

Rodney

By Robert Campbell

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"You SURE WAS DRUNK last night," the boy said. His slim black body rippled with every movement. He returned from the toilet and lay down again beside the white man. To the white man, puzzling through a terrible headache and malaise, the body and smile were utterly strange. He didn't remember the boy at all. The boy kissed him. "What you name?"

"Gary." The boy was a child. How had he got here? Gary shook his head to clear it. "What's yours?"

"I tole you last night." He kissed the white man again, longer this time. "Hey. Now we gettin some action. You couldn't do nothin last night." The kiss shifted from Gary's mouth to his ear, then neck, then shoulder, lingering on his chest, then shifting dramatically lower, while Gary struggled to contain his excitement—then, helpless, to reciprocate. There was "action" for a rather long time, punctuated by giggles, and animalistic growls, both from the boy. Gary's only sound was a cry of surprise.

Relaxed, repositioned, Gary asked again.

"Buster. But you call me Rodney. My real name. People I don't want to know calls me Buster."

"You want to know me?"

"I knows you. This good." He showed how good.

Gary pulled Rodney's head back up so that it was close enough to kiss, kissed, looked, considered, and, a little fearful that it was a bad question, said, "What grade are you in, Rodney?"

"I quit. But I be goin back. Don't you worry none about Rodney. I be gettin the G.E.D."

"You can't do that until you're eighteen."

"I kin wait. I ain't in no hurry. You sure was drunk last night."

"I know. I don't remember you." Not even dimly.

"I saved you. I seen you outside the 'Seasons. This big black dude had his hand in you pocket. I

said, don't do that, look what he doin, and you pushed him and you said I was your friend and I sure was pretty. Am I pretty?"

Now Gary remembered the street. The bar was closed. People milling. An alcoholic fog. He didn't remember saying anything, but it was the truth, if you liked blacks. "Better than Sugar Ray Leonard," Gary said. "His nose isn't right. Prettier than his little boy."

"Li'l Ray? You like'm young. How old you? Forty?" "Fifty."

The boy whistled. "You the oldest man I ever messed with."

Gary passed a hand over Rodney's chest and shoulder, then moved the boy's arm to watch the articulation. It was lovely. "How did you get your muscles?"

"Work out some. Play ball. Box too. But I ain't no Sugar Rodney. I gone keep my nose pretty. For you. I don want no ski slope nose like Sugar Ray."

Gary kissed Rodney's nose, and Rodney laughed and kissed Gary's. "I wonder did that dude steal from you? His hand was in you pocket."

Gary reached and checked his trousers. "Oh shit," he said. He accepted the fact that the boy was a thief. "He get somethin?"

"Money. Credit cards." The money clip had been a bad idea. Gary checked under the telephone and dialled an 800 number. He reported the theft and hung up.

Rodney held him. "How much money?"

Gary tried to relax his body; dislike had made it rigid. He couldn't. It was all he could do to keep his voice even. "A lot. I started with close to two hundred last night."

"In gay bars? You crazy, man."

"Yes. I was stupid."

"You was drunk, too. Ooo-oh." He put his face close to the white man's and said very seriously, "You don't think I took nothin? Search my clothes. I didn't take nothin from you."

Sure. Took it and passed it on. "All right. I didn't think you did."

"Search my clothes. I don't want you thinkin I took nothin."

"I don't suspect you." Maybe, because if the boy had passed the money last night, why did he come home with Gary? To his surprise, Gary found himself wanting to believe. He eased back, and pulled the boy onto himself. The muscles he felt move were silky.

"I don't want you to suspicion nothin about me. I want to be friends with you."

A black boy? A negro? Friends? It was absurd. The face was too close, and Gary could find nothing to dislike about it. "You can come back. Any time. Call me and I'll come get you."

"You do that?" The boy stretched out to make his contact with Gary total. It made Gary feel very good. Slowly, reluctantly, he disengaged.

As they were dressing the boy asked, "You like big meat? I got a friend with the biggest you ever saw." He indicated his own as he pulled up his shorts. "I got nothin."

"I like what you got." Gary felt his language slip a little. It was okay.

