

**PUT ON SOME MARVIN**  
*(for Zora Neale, bell and me)*

**by Lori D. Johnson**

"Come and get me," is what the note read. Before I could get the question out of my mouth, my son Terrance pulled his face out of his bowl of cereal and supplied me with a ready answer. "Aunt Gina. She called about an hour ago." He took the note from me and flipped it over. "This is her address on the back here."

While Terrance got up to replenish his bowl, I sat down at the kitchen table with a sigh and kicked off my shoes. The last time I had seen my sister had been nearly four years ago; she had been in a nightclub performing a medley of Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan tunes, and I had been a member of her listening audience. She'd gotten a standing ovation that night. And even though I had stood and applauded with the rest, it had really hurt me to hear the slur in Gina's voice, to see the sleepy slant of her eyes, the lazy nod of her head and realize that not only was the girl trying to sing like a jazz and blues diva of old, but she was trying to live like one too.

Yes, she was my sister, my baby sister, and I had always wanted the best in the world for her. But no, I didn't try to stop her, even when word got back to me that

she was out on the corner selling dope and her ass to support her habit. I had always known better than to think that I could make Gina do anything. If jumping off on the deep end is what the girl had made up her mind to do, that's all there was to it, and there would be no stopping her. The only thing I could do was sit back and wait for the call. And that's exactly what I had been doing for the past four years. Yes, I had been expecting a call, but not the one carrying the good news that my sister had finally come to her senses and was ready to straighten up and fly right; and not the one with Gina's happy-go-lucky voice on the other end telling me to put on some Marvin Gaye and a pot of coffee, because she was coming over; and most certainly not the one I actually got, demanding that I come and get her. No, the call I had been expecting was the one that nearly always comes in the early hours of the morning bearing the bad news that someone you love has died.

I looked over at Terrance and thought about scolding him for eating all that cereal before dinner, but instead I asked about the phone call. "She say anything else?"

He let out a loud belch and excused himself before attempting a response. "Who? Aunt Gina? Un-Uh. All she said was, 'tell Gail to come and get me.' Those were her exact words. Then she gave me the address and hung up."

\* \* \*

I pushed open the door to Gina's apartment and was almost knocked down by what I knew to be the stench of dreams gone bad.

"Whoo-wee!" Terrance said as he stepped around me and clamped a hand over his nose and mouth. "Excuse my French y'all, but it smells like shit, damn and hell in here."

My son Terrance, always the comedian. I cuffed him on the back of the head and silently blamed both his lack of tact and tasteless sense of humor on being fifteen and his father's child.

I spotted Gina seated on the bare floor between a couple of battered suitcases, and beneath a cloud of smoke. Her eyes were closed, but she nodded a greeting at us and stretched her mouth into what I suppose was an attempt at a smile. For a moment all I could do was stand and stare. The girl looked bad. Her lips were cracked and peeling. Her hair was a tangled, matted mess. And the corners of her eyes were so thick with crust, I didn't think she'd be able to open them.

When was the last time your ass saw some water is what I was tempted to scream at her. But instead I voiced a simple and calm observation of the obvious: "You look terrible."

"Yeah," she said as she took a final puff of her cigarette before snubbing it out. "Well, you'll be happy to know, I feel even worse." With a groan and a vile-sounding cough, she rose to her feet and jerked open her eyes. The gaze she shot me was hot and hazy, but the words that subsequently slid off her tongue were cool and unwavering. "So do me a favor and spare me the lecture this time around Gail. Just take me home. Okay?"

"Sure," I said, trying my best not to wince or turn away from her in disgust. "But not before you tell me what you're on."

Gina's eyes narrowed, and she looked as if she wanted to hit me, but didn't have the strength for it. Instead she turned her eyes toward the ceiling as if to call on the Lord, then heaved a sigh and said, "That's all past tense, babe. History. I just got out of rehab a couple of days ago. I'm clean."

Before I could respond, Terrance, who had been nosing around the filthy room, running roaches out of corners, bumped into a garbage can and knocked it over. He reached down to jerk the can upright, but bumbled the job, and we all shifted into pause as an empty liquor bottle rolled from the spilt garbage and made its way across the room.

