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Sheba

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Sheba

"This is a time for action!" shouted Sheba.

I glanced around the crowd that Sheba's intoxicating voice held in its command. Her hands were moving rhythmically as she spoke, beating the podium every once and awhile for effect and her words were beginning to run together, taking on a chant. Whenever she started this I knew she was coming to the end of her talk. The lyrical portion of Sheba's speeches never failed to produce an emotional outburst from the audience. People shouting, "Tell it like it is sister" or "Amen, little sister." Hands clapping, feet stomping, men and women yelling "Black solidarity" and "We need a change!" It was truly a sight to behold.

"I just want to leave you with this one thought," Sheba shouted, "White is *not* always right, but Black is *always* beautiful!" The screams of praise were deafening but they had little effect on Sheba.

Sheba took her final bow, then descended the platform steps and strolled through the crowd back to where I was standing, shaking a few hands on the way.

"How was I?"

"Great, as usual, but you knew that."

"You're right." She laughed confidently and appraised the mass confusion that she had caused. "Lord Jesus, they are wild tonight. We better get the fuck outta here 'fore somebody goes and calls the cops on me for disturbing their precious peace. I want something to drink. Wanna go to Wally's for a beer?"

"Sure, why not."

"Got any money?"

"Well how else did you plan to get the beer? God knows you ain't got nothing green in your pocket."

"You got that right."

Wally's was a bar on the East side of town. It was around 10:00 p.m. when we got there but the place was still fairly quiet. There were a few brothers in the back shooting craps and a couple of hookers stationed in the front trying to get a jump on their competitors. Wally was in his usual place behind the bar. He was a large man, weighing in at about 255 pounds of pure muscle. He stood about 6 feet 6 inches high. His afro was always neatly trimmed and well-groomed. I always felt deep down, that if given a little help, Wally and I could have a love affair.

There was only one semi-clean table in the bar and it was occupied by Exodus Jones, who hadn't seen a sober day since his son stepped on a land mine in the Viet Nam War. Sheba walked over to

the table and gripped the back of his chair. She coolly tipped the chair to the side and watched Exodus slide into a crumpled heap on the floor.

"Was that necessary, Sheba?" I asked after we were seated.

"Nothing in life is necessary or important 'cause in the end we're all gonna die anyways."

"Your optimism astounds me."

Wally's enormous frame swaggered toward the table with our beers; he spilled some on the floor but didn't seem to notice.

"Here ya go ladies. So, how you two sexy things doin' this evening?"

"We're women, not things, and if you weren't so busy lustin' after the women that come in your bar you probably could have gotten our fuckin' beers out here earlier. I can't stand you men, y'all always runnin' around with your tongues hangin' outta your mouths just like a pack of dogs. Just the other day I..."

"We're just fine Wally," I broke in. "Thanks for bringing out our drinks."

"My pleasure." He smiled down at me with those strong, white, overlapping teeth that I have grown so fond of. "I'll be back later to see if y'all need anything else." He picked up his serving tray and slipped it under his arm. He gave me a little wink, then turned to salute Sheba and strutted back to the front, providing me with a long look at his big, tight, rearend.

"He wants you," Sheba said, looking at me slyly over the frothy head of her upturned beer.

"No he doesn't. Why would you say that?"

"Oh God, don't be so naive. Anybody four blocks away could tell how hard he was."

"You are so crude."

"Fuck you."

"I'm going to let that pass. Anyway, how do you know he wasn't getting, uhm — excited over you?"

"Me? Lord have mercy, he knows I'm too much of a woman for him. I'd bring him to his knees."

"Well, thanks a lot!"

"You know what I mean."

