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Who's The Man?

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Who's The Man?

Author Bio

(Reach out to author)

Who's the Man?

MATTHEW SIEGLER

We just paid \$42.10 plus an overly generous tip to Lyft to what might be the worst mall I've ever been to in my entire life. It's three weeks into college and the calendar just flipped from August to September. That means there should be a fresh new \$100 in my Chase account. My monthly allowance that breaks down to \$25 a week is all I've got to my name; I quit my part time job before tennis season started in the spring so I didn't work all summer. It would be stupid to piss that money away on bullshit, but in for a dime in for a dollar, I guess.

Half of the Lyft tab belongs to me and the other half belongs to Clifton, my roommate. Truth be told we don't know each other too well yet, but we've been living together well and I do think we'll end up being good friends. Physically we're similar but in terms of pure *presence* we're incredibly different. We're nearly identical in height, though his tall head of curly brown locks makes him appear a couple of inches taller. We're both very slight; neither of us could weigh above 130 pounds and standing a good three inches below six feet it's fair to say neither of us are physical specimens. Both of us have bright blue eyes. He probably thinks I don't dress well, but I have a diverse and eclectic collection of sneakers to make sure I'm always coordinated. I'm not sure Clifton even owns sneakers. He's got a quintessential look of a rich entitled asshole, and that's exactly what he's going for. Todd's suede driving loafers, maroon cashmere socks, one of thirty very similar variations of tan-ish colored Ralph Lauren slacks, a button-down shirt and a V-neck sweater (also maroon, also cashmere), tucked into the front of his pants to show off the big gold "H" buckle of his \$700 belt. Again, the look feeds into his persona, but he definitely doesn't act the part you'd expect him to when you get to know him a bit better; he's very sensitive. Not sensitive like he can't take a joke or he'll throw a tantrum if you put too many ice cubes in his Starbucks, but sensitive like he's *emotionally present*. He doesn't like people to know it, which is why he puts on the Hermes belt. But I can tell, even after living with him for only a few weeks.

So, I've burned through nearly a week's worth of allowance before even stepping into this poor excuse for a shopping mall.

Clifton says “it looks shitty” when we pull into the lot, an accurate three-word summary of what we were seeing. There are only about twenty cars parked in the entire acre-wide lot, not boding well for what awaits us inside. From the back passenger’s side of the musty Ford Focus we are about to exit, I tell Clifton not to judge a book by its cover, to which he rolls his eyes. Mark the stocky Lyft driver pulls to a stop in front of the big green entryway of “Dick’s Sporting Goods.” We thank Mark and I look up at the entryway. The algae-covered sidewalk blends in with the immense square tiles built around the automatic glass doors at the entrance of the store. The blue paint marking the “handicapped only” parking spots is so faint that whoever painted the lines is likely in a wheelchair themselves by now. The single lamppost meant to illuminate the entryway is tilted at a roughly sixty-degree angle. It appears so unstable that I’m worried if one mangy crow were to fly overhead and drop a tablespoon’s worth of white shit onto it, that would be all it takes to cause the post to fully fall over and collapse down into the sidewalk, becoming one with the community of algae we are walking over while we apprehensively enter the store. It isn’t promising, but my hope remains strong that today will be a good day. As we enter the mall that smells faintly of wet cardboard, I feel determined to be fiscally irresponsible on this late summer Saturday afternoon.

We walk through Dick’s, which was completely picked over. I wander a bit, solely to rationalize the \$21.05 I spent to get here and without seriously considering buying a damned thing, we work our way to the back of the store where the doors exit into the main section of the mall. Either someone hasn’t been paying the complete electric bill or we’re the first to notice that half the lights hanging from the steel ceiling beams are out or both, but I’d be lying if I told you this place didn’t look like the set of a low-budget slasher film. Still, I don’t want to tell Clifton we should bail just because I was creeped out by a poorly lit shopping mall. I still don’t really know him that well. Plus, my \$21.05.

