High Pursuit

By Mitchell S. Jackson

Blood pulls up in a near-new new Caddy, heaven white, with flesh-colored guts and the white walls on his tires thick as rulers side by side.  It’s the kind of ride that hurts my feelings to look at but I can’t keep from looking at it, from hawking him as he parks and cools out wearing a grass-green velour tracksuit—unzipped so you see he’s shirtless—and reptile cowboy boots. He swaggers across the street and up the pathway, the same path that from the time I was a wee bit has been my chore to keep swept and weeded, like in the few years since he night-schooled his way to a diploma, dropped out the only college for miles, and got booted out the house, he’s become a grown-ass man who believes in himself so much you can’t convince him not to. He stops just short of the porch and cheeses. I set my magazine (I stay in these custom-car magazines) aside and stand.

What it is? he says.

Long time no see, I say.

You can whiff him from a distance. He smooths silky fresh-pressed strands that make it hard to tell we’re brothers by the head. Aw Maine, you know, he says. Been out here in high pursuit.

He fingers the thumb-thick gold herringbone dressing his neck, peeps Moms’ Plymouth in the driveway. He asks where she is, and I tell him in the house sleep ’cause she’s fresh off a double and said she’s ushering evening service. Blood asks what I’m into, if I’m down to roll, and since it’s my day off, what the fuck am I supposed to say—no? No sooner than we pull off, he turns his 8-track low and gets to high sighting about his Brougham, about how much get up the engine got, how smooth it drives on the freeway, about how he ain’t yet decided what his custom plate will say. He runs his hand over the fur smothering his steering wheel, fiddles the handmade Playboy logo and forest of spanking new Evergreen air fresheners hanging from his rearview.

Blood wheels over to the park in Northeast with the rose garden. Bloomed roses everymuthafuckinwhere and you can’t not smell them if you try. We stride a couple laps in the garden catching up on the latest family business, Pop’s latest appeal, Mom working a trillion double shifts to cover his legal fees, our sister’s first born—a baby boy that Blood has yet to see.

Say, you still down there scrubbin’ them white folks’ rides for a little bit of nothin’? Blood says.

They say I’m ’bout to come up for a raise, I say. Plus, the tips is cool when the weather breaks.

Oh, I beg to differ, Maine. You know I know that elbow-and-ass work ain’t never cool. He pulls out a bankroll that, no bullshit, would choke an Old Testament camel, and peels off enough to make me good and envious. Check it, he says. Give some to Mom, and say it’s from you. Give some to Sis, and say it’s from me. And the rest is fuck-off funds.

Before Blood second-guesses his largesse, I shove the bread in my jeans and tell him, right on.

We stride another half-lap with him a half-step ahead and me thinking of them days when you used to couldn’t tell me nothing about Blood. How it used to be that if you said something even halfway on its way to being sideways about my older brother to me, it was a prime cause for me going upside your head. How summers you used to couldn’t find me and Blood apart for more than a few ticks: picking berries, building a tree house, stealing ten-speeds. When you saw him coming, you saw me fresh on his heels.

You can hear the hoop court’s chain nets *ching* every so often, hear kids hollering and whooping on the playground, hear a hooptie in tragic need of a muffler stuttering up the street. Hold up, I say, and touch his shoulder. He swings so we’re facing each other, and I crane so we’re eye to eye. All bullshit aside, I say. Is it really that sweet?

Aw, Maine, it’s a toothache, he says. I tell you no lies.

Before visions of high-profile pimpin’ and flaunting, flaunting around Northeast in a Caddy, Blood pushed an AMC Pacer and worked graveyards at Coast to Coast Janitorial. Can’t tell you how many mornings he’d slump home smelling fetid as fuck with the whites of his eyes the color of industrial cleaner. Then one morning—memorable even more for it being my first day at the car wash—he stomped into the attic room he and I shared, snatched the name tag off his work shirt, slammed it on the floor, and stomped that joint to shards. They can have this shit, Maine, he said. They can have this shit for. ever.