I did know what she meant. I always seem to know what Sheba means. I guess it's from being around her for so many years. Sheba and I had grown up together. The first time I ever set eyes on Sheba was on the rooftop playground of our apartment building. She didn't notice me at first because she was too busy kicking sand at the other kids playing in the sandbox. I was new in the building and in a peak of loneliness I decided to come up to the playground to try and make friends. This was the first time I had ever seen a playground with no grass. My family and I had just moved to Brooklyn from a small town in Indiana. My father had been laid off from his job at the fiberglass

company for almost a year when he finally got wind of a job opportunity in the big city.

After Sheba had successfully run all the kids out of the sandbox and to the other side of the playground, she turned to stare at me. She started walking toward me. I was so scared I almost ran. She stood directly in front of me and just stared. Her big green eyes searched every inch of my body, and then she started talking.

"Watcha name?"

"Marla."

"Well I'm going to call you Marly 'cause I like that better. Ya know what, Marly? I can tell just by lookin' at a person whether or not they're going to be my friend, and I've decided that you are going to be my friend." We were five years old then and we've been friends now for almost twenty years. Sheba taught me how to survive in the city. She taught me how to dress, how to hustle, how to talk like I knew what I was talking about, even when I didn't, and how to fight when it was necessary.

"Watcha think' 'bout so hard, Marly?"

"Nothing."

"Don't do that! You know how I hate that. I can't stand it when you stare into space for 15 minutes and then you tell me you ain't thinking 'bout nothin'. You must be thinkin' something bad about me."

"Don't be so paranoid. Do you realize that I am probably the only person in this entire city that knows just how insecure you can be at times? To everybody else you're a tiny, overconfident, intimidating, strong-willed, crude mouthed, intelligent black woman."

Strangely enough, as intimidating and crass as Sheba was at times, she never failed to attract a crowd. At this very moment there was a table of men across the room trying to get up enough guts to come over and talk to her. It's not really surprising though, because Sheba was an incredibly beautiful woman. Her skin was a rich yellow-brown color and as smooth as a baby's behind. She kept her light brown curls cut very close to her scalp.

One of the men from the table across the room finally got up enough gumption or either, he finally got drunk enough, to make a move on Sheba. He strutted over to our table and looked down at Sheba, tilting his head a little to the side, trying to look nonchalant.

"Hey babe, uhm uhm uhm, you look good enough to eat." Sheba just glared at him out of the corner of her eye and went back to drumming her bright red fingernails on the table top, which is what she had been doing ever since he opened his mouth.

"Oh come on Mama, cut me some slack. A good looking little girl like you shouldn't be sitting here without male companionship."

Sheba's nails stopped in midbeat. She turned completely around

in her seat until she was staring directly up into the man's face. She gave him a look that would have made Satan grab for his coat. When I saw Sheba's index finger raise up off the table I knew all hell was about to cut loose.

"Let me tell you, motherfucker, I've been living in this world for twenty-five years. I've been drinkin' since I was old enough to open the bottle and I gave my virginity away 'fore I even knew what it was. So you can believe me when I tell you that I ain't nobody's 'little girl.'" By this time the man had backed up so far away from Sheba that she had to shout for him to hear her. "And furthermore," Sheba's whole upperbody was twisting and bouncing but her index finger held steady, "as ugly and scrawny lookin' as you are, if I was your mama I sure as hell wouldn't claim ya."

Now the whole club was getting involved. They were hooting and yelling. A handful of men were even taking bets as to whether Sheba was going to end the whole episode by slapping the man in the face. All of this attention was what Sheba needed to bring her scene to a climax.

"Now I suggest you take your ugly, no-account self and climb back into the hole you crawled out of . . . Cause if you don't get the hell outta my face I'm goin' take this beer bottle and shove it where the sun don't shine." The crowd went wild as the young man cowered back to his table. He downed the remainder of his beer and ran out the front door.

"Did you have to be so hard on him, Sheba? After all, in his way he was trying to pay you a compliment."

"Bullshit. He was trying to get a little play, that's all, and that ain't no compliment, it's exploitation."

Sheba bumped her glass of beer and spilled a drop or two on her skirt.

"Damn, hand me a napkin, Marly."

