' hurt!"

"I told you Darius, you're not going to get arrested tonight because we didn't find anything on you, but one day we will or we'll see you make an exchange and you will go back to jail and with your record the judge won't take it easy on you. I don't think that you want that and neither do we. Whatever you're doing here you need to stop." He walked around and helped Darius to his feet, and undid the handcuffs.

"Like I told you officer," Darius went on. "I didn't do nothing. I was just talking to friends, using the slot machines before you pulled this racist shit."

The officer that had been speaking to Darius gave a sideways glance at the black officer standing nearby. He turned Darius around and fixed his eyes back on him.

"Tell me, are you taking anything that I'm saying to you right now seriously?"

Darius, who had been looking at the ground as he spoke, fixed his eyes firmly on the policeman. He smiled. "You know that I take it seriously, sir. I'm trying to make something of my life, sir. I've signed up for online classes and everything. I'm going to be a lawyer when I grow up."

Maybe he intended to get a chuckle out of the cops but he didn't. The white officer looked at the black officer and muttered something, and the black officer nodded.

"Okay then," the white officer said, and turned Darius back around to re-cuff him. "We're going to go ahead and let you spend a night downtown, give you some time to think about your school assignments." Now the officer chuckled and though I didn't give a shit about Darius, I wanted to punch him dead in the face. These policemen thought they were mightier than God.

"Now this some bullshit," Darius shouted, and began to resist. Darius resisting wasn't the same as resistance from your average citizen either. He was a strong man, so when he resisted the officers had to work harder to keep him restrained.

“Don’t do it brother,” I said under my breath, my garbage bag held loosely in my gloved hand and the piece of old magazine that I was holding falling into the tall grass. But Darius was mad, jumping around, and shouting, and completely losing his mind. I looked around for the people with cell phones recording, but surprisingly no one had a phone out, no one else was even standing in the parking lot. But remember I said I wasn’t dumb. In this world our greatest weapon was being able to record this kind of shit and my cell phone had a camera just like most cell phones. I dropped the stuff that I was holding, extracted my phone, pushed the camcorder icon to set it to camcorder mode, zoomed in, and began to record. This was instinctive though the first time that I had done something like this. There was always someone else doing it, *always*. But this time around no one seemed to be paying attention. There were barely any people in the parking lot or visible through the glass-doored entrance.

I could see one of the store employees looking out of the window, and the couple of elderly customers sitting at the slot machines were slowly rising to their feet. Where were all the youngins at, that’s what I wondered.

“Must’ve split when these cops showed up here,” I muttered.

“Get the fuck off of me,” Darius shouted. “Let me go man! This is bullshit man! I have assignments to do!”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I said, holding the phone with unsteady hands. I licked my bottom lip. “Don’t give up the lie.”

Then something amazing happened. DQ managed to break away and run, just like the show cops (cops, by the way had never done anything to help the reputation of black people). His hat flew off in his haste and his arms pumped hard and his sneakers made clapping sounds against the concrete as he bolted toward the street. The cop that had been talking to him shouted for him to stop, pulled his firearm, and before DQ managed to make it to the end of the parking lot, he pulled the trigger four times, hitting him three times in the back and one time in the head. A splash of blood and bone erupted from the top of his skull like an exploded water balloon and DQ fell to the ground and lay there, for all intents and purposes, dead. His left leg performed one convulsive, fish-like flop, then stilled. Like a said. *Dead.*

I stood there, slack-jawed, the cell phone held in my shaking hands and still in recording mode. Once I realized what I was doing and the immediate danger I was in I took the phone off record mode and made it disappear. I grabbed my trash bag and left, deciding that I might take the next couple of days off before coming back to continue my voluntary cleaning duties.

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And still, when I woke up the next morning another drug dealer had gone missing. But that wasn't the main story, because an unarmed black man had been shot by the cops the other night, and both cops—including the black one—were claiming that it had been in self-defense. It was a huge local news story, which was surprising to me, because the shooting of someone that was a drug dealer was never the kind of thing that made headlines. With this case I had the proof too, I could prove definitively that both cops were lying about shooting the man in self-defense, and I could simultaneously embarrass all the pundits that had taken the wrong side early. Because the media—the goddamn, stupid media—was taking the side of the cops.

