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Opening Extract from...

The Sellout

Written by Paul Beatty

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THE SELLOUT

Prologue

This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I've never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier indifferent to the ways of mercantilism and minimum-wage expectations. I've never burgled a house. Held up a liquor store. Never boarded a crowded bus or subway car, sat in a seat reserved for the elderly, pulled out my gigantic penis and masturbated to satisfaction with a perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look on my face. But here I am, in the cavernous chambers of the Supreme Court of the United States of America, my car illegally and somewhat ironically parked on Constitution Avenue, my hands cuffed and crossed behind my back, my right to remain silent long since waived and said goodbye to as I sit in a thickly padded chair that, much like this country, isn't quite as comfortable as it looks.

Summoned here by an officious-looking envelope stamped IMPORTANT! in large, sweepstakes-red letters, I haven't stopped squirming since I arrived in this city.

"Dear Sir," the letter read.

"Congratulations, you may already be a winner! Your case has been selected from hundreds of other appellate cases to be heard

by the Supreme Court of the United States of America. What a glorious honor! It's highly recommended that you arrive at least two hours early for your hearing scheduled for 10:00 a.m. on the morning of March 19, the year of our Lord . . ." The letter closed with directions to the Supreme Court building from the airport, the train station, I-95, and a set of clip-out coupons to various attractions, restaurants, bed-and-breakfasts, and the like. There was no signature. It simply ended . . .

Sincerely yours,
The People of the United States of America

Washington, D.C., with its wide streets, confounding roundabouts, marble statues, Doric columns, and domes, is supposed to feel like ancient Rome (that is, if the streets of ancient Rome were lined with homeless black people, bomb-sniffing dogs, tour buses, and cherry blossoms). Yesterday afternoon, like some sandal-shod Ethiop from the sticks of the darkest of the Los Angeles jungles, I ventured from the hotel and joined the hajj of blue-jeaned yokels that paraded slowly and patriotically past the empire's historic landmarks. I stared in awe at the Lincoln Memorial. If Honest Abe had come to life and somehow managed to lift his bony twenty-three-foot, four-inch frame from his throne, what would he say? What would he do? Would he break-dance? Would he pitch pennies against the curbside? Would he read the paper and see that the Union he saved was now a dysfunctional plutocracy, that the people he freed were now slaves to rhythm, rap, and predatory lending, and that today his skill set would be better suited to the basketball court than the White House? There he could catch the rock on the break, pull up for a bearded three-pointer, hold the pose, and talk shit as the ball popped the net. The Great Emancipator, you can't stop him, you can only hope to contain him.

Not surprisingly, there's nothing to do at the Pentagon except

start a war. Tourists aren't even allowed to take photos with the building in the background, so when the sailor-suited family of Navy veterans four generations deep handed me a disposable camera and asked me to follow at a distance and secretly take photos of them while they snapped to attention, saluted, and flashed peace signs for no apparent reason, I was only too happy to serve my country. At the National Mall there was a one-man march on Washington. A lone white boy lay on the grass, fucking with the depth perception in such a way that the distant Washington Monument looked like a massive, pointy-tipped, Caucasian hard-on streaming from his unzipped trousers. He joked with passersby, smiling into their camera phones and stroking his trick photography priapism.

At the zoo, I stood in front of the primate cage listening to a woman marvel at how "presidential" the four-hundred-pound gorilla looked sitting astride a shorn oaken limb, keeping a watchful eye over his caged brood. When her boyfriend, his finger tapping the informational placard, pointed out the "presidential" silverback's name coincidentally was Baraka, the woman laughed aloud, until she saw me, the other four-hundred-pound gorilla in the room, stuffing something that might have been the last of a Big Stick Popsicle or a Chiquita banana in my mouth. Then she became disconsolate, crying and apologizing for having spoken her mind and my having been born. "Some of my best friends are monkeys," she said accidentally. It was my turn to laugh. I understood where she was coming from. This whole city's a Freudian slip of the tongue, a concrete hard-on for America's deeds and misdeeds. Slavery? Manifest Destiny? *Laverne & Shirley*? Standing by idly while Germany tried to kill every Jew in Europe? Why some of my best friends are the Museum of African Art, the Holocaust Museum, the Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of Women in the Arts. And furthermore, I'll have you know, my sister's daughter is married to an orangutan.

All it takes is a day trip through Georgetown and Chinatown. A slow saunter past the White House, Phoenix House, Blair House, and the local crackhouse for the message to become abundantly clear. Be it ancient Rome or modern-day America, you're either citizen or slave. Lion or Jew. Guilty or innocent. Comfortable or uncomfortable. And here, in the Supreme Court of the United States of America, fuck if between the handcuffs and the slipperiness of this chair's leather upholstery, the only way I can keep from spilling my ass ignominiously onto the goddamn floor is to lean back until I'm reclined at an angle just short of detention-room nonchalance, but definitely well past courtroom contempt.

Work keys jangling like sleigh bells, the Court officers march into the chambers like a two-by-two wagonless team of crew-cut Clydesdales harnessed together by a love of God and country. The lead dray, a proud Budweiser of a woman with a brightly colored sash of citations rainbowed across her chest, taps the back of my seat. She wants me to sit up straight, but the legendary civil disobedient that I am, I defiantly tilt myself even farther back in the chair, only to crash to the floor in a painful pratfall of inept nonviolent resistance. She dangles a handcuff key in my face and, with one thick hairless arm, hoists me upright, scooting my chair in so close to the table that I can see my suit and tie's reflection in its shiny, lemony-fresh mahogany finish. I've never worn a suit before, and the man who sold me this one said, "You're going to like the way you look. I guarantee it." But the face in the table staring back at me looks like what any business-suit-wearing, cornrowed, dreadlocked, bald-headed, corporate Afro'd black man whose name you don't know and whose face you don't recognize looks like—he looks like a criminal.

"When you look good, you feel good," the salesman also promised me. Guaranteed it. So when I get home I'm going to ask for my $129 back, because I don't like the way I look. The way I feel. I feel like my suit—cheap, itchy, and coming apart at the seams.