Quit bullshittin’. You ain’t quittin’, is you? I said. What you gone do now?

What I shoulda been did, he said. What I was born to do, he said. Check it, a nigga done lived his everlast day on his knees.

The next evening Moms, who was weeks into ushering first *and* second Sunday services, called devotion and Blood dawdled into the living room long after me and Sis and stood smug over our circle.

Well, have a seat, Moms said.

With all due respect, Mama, not tonight, he said. Not tomorrow night neither. Matter fact, no more nights.

What? Moms said, and called him by his full name. What’s this foolishness?

Foolishness? he said. Seem to me like foolishness is us down here every odd evening, praising the same God that let a white man put Pops in the penitentiary.

Moms, all the mirth sucked out her face, stood taller than I’d seen in life. So, I guess you got your heart set on being a heathen, huh? she said. God knows I can’t stop you. But I tell you what, you won’t do it livin’ here.

Blood tramped upstairs and made racket rummaging. He came back down an hour or so later, hefting a dingy duffel and a suitcase that looked old as the exodus. He floated over and gave my shoulder a squeeze that seemed to herald my fortune. He kissed Sis square in her forehead. Then he went to hug Mom, but she crossed her arms, huffed, and gave him her back.  He loaded his car alone in quiet, told us, Love is love, bid us a beauty contestant’s wave, and eased the front door shut. Nam one of us saw him again till after the New Year flipped.

In retrospect, Blood’s defiance was a declaration—to his damn self, to Moms, to the world—a stance that, truth be told, made him a hero to me, too, made me question when/if my nuts would ever swell that size, if I could summon the daring to seize from the world what I wanted, to proclaim who I am as this bitch keeps spinning.

Got the munchies something vicious, so I tramp down to the corner store at Union Ave and Failing. From a block or so off, I spy a few broads standing against the wall, all of them in bikini tops, skirts cut so high you don’t have to work to see their prize, and heels too tall for sure-footing. See a car pull curbside and the girls scramble to the window and barter not more than a hot minute before one of them hops in, and the driver eases off as if what just went down was on the up-and-up. The unchosen totter back to the side of the building. This, mind you, is nothing I ain’t witnessed under moonlight, but under a bright sun—well that’s something else. It’s damn near stunning, and more so when I behold who I’d trade a lung to *un*see—my ex, my one love. The best advice is to mind my motherfucking business, but see that’s the thing about advice though: We need somebody to give it to us. Ill-advised, I slug over to where she stands. She straightens her skirt and bra top, seeming about as happy to see me as she would be to see the police.

Nah, no, no, I say. Not you too. What you doin’ out here?!

She smacks her bright-red kissing lips, waves a hand.

You out here like this? I say. How this happen?

Just like you to be askin’ how, when what you need to be askin’ is why, she says.

She’s the one. Let me finger her freshman year and pop her cherry—quiet as it’s kept popped mine too—when we was sophomores. The one that tutored me through a math class I wouldn’t have passed in this life or the next without her. Was game for us wearing matching outfits to house parties. Was my date for homecomings and prom. We broke up last summer—I’d cheated her into tears for the last time—and not too long after, I waltzed across the stage with my diploma in hand, and though I’ve heard rumors since, I ain’t had the heart to ask. This close, I can see she’s wearing a cheap wig, that she’s tried to mask a scar on her cheek with blush.  C’mon, I say, and grab her by her bony wrist. We leavin’.

She jerks free with strength, peers into my bony chest and judges, as has been her gift, my percent of punk—too high. *We* ain’t goin’ nowhere, she says. Unless *you* is payin’.

While Moms pulls a swing shift, me and a couple of my patnas pass a J of homegrown and watch welterweights trade haymakers onthe old console a crew of us moved upstairs once Pops began his bid.  The blather champ among us gets to bickering with me about who’s up on the scorecards, and in the midst of our back and forth, Blood flaunts upstairs wearing a silk shirt, slacks, reptile boots, a Cuban-link chain, and a fucking gold-nugget watch.