The first few store fronts as we begin walking straight over the large grey tiles are abandoned, with “for lease” signs in the boarded up windows along with a phone number to call. Under my breath, “1-800-fuck-this.” The next five minutes are a blur, a ruptured brain aneurism of screeching birds and inhalation of dense, hot and heavy air reeking of animal piss as we walk through a pet shop largely occupied by colorful house birds. “This place is fucking hell.” Clifton again eloquently and concisely summarizes my thoughts. I’m close to pulling the plug, eating my \$21.05, and calling a Lyft to take us back to campus. I pull out my phone from the pocket of my jeans, watch it unlock using the scan of my face, and move my thumb over

the hot pink Lyft app as Clifton says, “let’s go there,” pointing behind me towards a store. It’s bright, *really* bright. It might be a mirage it’s so beautiful. Bold, colorful letters light up the entryway: “EXTRA Books, Calendars, and More!” I lock my phone and replace it in my right pocket. It’s the only part of the mall where I don’t have a feeling that we’re more likely to get mugged by a man who hasn’t seen daylight in nine years than we are to find something we want to buy.

As we get closer, the store looks like it’s mostly novelties and not actual books. There seem to be some, but as I look in through the crystal-clear glass panes on either side of the doorless entrance, I see plush toys, board games, Japanese manga comics, knickknacks, chachkas, and hazarai. There’s just one person working, a young woman at the round, oak register perfectly centered in the middle of the rectangular store. She pays us no attention as Clifton and I enter, deciding where to look first.

We gravitate towards the back, home of the magazines. Floor to ceiling, there are easily ten rows of magazines split into eight or nine columns. Down by our feet is the sports row. Of course I notice the one about baseball first. I reach down, pick it up, and start to thumb through it with great intention. I’m reading a blurb about Mookie Betts’s MVP candidacy on page 12 when I feel a tug on my right sleeve to look up to where Clifton is pointing. He says nothing as the two of us glare at the row of plastic wrapped magazines lined up eloquently and evenly spaced out resting on the top shelf.

“Heh,” I chuckle.

“Heh,” Clifton reverberates.

As if we share a mind, we both look back and to the left simultaneously to see if we’re within eyeshot of the clerk standing in her cashier’s nest. Just the back of her head and her red collared shirt are visible. We turn back towards the shelves, again at the same time, and we are communicating telepathically. We are clearly on the same page about trying to get a closer look at one, hoping that the other will take the initiative and put his foot up on the second shelf from the ground to gain leverage and peel a magazine from the top. My heart is beating a little faster than it was before, but I’m more at ease when Clifton and I break eye contact and he starts to climb the shelves like a ladder.

In a quick and decisive maneuver, he thrusts himself upward with his tiptoes on the base of the third-lowest shelf. He reaches up, now I’m looking at him from below. His shirt and sweater come untucked from the front of his pants during his upward extension, enough for me to see his happy hair trail from his waistband to his belly button. I do a fast dou-

ble-take towards the cashier, hoping she is oblivious to the situation behind her. Nothing has changed there. As I settle my attention back on the mission at hand, Clifton is down again on ground level carefully grasping the thin clear plastic wrapping around the October issue of "18TEEN." Displayed on the cover is a young blonde, wearing nothing but a pair of unbuttoned jean shorts that are so short you could barely call them shorts and knee high black leather boots. Evidently her name is Amber, and the photo is poorly Photoshopped to make it seem as though she is standing firmly on a block of words that reads "This **AUTUMN**, let your pants **FALL** off!" Amber is holding two big, obviously manufactured red-orange maple leaves up to her chest, covering her areolas, supposed to leave us wanting more.

It's not as if we *don't* want to see more, but that would mean one of us has to buy it. My heart starts beating faster again as Clifton looks up from the shiny, oiled skin of Amber to meet my eyes. His glare dares me to take the magazine from him, walk triumphantly over to the cashier, slam the lewd publication on the counter with authority, whip out my debit card, and tell her she doesn't need to bag it because I'm the fucking *man* and I'm not ashamed to pay real money for a trashy porn magazine. He points his head down, nodding at me ever so slightly with his eyebrows raised. A challenge has been issued.

