

LOTTERY STORY

By Matt Burch

The way I first heard it, Mr. Jackson never wanted the damned ticket in the first place. Our principal, Mr. Strouse, gives 'em out as Christmas presents to all the teachers, or at least the ones that taught us good that year. The town is kinda small and don't have many rich folks in it, just a lot of poor ones hoping to get that way. So most of 'em play the Lotto. Mr. Jackson was our janitor, but he never played no Lotto. When Mr. Strouse gave him one of them lottery tickets for cleaning up the school real nice, he first tried to give it back.

"What's the matter, Carl, you Jewish or somethin'?" said Mr. Strouse, making a bad joke because everybody knew Mr. Jackson weren't exactly that.

"Seeing these hallways clean for the children is gift enough for me," Mr. Jackson said, smiling that quiet way he does so you know he really means it.

Well, that wasn't good enough for Mr. Strouse because he folded up the ticket and put it in Mr. Jackson's front pocket. Mr. Jackson let it set there so as not to make a fuss and kept on cleaning. And, for a while, that's all we heard of the matter. Until a few weeks later when they called the million dollar jackpot winner on TV and nobody came forward to claim the prize.

Mr. Strouse must buy them tickets in bulk because he recognized some of the numbers on TV being close to his own but not close enough to matter. So he calls all the teachers he bought tickets for, but none of them have the lucky winner. The only person left is Mr. Jackson who don't have a phone. He lives in a poor part of town—not a regular neighborhood or a trailer park but a wood cabin behind the old slaughterhouse. It don't operate no more since they got that fancy new processing plant in Burleigh. So Mr. Strouse drives over that night to see if Mr.

Jackson has the winning ticket. Turns out he does, and it was still in his pocket. The way Mr. Strouse tells it, Mr. Jackson was washing his work clothes in the basin when he got there. He damn near scrubbed those ticket numbers right off!

Well, Mr. Strouse offers to drive him to the city to collect that money, and Mr. Jackson says not to make a fuss. He'll just walk there to pick it up after he's finished the gymnasium floors the next afternoon. But Mr. Strouse insists on it and tells him he'd be a fool to walk fifty miles and carry a million dollars all the way back in a laundry sack. So they drive to the city that night to get the money. And this is the part of the story nobody knows so well, seeing as the two of them was out of town, except it was all over TV afterwards about a janitor winning a million dollar jackpot. A boy I know, Tommy Pruitt, says there was even video of Mr. Jackson holding up a big cardboard check. But I wouldn't know since we don't have the cable TV where I live.

The next week at school is when things turned peculiar. Not with Mr. Jackson; he just walked his three miles to school same as normal and done the cafeteria floors on Monday like always. But the kids started paying him more mind: eyeballing his clothes to see if they was new, looking for gold rings or a diamond wristwatch peeking from his shirt sleeves. They even spied on his lunch to see if it was caviar or chicken cord-on-blue or some such thing he pulled from his lunch pail. But it was just sardines on old Saltine crackers. And there was nothing new about his work clothes other than maybe a fresh hole or two.

Some of the teachers also started acting strange, too. Sally Rogers says she heard Mrs. Hannrehan cornered Mr. Jackson in the teacher parking lot. Most folks didn't talk with Mr. Jackson on account of him keeping to himself and being a janitor. But Mrs. Hannrehan taught Speech class, so she was real gabby. She asked him straightforward when he was gonna start

spending all that money. "Soon enough, I guess" is all he said. Or at least that's what Sally Rogers said that he said.

Well, "soon enough" don't come soon enough for most people in this town, because sooner than that other folks started asking the same questions. "When's that man gonna get himself a car, tramping around town like he does?" "When's he gonna buy himself a new place and get out from behind that old slaughterhouse?" "Don't he want a nice boat to go fishing in the summertime?"

Mr. Jackson never bought no boat. I know for sure because that's when me and some of the fellas started following him home from school in the evenings. We didn't mean nothing by it at first; we was just curious. Me, Toby Johnston, Little Dale Cullers and Kenny Colvin would hide out in the woods waiting for Mr. Jackson to leave once the last yellow bus drove off. When he came out with his lunch pail and started walking the utility road towards Route 7, we'd trail him from a distance through the woods. There wasn't much to see but Mr. Jackson shuffling along the highway whistling some song I never heard, but it felt like we were doing something important. A "recognition mission" Toby called it, or some such word he learned on cable TV.

