

## Farah Tejani / TOO HOT

"What you be looking at?" Sister come hobbling across the street, her eyes bugging out.

"Not much," I say. Knowing full well I be asking for a mouthful. Sister's on fire on account that she been drinking too much of that toledo torpedo shit over at Millern's Tavern across the street from my place.

"You can't be all criss cross at me, girl," Sister holding two fingers up at me and heading for the kitchen, "I only had two drinks . . . and . . . and a handful of them peanuts." Sister's walking the tiles. "See? Straighter than you. Go on, draw me a line. Go on." She only be staying with me four days, counting today, and she been at Millern's more than me in the whole three months I been in Gibbons. Don't know whatever made me come to a place called Gibbons except craziness, and Sister will tell you I had a lot of that when I was with Tiny, but she just being jealous because I was the last one to have some of him before he died.

It's too hot to start up on her so I go back outside and sit on the porch. I know she gonna follow, so I say, "Bring my Marlboros and you can have whatever be left of the beer."

The stars they out real pretty tonight. Even prettier because I ain't thinking of Tiny — unless thinking that I ain't thinking about him gonna count. It's dark enough to see them from where I'm sitting 'cause I don't have me one of them porch lights that all them other houses down the street do. I'm swinging on my sweet bird cage chair that came with the porch that came with the house and that's when I get to remembering why I picked this old broken down place in Gibbons. Lord knows it ain't because of the insides. The insides be all

rotting and decaying from the fire that hit it a year ago. No one be living in this house until me. I come along and the real estate guy must have smell me coming. He thinks I'm stupid because I go and buy the smokey house. But here's the thing. Number one, I ain't stupid on account that I buy the house with the cash Tiny's insurance left me, and number two, he be the one that's stupid because I sure as hell knew that this porch here be brand new. What they call an extension. Yes indeed, not even touched by the fire. So I ask him real smooth like, "I'm only buying if the bird cage chair comes with the deal." Well he look at me then like he know I'm not stupid and say he gonna be right back with them papers. I say, "You better hurry there, mister, I'm looking for a place today, not tomorrow." I say that real cool. I can tell by the way he be running to his car.

Sister come out grinning from one side of her face to the other. She be wearing one of them stretchy velvet-like dresses, them one-size-fits-all kind. Sure it fit me all right, but ain't look nowhere near as fine as on Sister. She come strutting in like the booze be telling her we in some mansion or something. She be happier than a pig in shit when she get her booze. But Sister can strut, drunk or not. Sister be making heads turn.

The night turn my house all blue in color and Sister's dress look purple but I know it's red. She got one beer in each hand and my pack of smokes in her bra.

"Get them out of there, you gonna crush them."

"Honey, I ain't got nothing up there to do that kind of damage, remember? You the one with the tits. Hell, I got stuck with the looks."

"Yeah, you sure did. You looking real fine with that booze in you, baby. Makes your eyes bug out like someone squeezing you too tight. Who been squeezing you tonight?"

"Shut up." Sister fall into the bean bag like one of them rag dolls been played with too long and before I can remind her it's broke a row of beans spill out and she so drunk she don't even notice.

"You sure have yourself a sweet place, Del." Sister still be smiling and swinging my chair with her feet.

"Don't start up with that shit." Sister ain't call me Del since we was three and nine years old—Tiny the only one call me Del after that—and the only thing sweet about this here place aside from my porch is that it be far away from all them other places I know.

Sister's looking over at Millern's and praying it be open before noon tomorrow. I know that's what she be thinking. She already almost done the first beer and I be hoping she's out before the second.

"How come they don't keep the sign lit up at night?" Sister's legs is as smooth as black plastic. She say she wax the hair so it look like that. Like plastic.

"Because I asked them not to."

"So they're going to listen to you?" Sister too tired to swing my chair anymore. She all bunched up in the bean bag and sitting so still no beans be spilling anymore.

"They sure as hot hell better listen to me. This is my house—"

"How come? It's a business, Delrae. People got to know where to find them when they're feeling down. Just because you don't drink don't mean you can make so many God damned rules for the rest of us." Sister's eyes, they look like they trying to focus on me. I know she mad. Sister's on fire. But she be mad about something else.

"It's because I need to see the stars at night," I say.

Sister look lost, like she forgot what we been talking about already. "Stars?" She says, looking up into the black.

"Yeah."

"Wow," Sister says. "You sure have a lot of them." She says this like I own the ones on top of my place. It sure look like I got a whole lot more than the other houses on account that I don't got me one of them fancy porch lights. Stars don't like anything that try and outshine them.

"Yeah." I try and show her the dipper but she can't focus long enough to see the whole thing—she can only see it in parts.

"Sort of like a big ice-cream scoop, right?"

