

The Look
By Milton Davis

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“So you’ll see her?”

Steve leaned backed in his leather executive chair, Pierre sitting on the opposite side of his desk. Pierre’s eyes were wide like they always were when he was excited. He looked like a guppy. Steve held back a snicker while picking up the photos spread across the desk. The girl was attractive, but so were a million other girls in the world. What he wanted was the look.

“I don’t see it,” he finally said.

Pierre leaned toward him. “That damn Tony! He’s a crackpot photographer. I tell you, Steve, she’s the girl you’re looking for, the face of the new millennia. She has a... a...damn! I can’t describe it. You’ll have to meet her to see what I’m talking about”

When Steve looked up Pierre’s animated look had vanished. His heavy eyebrows were drawn in, his mouth barren of the familiar upward curve. Steve couldn’t be sure but it looked like Pierre was getting serious.

“I’m giving a party this weekend at the lodge. Why don’t you come by? She’ll be there, among others.”

“Hell, I don’t know, Pierre.” But he did know. Among others meant call girls. Pierre had access to some of the best in Atlanta, mainly because he launched their careers. Besides, it had been a long time since he had his hand on some young flesh. There was the matter of the business weekend with Kristen, but he could handle that.

“I guess I can make it,” he finally said. “But no promises.”

Pierre's face gleamed. "Excellent! I promise you Steve, you'll love her!"

"Yeah, tell me about it. Now get out of here. I got a lot of work to finish."

Pierre strode out with a victorious swagger. Steve watched him leave, and then thumbed through the photos again. The man always showed up in the middle of the night, interrupting the only time Steve had for paperwork. He was a short, fat, obnoxious coke head, but he did have an eye for women. This girl didn't fit his type. She was a little thin and the dreadlocks did nothing for her. She did look good in an evening gown. Good, but not stunning. Positively not the look he was searching for. Still, if Pierre was so worked up over her it was worth taking a peek.

He glanced at the mirrored clock resting on the opposite wall just out of reach of the ficus tree. One a.m. If he hurried he could catch the last set at Marley's. He logged out of the photo file and got off the computer. Pierre's dream girl would have until the weekend.

Fall had come to North Georgia with its usual brilliance, prompting the annual invasion of the hills by thousands of urban Atlantans. A cleansing chill hung in the air but it was still warm enough to drive with the top down. Steve took the jeep for just that reason. He enjoyed the changing seasons; the emerging yellows and oranges broke the monotonous green of summer, just like the grey hairs intruding on his curly black mane. The grey, though premature, gave him a dignified look. It helped when dealing with young girls. They needed a father image and he was happy to oblige if it meant signing the good ones. He glanced at Kristen sitting beside him in her trademark sweatshirt and blue jeans. A wide brim cowboy hat protected her raven hair from the wind. If it wasn't for the broad frown on her face anyone would think she was enjoying herself.

“Why do I have to go?” she whined.

“Because I have to,” Steve replied. “Besides, we might see someone worth taking pictures.”

Kristen laughed. “Yeah, right. I didn’t know you were working for Hustler.”

“Look, Pierre has this new girl he’s really mad about.” Steve reached over to the glove compartment and extracted the folder.

“Check these out.”

Kristen flipped through the photos.

“He’s right.”

“About the girl?”

“No, about Tony. These are some shitty photos.”

Their free-wheeling cruise ended abruptly at the Cleveland city limits. Traffic was bumper to bumper through the hamlet. They inched ahead, trapped in the exodus northward. By the time they reached Helen it was sunset. They stopped in the fake German village long enough to put up the top then sped farther north into the mountains.

Pierre’s retreat lay twenty miles further. Steve took advantage of the clear road, pressing down on the accelerator. He felt warm despite the cool night, eagerly anticipating what delights he might find at the party. He’d deal with the mystery girl as fast as possible then get to some real fun. He glimpsed at Kristen bouncing off the seat to the rhythm of Bob Marley. The only woman safe around him, he thought. She was appealing in an androgynous way, but not his type. His preference lay at the end of the dirt road they approached.

The jeep made the transition from smooth pavement to rough dirt with a jolt, bright lights on and four-wheel drive kicked in. The lodge appeared moments later, a stucco and wood trimmed replica of a German retreat bathed in yellow light.

“Hansel and Gretel could’ve found this place blind,” Kristen said as she put on her shades. “I wonder what kind of candy we’ll find inside.”

Steve swerved the jeep into the first empty parking space. “They’ll be something for everyone. Pierre’s cool.”

“Watch out for the witch!” Kristen crinkled her face and bent her fingers into claws.

