

21 Peachtree Plaza

Sitting under a stop light at the corner of Cascade and Childress, Justin, while admiring the interior detail of his new 2005 Dub Edition Chrysler 300C, flip flops between Hot 107.9 and V103 morning shows on the Infinity stereo system. He rolls the windows down—leans his left arm out of the opening while his right hand remains on the steering wheel. Justin, now sporting a pair of non-prescription “Transitions” eyewear, gazes from behind the smoke tint generated by the bright early morning sun. He’s in peep mode—trying to see everything he can see, while in the process—being seen himself. It’s become a morning ritual ever since he and Jerome moved into the area. The Cascade District reaps of affluence—with a higher concentration of sophisticated, educated, and largely single independent fine ass black women—Justin’s specialty! And so every morning—in right about this same spot, spontaneously the stereo seems to get a little louder, the windows come down as the shades go on, and the ride tends to slow down in this high traffic region of his daily journey.

On this morning, as he gets good into his usual campaign—his cell phone rings. And resonating from its speaker is a weak rendition of Africa Bambataa and SoulSonic Force’s “Planet Rock,” reflecting the generation of his musical origin. Swiveling open the receiver after the second ring—he answers.

“What up?”

“Hey—whatcha doin’?” replies a female voice.

“On my way to work. What’s up?”

“How did it go last night?”

“What do you mean how do it go? You know how it went...I tapped that ass!” Justin replies with confident swagger.

The voice on the other end bursts into hysterical laughter retorting, “Boy—you stupid!”

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And Justin, imitating his favorite Chris Tucker character, Smokey, from the movie *Friday* blurts, “And you know dis!” Both continue to laugh. Justin realizing his upcoming approach on to the habitually congested 285 expressway, cuts the conversation short. “Hey—whatcha doin’ later?”

“Nuthin’—why?”

“I’ll come thru—cool?”

“Yeeaahh,” she replies softly. For that was music to her ears. A visit from the man she has secretly loved for years—just made her day. “Bye Boo.” She finishes her part of the conversation.

“Holla.” Justin then hangs up the phone.

The female voice on the other end of the conversation was none other than Jackie Hewitt, Justin’s best friend and #1 fan. For years Jackie had been diligently by his side—long before his rise into the public spotlight. During those early days when he considered himself “po’, broke, and lonely—busted and disgusted”—and always seemingly on life’s short end, she was there feeding him, supporting him in whatever capacity she could—even at the sacrifice of her own marriage. She is Justin’s rock—the wind beneath his wings—that ride or die chick who’s always been down for whatever. They’ve been through the cycle of being friends—and then lovers—and back around as friends more than a time or two. For Justin she represents the only stable, cordially maintained female relationship to have graced his life. When he needs someone to talk to—it’s her number he dials, any day or hour. She’s always there. Yet he remains blind to the actual depth of her romantic feelings for him. What Justin sees as loyalty is actually unconditional love. A love strong enough to bear watching Justin go through his countless sexual encounters, with all the play by play accounts, while still having the ability to smile despite her own personal agony.

And yet, even in this relationship, Justin manages to let his true shallow colors shine gloriously through. For as good of a woman that Jackie is, she doesn’t meet the physical standards of his reputation. Therefore, she will always remain in the backdrop of his life—never the leading lady. Though still very attractive, the years have added pounds to her already curvaceous figure. Now at about 180 lbs., this tall red big-boned woman has fallen completely off of Justin’s sexual radar. His interest in her is only as an appreciative and devoted friend.

As he passes the Old National Highway exit, Justin sees that traffic will quickly be coming to a stand still. Taking a glimpse downward at

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the clock on the analog display that reads 8:42am, he realizes that he's definitely going to be late for work. He then relaxes his tense disposition muttering under his breath.

"Fuck it—oh well!" He pauses and says, "Damn I hate to hear this nigga's mouth."