"You ought to see him. Ten inches, man. You want, I bring him."

"All right. But phone first."

"I gon give you my phone number, Gary. But you don't call me, hear? My folks don't know I mess around." "That's all right. You call me."

"Search me," he said, dressed. "I ain't got your money, Gary."

"No." Something said, search! "I don't want to search you. I'd rather kiss you."

Rodney kissed him.

Gary drove Rodney to where, he insisted, he would take a bus. "To far, Gary. You got change? That dude didn't want no change. Len me seventyfi, I be okay."

As Gary drove away, he smiled, thinking, I'll never do that again. He won't call, but it was a good morning, and I'm not sorry at all. Getting so drunk—drunk enough even to look twice at a black boy, and one so young—it was insanity. Fun, but expensive and dangerous. Never again.

He knew, Gary thought now. He knew I had seventy-five cents.

RODNEY RETURNED TWO DAYS later without calling. With him was a large, sullen youth, in a muscle shirt and jeans. The boy's body was impressive, but the slackjaw face was ugly. "This is Zack," Rodney said. "He got that ten inch dick you wanted I should show you."

Gary was surprised, surprised the boy had returned, and surprised by a sudden happiness. His pleasure was brief, counteracted by irritation that the boy had brought the "ten inch dick". Zack, too obviously, was a threat. "I didn't want. You wanted." Gary shook hands with Zack. "Sorry, Zack. I really don't want to see it." Appendages, per se, did not interest Gary anyway. Zack's expression did not change. Might he be no more than a show of friendship from Rodney? An offering?

Rodney provided a sort of answer. "Gary. Can you len me ten dollars? I pay you back Friday."

That explained it; he was supposed to pay Zack for the dick. Rodney was talking on, not waiting for an answer. "We goin out Friday?"

Gary felt unwilling to answer in front of Zack. Either fear of a witness to his corruption of a child, or—was it just that he didn't want Zack to be part of Rodney? Zack confirmed Rodney's blackness, his danger. Gary held out a ten dollar bill. Rodney replied with a kiss that Gary had to pull away from. Zack was, beyond question, the problem. Rodney seemed not to notice. "I call you Friday where to pick me up?"

Good sense cried no, no, no. "After five-thirty."

"Okay." Zack left, and then Rodney was at the door to go too. He paused. "Gary. You wan some dope? I get some for you? Cheap too."

"No. No dope." Marijuana. Gary hoped that was all Rodney meant.

A quick kiss, that Gary could not prevent—the door was half open—and Rodney was gone.

Gary leaned against the closed door to let his panic ease. He didn't like black boys. Or dope dealers. Especially not real black, like Rodney. A copper mulatto, maybe, could be beautiful. Yet he was pretty. Not girl pretty, but like a blacker, baby Cassius Clay. Gary laughed. Cassius Clay. That showed his generation. Rodney's kiss, his cheek, had been like black satin. And Zack, with the big dick. Gary imagined himself, robbed and raped, his anus torn.

Now that Rodney had some money, maybe he wouldn't call. That would be best.

THE FRIDAY TELEPHONE conversation was cacophonous. Rodney was trying, whispering, to give an address while a woman's voice with unmistakable black accent and fury was yelling for him to get to work, go to school, to take out the trash, to get off the phone. When Gary finally said, "Got it," Rodney hung up without saying goodbye.

So Rodney had a home. Awful perhaps, but a home. Was that woman his mother? No wonder Rodney wasn't in school, stayed out nights—and the rest. Was he gay? Or just polysexual? Sex for freedom? Or dope. Or money.

Gary telephoned for two tickets to the basketball game. The 76ers were in town. Rodney was certain to like that.

Gary couldn't think of anything else even possibly interesting to a black drop out. And not over fourteen. Too experienced to be younger—yet how could Gary know? A lot of people would wonder at Gary being there with Rodney. Age or loneliness was leading Gary into folly. Public folly. Yes, but it was too late. The best hope was juvenile unreliability—Rodney would not show up.