So what's the question that the average person asks in this situation? The person on the outside looking in. It's the obvious thing. Why don't I give the video over to the media, and if I'm too afraid to do it directly, why don't I anonymously post the video that I recorded on YouTube? If I do that countless curious browsers will click the video, find out what it is, and send it into CNN and NBC for me. I'll give you the backstory of why I hadn't.

When I was nineteen I was out at the movies with a good male friend of mine. As I stood in line for the concession stand I noticed my brother's girlfriend standing a few spots in front of me. She was holding the hand of a man I had never seen before. When I saw this I took a couple of moments to consider if I had gotten something wrong, if I might've been seeing a look-alike. Because for her to be out in the neighborhood, not even that far from where my brother lived, seemed beyond idiotic. After grappling with what I should do for a couple of days—yes, I did, in fact, wait a couple of days—I decided

to let him know. My brother wasn't the type known to have the temper, I actually was. But when I told him—at the time we still lived with our parents—he punched me in the face, with absolutely no warning. Of course, I didn't just stand there and take it; I punched him back, but it turned out to be a fight that I ended up losing, bloody nose, swollen eye, sore jaw and all.

My brother's temper didn't end with attacking me, no, it culminated in him using a tire wrench to put the man into a coma, then he broke his girl's nose by grabbing two thick locks of her hair, yanking her head down, and kneeling her in the face. Yeah, my brother was sentenced to ten years, ended up getting out in seven.

Ever since, I learned it was best not to stick my face in business I didn't belong in. Yeah, yeah, I know it's not the same thing, but understand my point of view. How would you be in this situation? Actually, come to think of it, don't answer that question.

My cleaning duties continued that week, and on Sunday I found out the name of the girl with red shorts that had seemed to be so concerned about my well-being. Kia. We had another conversation while the weather broke my entire body out a horrible sweat for what must've been the millionth time since I was born into this world.

"You hear about the shooting earlier this week," she asked. She was wearing blue shorts this day and a midriff shirt, and boy, she was sweating too. Her legs and arms had a very attractive sheen to them. I focused harder on cleaning up trash. It was so bad in the area I was cleaning you would've thought they were stockpiling garbage. "Or you was probably there, wasn't you?"

"I didn't see anything," I said. "Not like it matters though. One dead nigger is the same as any other. No one gives a shit whether they're shot by a cop or whether they go missing."

"Someone else go missing?"

"Yeah, didn't you hear? All you have to do is pick up the paper."

"Do you mean newspaper," she said, and broke out in laughter. "You still read the paper? Do you know what the internet is?" I thought that she had a pretty laugh and also thought that the back of my hand would make a very loud slapping noise if I backhanded her right in the mouth.

“More reliable news comes from the paper. How do you know what you’re getting online isn’t a lie?”

“How do you know it is?”

At this point she was starting to annoy me. I waved a hand at her, hoping she would take it as enough of a signal to go somewhere. She didn’t take the hint. The goddamn millennials.

“What you’re reading online anyone could’ve written. How do you know you’re not reading the ramblings of some junkie with a needle sticking from their wrist?”

“I could ask you the same thing. You take the credentials you hear about the paper you read as the gospel. But it isn’t the gospel, just a bunch of lines written on processed trees.” She was leaning forward slightly now, her hands on her sides as she spoke. “Lines written by people no different than you or me.”

“You make a good point, little girl. Now you think you can go somewhere and let an old man finish up his work?”

“Okay. My name’s Kia by the way.”

It was funny because it meant that she thought I cared about getting her name. In truth at the moment I didn’t give a fuck, but later turned out to be grateful.

“What’s your name?” she asked

“Evan,” I said, hoping that the honesty would make her gone. For another couple of minutes it didn’t, and it was hard to just tell her to leave an old nigga alone.

“That’s a nice name,” she said. “Does it mean anything?”

“No meaning, as far as I know.”

“There’s sites you can go to online and get the meanings of names. You can probably do it too, Evan, even if you’re not experience with the internet.” She was smiling now and her eyes absolutely sparkled. “I bet your name’s biblical.”

I said nothing. Picked up a used needle with blood on the end. I dropped it inside the garbage bag. Now, I was curious about this girl, wondering if she was only talking to me because she needed someone

she perceived as smarter to talk with. You've heard the saying, with age comes wisdom. Yeah, that whole bit.

"My name is like the car but not pronounced the same. It's like my mom was naming me after that nasty ass rapper who had that one hit all those years ago. I don't like my name, but I gave you the real pronunciation. Usually when I tell anyone else I say it so it sounds just like Key-yah."