"Sorry," Terrance said with a shame-faced shrug of the

shoulders.

While he went to retrieve the bottle, I walked over to the garbage can and peeked inside. More bottles, liquor bottles, some empty and some not so empty, peeked back up at me. I looked at Gina and shook my head. "Rehab, huh?"

She sighed again. "I know what you're thinking, but I threw all that out before I checked myself into the clinic."

"Yeah? Is that right?" I said, filling my voice with enough anger to hide the hurt. "And what about the other stuff?"

"Dammit Gail, there is no other stuff, okay? What little coke and weed I had, I got rid of before I checked myself in." She snatched her purse from the floor, and walked over and handed it to me. "Look, go ahead and search my things if you think I'm lying. Go ahead."

"Gina," I started, but couldn't find the words to finish. I squeezed the purse she had handed me and then tucked it under my arm.

"Ma, you want me to take her bags out to the car?"

I nodded a yes in reply to Terrance's question, and watched as he lifted the handleless suitcases and carried them from the room. Upon his exit, a loud choking silence filled the space between me and Gina, and I temporarily

lost myself beneath a suffocating blanket of unvoiced thoughts and memories. But before I could fade completely to black, Gina cleared her throat and said, "You know, if you gave that boy a mustache and put a curl kit in his hair, he'd look just like Lucifer."

\* \* \*

"Lucifer," had always been Gina's favorite pet name for my husband Luther. He had names for her as well, and though his descriptive references varied somewhat, they typically began somewhere along the lines of stupid, ignorant, or crazy, and nearly always ended in bitch.

"Gina? That crazy bitch? Hell, I know she's your sister and all, but your best bet is to leave that ignorant child right where she is," is how he had responded when I told him about Gina's call. I had figured he'd say something like that, and once upon a time it might have upset me--but not any more. Although we weren't divorced or even seriously considering such, Luther and I had decided a couple of years ago that it would be best if we lived apart. Actually, I had been the first to arrive at the conclusion that our relationship would be better off if conducted from a distance.

It's not easy to stand by and be a silent eye-witness to another person's slow descent into hell, especially when that person is someone you truly care about. But that's exactly what Luther had asked of me--to stand by and watch while he literally gambled both his and our lives away.

Luther would bet and try his luck on anything--horses, dogs, wrestling, the weather . . . I mean, this was a man to whom filling out one of those darn Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes packages was like eating birthday cake with ice-cream. And he could hardly wait for the weekends to come when he would spend the bulk of his free time at the various race tracks, casinos, and bingo parlors in our area. Trying to beat the odds and cash in on the big one, is basically what the poor soul lived for. But the killing part of it was he never won anything. Not a dime. Not a single red cent. Nothing.

I had been somewhat concerned about Terrance contracting his father's gambling jones until the day our precious only child stopped stuffing his mouth full of food long enough to share a bit of his youthful wisdom. Luther had been treating us to a visit that day and was waiting around rather impatiently for the televised results of one of the dozen or so out-of-state lotteries he regularly entered. I had been trying not to doze off while he

rambled on about lotteries, and their many benefits to society, and why our state needed its own. And just as Luther was about to fray my last nerve, Terrance who had been sitting by quietly, doodling cartoons into his sketch pad and munching on a hot dog, suddenly interrupted his father's spiel with a, "Yo Pops, did you know that being a Black man and all, you've actually got a better chance of being murdered than you do of winning the lottery-- statistically speaking that is?"

Luther had paused for a few seconds then frowned and said, "Thank you son. I love you too."

Gambling hadn't always been Luther's sole passion in life. At one time he had wanted very much to be a scientist, or in his words, "a modern day Benjamin Banneker." All through junior high and high school he had held fast to the dream, winning every science fair he entered and graduating at the top of his class with honors. Then came college. He won a scholarship and went off to one of those prestigious ivy league universities to seek his fortune and what he promised would be our future together. But after about a year, he came back home-- without the degree, without the fortune, and without any real hopes for the future. Eventually he took a job at the post office, married me and tried to settle peacefully into

what was left of his life.