The corner barely intelligible on the telephone turned out to be the right one, and Rodney was there, looking splendid in clean jeans and a very white T-shirt labelled in ornate script, "If you got it, BEAT IT." Rodney was merely affectionate until he saw the game tickets. Then his

behavior began to interfere with driving. "01' Moses and the Doctor, too, man. I never saw none of 'em cept on TV. Lemme kiss you." Gary held him off and warned him. "I don't mind no accident along wit you. I do anything wit you. You my man. You not my main man. You my onliest man."

Excited but unbelieving, Gary was firm: "I love you too, but let me drive."

"You love me, Gary? You say that?" Rodney did not release Gary.

Gary's irritation showed in his voice. "Yes. But I sure mind accidents. They're expensive. Let me go before I wreck this thing."

Rodney withdrew, contrite. "I got to save you money. You lost a lot to that big back dude when you was so drunk."

Gary felt that the boy had pulled away too far. He looked and saw Rodney, unsmiling, vivacity gone. "What have you been doing all week?" Making conversation, though difficult, was not impossible.

"Hangin around," Rodney said, listless. "I ain't messed with nobody. Ain't messed at all." Life returned to Rodney's voice, as if he could not repress the energy. "Hey! I be hot as a goddam firecracker in bed tonight. What you think? I gone tongue dribble your basketballs. You gone be ready for that?"

"I'll be ready." Gary found he was ready now. Rodney's hand found out too. "Watch it, Rodney! Let me drive, dammit."

AFTER DROPPING RODNEY off Saturday morning, Gary drove to the park and walked a while. Rodney obsessed his thoughts. He'd been explosive in bed. The boy was, in his way—no, not his, but in any way that Gary could envision—the most exciting ever, in Gary's thirty-odd years experience of sex. Sheer animality? No. Just no inhibitions? Not just that. Rodney loved everything they did. Total participation. So much that Gary could, himself, forget himself. That was it. He had yielded himself to Rodney. He wasn't a yielding person, but he had yielded. Like so many years ago, his marriage disintegrating, he'd yielded to his own passion and submitted to depravity. And somehow, with Rodney, it wasn't even depraved.

He could do it again on Wednesday. Same time. Same corner. "We don't go out and spend no money, Gary. Just watch TV and mess around." And mess around. A new reality, perhaps. He shook off the thought. He would not discover reality in a child. Wednesday, if it happened at all, would be the last.

THE LAST. Not in the way Gary had hoped for. Tuesday Maria found the credit cards. Maria cleaned on Tuesdays and Fridays. Tuesday she thought the books on the shelf by Gary's desk in the bedroom needed dusting. The credit cards, she told him, calling him at his office, were under the stack of books. Yes, the money clip was there too. Gary thanked her and hung up

the receiver. He went to the men's toilet and locked himself in a stall for a while. It was absurd. After knowing Wednesday would be the end, still he'd been thinking of taking Rodney away from that screaming mother, of Rodney going to school again, of little black Rodney living in all-white West Pines. It had been absurd. This was no surprise. He rinsed his face and went back to his office. His secretary seemed not to notice anything unusual.

Wednesday he went out. He didn't go to the Four Seasons, outside of which Rodney had found him. He knew of a straight bar without swingers. A place with a little dignity.

Danielle's was plush, but the bar was relatively austere. The piped music was quiet and old. Tired, in its way, like Gary. He ordered a scotch and mellowed his anguish in the piped voice of Sinatra; something forgotten and familiar.

"Nice of you to take a black kid to the basketball game." Murray Anderson, a man Gary didn't know well, had come to sit beside him. He was bald, with a belly. Nevertheless, he was more raffishly dressed than Gary, a scarf knotted under an open collar. "I didn't know you were such a liberal." Murray sounded sincere.

Gary didn't want to lie or even to talk, yet he evaded. "A friend asked me to do it. Didn't want to disappoint the boy."

"Hope he didn't hear you call him 'boy'," Murray chuckled. "They don't like that."

"I don't remember whether I did not not," Gary said, an edge to his voice. It was the truth. "I didn't think about it."

