

Dope

Once the bells jingle, what can only be a lost mannequin from Urban Outfitters, obviously annoyed to stumble upon a mattress store, enters with a dripping yellow umbrella. She props open the door with her black boot, yelling, “Justin, will you *please* get the hell in here?” Her voice is a regular corkscrew to the urethra. The kid just tips his black hat over his forehead and yanks his black-shirt that’s freckled from rain over his chub. Even though I’m a quarter-focused on the Phillies-Dodgers game, one of four screens open, relaxing on a lazy Sunday afternoon, I tuck away the Galaxy and slip off the merchandise to make eye contact – the first rule of good salesmanship.

She slowly unbuttons her jacket and scans the store. She has plump lips. An overpowering perfume, something almond-infused and opiate-laced, perhaps, something labeled Forbidden Passion, divides the air in the mattress store and hits the mark. My interest rises, if you get my drift. Underneath her jacket a tight orange hoodie and low-rise jeans define her reconstructed figure. She’s on the first few holes of forty, I guess, with long black hair, dyed with what can only be imported Mediterranean squid ink from Nordstrom’s; she’s a walking American Express Gold Card. But then, wait: I *know* her. My *hands* have known her.

“Good afternoon,” I say as if the store has suddenly materialized around her.
“Looks like you beat the heavy rain.”

“That’s why we need to make this quick,” she snaps.

Her eyes give her away; I know those Nefertiti eyes of black that hint of the dangers and delights of the Nile. Sure, I wrote back in high school and sure enough, I danced with this Sphinx a year ago at a Professional Business Singles Dance. The cherry blossoms were out then. What was her name? Michele? Michele with a lonely L? I had been scouring these singles events for years, dances at hotels, and speaker events about ‘finding happiness while single’, and it was always the speaker who scooped the most dip with the choicest chip, if you get my meaning. But by the end of that evening, I had managed to secure her business card that read “Innovative Designs by Michele.” To make sure I didn’t lose it, I gripped the card, but the sweat from my hand smeared the phone number. Three calls, three messages, but she never returned my call.

“My son needs a new bed,” she says sternly. “I guess it’s a twin size.”

“Yes. And my name’s Doug,” After quickly wiping my hand on my faded beige Dockers, I extend my hand, but she doesn’t see my gesture. She doesn’t remember me. I say: “Looks like he’s outgrown a toddler bed...”

“Are these the twins?” she asks.

“Yes, but those aren’t the only twins on display. All of the models can be ordered as a twin. This model here, The Dreamstate Pose Sleep Excelsior II, is the lowest quality I wish to sell. . .”

She asks for a bathroom. I point through the store. “I just cleaned it this morning,” I say, but this for some reason startles her. Doesn’t she clean bathrooms? She checks her purse, perhaps for a maxi pad, and oh, to be that maxi pad, and she strides through the store as regally as if brandishing a staff. Then it starts: the rain, and what rain. I approach her man-child Justin who’s pushing down on each bed. “Can I ask you a question?” I ask.

“If it’s none of my business, you can just tell me to back off, Mattress Dude. But what’s with your hat that says “dope?”

The kid just glares at me.

“You’re either advertising you’re a dope addict or you’re an idiot. You know, a dope means an idiot. And why would you want people to know that about you?”

“I don’t care what a forty year old man thinks...”

I laugh. “I’m actually forty-four.”

“Whatever. It’s just an expression,” the kid says. “You know, ‘that’s so dope.’”

“Ah, like cool?”

“Kinda, yeah. That’s dope.”

I glance across the Cherry Orchard Shopping Plaza. The rain is biblical now. I spot a canary yellow Mini Cooper nestled illegally in a recess where the dump truck pulls up for the trash. My beat-up hatchback Civic, parked around the back, would hit 200,000 miles by the weekend. Since the heat went, I dread another winter scraping the ice off the windows from the inside, but it still gets me from A to B. Michele is taking her sweet time.

“Is that your car?” I ask.

The kid nods.

“That’s the dope!”

The kid smirks. I notice a black nose in the crack of the Mini’s window.

“What kind of dog is that?”

As soon as Justin blurts out a Pomeranian, Michele returns, rearranging the furniture in her purse. She asks if we have been discussing business.

“He’s a fine boy,” I say.

“He’s a pain in my ass, to be perfectly frank.”

“Then maybe it’s you who needs a new comfortable bed, right?”

Why doesn’t she laugh? Hearing the rain, she opens the door, jingles the bells, and exclaims, “shit.” The fresh air refreshes her perfume. She gazes at her car, obviously concerned with the rain getting in the car as well as her dog inside the car. It must be cumbersome to bring an animal everywhere you go. She conducts a private soliloquy with her pooch while her son moves to the Canyonland Whisper Rhapsody Pillowtop King. Would it would worth it, I wonder, to have a kid like Justin, if Justin was my only shot at having a descendent?

“I don’t like this bed,” the boy says. “It’s too firm.”