Every once in a while, Little Dale would get to following too fast and stumble and make a racket, and Mr. Jackson would stop whistling and turn back, though we was hid too well for him to catch us. Whenever he stopped and looked back like that, with his eyes fixed on the woods, it always felt like they was fixed directly on me. I didn't want to follow Mr. Jackson all the way home, in part because of that look but in another part because we had to pass the old slaughterhouse. It wasn't that I was scared of what happened there. I'd seen my daddy put a wounded stag out its misery clean through the neck with an timber axe and didn't flinch. It was

more the smell of the place; not blood or raw meat or nothing, but a real sweet smell like a birthday cake left in the sun and gone rotten.

Well, we went on past the slaughterhouse to spy on Mr. Jackson in his cabin anyhow. And there wasn't much to see on account of him only having one kitchen window. We'd crouch in the tall grass after sundown watching that hole for hours and waiting for something strange to happen. I don't know what we was waiting for exactly. I guess we thought we'd see Mr. Jackson parading around in a fur coat or counting up great big stacks of money. But all we ever saw was him scraping his plate at the kitchen sink after supper and whistling that same damn tune.

After a time, Little Dale had to quit spying on account of getting in trouble for missing his own supper. Then Kenny got bored and said he'd rather be digging for grub worms in his backyard. Toby got mad at Mr. Jackson for not doing something more interesting. Pretty soon, the grown-ups in town started getting peeved, too.

Carla Denton's mother works as a teller at the local bank. She started blabberin' to anybody who'd listen that Mr. Jackson ain't never been in to open an account. Calvin Treacher's uncle runs the car dealership, and he got mad when Mr. Jackson wouldn't even glance at the new-used Cadillac he drove over to the school. Sully Grange's pop works real estate, and he got maddest of all. He went all the way out to Mr. Jackson's cabin to talk him into buying a new stone-cut split-level. Mr. Jackson just told him liked his little cabin just fine the way it was.

Before long, my Pop started talking angry, too. He'd come home after a long day at the processing plant in Burleigh and couldn't think about nothing else at the supper. He'd tell Mama it was wrong for a man to sit on his money when there was poor people all over. He said if Mr. Jackson weren't hiding it in a Switzerland bank account or in that old slaughterhouse, then he

must be using it for something unholy. Mama would just nod and draw the Trinity on herself every once in a while. Me, I just kept quiet and ate my beans and franks.

Well, about that time is when Principal Strouse got back from his Caribbean vacation. There was some talk because Mrs. Strouse ain't gone with him, and Miss Randana, our Arts and Crafts teacher, was out sick for the same two weeks. But the talk on Miss Randana and Mr. Strouse still couldn't beat that on Mr. Jackson. Parents started coming into school, saying they didn't trust the man, didn't want him around their kids. It wasn't right for him to be living out there alone with all that money and still coming into work the way he did. Mr. Strouse didn't have much choice but to finally go and speak to him. And this part I know for sure because I stayed behind after school in a boy's bathroom stall to listen. It wasn't an official recognizance mission this time. I was just trying to figure out the song Mr. Jackson kept whistling.

Mr. Strouse told Mr. Jackson he didn't want to fire him, but circumstantial would force him to unless he started to spend the money. Mr. Jackson got that same quiet look he gets and said he just wanted to be left alone to mop the halls and floors. People need pay no nevermind if he had money to spend or not. Mr. Strouse told him things didn't always work that way. Then he told him to make a show of buying some stuff, maybe that Cadillac down at Treacher's Auto or a downed payment on the Grange Realty split-level. When Mr. Jackson said he didn't have no driver's license and didn't want to live nowhere but his cabin, Mr. Strouse got real huffy. He told him to at least go into town for an expensive meal and some alcohol drinks with Miss Randana. That way, he could kill two birds with one rock.