As soon as he stepped out of the jeep he was convinced the party was an elaborate sales pitch. Most of the parked cars he recognized and the heavy thumb of reggae bleeding out of the lodge was definitely his style. Pierre was going all out for this chick, but why? Love was the only reason he could come up with and that made him laugh. He pictured Pierre’s fat ass waiting on Miss Haystack hand and foot, a too small waiter’s uniform squeezing the blood out of him. Pierre should know better. Get involved, profits fall. The girls were merchandise. The only ones you touch are the ones that don’t have a chance.

They climbed the wooden stairs and Kristen banged impatiently on the door. Pierre answered, his eyes shifting from wary to joyful when he recognized them.

“Steve! Kristen!” He grabbed their arms and pulled them inside. “Look everyone! Look who’s here!”

From the raised foyer they surveyed the great room below. The fireplace on the opposite wall blazed and beside it the Ire-ites, the house band from Steve’s favorite

reggae club, added an island cadence to the flickering flames. Most of the people glanced up and waved.

Pierre took Steve's jacket. "If you had not shown up this party would have been a disaster."

"I don't know," Steve replied. "Looks pretty good to me." His eyes wandering over the revelers, mentally separating the paid company from the guests. He spotted a couple of girlfriends on hold and gave the friendly wink. He could have them if he wanted, but he didn't feel like romance.

Kristen laid a heavy hand on Pierre's shoulder. "Pete! What you got for the nose?"

Pierre frowned. "Go to the guest house out back."

"Great!" Kristen planted a wet kiss on Pierre's cheek and winked at Steve. "I'll be back when the party starts. "Later!"

Pierre snatched out a handkerchief, scrubbing his jaw. "Why did you bring that dike with you?"

"She's good company." Steve headed for the stairs, Pierre close behind. "I also needed someone to take a few shots if this dream girl of yours turns out to be anything. Is she here?"

"She's still dressing," Pierre answered. "I tell you Steve, you won't be disappointed. She's magnificent!"

They descended into the crowd, Steve nodding shaking and grinning his way to the band. He picked up a tall red head along the way and they cleared a space on the floor with their vigorous dancing. Other couples joined in; soon the great room undulated with

bodies rapt with the Caribbean beat. Now this was a party, Steve thought. The drinks and drugs could wait. There was nothing better than attractive bodies moving to a good beat while creating a glimpse of later passion.

The band slowed the pace after the fourth song. Steve had a chocolate beauty before him named Tanya. They followed the lead, pulling each other close. He was closing his eyes, savoring Tanya's sweet smell when he felt someone staring at him. He cracked his eyes, looking over Tanya's shoulder for the culprit. A few couples danced while others mingled around the snack table. No one seemed interested in him. He was about to dismiss it to paranoia when the feeling swept over him again. His legs buckled and he almost fell. Luckily Tanya was stronger than she appeared.

"Watch it, love," she said. "Too much toot will do it every time."

"Sorry" Steve turned about, looking to the direction he sensed was right. Pierre stood in the foyer, eyes wide and twinkling. Beside him posed the other reason the evening had been planned. She was a foot and a half taller than her mentor. Black dreadlocks twisted down to her shoulders, flanking a golden brown face. She was heavy for a model but finely shaped. The matching halter and wrap-around skirt she wore complimented her perfectly. The island nymph, obviously Pierre's idea. He was playing to Steve's every weakness. But it was her eyes that trapped Steve's attention, deep green orbs that seemed ancient yet innocent. He excused himself from Tanya and made his way to the pair.

Pierre rustled like proud father. "Steven McCarthy, I'd like you to meet Ms. Kyla Swane." Steve took her extended hand anxiously.

"Ms. Swane. May I call you Kyla?"

“Of course, Mr. McCarthy. A man of your reputation needn’t ask.”

“Call me Steve, please.” Her hand felt eerie, cold yet compelling. He wanted hold more than just an appendage. He needed more.

Pierre’s piping voice cut into his musing. “What did I tell you? Isn’t she magnificent?”

Kyla blushed. “Pierre, you’re embarrassing me.”

“No, he’s not,” Steve said. “The photos I saw don’t do you justice. There’s something about you that eludes the camera. Your eyes...”

“What about my eyes, Steven?”

Steve hurtled back in time, images of decades past flashing by in an accelerated parade. In every sequence Kyla was the only permanence, unchanging and ever beautiful. He swayed and grabbed the railing for support.

“Are you all right?” Pierre asked.

Steve steadied himself, his eyes still engaged with Kyla’s. The sensation that held him was tempered by a twinge of foreboding.