I've never known the exact details of what happened to Luther while he was away. He never wanted to talk about it. Grades might have been a factor, money, discrimination, overblown expectations, or any number of such things. He never said. As a matter of fact, he never lent any verbal acknowledgement to that part of his past.

All that remained of his dreams from those days was a box of old National Geographics, an aquarium full of exotic fish, and a telescope. The magazines he kept stored away in our attic, the fish he tended to on a fairly regular basis, and periodically he'd still take the telescope out into the backyard at night and stare up at the stars. One night, not long before I asked him to leave, I had ventured out into the backyard with him and summoned up enough courage to ask aloud what I had always wondered: "What are you looking for up there?"

I hadn't really expected an answer, but he had turned to me, his face full of surprise--I suppose at my not knowing--and said softly, "A way out."

\* \* \*

The first thing I did when I got Gina home that day was run her a bath and order her into. As she undressed, I forced myself to take it all in--the scabs, the scars, the

track marks--but it wasn't until she stood before me completely naked that I saw just how much life the years of running hard in the fast lane had stolen from her. I had seven years on the girl, but her body looked at least ten years older than mine. Her breasts fell flat, like thick slices of bologna on her bony rib-cage; likewise, her stretch-marked and puckered behind drooped onto the back of her thighs; and her small knot of a stomach was bloated and swollen tight, like that of a starving child.

I helped her get into the tub, but breathed a sigh of relief when she indicated she could handle the rest by herself. While she bathed, I put on a pot of coffee, lit up one of her cigarettes, and then sat down to smoke, reminisce, and wonder where I had gone wrong.

Ever since childhood, whether I'd wanted to or not, I'd always been the one to take the blame for Gina's numerous mishaps and outrages. When five-year old Gina happily announced to the visiting preacher one Sunday afternoon at the family's dinner table that she was gonna be a go-go dancer in a butt-naked club when she grew up--and then stood up and proceeded to give her stunned audience a clothed demonstration of her proposed shake and grind routine--I had gotten an ass-whupping right along with her for allegedly putting her up to it. But the truth

of the matter was, Gina had come into this world with a mind of her own to do exactly what she pleased--irrespective of the likely consequences. And if in fact I was guilty of anything, it was of recognizing early on the beauty of her independent spirit and quick mind, and trying my best to nurture them both.

Gina had shared my love of books and the written word, and I'd always let her tag along with me on my weekly visits to the library. But whereas I had been one of those quiet little bookworms, content to keep all that I read to myself, Gina had been just the opposite. Everything she'd laid eyes on had turned into a question, a thought, an argument or a series of such, spoken aloud. The places her mind would take her and the ideas she'd give voice to had never ceased to amaze me.

But to my mama, daddy and five older sisters, Gina's precociousness had translated into her being too fast for her own good, and having a mouth on her that was bound to lead her into a world of trouble. Mama used to say all the time, "I'll be damn if I don't beat the fool out that girl," when all the while I think her real intent was to beat the brilliance out of her, and twist it into something more palatable.

"I don't know Gail. Maybe, Mama was right."

I looked up from my coffee mug and rested my eyes on Gina, now freshly bathed and dressed in my bathrobe. She walked over and took a sip from my mug before finishing her thought. "Maybe mediocrity is the best way to preserve one's sanity."

I stood up and pulled the sash around her waist a little tighter. How'd you know I was thinking about you and Mama?"

Instead of answering she scratched her head and said, "I would have washed my hair, but I couldn't summon up enough strength to tackle it. Think you could do it for me?"

As I bent over her at the kitchen sink, and gently massaged in the shampoo, I thought about how when we were kids, she'd always accuse me of being too rough on her tender head, but yet and still, she wouldn't allow anyone but me near her hair. In spite of our seven-year age difference, and all the trouble she managed to get me into, we had been close. And there had been a genuine bond of friendship in our sisterhood. Even after we were grown, and had moved off into our separate directions, I could still count on her to call at least once a week, and keep me on the phone for hours, or better yet say, "Hey Gail,

put on some Marvin and a pot of coffee. I'll be over in a bit."