What it is? he says.

Can’t call it, I say.

He lazes on the couch beside me and asks if he can blow with us. When the J reaches him he pulls deep, holds it and holds it, exhales a cloud, waits and waits, and shakes his head. Well I’ll be goddamned! Y’all down here puffin’ bunk, he says, and digs Zig Zags and the fattest gram bag in all the world from a pocket. He opens it, tells me to smell, and I scent myself good and covetous. When it reaches him again, he rolls—Blood’s a twisting phenom—a tumescent J on the shoebox top we keep near for the cause. He admires his handiwork from up close. He sucks a lungful and, beats later, coughs like he might got TB. Now that, he says. That right there’s some killer.

He passes it to me, and I know in a pulse he ain’t in the least bit overstating the truth. By the time the judges announce the fight’s final scorecards, I’m high as dying stars and paranoid Moms will rush home early from her shift and instead of calling from the base, per her norm, will stomp upstairs, condemn my patnas into purgatory, and make me the latest and last of whom she bore bounced permanent out the house. Blood rolls another pregnant J, seeming oblivious about this prospect. But why shouldn’t he be when, as far as any of us can tell, he’s making it happen.

Shit, I’m the one life’s happening *to.*

One of my patnas asks to see Blood’s watch, and he unclasps it and tosses it to him. My patna runs his fingers over the ridges, smashes it against his ear, measures the weight in his palm. What’s this shit, solid gold or somethin’? he says. This shit heavy as a motherfucka.

Pimp tools, Blood says. They out here choosin’.

We awe Blood’s gold glory between us and back to him. He cuffs his sleeve and fastens it back on his wrist. Another patna asks how Blood got in the game and he mentions this old head he met at an afterhours spot, explains how the old head took a liking to him, said he was a natural, started putting him up on game.

What he tell you? my sycophantic patna asks. Yeah, what he say? another one chimes because we’re all, in our own way, waiting on a blueprint, or else a rescue plan.

Blood hops up and struts in front of the TV. He turns the sound almost mute. Say Maine, this grade A is sold. Never *pro bono,* he says.  So, if any one of y’all so much as check a nickel, you owe me cents. He hits the J, breathes a troposphere, cough-sneezes, and knocks his fist against his chest. First off, its rules to this shit, he says. And the first rule is ain’t no such thing as half-hearted pimpin’. Rule number two is it ain’t no love nowhere in it. When the game begins, friendship ends. Keep it purse first and ass last always, he says. Keep a ho in arrears and do it with this here, he says, and touches his temple. Keep it head down, hand out. And don’t turn down nothin’ but your collar, he says. Earn a name in the game but don’t black eye it with that gorilla shit, he warns. Tell her, you’re in high pursuit of a new prostitute. Tell her, let her next move be her best move. That you don’t need her, you want her. That it ain’t a force thing, it’s a choice thing. To stay ten toes down and it’s greater later. He leans against the TV and flashes his pearl white voltage at us lackeys. And whatever you do, don’t neva let it slip your mind that pimp is what you do *and* who you are.

Aw, Blood, you really believe that shit? I say.

Say Maine, we believe what we want to, he says. Get it how you live.

It’s the first dry day after days of rain, rain, rain, and cars are marathoning off the line, so if I play it right, I can bop home with a pocketful of singles at shift’s end. This, though, depends on out-hustling, by bounds, the white boy that, most days, no matter how tough I scrub, buff, simper, clocks a grip on more tips than me. The belt conveys a Buick off the line and I hustle to it quick-fast, hedging that, since it’s a late model, there’s, forthcoming, a brag-worthy tip for a proper wipe and shine. Hopeful that is, until I see bald-face, high-booty, feels-cursed-’cause-he’s-a-nigger type, gump over and linger beside it. He fiddles his belt turning his khakis to floods, straightens his geek glasses, crosses the arms of a button-down buttoned at his throat—in effect dashing all hope of more than a few coins for my effort. But I go at it with grit anyhow because you never can be sure till you’re done. Plus, I ain’t trying to give even a hint of just cause.