To say Sheba was a flashy dresser could not even begin to describe her way with fashion. She loved mini skirts. I swear she must have one in every texture and color imaginable. Of course, if I had legs like Sheba, firm, smooth and meaty, I'd want to show them off too.

Tonight she was wearing a sapphire blue mini skirt with a little split in the back; just high enough to be sexy but not sleazy. Her blouse was made of white chiffon lace — see-through for the most part. She had a silver chain draped across her midsection. Sheba topped all this off with a black leather jacket. Silver hoops adorned her ear lobes and her silver bangle bracelets that she never took off gleamed in the dim glow of Wally's ceiling lights. She claimed that her father sent her the bracelets from Nigeria while he was serving in the Peace Corps. I know this is not true though, because one night when we were sixteen, after splitting a gallon jug of Wild Irish Rose, she confessed to me that she

had no idea who her father was and neither did her mother. She told me it didn't matter because she didn't need any hard-headed black man telling her how to live her life, but I could tell it did matter. We never talked about her father again.

Sheba and her mother got along alright, mostly because they had never sat down and talked to each other. Her mother had been one of Cicero's girls. She worked the corner of 122nd and Locust. I remember the night she was killed. It was the October when Sheba and I were nine. The police met us at my front door. We thought they were after us for breaking windows and spray painting nasty words on the side of the Washington Square Apartments. The police told Sheba that they had found her mother strangled in a hotel room. Evidently one of her customers had not been completely satisfied with the service. When they told Sheba, she sat down in one of our worn red velvet chairs close to the window. She sat there for two days. She didn't talk, she didn't eat, and didn't cry — she just sat staring out the window. On the third day she got up, washed her face, brushed her teeth, and then asked me if I wanted to go to the mall and practice shoplifting.

"Damit, there you go again."

"What?"

"Starin' off into space. By the way, what was that shit you was sayin' about me havin' a crude mouth?"

"Crude, C-R-U-D-E. Your mouth is like a sewer. I don't know how you ever expect to get into politics using language like that."

"I speak for my people and if those conservative motherfu..."

"Save it. I know what you are going to say and I agree with you to a certain extent. But what I'm trying to tell you is that in order for you to help the people you have got to get your foot in the door, and if that means toning down your language a little bit, then so be it."

"OK, OK, I'll work on it. I want another drink."

"You've already had four."

"You ain't my mama."

"You're right, I'm not your mother and it's not going to be your mother carrying you out of here when you get stinking drunk."

"Bullshit, oops I mean uhm — baloney! You'll see, when we get ready to leave I am going to walk outta here as sober as a preacher."

"Yeah, sober as a preacher on a two day drunk."

Sometime later I looked up to see Wally walking toward our table with a broom in his hand.

"Well ladies, I'm going to have to close up shop. Do you want me to call you a taxi?"

"O-oh noo Warlly. We'd raather warlk and let the cold night air rum-ru-rush through our hair and freeeeze our tonsils. After arll it's only twenty blocks. Ya big dummy!"

"Yes, thanks Wally that would be very kind of you." I paused momentarily to watch Wally's beautiful body glide up to the front of the bar, then I went back to looking for Sheba's shoes.

"Heey, Heey, Marly, watcha doin' under the table?"

"Looking for your shoes."

I finally got Sheba's shoes on her feet and got her into an upright position. We headed for the door, tripping over Exodus on the way out. Once we were outside I turned to take one last look at Wally. To my surprise he was standing right behind us helping me hold Sheba up. He reached over me to open the cab door. He smiled down at me, his overlapping teeth gleaming under the fluorescent glow of the street lamp. I could tell by looking at him that he was thinking the same thing I was thinking.

We slid Sheba into the backseat, her silver bracelets clanging together musically. I told the driver where to take Sheba and gave him some money. Wally shut the door and looped his big brown arm around my waist. We watched the taxi drive off and turned to walk back inside the bar.

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