Still, I said nothing. I wanted her to go and she was testing the last thread of this old man's patience. How much of this was I supposed to take, trying to stand here, helping this neighborhood out when I didn't have to do a thing? This girl was getting in the way of my work and that was a personal offense. At that point I began to mentally time how long it would take before I was forced to tell her off.

"Well, bye, Evan," Kia said, and turned and trotted away without another word. That happy-go-lucky bitch.

I trashed more Twinkies wrappers, condom wrappers, candy wrappers, and pieces of clothing spread throughout this grassy area and curbside, and I picked up more shit for hours, while the Houston sun cooked the hell out of my world-weary body. When dark fell, I left, only remembering my phone and the video it contained when I made it home. I undressed, took a scolding hot shower, threw on my robe and sat on the edge of my bed and viewed it. This was only the second time that I had looked at it since I'd first recorded the video.

Did I really want to help the case of DQ or did I even care? I put the phone on my nightstand, laid back in my bed and closed my eyes. That night I dreamed of the shooting, DQ's shouts, the four gunshots in rapid succession, and when I woke up I was drenched in sweat. I wondered if the sweat was the result of the dream or the temperature in the house. At first I couldn't even remember the details of the dream and was grateful for it. I'm haunted by enough in my life, I don't need to be haunted by this shooting as well.

Kia stayed away for a while, and I didn't know if it was intentional or if she just happened to be out of the area. But a funny thing was starting to happen; I was starting to miss her. She was pretty, which was saying a lot considering some of the worn down, prematurely aged girls that I had seen amble these

streets as if old souls. But I only wanted to see her because it helped pass the time and not because it had anything to do with something sexual. And, to be quite candid, I could feel that she had a good spirit, a healthy spirit. She was probably something new age, Wayne Dyer, at one with all creation bullshit. Who knew?

An interesting conversation happened on the first of August. I was back in the convenience store, sitting at a slot machine with a can of Coke, and a styrofoam cup full of change. The conversation going on in the seats next to me was about DQ getting shot and how messed up the police were and how things were never going to change with race relations despite having a black president. This was talk that was familiar in the hood. The mention of an optimistic viewpoint, now that was something that was rare.

A man seated directly to my right leaned over and whispered in my ear, "What if I told you I know who the killer of all those drug dealers was?"

I looked at him, one of my eyebrows cocked. "The might be something you should go to the police about, don't you think?"

He seemed immediately bothered by my response. With a grimace he said,

"Well, I want to think it out first. I don't want to just jump out there like that, you know?"

He wore an open white button-up without a T-shirt or a wife-beater beneath. Had a pair of jeans with oil stains on them and nails long enough to look like a strange weapon.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm dealing with something similar right now." I didn't realize until that moment that I was touching the pocket that contained my cell phone.

"There's a reward or something for information, right? That's what I heard. Do you know?"

I had no idea. I simply shrugged.

"Well, I'm going to get on the internet and check that out and if it looks like there's a reward I might go ahead and say something."

"That's good," I said. "You should go ahead and do that." I pulled the handle on the slot machine, came up with three **BARS**. I won five dollars, grabbed the change from the dispenser and dropped it into my cup. When you played this game these weren't the prizes that you looked for. You wanted to win the

twenty dollar prize, the fifty dollar prize, and with the grace of God, the two hundred dollar prize, which was the equivalent of the feel-like-you're-rich-for-a-week-when-you're-really-just-slightly-less-broke-than-all-them-other-niggas prize. Five dollars in change only represented money that was meant to be spent on more tries on the slot. That five dollars, by the way, I ended up spending on the slot like I was supposed to, then grabbed myself a water from the drink section, paid for it, and left that piece of shit establishment. I went back home and took my pills, grabbed the items that I needed, left my apartment, and went back to work.

The next day I ran into Kia, who was fresh from having an argument with one of the drug dealers that hung around the store. I didn't know if she was dating this man, if she had a kid with him, had fucked him once or ten times, but it wasn't the first time I had seen them talking. I heard bits of this particular exchange and it didn't take long to get the gist of what was going on.

It was seven in the morning, a few hours before the sun would radiate its heat with mercilessness and my skin would begin to shine like the exterior of a newly detailed Cadillac. The weather was too hot for people to argue in at that point.