Once I finish, I turn my towel into a white flag and dude stalks a lap around his ride.  His second go-round, he swings open a door and swipes the jamb and holds his finger close enough to me to, in most other circumstances, warrant me slapping his face clean the fuck off.

Is this what you call done? he says.

Sorry about that sir, I say, and the next moment want to shove my fist in my mouth for sounding like a lame-ass lickspittle. He hovers while I rewipe the jambs.

How’s that? I say.

How’s what? he says. He ducks inside and plucks a phantom mote off his floor mat. The motherfucka complains of smudges on the paint, streaks on the windows, dust on the dash, dirt on the license plate, a pebble in his spokes, an ashtray that still smells faint of ashes.

Moms preaches a man who don’t work is a washout, a burden, and since I’m loath to be her latest proof, I stoop to rub this and that and trail this low-octane sucka as he gestures at smashed bugs on his bumper and fender and tar on the car’s underbelly that no amount of scrubbing will clean. He points to another complaint and I take a knee in the wet gravel and feel sharp pebbles gouge my skin. Sheesh, what do I have to do to get decent service around here? he says.

What would Mom say? I ask myself. What would Blood do? I ask myself, scramble upright, cock my head, and wrap the towel around my fist.

What you need to do is wash the shit yourself!

Dude retreats a step, goes rictus. Uh, excuse me? You’re going to regret that, he says, and double-gumps for the office calling for the manager.

How am I gone explain to Moms that I lost my job? And where, now, will I get the bread to buy the Deuce and a Quarter I’ve had my heart set on buying and restoring since what feels like let there be light. Shit, how I’m supposed to live day-to-day when I got a grand sum of not one red cent saved?

Dude stomps out stabbing a finger at me, my punk manager devil-smirking behind him. But I can’t give neither one of them the pleasure, so I yank off this corny-ass work shirt and tell them both what they can kiss.

Sis’s crib is a hike and a half from the car wash, but since bus fare at present seems a small ransom, I slink side streets past neighborhood girls double Dutching and hopscotching, an ashy-legged boy taking a wrench to a raggedy go-kart, a clique of grade-schoolers catching wheelies on ten-speeds, an old head ducked under the hood of a Glass House, Crazy Johnny dragging his frail rottweiler—or maybe the dog’s tugging him—on a leash made of clothes tied together.

Sis answers cradling her baby boy, my firstborn nephew.

Surprise, I say.

Surprise is right, she says. What brings you by?

Do I, I say, need a reason?

No, she says. You don’t. But you almost always got one.

True, and I’m lookin’ at him right now, I say. Hey nephew. It’s your uncle. The handsomest one.

My nephew makes a face as if he might agree. As if this young he knows how to speak with his eyes. His eyes are wonders like ours, though I hope they know more triumph than mine.

Sis leads me into the living room. She sits in the velvet loveseat and kicks up her feet on a low table. Since there ain’t another seat, I plunk on the floor beside a carpet stain the size of a toddler—it makes me feel poorer to see it—that wasn’t here the last time I came by. Sis asks if I’m thirsty, hands me my nephew, shuffles into the kitchen, and returns with Big Gulp cups filled with something iced. I’d offer you somethin’ else, but all’s I got is this and the baby’s formula, she says.

Here, she says, and reaches for my nephew. Got to put him down or he’ll be a terror tonight. She lowers nephew in the bassinet I bought her for her baby shower and forsakes the chair in favor of sitting cross-legged beside me. My nephew whimpers a bit and then goes quiet, and neither Sis nor I bother his gift for a good while. One thing about Sis, she knows how and when to let things be. The crumpled few dollars in tips I made, I fish out my pocket, smooth them on the carpet, roll them into a tube, and hold the tube in my fist.