I don't often give in to peer pressure. I've never been too concerned with being "cool" or making myself seem a lot tougher or badder than I am. Something about this moment, though; right here, right now. This could be the instance that solidifies our friendship. I could be \$17 and some slight embarrassment away from getting my roommate's stamp of approval, creating a memory that we'll revisit every time he needs a reminder that I'm not a pussy. I reach out with my right hand, trying not to quiver, and pinch the top of the plastic covering. A rush of heat waves over me as Clifton releases his grasp on the magazine and I now hold the weight of fifty naked women between my thumb and index finger.

Without saying a word, Clifton turns and makes a beeline for the front door. I follow after him, dropping my hand holding the magazine down to my side. He slows down a little bit as we get closer towards the center where the cashier stands, though we're still out of her sight. Clifton turns around and I quickly adjust my posture, straightening my shoulders so I'm standing taut. With that motion, the thin layer of sweat that is coating my back makes contact with the fabric of my t-shirt, sending a chill up my spine. Clifton looks at me and says quietly, "have fun, champ," before turning back around and leaving me there alone in the center of the store

with the oh-so-normal-looking female clerk.

Clifton is back outside in the dark hallway. Only the outline of his frame and the curls of his big fluffy hair are visible as I look through the entrance to outside the front of the store. I can't read his expression or tell if he's looking in at me. I go as long as I can standing there, holding the magazine by my side, intentionally underneath the lip of the brown check-out desk, avoiding eye contact with the clerk. Naturally, I look up when she friendlily chimes, "Hello sir, how are you today?" She's got to be standing on some sort of a raised platform in that circular desk of hers because she's looking down a good twelve inches at me. I feel miniscule, like someone's little sibling getting rejected from entering my brother's friend's house party. The woman's slight, Mona Lisa-esque smile and her piercing green eyes burn a hole through me. Even though she can't yet see what is in my hand I feel vulnerable and embarrassed. I hope Clifton can't see me too well from outside the store.

As I quietly respond, "g-good, how are you?" I feel the magazine start to slip as sweat from my fingertips has begun to gather between my grasp and the plastic cover. I can't avoid the inevitable anymore. The magazine and my arm feel heavy together, like I'm lifting up the Rosetta Stone to place on the counter rather than some D-tier porn. As soon as I get the magazine above the counter and gently slide it face down, forwards toward the clerk, my eyes dart a couple feet to the left where I see a small rack of various flavors of Trident gum. Without hesitation, I shoot my hand over and grab an eighteen-pack of passion fruit—anything to distract the cashier from my sinful purchase.

"Will this be all?" she asks as she scans the gum and then the magazine, lifting each one up to the thin red laser light shooting out from the handheld scanner sitting in its tabletop holster. Her nametag reads "HANNAH" and "Favorite Book: *Fahrenheit 451*."

"Uh, I think so," I answer, as my eyes meet hers again. "My friend wanted it but was too much of a wimp," I add. I had not thought this part through. I immediately regret drawing more attention to what I was doing rather than just paying for the two items and promptly leaving.

An attempt at a comforting smile stretches across her lips, showing her straight white teeth. "It's okay, everyone has these thoughts."

I go beet red. Not only did I draw more attention to it, but now she thinks I'm lying to cover my ass and that I'm some horny little devil who pays \$17 for porno magazines at the worst mall in America. I've been holding my breath for a while. I respond to her poor attempt at consolation with something between an exhale, a nervous laugh, and a cry of embar-

rassment. The noise sounded more like something you'd expect to hear in the bird store.

“Do you have your ID?” She asks softly, maintaining eye contact. At this point I was already gripping my card holder that I removed from my left pocket without even noticing. I stare down in slow motion and thumb through my AAA card, insurance card, and “16 Handles” frozen yogurt punch card from back home until I get to my driver’s license with my picture that makes me look like a middle school student who doesn’t know what masturbation is yet. I pull it out and try to hand it to her, but she doesn’t take it, instead only quickly glancing at it and telling me my total. “Nineteen-fifty-eight,” she rings while she puts my two items in a thankfully opaque white plastic bag.

I replace my ID back in its card holder, trading it for my blue Chase debit card. I struggle to slide the card into the payment slot immediately, but I figure it out and follow the prompts on the screen:

AMOUNT OK?

\$19.58

YES

CASH BACK?