“Feel free to lie down,” I suggest as the kid stretches out. A mess of cherry blossoms dirties the foot of the bed. The rain thunders on the roof. I ask the boy if he likes the Phillies chances of another title.

“It’s gay,” the kid replies.

“Gay? Baseball’s a man’s sport,” I say. “It’s the All-American pastime.”

“It’s the All-American *Gay*-time,” the boy says.

“What do you think of the bed?” the mother asks pondering the rain, not looking at him. “We don’t have much time. Do you see how bad it is out there?”

“You should wait until it passes,” I suggest.

“I don’t want to be stuck in a mattress store all afternoon,” she replies. Even if it’s true, can she think for a moment how much that hurts?

“I don’t like this one,” the boy says, bouncing up and down.

“How about this one?” I say, patting the next model. “This one you’ll like.”

The boy peels one of the cherry blossoms from his sneaker, rolls it like a booger, sniffs it, flicks it and says, “Dude, that’s a P.O.S.”

“Watch your language young man!” Michele says.

“I didn’t say piece of shit.”

“You shouldn’t talk that way to a lady, young man,” I say.

She glares at me, the mattress man, the man in a dead-end job at forty-four; she glares indirectly, avoiding my eyes. “Please. I can handle this.” Then she turns to her son. “When it’s your money, you can...”

Muffled inside her purse, her phone rings out to Lady Gaga. A village in Africa could live for a year on what the purse cost. Like a snow shovel her ass clears a spot on my desk, moving pictures, the book *1776*, and a Camden County College course guide. I guess it doesn’t matter what’s in her way. Then I wonder: why didn’t she call me back? Was it something I said? Did I talk too much baseball while dancing? Why doesn’t she remember me? I didn’t change much over the past year; a few missing hairs here and there, a few extra pounds, and maybe a new wrinkle under my blue eyes. But I remember *her*. You can’t work in a mattress store and not fantasize about women, especially when you have no one. Why did I even like her? Was it just because her booty could be inducted into the Booty Hall of Fame? If that’s true, what does that make me?

“Bet you’d impress the ladies on this one?” I tell the boy, pushing on the mattress.

“It’s got the right amount of give.”

“What?”

“You have a nose for quality, my boy. Go ahead. Lie down. Don’t be shy. This one’s *just* right,” I say like Goldilocks.

Just then an oak frame from my desk falls – the glass shattering. It’s a picture of my dad.

“Oh,” she says, looking down. “It must have slipped.”

“It was an accident,” I say. “It’s okay.”

By now the rain is horrendous; like the monsoon scenes from Bangladesh, the rain that drowns oxen. “Looks like we’re under Niagara Falls, huh?”

Annoyed, she glances at her watch, as if her eyes read, ‘we just had to come out today for this, right’? She asks her son: “Have you tried every bed in the store?”

“Yep.”

“Which one do you like?” He points to the one. “How much is it?”

I examine the tag. The mattress alone costs six hundred and ninety five. It also comes with a full ten-year warranty. She doesn’t see spending that much on just a twin mattress. As the boy tosses and turns on the bed, he says, “This one is just right, this one is juuuuust right.” The kid arches his back, pulls up his pants, and smiles as he runs his hand over the white pillow top. “Why such a problem? It’s my dad’s money.”

“Let me discuss it with my son.”

What did it matter what I said? I just plug in numbers, fill out forms, and swipe credit cards. I chewed on a pen. Then, after two minutes or twenty minutes, with a wave of her hand, she informs me of her son’s decision. “After all, it is his bed,” she says.

“Whatever the kid wants, that’s dope!”

I pull out the forms.

“Keep that hat off inside!” the mother says. “Don’t you have any manners?”

“Nope,” Justin replies, taking off the hat slowly, twirling it around his finger.

Just then she screams, “Oh God! The car’s floating!” A flash flood swamps the parking lot and the car drifts away from the curb. I ask her to quickly throw me the keys: “I’ll get the car for you!”

“My dog is in there!”

“Don’t worry,” I say.

Michele tosses me her keys, a keychain with a pink margarita. I’m doused as soon as I leave the store; the water is well over my ankles. It gets deeper as I approach the car. The water is almost door level. Cherry blossoms form a pink racing stripe on the car. I open the car with the electric opener and the lights flash. But I couldn’t hear it open; the rain’s too loud. The Pomeranian yaps madly. As soon as I sit in the front seat, the dog with a Napoleon complex attacks my right flank, biting my pinky. I yelp as he yaps as I try to throw the Little Corporal off me. “I’m here to rescue you,” I tell the Corsican, but now he’s storming my shoulders. I wince and grab some fur, and that’s when I realize that I’m fighting a wolf that’s not fifty times smaller but fifty times fiercer. The door opens, and this Dog of Destiny falls into the rushing waters. I stumble out of the car, close the door, and tramp several feet to scoop up the menace. I’m worried that the car would hit me, but for now the car has stopped drifting; maybe the pavement has inched up a bit, like on a sandbar; to keep the mad Napoleon safe I toss the him into the trunk and drive the car up on the grass, well away from the rushing water. By the time I make it into the store, Michele is shouting, “Polly, oh Polly.” I couldn’t just leave Polly the Ogre locked away on the island of Elba, although it would be good for democracy if I did.