Look like somebody had a good work day, she says.

That what this look like? I say.

Moms kicked Sis out the day she told her she was pregnant. It was a Sunday, and Sis must’ve thought that the Sabbath was her best shot at grace. But Mom said, You ain’t having an out-of-wedlock baby in this house, and made her hand a wall that ceased all talk. Sis had little choice but to move in with her boyfriend—fingerwave sporting nigga who was an average-ass hooper for my high school’s arch rival—and his mama until she finagled a way into this place.

Where’s that wavy-head man of yours? I ask.

Ain’t seen him, she says. Since he came home loaded, claimed I tried to trap him with the baby, packed his stuff, and bounced.

Damn, I ain’t even know. How come you didn’t call me? I say, and in a blink, my troubles by contrast feel no bigger than a mustard seed.

Call who for what? she says. Boy, don’t you stress over us. We gone be good. Got an appointment with the welfare folks this week and problems solved.

Just like that? I say.

That’s what they say, she says.

Sis, who’s cordial with my ex, asks if I’ve seen her, if she and I are working on rekindling.

Not yet, I say.

But not yet is not never, she says.

Look at us, I say, and nod at the framed black-and-white picture of her, Blood, and me the Easter before Pops caught his case. Yeah, better days, she says, and announces she heard Blood knocked one of her friends and has been ferrying her up to Sea-Tac to work a track. And I hope you got sense enough not to go that route, she says.

Sis, I say. Oh, how I wish I could tell as easy as you what make sense and what don’t.

She draws a heart on my chest. You do, she says. Trust it.

We, per our usual, get around to chatting about Moms and Pops. Sis confesses she ain’t sure if/when she’ll let nephew visit our father behind the walls, that she and Moms ain’t spoke since the day she kicked her out. And I tell her how, mealtimes now, Moms is liable to recite the Ten Commandments, has also conceived of even more incontrovertible laws and Lords against me transgressing them, her having to boot her last child out the house and/or the specter of me worrying her into another stroke and/or my condemnation to hell on Earth or eternal hellfire.

 That woman gone keep believin’ life’s a Bible till the rapture, Sis says, and snickers, but I remind her, in so many words, that Pops’ case ordained Mom a zealot. No doubt, she be downright wrong sometimes, I say. But we’ve also doled her a fair share of disappointments. And who’s to say what she can stand?

Sis pulls at the nap of her carpet, recrosses her legs.

Enough about that for now. How about you tell me what’s what with you? she says, and plies me with the eyes that, when I was young, when she was the one scooping me from grade school and quizzing me on my times tables and spelling words, would tug the truth right out of me.

Ain’t nothin’ to spill, I say, flatten the little bit of nothing in my palm, consider giving it to Sis, think better of it, think better of my second mind, hand her most of it, feel richer for it.

What’s this for? she says.

Wrong question, I say. Not for what. For who?

My nephew—the boy got lungs—rustles and starts wailing. Sis rises, fetches him, rests him on her shoulder, and strolls around the living room humming and patting him into a coo.

The invite said BYOB and smoke, and damn near everybody in this joint is rose-eyed saucy. Me and my greedy patnas post near a corner table loaded with near-empty bowls of chips and pretzels and a scant tray of crackers and cheese, and pass a jug of rotgut liquor. The DJ spins one funk jam, one disco. Songs later, my patnas cut out on prospecting missions, and I stagger through a touch-and-feel festival on a hunt for the toilet. Well I’ll be good and gotdamed, I see some sucka in a sharkskin sport coat macking in the ear of my ex, my one love, as she leans against a wall wearing a dress so tight she might as well be butt-ass naked. Closer, I see he’s the cat new to the neighborhood that my patnas have been envying for his rides: a ragtop Impala, a Cougar with a racing stripe, a Mustang with glass-packed dual exhausts. Call it the weed or the wine or wanting to save her—or wanting to save me, or wanting to save us—but, whatever it is, throbs my heart near my headed-for-rot liver.