"Yeah." I light up a cigarette and the stars disappear for a second until the black comes back. "Sort of."

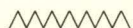


Sister, she right. She got the looks for sure. She be walking anywhere, even in a cemetery, and people be looking. She got them hips, you know the kind, big, black, mama hips swinging to the beat of matatu drums even when there be no drums playing. Oh yeah, and big brown eyes too, not mud brown like mine, more like coffee with a couple a drops of cream. She know she good. She damn good and she ain't never tried to hide it. Not even in front of Tiny. We be fighting like crazies and she walk in with that red dress in enough perfume to stop you from breathing— and even I be looking. Sometimes we all be sitting down and laughing together. Two or three minutes after she come in we forgot what we even been fighting about. And Tiny? Well, he be getting this look on his face every time they get close. And I know that look. I used to get it sometimes.

“Shit.” Sister wake up in a start. The beer all over her dress but she don't move. It's too hot too move. “Shit. What time is it?”

“Time to sleep some of that booze off,” I say. And before I can finish my sermon she be off again and snoring with a blanket of cool beer and a head full of them drunk dreams. Most of the time we be really different people, you know, but sometimes I know for sure we be dreaming about the same things.

Millern's clock say three twenty-nine but I know it's fifteen fast. Them drunks they just take so long to leave, so they set the clock fast and it work just fine now. I leave Sister outside. The booze be coming out of her skin and blowing into the house so I shut the door and leave her on the porch. No muggings or killings in Gibbons, just a lot of drunk folk singing the blues. Too small for crime. We only got two buses in Gibbons. One that run up and down Main Street and the other goes to the Greyhound Station. I picked Sister up from there and I be thinking she just coming for a few days to kick a bit of dirt in my face, but Sister she smart, first thing she say when she get off the bus, “I'm so glad I got you, Del, ain't nobody out there for me but you.” She be packing a fifty pound suitcase and I know she going to be around for a while.



I start cutting about four o'clock. I'm late. Blood only truly look black at midnight, but Sister she be in the way of my routine. Normally I cut right there on my porch. The tavern folk be too drunk to pay me any mind. Even be some old black blood stains on the wood but nothing to notice really. But since Sister be here she be sleeping on the porch every night. She say she can't sleep in the house on account that the smoke get inside her head and make her all dizzy and stuff. I tell her that it can't be making her more dizzy than Millern's, and she just smile and carry a blanket outside to my bird cage chair. Tonight my chair is empty because Sister's on the beanbag, and I'm tempted but I know she gonna be waking up in starts so I do my cutting in the kitchen. I sit where I can see her and I let the blood drip onto the tiles. It be getting lighter outside so it's not as black as I like it, but black enough that I know it be my blood.

Sister be moving side to side like she dreaming of something bad. I know because I get the same dreams. Not dreams. Nightmares. I want to go and get her and hold her. I want to tell her that it ain't our fault. He did it all by himself. I want to tell her this so that she can be telling me the same. But I know, and she knows, nothing we say gonna make a hair of a difference anyway. And so we get by not saying anything. Two days after Tiny killed himself, Sister and I swore without saying nothing that we would never be talking about that day again. Now it be three months, and so far we keep our promise.

When she got off the bus in her yellow summer dress she look just like the sun finally coming to pay a visit to Gibbons.

"Surprise!" She say. I tell her she don't have to tell me to be surprised on account that I was already surprised enough.

"What the hell you doing here?" I say, half smiling, half serious-like.

"I just want to make sure you O.K.," she say.

We stand there looking dumb at each other for a while before we hug.

Yeah. O.K. Sure. I'm O.K. I know what she really be meaning is that she want to make sure she O.K.



"Oh," I say. "Yeah, I'm O.K." And since she be here with me, I be saying more O.K.s than I really like to be saying.

Sister stop moving now. She be back to the normal dreams. And I be back to cutting. I start cutting a week after Tiny die. The first time I think for sure I be going crazy, but after a while I know that I need to be cutting. I cut, and Sister, she drink. And between the two of us, we both got it bad in our own way. She need the bars like I need the blade and sometimes I want to tell her that my way be a hell of a lot simpler, but then I get smart and forget the whole idea.

*La. La. Lalalala. Ooh. Ooh*

*La. La. Lalalala. Whoa. Yay.*

*Behind the wall in a dark cafe, me and my baby be drinking away.*

*And summer nights we slip away, behind the walls of another day.*

*La. La. Lalalala. Ooh. Ooh*

*La. La. Lalalala. Whoa. Yay.*

*Behind the shadows of the shady tree, forever together just wait and see*

*Nobody knows, just you and me, and that's the way it'll always be.*

I sing this song when I cut and it always make things a whole lot better. Tiny and Sister be singing this song all day. They say they gonna be famous just as soon as they can get someone to buy the tune. And I believe them. I believe them until I catch them together. Then I know ain't no one gonna buy the song but them.