"Oh," Murray said with a reassuring laugh, "you can't have done anything to bother him much. I was sitting only a few rows behind you. That kid liked you so much he could hardly keep his hands off you." Gary felt threatened momentarily, but Murray's tone seemed admiring, not hostile. "You know I was assistant principal—I guess you don't know, but I was at .Washington High—Booker T., not George—" he laughed again, "and I never saw real liking between a white and a black." He lowered his voice into obvious sincerity. "You know, it really made me feel good inside to see you two. The new generation of black kids. Maybe there's some hope that they can grow up without hatred, with us, not against us or using us. You know what I mean?"

You simple, dumb, liberal son of a bitch, Gary thought.

It's race war; only the rules have changed a little. Strategic redeployment.

He was as polite as concealing his feelings permitted. He left the bar soon; what he sought wasn't there.

He drove to the Chicken Palace. It was the kind of place a cute thief like Rodney would frequent when he was old enough. Rick, the hunky bouncer who, for a quite reasonable price, Gary had made it with several times, was welcoming. But Rick didn't interest Gary tonight. And the crowd of overenthusiastic, overtired "chickens", some in drag, and their johns in whom too clearly Gary saw himself, discouraged him. He left the drink he ordered untouched and ended

at a late movie. In bed that night he tried to remember what the movie was about. Rodney blacked it out.

He stayed away from home, one way or another, Thursday and Friday nights. So Rodney did not find him until Saturday afternoon. When Gary opened the door, Rodney began, "Where you been, man? I been phonin and phonin so my mama think I be crazy." He stopped. "Ain't you gonna let me come in?"

Gary spoke with an even voice, quietly. "I found the credit cards. I know you stole the money."

Rodney did not hesitate. He turned away without a word and walked down the path to the street. Gary shut the door. He had been "cool", you could say. He was glad he had shown no emotion. Rodney had not attempted a denial. It had been easy. It had ended easily.

Still, Gary replayed the scene. He wished he'd held him, asked him why. Or that Rodney had protested, even made a fight of it. A chance to know Rodney's feelings. No. It would have been useless. Gary reran the scenario several more times, and always ended with the idea that had disturbed his thoughts from the start. Rodney was just setting him up for another theft, for a robbery, probably. He and Zack with the ten-inch dick. Using sex to gain entry, access. Insurance would not replace things Gary cared about.

It had been stupid of Rodney to leave the credit cards. Gary had thought Rodney would try to explain them, so he'd put off the question of why the young thief would make an error, an error that must expose him eventually. Maybe he'd put the money into one of those belts with slots for money. "Search my clothes." No place to hide credit cards. And then, having gotten away with the cash, forgot the cards. Could he have wanted Gary to find them? Nonsense.

As a citizen, Gary had the responsibility to report the Rodney/Zack scam to the police. But he could not face their contempt. What did he expect, taking a black boy to bed? Worse, on his own complaint, he could be charged with sexual abuse of a child. No one would be fool enough to believe him if he said he thought the boy was eighteen.

Damn Maria anyway. It would have ended badly, one way or another, but there would have been Wednesday night, if she'd waited until Friday. Wednesday night would have been—Gary's lust fogged his mind. He eased off as best he could, thinking, I got off cheap. In a few days, I'll forget him.

TUESDAY EVENING, ten days later, Gary had not forgotten. But by then the rush of expectation when he heard the telephone or the doorbell ring had diminished. Still he did, opening the door, once again, though not so violently, feel his heart beating. It was Zack. And if Zack, then Rodney must be near. Gary spoke, a simple, "Hello, Zack," neither friendly nor hostile. Almost as if to a stranger. He did not even look to see where Rodney might be.

"Buster says give you this." Zack held out two grubby ten dollar bills. "All he could borrow. He got hisself a job at Jack in the Box. He be payin you the rest. He want to know can he come see you."

Gary took the money and looked at it. If the bills had been crisp, they would not affect him so. For just a moment, he couldn't speak. Then he said, "No, Zack. Tell him, no."