He fondles her hair—her natural hair too, which is pulled into a bun—and her hand, and she titters and bats her eyes at him. It’s how, moons ago, she’d fawn at me, a boon no other fool on Earth but me should reap. He swanks off through the crowd, peeking once over his shoulder with the hubris of a nigga who’s got more than a pittance in his pocket. Then, steady as the liquor will let me, I bumble over and catch her by the wrist.

Say. Let me holler at you.

Holler at me about what? she says.

About us, I say.

What don’t you get? she says, and jerks free. There ain’t no us. There ain’t been no us.

But it could be, I say. Let me make it right.

What you gone do for me that I can’t do for me? she says. What you gone do for me that the next man won’t do for me? she says. What you even doin’ for yourself?

The shark-suited sucker flaunts beside us holding a vodka bottle by the neck and foam cups. He looks me a once-over and smirks as if, in an instant, he’s done the math and figured he’d tip a scale.

Say, Babygirl, who this? he says.

Who him? she says and hooks her arm through his. Nobody. Not no one we need to know.

Blood parks his new*ish* Caddy off Grand Ave, and we foot it halfway across the bridge and stop close enough to the made in oregon sign to hear it buzzing, to see where some of the bulbs have burned black. Called Blood and bummed a few bucks because the peckerwoods at the car wash been playing games with cutting my last check and I can’t not now or maybe ever admit to Moms that I’ve loss my gig—an admission sure to spike her systolic and have her on my neck something terrible about my part of the bills. But we’re here even more so because, of late, I’ve been feeling, in plural, like I’ve had enough, like I’m past that point.

Blood sweeps out his arm as if offering me the Willamette on bargain. Look, he says. What you see?

From up here, the river’s a blue-black sheet twinkling the lights of the cityscape. Water, I say. What else is there?

Nah, Maine, he says. Blood explains how the river begins as streams in the mountains near Eugene and Springfield, how the streams cut sharp around Newberg before splitting into channels around Sauvie Island, how the main stream flows into the Columbia and makes its way to a mouth of the Pacific.

Look again, he says.

And I shrug.

Current, Maine, he says. We got to stay in motion, you dig. ’Cause either we movin’ or we standin’ still. And if we standin’ still, well shit, we may as well be at the bottom of that muthafucka. A car rumbles over the bridge, cast Blood in a halo and shivers his silk. Say, check this out, he says. I don’t mind spottin’ you a couple bucks every blue moon, but that ain’t gone keep your head up day-to-day. So you gone hafta make a serious move.

Another car shakes bridge underfoot and I receive it as God speak.

For years I’ve dreamed of cruising a pristine Deuce and a Quarter up Union Ave with my windows dropped and an arm flung out, of wheeling by my old slave, ordering a deluxe in-and-out wash, and catching rubber on the favored white boys as I leave, of strolling into the park during the championship of a summer hoop tournament in a mean designer short set, gator loafers, and a watch and bracelet made of Pharaoh’s gold, of catching my ex, the truest love, at an all-white affair and flashing a knot that would make her contrite. For years, I’ve dreamed of being more than just another one of us.

Sometimes we got time, and sometimes we got to get to it while the getting’s within reach, he says.

We tramp back to his ride, climb in, and bend corners. We stop in the Burger Barn where a couple of old heads in zoot suits chomp jumbo chicken wings in a corner booth. We pop in the Social Club, where somebody’s auntie grooves beside the jukebox. Blood wheels to an afterhours spot housed in somebody’s basement—dice, spades, and poker games going full fledge. Everywhere we go, Blood greets the doorman like a long-lost patna, glides inside, knocks fists and slaps palms with the flashiest dudes in sight, chitchats with a couple of prime broads, and just as suave as he came, gets ghost. He calls it campaigning.

Trust, they got to see you to feel you, he says.