With the yellow umbrella, I race back like a hunchback. The rain is still horrible, but there's clearing in the West. I struggle with the dog that must think he's been kidnapped. He's yelping and fidgeting, and I feel like sailing across the pond back to Poland, or wherever Pomeranians originate or coagulate.

Mother Michele and daughter Polly exchange an uncomfortable number of kisses and caresses and assurances of that "never happening again for as long as I live." I guess the only way to get action these days is to grow fur and have the love of your lap pick up your crap. She doesn't notice the blood on my hand. Then she says: "I guess I should thank you," Michele says. "Is the car okay?"

"It started up fine," I say. "That's quite a little number you got."

"It's not flooded?"

"The engine's not, no," I say. "But you'll need a towel for the inside."

I hold my finger and search for a band-aid.

Then I ask: "Listen, don't you remember me?"

She doesn't seem to hear me. She's coddling her pooch, rubbing his fur, saying what an adventure he must have had in that flood, protecting her car from some stranger.

"I'm Doug. Doug Rybeck. Remember? That PBSN dance?" I ask louder. "We danced, had a nice time, and you gave me your number."

"When was that?"

"A year ago. I remember because the cherry blossoms were out. It was a gorgeous spring last spring."

"Why, yes, I do remember. I'm sorry. It's been so long."

The kid says the rain is letting up. He's ready to leave.

“I left a message, two messages, with your son. How come you didn’t call me back?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think I ever got the messages.”

“Mom, this guy’s some pervert,” Justin says. “He said I would impress the ladies on the mattress. Said the mattress had a lot of give.” The kid thrusts his hips. “He moved your car just to get some action, your action. He must have heard about your Brazilian wax.”

“Is this true, about what you said to my son?”

“It was banter. Between men.”

She reminds me that her son is only a child. So the kid sells me down the Delaware River and hammers the final nail in the coffin. I’m waterlogged too – like driftwood. My socks are soaked, like my underwear. And I don’t know where my penis went. So, is this what children do? Kill game – they’re the ultimate game killer.

“So would you like to give it another try? We could get some coffee, or a towel.”

“Well, you aren’t really... how can I say this, a professional business...”

“My mom doesn’t date balding mattress salesmen,” the boy says.

“I’m not going to do this forever,” I say. “I’m just waiting for my opportunity... and most people don’t recognize opportunity because it often means hard work.” That was on my tea bag from the morning. “And, you still look great. And that term ‘professional’ can be interpreted many different ways... And it’s only in America where what people do matter more than who they are, isn’t that right?”

“Well, we’re in America,” Justin says. “And it’s America’s rule.”

Michele says his kind words meant a lot, but that she is “involved” with someone, and it would be better just to keep everything on a professional level, the buyer and the seller of her son’s mattress, which she expects to hear about soon. She thanks me for what I did for her dog. “And oh, yeah, with the car too.” She escorts her Enlightened Despot with the umbrella to her Mini.

“Listen,” says Justin, “I didn’t want a mattress salesman for a step-father. That’s right. I deleted the messages. I need to look out for my mom. She doesn’t have the best choice in guys, and I’m tired of the carousel of losers.”

Annoyed, Michele yells, “Justin, will you *please* hurry the hell up?”

“At least I’m not out loved by a bundle of fur and teeth!” I reply.

Justin frowns, places his hat on crooked, and swaggers outside as confidently if he’ll never know pain. He’ll be lucky if there’s a mattress store in his future. I slip out my phone. The Phillies are still losing. I close that window. I nurse my finger, change into my old tracksuit, dry my hair underneath the hand dryer, and sit at my desk, gazing at Michele’s name on the invoice. I would never pay that much for a mattress, especially for a spoiled kid. How come stupid people have money? I have her address. I have her phone number. I still have her business card. Perhaps I could drive by her house. Threaten the son. Kidnap the damn dog. Puncture the tires of her precious mini Cooper. Take a dump in her purse. But perhaps the son is right. After picking up the book from floor, I glance at Washington on the cover of *1776* at the decisive Battle of Princeton. I’m no George Washington. I apologize to my father’s picture and place him back in the corner of the desk – the glass cracked.

So I watch some soft porn on You Tube. Lesbians are dope, all right. I never need to hyperlink to the x-rated sites. The teasers are just fine. And I'll be okay. I can spend a few more months at the Rest Assured mattress store in Marlton, New Jersey before doing what I need to do to get my business in order, and I can remain comfortable in my dad's crumbling two-bedroom rancher in Pennsauken that I will inherit after his death. There's a PBSN event at the Sheraton this weekend. And sure, I'll be okay. Hope springs eternal, right? Whatever happens, I'll be okay.

An hour later the bells jingle on the door, but this time I just can't get up.