On the way home, I got to thinking on Mr. Jackson's dilemma. It seemed to me people in town were never gonna leave him alone until they discovered he had some kinda buried treasure. The next day, I told Toby what I heard in the boy's restroom, and straight away he wanted to get

our old recognizance mission back together. He said we'd do it right this time on Saturday night when Mr. Jackson was in town with Miss Randana. We'd climb through that kitchen window and find all the rich things he had hid away inside. I told him we weren't gonna find nothing rich, but Toby didn't listen. He asked me what time Mr. Jackson was fixing to go out. I said eight o'clock, though I knew it was really seven.

When Toby called over to my house that Saturday, I told him I was sick, which weren't true neither. I'd spent most of the day looking around the house for something rich to spare while Pop and Mama were out of the house. The only things I could find were Pop's new-bought shotgun and a photo camera still in the box that Mama won in a church raffle but never learned how to use. When Toby called Little Dale, he told him he was still grounded. I happened to know that also weren't true. It was because his daddy was a drunk and came home late the night before and gave him a good ass-whooping for no other reason than Dale being the only one around.

So that night Toby's recognizance mission was down to just him and Kenny Colvin. About eight o'clock, they went through the woods past the slaughterhouse to Mr. Jackson's. I know for sure because I was hiding in the tall grass and already saw Miss Randana coming to pick up Mr. Jackson in her new-bought Chevrolet. It looked peculiar—a pretty lady picking up a man who was supposed to be rich while she was the one driving the fancy new car. Mr. Jackson came out to meet her in his Sunday best, which still wasn't much better than his Monday to Friday's. He was smiling polite like he always does, but, this time, it didn't look so much like he meant it.

After they left, I watched Toby and Kenny sneak through Mr. Jackson's kitchen window just like he said they would. They got in real easy since I'd left the window cracked behind me. I

spied from the tall grass as they knocked around inside with the lights off trying real hard to be quiet but whispering so loud as anybody could hear 'em over the crickets. For a little while, it looked like my plan was gonna work, until Toby and Kenny hurry out and run off empty-handed. They were so dumb, they couldn't even find what I left for them, smack in the middle of Mr. Jackson's kitchen table.

This is the part of the story where everything turns backwards and I start to feel real sad. And you got to believe me when I tell you I tried real hard to get in after Toby and Kenny and get it back. The way I figured it, Toby would find my Mama's camera and see it as something rich and take it as proof that Mr. Jackson was spending money and that would be the end of things. But I couldn't get in the cabin window in time before Mr. Jackson come back in the rear of Sheriff Moseley's squad car. Lila Simms's mama is a waitress at the Bob's Big Boy in town. The way she tells it, Mr. Jackson and Miss Randana didn't get too far into their fancy meal before some fellas started in on 'em, saying Mr. Jackson should be buying steak dinners for the whole town and not just Miss Randana. Mr. Jackson didn't say much, being that's his way, but Miss Randana shouted for them to mind their own business. They said everyone in town knew she wasn't minding nobody's business but Mr. Strouse's anyway. This got Miss Randana real mad, and soon her and those fellas got to hollering back and forth. According to Lila Simms, Mr. Jackson just set there silent until the sheriff and his deputies came. They took him away in handcuffs, figuring he was the one that started the whole thing.

Well, when they bring Mr. Jackson back to his cabin, I'm stuck there in the tall grass watching. And I'm surprised he's back so soon but more surprised it's the sheriff that brought him. They take him inside and start knocking around the same way Toby and Kenny done except with the lights on. Pretty soon, they find my Mama's camera on the kitchen table and ask Mr.

Jackson if he bought it with his Lotto money. He gets nervous and says he don't know nothing about the camera, never saw it before in his life. This makes the sheriff real suspicious, and he asks Mr. Jackson what kind of pictures are on it. Mr. Jackson just shrugs, until the sheriff suggests they go to the all-night drugstore with one-hour processing to find out.

Before I tell you what was on them pictures, there's another part to the story I forgot to mention. Earlier that day when I went over to Little Dale's to see if he was going on Toby's reconnaissance mission, I took the camera with me. When Little Dale 'fessed up about his daddy hitting him the night before, I 'fessed up my idea about my Mama's new Kodak. He said we should take some pictures to test out the camera, pictures of his bruises. This seemed like a good idea at the time, and before I know it Little Dale's got his shirt and dungarees off showing me shiners on every part of his body, and I'm snapping every last one. Now that don't seem like such a good idea, and I started thinking the same thing that night running home through the woods from Mr. Jackson's. I ran like a lit bottle rocket by that old slaughterhouse. But this time, that sick-sweet smell couldn't catch me I was running so fast.