We end up on the stroll in the wee hours. Blood points to a mile-legged white girl fretting the hem of a miniskirt. Over there. That one, he says. Knocked baby girl comin’ out a shelter. He drops his window, shouts and motions, and she flits over. She leans inside the car on arms no more than nothing nothings. Hey Daddy, she says. She’s painted her face till the shit looks tribal and reeks of a discount scent.

What it look like? he says.

Slow, she says. But I’ll hit my number before the night’s up.

Correction, he says. We’llhit *our*number before the night’s up. How many times I got to tell you, it ain’t no me nor no you. It’s us. It’s us and us only—always.

He leans in his seat, regards the sparse traffic crawling the boulevard, the lot across the street that sells hoopties with a suspect warranty. In the distance, a pair of waifs totter into an all-night mini-mart advertised in flagrant neon. Closer, a squat broad in leggings parades past a ramshackle X-rated video store. Blood makes his hands into a pose that looks almost holy, and the white girl digs a fold of bills from the waist of her skirt and lays them in it.

He tosses the ends to me and asks me to count them, and I tab them once, tab them twice, and call a figure that’s less than I expected.

Blood frowns. You stashin’ or out here lettin’ some other broad outwork you? he says.

No, Daddy, that’s all of it, she says. All of it for now. But don’t worry, I’ll have the rest by night’s end.

Oh, I know you will, he says. ’Cause you got to. We don’t fall short. We exceed.

Blood drives me home, pulls into the driveway—a hazard—lowers an 8-track of Lenny wailing, ’*Cause I looooooove you,* to a shush. Let’s check your math, he says, and I hand him his slight harvest. He turns the bills same-side up and smooths them on the dash. Say Maine, he says, eyes unmoved from his task. We’re born. That’s a natural fact. So, whatever’s in me liable to be in you too. He folds the bills and stuffs them under his visor. He turns the key and the Caddy sings a hymn. He clamps my shoulder—what might be another revelation—and I get out and bop up the steps. From the porch, I watch Blood back onto the street, our street, behold his beams illume the dark, and turn most lucid the truth that, for all my days on Earth, he’s been out ahead me—a beacon.

Armed with every cent of my last check, I bop into a boutique in the mall where Pops used to shop. The joint is almost empty, the kind of sparse that would’ve been a tell-tale work hazard those days me and my surreptitious patnas called ourselves boosting. A sales lady with a freeze of brunette curls and tweed work suit appears at my side and asks if I need help.

Yeah, that’d be nice, I say. I’m looking for some dress shirts.

Then you’ve came to the right place, she says. We’ve got the nicest ones in the whole mall. Follow me, she says, and leads me to shelves and spinning racks. She asks if I happen to know my neck and sleeve measurements.

Not off the top of my head, I say, and keep secreted the fact that I ain’t owned a new collar shirt since Moms copped me one for Pops’ last parole hearing.

Well, don’t you worry, she says. We’ll get you fitted. What’s the occasion? She picks a shirt off the rack and proffers it.

The fabric feels downright rich. Like the least I should own in this life or the next. But I came for something silk, celestial—what flutters in a night breeze.



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Mitchell S. Jackson’s debut novel, *The Residue Years*(Bloomsbury, 2013), won the Ernest J. Gaines Prize for Literary Excellence and was a finalist for the Center for Fiction Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Prize, the PEN / Hemingway Award for Debut Fiction, and the Hurston / Wright Legacy Award. Jackson’s honors include a Whiting Writers’ Award, and fellowships from the Lannan Foundation, the Ford Foundation, PEN America, TED, New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Center for Fiction. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in the*New Yorker, Harper’s,*the*New York Times Book Review,*the*Paris Review,*the*Guardian, Tin House*, and elsewhere. His nonfiction book *Survival Math: Notes on an All-American Family*is forthcoming from Scribner. He is a Clinical Associate Professor of Writing in Liberal Studies at New York University.

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