"Most dudes I know," Kia shouted, with her arms outstretched like she was preparing for a hug or ready to fight, "wouldn't do a girl that's good to them like that. They know how to call a bitch back, and not pretend like they never seen her before."

"*You are mistaken,*" I said under my breath, shoving an old phone book (who even used these, anymore?) into the plastic bag. "The men that *you* know live in this neighborhood and how often do you see anything other than bum ass niggas around here?" I chuckled. Said, "*Most men you know. Sure*"

"You should just go somewhere," the dealer said. "I don't know why you be around here all the time. And you know that I'm busy with this shit. You just a kid, anyway."

"I'm only two years younger than you, nigga!" I'd never heard her yell like that before, but I've heard a fair number of addicts yell similar things. Phrases like '*I need to be the only bitch you fucking, BITCH!*' and '*you ain't worth half a fuckin' rock*' and '*you ain't the only nigga I'm fucking,* were commonplace around these parts.

Kia stormed off, the drug dealer she had been arguing with simply shaking his head, then strutting off around the corner and out of sight. On the way out of the lot, Kia glanced in my direction, noticed me, and changed course. Suddenly, she was smiling like sunshine, and the rage that the dealer had incited seemed to be gone, at least in that moment. She had blue shorts on this morning, and a striped tank-top. She had her hair tied back in a single, short ponytail.

“Evan!” she shouted cheerfully, both hands cupped over her mouth.

“I hear you,” I murmured. “Just come over here. It’s not like you have to be yelling and shit.” She made her way over to the grass where I was cleaning up and stopped just before her sandals left the concrete.

“Boy, you’re out here early. Is it true that older people always get up earlier?”

“We sleep less too,” I said. “Guess God figures he might as well give us the energy to enjoy as much of our days as possible, considering that we’re on the way out.” She laughed at that and I smiled.

“From the way it sounds with those cops it looks like there’s not even going to be an indictment for that shooting. Isn’t that messed up?”

I lifted my old shoulders in a shrug. “It’s expected. What can you do?”

“Yeah, well, I don’t like it. I don’t think that’s the kind of thing that black people should be having to expect in 2015.”

“Don’t I know it,” I muttered.

“Huh?”

I turned and faced Kia directly. Took in her dark skin, her wide, green eyes.

“Are those real? Your eyes?”

“All day,” she said. “My Dad had green eyes. He’s dead as shit now.”

“I’m going to tell you something my Dad said. A piece of advice so you know how to go about your life and how to deduce what’s the bullshit you’re hearing and what’s not.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“We’re never going to be seen as equal by white America, understand? The chasm that’s been dug since slavery has gotten thinner and will continue to get thinner, but with all that suffering, all those lies and splitting up of families and raping of our women, with all that *history*, there will never be a day where this will truly be a post racial society. Your mindset, little girl, needs to be, fuck everybody, and how do I get mine.” I lifted the hand holding the garbage bag, and pointed one gloved index finger at her. “Don’t nobody give a fuck about you. Those white women you see in the supermarket think you have five un-fathered kids, and the white men in that same store think you’ll fuck for a dime bag of reefer. And shit like that ain’t ever changing.” I went back to my work. “Get yours, Kia. That’s all you need to be concerned with is getting yours.”

Kia chuckled. “Boy, I don’t know. I think I’m a bit more optimistic than that. Shit’s fucked up in this world but it not that bad. And if you thinking the whole world’s messed up that’s what you’ll bring into your life. You should watch Tony Robbins, Evan.”

“Call him Tony *Robbings*. Because that’s all he’s doing, is robbing you.”

“I didn’t pay nothing to hear the stuff that he has to say. He has free audiobooks on the net.”

I didn’t respond to this. Picked up an old latex glove and shoved it into the bag.

“When you going to be done with this,” Kia asked. “Since you out here so early you should be getting off early too.”

“In about an hour, why?”

She shook her head, looking down. “No reason.”

“No, go ahead, tell me. Why?”

“Do you have any place where we can talk, like out of the heat?” She looked up at the sky. “Because it’s hot as *fuuuck*.”

I looked at her again, more serious than the first time. “I’m not going to sleep with you, Kia, and neither do I have an interest in it.”

Kia grimaced at this thought. “Nigga, I am *not* trying to sleep with you. I was just hoping you had a place to talk, because you’re interesting. And it’s getting hot out here and I thought that it might be

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