

The Big One

a *Trick Baby* (1972) ficlet

by Rodo

for *SegaBarrett*

“NOW, FOR THE most important lesson,” Blue Howard began, gesturing at Folks with the tumbler in his hand. The ice cubes clinked against the glass and the radio played soul in their dingy little motel room. That always got him in a melancholy mood once he’d had a couple, for some reason. Should have known better and picked a different station for a celebration. At least the bourbon was good, even if the boy was technically too young to drink it yet.

“Come on!” the kid protested. “Thought you said I’d learned it all – how to pick a mark, how to reel them in, which cons to play and which to avoid, how to speak like a proper white man. Isn’t that what this is all about? My graduation from the school of life?”

It was. But there was still that last lesson. The one hustlers usually learned the hard way. “You did, Folks, you did. But there’s still one lesson left.”

“What is it? Never to trust your partner? Because I don’t think I could ever do that.”

Boy was too sober still. “No, son,” Blue told him. “You know everything you need to know to play the con. There’s just one thing left to learn: never trust the big one.”

Folks frowned, making his youthful face look even younger. Blue had known him since he’d visited his mother one day and the kid had walked in, all bruised and defiant. An angry black kid with the face of a pampered white boy. In a couple of years, he’d be the best partner an old hustler like him could dream of, once he could pass for a successful businessman. Until then, small cons it was. Probably for the best.

“What does that mean?”

Blue sighed like the weary old mentor he enjoyed playing on occasion. “Never bet everything on a big score. That’s how most hustlers get caught. They get on board a big one, the one to set them up for life, a good life too. But the con’s too big, and they don’t

get off when they should. You always gotta know when to get off. Most important skill a hustler should have.”

“I know, you told me,” White Folks agreed, and he finally started to drink enough for his pretty white face to flush.

“But you also gotta know which cons not to start. With some, once you’re on, you’re on. No getting off. You gotta avoid those. If you don’t know how to get off, don’t get on in the first place, no matter how juicy the bait.”

The boy nodded solemnly and kept drinking. He was a good kid. They’d go far together. Blue could see their bright future, getting the better of greedy white folk who thought an old black guy like him was easy pickings. And he’d make sure to avoid the big one. He’d promised the boy’s mother he’d keep him safe, after all.

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