“I’m fine,” he finally said. “Excuse me, I need to find Kristen.”

Steve exploded from the front door and stumbled down the stairs. His breath came in gasps, his head throbbed and his heart pounded relentlessly against his chest. Easing himself down on the last stair, he took a deep breath to regain control. This was ridiculous, he thought. He felt childish, like a boy meeting his secret love for the first time. Another part of him responded to something intangible, an unsettling feeling that welled up from deep inside.

“Cant handle it, huh?” Steve jerked his head up to see Kristen standing in front of him, her hands deep in her pockets.

“I was looking for you,” Steve said. “Get your camera. I want to do some shots of Pierre’s wonder girl.”

“So you met her?”

Steve felt a warm rush through his body. “Yes I did. Pierre’s pictures don’t do her justice. I’m still not quite sure if she has what I want.”

“What’s there to be sure of?” Kristen said. “Either it’s there or it’s not.”

“It’s not that simple this time. Go on and get the gear.”

Steve waited outside for Kristen. With her he would have more control and be able to keep his mind on business

“Okay, Mr. Genius, let’s do this,” Kristen said, sauntering past him to climbed the stairs. The band was taking a break as they entered. Steve spotted Pierre working the room with Kyla by his side, the man loud and energetic, Kyla restrained but no less enchanting.

“There she is,” he said. “Her name is Kyla.”

“She is a looker,” Kristen said. “Somebody should trash Tony’s cameras and kick his ass.”

They pushed through the crowd to the duo. Steve placed a hand on Kyla’s shoulder and she turned to him with a smile.

“You’re back!” She noticed Kristen and shared a smile with her as well. Kristen smiled back and took pictures.

Pierre clapped his hands. You’re taking pictures! Outstanding!”

Steve nodded, fearing his voice might crack if he spoke. He watched Kyla move with the camera with an assurance beyond her experience. She gazed at him between shots, her eyes penetrating him and pulling forth feelings he tried desperately to hide.

The band started again and the crowd flowed back to the dance floor. Steve found himself standing face to face with Kyla.

“Dance?” she asked.

He nodded. She took his hand and guided him to the dance space. She was an excellent dancer, prancing around him with training gracefulness.

“No fair!” he complained. “You’re a pro.”

“Professionals get paid,” Kyla replied. “I only dance like this when I’m inspired.”

As they continued to dance Steve realized he’d been falling in love since the moment they met. He was suddenly amazed and frightened. The sensation he experienced wasn’t voluntary. He’d been coerced, dragged into this bondage like a slave. The bitterness rising in him was crushed by a question.

“Have you seen the house?” Kyla asked.

“A few times. Pierre lets me crash here when I’m trout fishing in the area.”

“Oh. What about the guest house?”

Steve wanted to lie but he couldn’t. Those endless eyes demanded the truth.

“No I haven’t.”

“Come on!” She grabbed his hand with surprising strength and towed him across the great room. Kristen appeared from nowhere and took a few pictures.

“Bingo!” she said.

Steve shook his head as an unexplained terror gripped him. They ran out the back door down the stone walkway that winded toward the guest house. Kyla had overwhelmed his mind as was overpowering his body. He tried to pry his arm free but her thin fingers refused to budge.

“Kyla, what the hell is going on?”

“You’ll find out soon.” She looked back at him and smiled. “Don’t worry, it’ll be fun.”

He stopped resisting. The quest house was quaint, a white stained wood with dark cedar trim. Kyla opened the front door and led him inside. The aroma of apple cinnamon struggled to mask a strange musk filling the cottage. The room they entered was sparsely furnished, a pit group and mirrored coffee table its only inhabitants.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said. Her voice lost its innocuous tone, becoming as archaic as her eyes. “I won’t hurt you.”

Steve stumbled away. He grabbed his head and shook it violently, trying to bring order to his feelings. A tempest churned inside him; on the surface desire reigned but below instinct warned him.

“Kyla, I don’t think this is a good idea,” he managed to say.

She undid her blouse, took it off and let it float to the floor. The fear inside him floundered then drowned in a torrent of lust. He staggered to her as she took off her wraparound skirt. He was dizzy with the thought of having her before the fireplace, the flames outlining their bodies, their arms entangled about each other like vines, kisses like embers smattering his cheeks, eyes, lips and throat.

He yelled and tried to break away. Kyla pinned his arms and they fell to the floor. She raised her head and this time he saw the fangs glinting from the firelight, pointed pearls meant only for him. As she plunged for his throat calmness returned to his frayed mind. He had been right all along. It wasn't the look. It was more.

The End