\$10 -- \$20 -- \$50 – OTHER

NO

ENTER PIN OR CLICK CONTINUE FOR CREDIT

**PAYMENT COMPLETE
PLEASE REMOVE CARD
THANK YOU**

I thank Hannah, avoiding further eye contact, and don’t bother to take the time to replace my card back in its holder, shoving them both deep to the bottom of my pocket. I grab the bag that is sitting on the counter in front of me, turn to my left, and hear Hannah’s final chirp of “have a great day!” as my back is turned to her and I’m speed walking to the front of the store to meet Clifton in the corridor.

I take a deep breath. I must look as anxious as I feel because Clifton jeers, “how was Vietnam?”

I try and play it off cool by responding, “you were too scared to do it. At least I did it.” We start walking back in the direction of the loud aviary and Dick’s Sporting Goods, as if we had an unspoken agreement that we were going to leave the mall after departing the bookstore, as if our end

goal all along was to overpay for some bad porn with a table of contents. Clifton and I don't say a word to each other as we retrace our steps and find ourselves standing outside the big green entryway of Dick's once again, staring into the deep, empty parking lot where we began our harrowing journey. I'm about to take my phone out of my pocket and call another Lyft, but Clifton must have thought ahead and called one already because before I can even unlock my phone, a grey Mazda 3 pulls in front of us and Clifton starts walking towards the back passenger's side door. I follow him in, as he climbs across the back row to the driver's side.

Fuck. I have to pay another \$21.05 to get back to school.

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The fate of the magazine was a strange one. Naturally, we removed it from its plastic sleeve and pawed through it. At one point it ended up taped to the wall above Clifton's headboard, opened to pages thirty-one and thirty-two, displaying a feature of a woman by the same name as Clifton's mother. Some kid on the first floor of our building asked to borrow it after we showed it to him, claiming that one girl in it looked just like his ex-girlfriend from high school. I was afraid to open it up again after getting it back from him.

At a loss for what to do with it about six days after buying it, when its novelty had long worn off, we put it in the lockbox underneath my bed as it seemed wasteful to throw it out just a week later. This move is one I ended up deeply regretting, and to this day remains one of the worst mistakes I have made during my time in college.

The safe where the magazine resided opened and closed with a digital pin pad, which ran out of batteries at some point later in the semester. It had a basic lock and key, too, but my stupid ass thought the best place for the key was inside of the safe to keep the nudie mag company. So, of course, the magazine got stuck in the lockbox. This was a big deal, because my mother (who, put nicely, is a bit high-strung), is the one who insisted I bring a safe with me to college in the first place, so she borrowed it from a relative whose son had just finished college himself and did not need the lockbox anymore. I'm sure you understand the premise of borrowing.

In the midst of finals and with a general understanding that it would be nearly impossible to open up the safe without absolutely destroying it, which we didn't have the brute strength nor the power tools to accomplish, we conceded, figuring we could revisit the issue next semester before we have to pack up and go home. That was until Clifton off-handedly mentioned that the safe was broken in the company of my parents when they were visiting for family weekend.

I had no choice but to pull my father aside, give him a brief and semi-honest rundown of the situation at hand, and ask him if he could take care of removing the contents from the box without my mother finding out. A couple weeks later, I got a text from my dad letting me know that the safe had been brought to the locksmith and opened, and that he was unimpressed with the quality of the magazine. I was also informed that he had hid it in his sock drawer, as he was too afraid that my mother would find it if he disposed of it in the kitchen trash can or the recycling bin in the garage. It would also be a tough sell to convince his wife that the magazine actually belonged to their son who was 350 miles away at college.

The final resting place of the magazine (or at least its final intended resting place) was a pile of black Hefty trash bags on the side of a street in Midtown, Manhattan, where my father and I brought it one day during winter break, carried it around in his briefcase through two business meetings, and finally dropped it into the pile of garbage on West 57th Street. Whether the magazine's journey continued with one of New York's many homeless residents, with a curious and horny Wall Street sell-out on his lunch break, or if it ended completely just a few moments later, being hoisted into a garbage truck after my father and I rounded the block is information I am not privy to. Feel free to imagine what you wish about its fate, but as far as I'm concerned, its story ends here.