When I called over to Little Dale's house next morning, he told me Sheriff Moseley and his deputies had already been by. He said they asked him whether Mr. Jackson ever cornered him at school, and Little Dale told 'em no but did say we'd followed him home on a spy mission a few times. He even told 'em he went by himself one night. That part I didn't know, and pretty soon they were asking whether Mr. Jackson gave him those bruises. Little Dale was scared to tell the truth since his Pop was standing there being nice and polite, so he just shrugged and said "I guess so."

Well, this was all Sheriff Moseley needed to hear, so he headed off with his deputies to arrest Mr. Jackson. Once they left, Little Dale said his Pop did something he never, ever done

before or since. He started crying and hugging him real hard and promised never to hit him again. Little Dale thought everything was OK after that, so he didn't need to tell nobody the rest.

Pretty soon, I got to thinking the same thing. People in town finally stopped talking on Mr. Jackson when they took him away to the state prison a few counties over. Supposedly, he went right along, never complained a smidge. Mitchell Goode, whose daddy is in the same prison for manslaughter, said they even let Mr. Jackson mop the hallways of the cell block like he used to do the old gymnasium. For a while, that's all I heard of the matter. Until a few years later when me and Dale, who's just Regular Dale now on account of being older and bigger, were watching the news at his house and saw that Mr. Jackson had been killed in prison.

The newsman said it had something to do with Mr. Jackson being a child molester and most of the other prisoners not liking that crime so much. I happen to know different—it's because Dale's daddy had been out drinking again with all the money he got selling Dale's story to a Hollywood producer and started bragging in town about how it was money for nothing and how the janitor never laid a finger on his son. Well, word got around fast enough and far enough to get back to the prison. And when the warden realized how upside-down everything was, he offered Mr. Jackson an early parole. The thing of it is, Mr. Jackson didn't want no parole. He said he was just fine where he was, mopping the hallways of the cell block. He didn't ever want to go back to civilization. This made the other prisoners real mad, seeing as they were stuck there and Mr. Jackson had a chance to leave and wouldn't take it. It made one convict so ornery he cut clean through Mr. Jackson's neck with a knife made from a toothbrush.

In memorial, they played the same Lotto video Tommy Pruitt first talked about, the one with Mr. Jackson getting the great big cardboard check. I noticed he weren't smiling so much as they dropped gold sparkles and streamers on him, but I recognized the music they played was the

same song he'd always been whistling. Something to do with "We're in the money, we're in the money." I thought it peculiar since Mr. Jackson never wanted the damned ticket in the first place. I don't know—maybe he just liked the music parts of the tune.

On the way home from Dale's, I got to thinking on Mr. Jackson's dilemma like I hadn't done in a long while. I got to thinking on it so much I took the roundabout way through the woods and went by his old cabin. It had been boarded up since, but that old slaughterhouse was still standing, and that sweet smell was still in the air, but I guess it didn't bother me so much no more because I finally went inside. It was kinda dark, but still light enough to see. There wasn't no dead cow skulls or blood stains or chemicals, just vines and vines of plants growing from the ground and the cracks in the walls. It was honeysuckle. I could tell by the little yellow flowers on the vines and that same sweet smell. It got me thinking on how good things can grow in places where so many bad things have happened. I wondered if our poor broken town could ever be like that. Pretty soon, I stopped wondering.

When I got home for supper, Mama was waiting for me at the door, holding that same empty camera box from years before. I was surprised since it had been so long I thought she never knew it was gone. Well, when she haul off and smack me across the face on the doorstep, I knew she must have heard the news about Mr. Jackson, put two and two together. I don't know where she heard it—we still don't have the cable TV out where I live. I guess somebody in town must've called her on the phone. Maybe Carla Jean Denton's mama or Miss Hannrehan since she's so gabby. Either way, Mama didn't say a word after that. She never told my daddy what happened neither. She just drew the Trinity on herself and went inside to finish the beans and franks.