He then proceeds to reach for his cell. This time, he connects one of those hands-free headsets to the side of the phone. Using voice-activated dialing, he says, "Teresha".

His phone automatically dials the number—he hears her phone ringing. She picks up.

"Hello?"

"What up?"

"*Heeey?*" as she recognizes his voice.

"How's everything?"

"We're doing fine. How 'bout you? You're hard to catch these days."

"I'm cool—you know how shit is right about now—its hectic! I ain't even had time ta think."

"By the way—congratulations on your promotion. I heard about it through the grapevine—you've earned it!"

"Appreciate. That's what I wanted to talk to you about—Justice. What are we goin' to do 'bout him? I'll be in the Chi."

"I know—but I don't know what to say. He worships you! You're an important part of his life. He'll miss you."

"And what 'bout you?" he advertently flips the statement.

"Stop!" as she blushes in the background. "This ain't about me. It's about our son—and his feelings."

"That's what I wanted to ask you...let him come with me. He's thirteen now—he needs a man to become a man," repeating one his father's classic proverbs.

There's silence. She's the first to speak.

"You know I can't do that. I can't let you do that. Look at your lifestyle! When would you have time for a child? You said it yourself... You don't even have time to think."

"I can do this. I'll work it out!"

"Justin you're full of it. I don't want my son stuck somewhere in some far away city with nobody while *y0* ass is off doin' whatever! I can't do it. *Hell no!*" Her tone becomes angered as she reflects on the many broken promises and fabricated stories she experienced during their life together.

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“But baby it’s not goin’ to be like that—you’ll see!”

“Justin, who do you think you’re talking to? I know you! And it ain’t gonna happen. I said *NO!* ...End of conversation!”

He hears nothing but a dial tone. She’s obviously hung up on him. Devastated by her response—he flings the headset to the floor.

“Stupid bitch. *FUCK* you!”

Quite shaken by the conversation, he nearly misses his turn onto 75N. His slow simmering anger turns to a quick boil. Heated, he begins to blurt out his frustrations.

“Fuck her—I’m tired of her shit! She can’t play me like that! I got a lawyer—fuck that! *TAKE* custody from her ass! She ain’t gonna *play* me like this! ...Who in the *FUCK* does she think she is? ...That’s *MY* son! Ain’t no other mutha fucka gonna raise *MY* kid! I’ll kill her mutha fuckin’ ass. ...Fuck wit me! ...That’s my goddamn son!”

Justin, who’s by now visibly upset, is swerving out of his lane causing other vehicles to avoid hitting him. A horn beeps from his left side. Justin leans out and shouts, “Fuck you!” as the car passes.

Here’s a side of him that few have seen—stored anger and hostility that has haunted him for most of his adult life. The years of abuse that he and his brother experienced during their childhood has taken its toll on Justin. The animosity he feels toward his estranged father has begun to spew outwardly and openly to those closest to him. He begins to sob, realizing that he’s way out of control.

Upon exiting the expressway, Justin collects himself knowing that he is only a few blocks away from work. This latest conversation reinforces his decision not to attempt a reconciliation of the relationship—not even for the sake of his son. He and Teresha went a long way back, but from day one they seemed to find ways to bump heads, both stubborn, strong-minded individuals—unwilling to grant concessions. In Teresha, Justin met his match. He can’t control her like other women—and that’s what pisses him off. When it comes to her it doesn’t take much to get the spark started. She is the constant thorn in his side. Once upon a time—he loved her—and yet the relationship didn’t work. Thus it changed the way he looks at all women—as nothing more than *bitches* and *boes*.