Sister say Tiny be asking her all the time and she always be saying no until one day he catch her drunk half near to death. She say Tiny be waiting to catch her like that, but I don't see how it be so hard. Sister drinking more now he's gone and all, but Sister get drunk almost once a week back then. I ask her why she gotta do it with him in my place, in my bed. Sister never answer that question on account that she say she don't remember nothing. Sometimes I believe her. Sometimes I don't. It all depend on her eyes when she be saying it.

My skin peel back like one of them chinese oranges. Easier now than the first times. Sometime I don't even cry. I mean I never cry out loud like babies or nothing. The tears they just fall out like they got nothing better to do but fall out. But some days, my eyes, they be dry like the air and I can be cutting almost twenty minutes before they get wet. Today, my eyes they drier than the sun. I look at Sister and she be sleeping so deep that she don't even move when I start singing.

*. . . And summer nights we slip away, behind the walls of another day.*

*La. La. Lalalala. Ooh. Ooh*

*La. La. Lalalala. Whoa. Yay.*

The cuts when they dry leave scars that look like smiles or sort of like fishscales. I got a whole bunch of them now. All going one direction. The first ten or so ain't so good on account that I was using one of them ordinary blades and all. But since I be using the stencil knife I found in the one and only arts and crafts store in Gibbons, they starting to look real clean now. Like they professionally done. Two of the smiles keep opening so they ain't so clean but the others look real fine. The trick is you got to lift the skin and put just a wee bit of fresh lemon in the cut before it get a chance to really bleed. I know when a scar gonna come out clean long before it dries. It's all in the cut. You got to cut to the white of the flesh. You got to cut clean and fast before the blood comes out and then you can't see so good. I do some test grooves before I actually cut. Then I take a deep breath and do a quick half circle smile in the same groove as the other ones. Then I wipe real quick and rub the lemon on it. Clean sting. That be the only time I make a real bit of noise. The sting part, on account that it stings.

"Sssssssssss. Sweet Jesus," I say. I say this after all the stings.

But Sister she don't even move. She sleeping like Tiny. Like she dead or something.

When Tiny sleep, sometime he roll over and put his big arm on my breast and squeeze. Sometime I let him be doing that, but sometime I get to thinking that he be thinking of some other breast in his



head. So I roll over the other side and pretend I be real tired, in case he want to start something. Sure. Tiny sometime even make love half asleep. He don't know what he be doing all the time, but it don't matter on account that Tiny always do that one thing right.

When Tiny start the white stuff that be when he don't want to do it no more. We go weeks and sometimes even months without no loving. Not even kisses. Them the times that I be sure he getting it from someone else but I keep telling myself, no. Tiny? Tiny ain't that way. And there ain't nobody he hang with but Sister, and they the best of friends. I never ever did think of them together 'til the day I saw them together. Didn't even look right together that day. Something look real wrong that day. And two weeks later we all be talking again like all's forgiven, but something was real wrong and no one could do a damn thing about it.

Sometime I start to crying for no reason, and the first couple a times, Tiny and Sister they come around me hugging and kissing me 'til the tears go away and we just laughing again. But after a while they get real tired of me crying so they stop. I could cry for hours straight and no one say a thing about it. I started going down. And Tiny? He don't think so at the time, but he be going straight down with me.

I come home from the butcher with back ribs for his birthday, but no one ever ate no backribs that day. Took me four days to even put something in my mouth after that day. Tiny, he be sitting on the dining table chair pulled out into the living room. When I walk in he be staring straight at me. Straight naked like the day he was born, except for a cigarette dangling from his lips and his clothes be in a wet pile on the floor. I walk in and the gasoline go straight to my head. I drop the meat and my head be spinning. Before I can say nothing Tiny go and light the cigarette. He look real sick in the eyes, like he not sure or something. I run to him but he already gone and drop the cigarette into the clothes. I try and try to put him out. Them men they try and try to put him out. Tiny, he didn't even say one word to me that day. But what be even worse than that is that I didn't even say one to him.

"Sssssssssss. Oh Sweet Jesus, help us." Sweet Jesus. Sweet Sting. And Sweet Sister. This for sure be the cleanest cut ever. Yes indeed.



I don't even fuss with cleaning the floor. I just go straight out to my sweet chair and sing to Sister with a piece of lemon on my breast. She out like a light. She don't hear nothing.

*La. La. Lalalala. Ooh. Ooh*

*La. La. Lalalala. Whoa. Yay.*

*Behind the shadows of the shady tree, forever together just wait and see  
Nobody knows, just you and me, and that's the way it'll always be.*