Zack turned, indifferent, without a word more, and Gary closed the door. He leaned against it. Then he remembered that he still had the two dirty bills in his hand, not wanting to give them up. He opened the door again. He called, "Zack." The car, a huge battered old Pontiac, oxydized blue, was starting. He refused to run, but he stepped down to the path, calling, "Zack" again. The door on the far side of the car opened.

It was Rodney. "You change your mind, Gary?"

All this was too loud for the treelined street, the neighbors. The bright sunlight. Gary just stood there.

Rodney slammed the door. He spoke too loudly. "You go on, Zack. Gary gone take me home." Zack drove off, leaving Rodney standing in the street.

Gary watched this, but didn't speak. He turned around and went back to the house. Inside the door, he waited for Rodney to come in. But he did not look at him or offer him the money, now crushed, wadded in his hand.

"Zack give you the twenty? He didn't keep it hisself?" "No. He gave it to me." Gary looked at it, now puzzled at his own response. "Here. I don't want it."

Rodney pulled Gary around and tried to kiss him. "It ain't my money," he said, and tried again. The attempt didn't work against Gary's passivity. Rodney was too small to reach Gary's lips. "You still mad, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"It don't do no good." Rodney's voice rose in pitch. "Being mad don't do no good."

What difference did that make? "I know."

"Zack tell you about Jack in the Box?"

"Yes."

The enthusiasm rose. "Three seventy-five an hour. I be payin you back in no time. Mama ain't gone see none of that money."

That was the wrong thing to say. Gary, self-righteous and angry, turned away. "It wouldn't be right."

The boy's voice rose again, assertively, as if a restatement of the obvious. "I be givin her some. I owe you one hundred twenty-eight. I give you my first week pay. After that I give her some."

He looked at Gary and, finding no smile, let his anger show. "You still mad." It was an accusation.

"It's not the money."

Rodney's voice became shrill, impatient, like the woman hectoring Rodney on the telephone. "Did I know you then? Who was you to me? Answer me that."

Gary felt himself falling, though rebelling at that voice, and had no idea where the fall might take him. "A man on the street. Drunk." Not as he saw himself, not as the world saw him, but as seen by this black boy.

"There! you see?" Rodney caught Gary's head and pulled it down, and Gary let his hands touch the boy's back. "That's better. Now really do it." After the next kiss, Rodney whispered, "You my man, Gary. You my onliest man."

It was a lie. Rehearsed. Gary cared, intensely, that it was a lie. Yet there are worse things than lies. The future begins now. It took a terrible effort, but Gary forced out a confirmation, his own lie. "You're my man, Rodney," he said.

"No, I ain't." Rodney was scornful now. "I'm your boy. You don't want no man. And you ain't got no other boy but me. Stop wastin time. We got things to do. A whole week of things." He had his shirt off.

The black flesh reminded Gary: no black boys, not now, not ever. That, too, was useless.

"You stood me up last Wednesday week." Rodney, still undressing, spoke bitterly. "I waited, man. Waited an hour. Gary ain't that kind, I said. You be sayin you love me." Rodney looked up to check Gary's eyes. His voice became insistent. "I remembers what you says. I knows you now. I phoned you too. I thought you was sick."

The future seemed to be beginning all over again. What will he do if I try to get him to go back to school? He's not stupid. Gary pulled off his own shirt slowly, his eyes, reluctant, caressing Rodney's shoulder and chest, now his belly and erect cock, as the boy's jeans came off. Con man and thief.

"You wastin time, Gary. Let me do that." Rodney tugged at Gary's belt. "I didn't know. Ain't right to worry me so. You could a tole me. It don't matter you was mad. You could a told me, you hear me? Come on."

Yes, Gary agreed, I could have told him. Anything's possible—except for this to go on, hearing that hectoring voice. Yes, Gary must not worry Rodney, it wasn't right. Gary must not worry, too. He felt Rodney's hand pulling underwear away; he put his cheek down to the boy's shoulder, smooth as a baby's.

"There you is! I knowed you was hot for of Rodney."

Con man, thief and—God knows what else. And what about Zack? He's even more dangerous. And then, what if Rodney should want to live here? It was impossible. Yet Rodney's hands on Gary and Gary's on Rodney, and their two bodies, became, for now, all there was.