Within minutes, he pulls in front of this colossal, fifty plus story office centerplex housing some of the most prominent businesses in the country—21 Peachtree Plaza, home of Sho’ Nuff Entertainment. As Justin enters the underground parking facility, he must travel some three levels below to finally find an open park. With one last look at

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the clock—at 9:21am, he wastes no time getting to an elevator. On his way up, he tries to remember if he’s seen a black chromed-out H2 parked anywhere signifying the arrival of his boss—Rico Pittman. The elevator stops on the twenty-sixth floor and once the stainless steel doors open, Justin steps around the corner where the offices rest directly adjacent to his position. “The House of Glass” as it’s affectionately known, represents the solid glass walls and doorway that compose the front entrance of Sho’ Nuff. Stretching from the ceiling to the floor, anyone who passes by can clearly view all activity within the main lobby. Clean lines and contemporary furnishings punctuate the interior décor. To understand the internal design is to know CEO and founder, Rico Pittman—smooth, clean, and minimal.

He greets the girls at the front desk, while making his way to his office. “Hey ladies.”

“Hey Mr. Vaughn.” Two voices speak in perfect unison.

“Y’all al-ight?”

“Yes Mr. Vaughn.” Again—the two speaking on one accord.

Smiling, Justin asks, “Have y’all seen Rico today?”

One of the girls responds, “No sir—he hasn’t made it in yet.”

Walking away, he thanks the ladies for their cooperation and leaves one tidbit of parting wisdom. “Oh by the way ladies, just call me Justin.”

The two giggle amongst themselves as Justin continues down the hall. After grabbing a cup of decaf, he enters his office—a modest space with a few pictures and no real color palette. Laying his bag on the desk, he first checks for any messages, then unzips the leather carrying case—unpacking its contents. Taking a second to unwind, he stares out the window exposing the beautiful Atlanta skyline. And like his morning mocha, it’s meditation to his soul—a small piece of tranquility. Justin, caught in the moment, loses himself. His door suddenly swings open.

“Wake yo ass up nigga!” It’s Dee, other wise known as Demetrius McPhail, a recent addition to the Sho’ Nuff A&R family as a transferee from Connecticut by way of Def Jam Soul. “Where the fuck you been?” he asked, harping on the fact that Justin is a few minutes late as usual. To know Dee is to either love him or hate him, his silly antics have already become legendary with the office associates. Quickly, he has gained Justin’s trust and comradeship—in and out of the office.

“So when we headed for the Chi?”

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Justin, checking over the itinerary answers, “Monday, we’re takin’ a flight out from Hartsfield-Jackson International to Chicago Midway on Airtran.”

“*Airtran*. Y’all niggas down here are cheap man! ...Ain’t this the home of Delta? Y’all niggas can’t get a discount or sumthin’? Where’s dat nigga Rico?” Dee playfully runs off at the mouth—as he would any other time.

“Chill nigga—it’s all good! Jus leaves us a lil’ sumptin’ to play with,” brags Justin.

“Oh, it’s like that?”

“*Yeaah*—it’s like that!”

By this time Shantel, Justin’s assistant, slips through the doorway. Both turn in acknowledgment of her entrance. Dee speaks.

“What’s up Shantel—Shante’—Ashanti’ or whatever the hell you call yourself. ...Po’ ass need ta find her an identity—and stick to it.” Both men laugh. Once again, Dee speaks after further examining Shantel’s very slender figure.

“Homegirl sufferin’ from that disease—NoAssAtol!” Their laughter gets louder.

Shantel, now fed up with Dee’s sarcasm comes back with, “Shut da hell up—ig’nant ass!”

Dee quickly rebuttals, “Grow you sum ass—*beeeotch!*”

Disgusted, Shantel walks away.

After a couple more minutes of idle discussion, Shantel buzzes Justin.

“Rico’s here and he wants to talk to you—*NOW?*”

“Al-ight,” Justin reluctantly answers. Dee takes it as his cue to leave.

Justin analytically rambles through the possibilities of reasons why Rico would so urgently want to see him. He comes up empty as he approaches Rico’s door—three offices across the hall. Justin lightly taps on the door. Rico invites him in.

“What up Riq—I heard you wanted to see me?” In one motion Justin has found his way to the first of three ergonomic leather and chrome executive chairs that line the front of Rico’s desk. To be in Rico’s office for any first time visitor would be 1200 square feet of “shock and awe,” laced with exotic artwork, at least four plasma monitors—leather and chrome everything, a 250 gallon aquarium, walls lined with platinum and gold plaques, and a who’s who of framed photos and other accolades gathered over the years in a special display called “the wall of fame.” Imposing—yet quite inspiring!

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Rico, a medium complexioned young black entrepreneur in his late twenties—maybe thirty at the most, stands about 5' 8"—and no more than 160lbs. Always well-dressed, he keeps a clean cut with just a tinge of facial hair, with his upper body covered with tattoos—looking like a thug turned prince—your typical ghetto superstar. He's a self-made man who happens to be young, gifted, and black—the same ole' story seen across the board with the rise of Hip Hop in today's society. Rico, who's not one for mincing words—gets straight to the point.

"Y'all takin' Tae (Shantel) wit cha to Chicago."

"Al-ight. Can I ask why?" Justin answers with stuttered inquiry.

"First—because I said so. Second—because I know she'll keep y'all niggas straight! This ain't no pleasure trip—this is all 'bout business. We gotta get *dem* girls signed. ...I need you to close the deal next week."

"Riq, you know I got it!" Changing the subject, Justin brings up the night before. "Rome told me 'bout the session last night. Said BeeGee gonna take the South."

"Yeah—we hope so. If we keep a nigga out of jail."

Justin smirks. Rico continues to talk.

"Your boy Dee—you need to talk to him. Tell him to calm his little ass down. I spoke to Tae—I ain't havin' it! Either he calms the fuck down or I'm puttin' his ass out on some sexual harassment bullshit! We ain't catchin' no lawsuit on his petty shit. I mean that Jay! I ain't havin' it—betta talk to him."

Justin, feeling the pressure of that last demand, simply tells Rico "I got it," then commences to walk out of his office. Knowing the tone of Rico's voice, it meant that the conversation was over.

Headed back to his office, Justin passes Shantel in the hallway, who doesn't make eye contact—obviously feeling the guilt behind telling Rico of Dee's actions. He wanting to desperately say something makes a rare concession—bites his tongue and walks away shaking his head. There's this love/hate thing going on between he and Shantel. Under normal conditions, the two get along quite well. In fact, they make a great team. But Shantel doesn't really fit in with that *it* crowd while Justin does. She wants to—but doesn't know how. Therefore, she can't run in the same circles as Justin. Yet, she's intelligent, crafty, and organized as she envies Justin's social status—although sometimes to the point of being vindictive. Other times, the two appear to be the best of friends. In keeping the peace, Justin decides to let this latest incident go.

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He makes a short detour en route to his office to find Dee. And as suspected, he's up front in the main lobby—fraternizing with the girls at the desk. The group shares a laugh as Justin interrupts.

“Hey man—come holla at me for a minute.”

“What up?” Dee, now looking concerned, follows Justin back to his office.

“Man, leave Tae alone—stop fuckin’ wit her.”

“*What?* I was just teasin’ her lil’ bony ass.”

“Jus don’t fuck wit her.”

“What? That’s from Riq or sumthin?”

“Jus leave her alone.” Justin repeats his plea once more.

“*What’s up?* She snitched?”

“Nigga, you heard me! Jus do it!” Justin remarks with a slight grin on face—refusing to concede any more information. They then wander off on some other tangent, changing the course of their discussion.

As initially forecast, the day ends fairly uneventfully. Justin has opted to hangout at the office a little later than usual to avoid the afternoon rush hour. It’s now 6:30pm, as he puts away his various things, he abruptly plops back down at his desk—grabbing the phone and dialing “404-419-2727”. The line rings—but no ones answers, so he hangs up once the machine picks up—leaving no message. Ready to go, he turns off all lights, secures the premises and heads home.