As I toweled the excess water from Gina's hair and led her into the den, I tried to recall the last time we had sat up all night, laughing and talking while Marvin Gaye sang his heart out in the background. My memory failed to produce any mental pictures of that last time, but quick riffs and snatches from the songs "Sparrow" and "Flying High (In the Friendly Sky)" fluttered and wailed through my head as I sat down with comb and hair oil in hand, and asked Gina how she wanted her hair braided.

"Don't matter," she said as she plopped down on the floor between my legs, and promptly began to doze off just like she used to when we were kids.

As I gently forced the comb through the snarls and tangles of her hair, I wondered just how far gone she really was. I wondered if she could remember at all the days and nights of hot coffee and Marvin, when she had deliberately hand-fed me clipped, photocopied, bought, borrowed, and videotaped samples of the contemporary Black artists and intellectuals she so favored and adored: essays by bell hooks . . . novels by Toni Morrison . . . plays by George C. Wolfe, August Wilson . . . movies by Julie Dash,

Charles Burnett, Ayoka Chenzira . . . until I had acquired both a taste for them and a desire to seek them out on my own.

I wondered if she could still remember how whenever we disagreed or she got overly frustrated with what she perceived as the shallowness of my narrow mind, that she'd launch into this hilarious twelve-minute lecture that typically began with, "Oh hell, Gail! Memphis ain't the world. There's more to life than blues, and barbecue, and shopping for a new dress to wear to church on Sunday . . ."

I missed those days and nights, and all the laughs and good times we had shared. But most of all I missed my sister--my bright, funny, energetic, headstrong baby sister.

"What happened Gina? What happened to you?" I whispered as I put the finishing touches on her braids, and then tapped the top of her head lightly as a signal to her that I was through. When she didn't awaken from her sound sleep, I gave in to the temptation of one of our oldest rituals: I tilted her head back and filled in the warm space between her eyebrows and her hairline with a soft kiss.

\* \* \*

Gina pretty much slept through the first week of her

stay. On the occasions that she did open her eyes and leave her bed, it was only to use the bathroom or to sit for hours on end at the kitchen table, doing nothing but staring off into space, and smoking one cigarette after another.

In an non-too subtle attempt to lure her out from under the cover of her closed eye-lids and rank clouds of smoke, I sat down with her one night, cleared my throat, and said, "The other day I ran across this journal that did a really nice retrospective piece on the whole Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill thing. Can you believe there are still people out there who feel Anita Hill should have kept her mouth shut out of some warped sense of respect and allegiance to the man?"

And had it been another place and time, or perhaps someone other than my baby sister, I might have laughed as she flicked the ashes off the end of her cigarette, narrowed her eyes at me and said, "Gail . . . who in the world is Anita Hill?"

With Gina's fragile state of being uppermost on my mind, I made Luther promise to wait at least a couple of weeks before dropping by the house for a visit. But my request was a personal stall for time as well, because I didn't feel like refereeing just yet the fight that was

bound to occur once the two of them finally did get together. It never ceased to amaze me how two people who were so similar could be so contemptuous of and hostile toward one another. But, I had come to believe, that was the reason why whenever Gina and Luther got together they butted heads like two warring billy goats--because they were so much alike. And really, the parallels spoke for themselves: both were once so full of promise; but neither had quite managed to live up to his/her potential; and now all that seemed to be left was pain and occasional glimpses of what might have been.

I tried to solicit similar promises to stay away from my five older sisters, but asking them not to come was just like giving them open invitations to rush right over. Not only did they show up at my house en masses as soon as they got word not to, but they came and damn near made a party of it. It truly gladdened their hearts to see Gina down and out. It gave them an opportunity to point their fingers, look down their noses and say, "See, we told you so. We told you Gina would never amount to much. Too much book sense, and not hardly enough common sense. And look at her now. Just look at her. Umph-Umph-Umph. Crazy as she want to be."

About all I could do was stand back with my arms

folded and glare as the bitches cake-walked their big asses around Gina's bed and blew their pursed-lipped, self-righteous sentiments over her prone and listless figure. In the back of my mind I clung, like a drowning woman, to the hope that at any moment Gina would jump up, and give them all a real good cursing out. She'd be her old self again, and later the two of us would have the last laugh about it over coffee and Marvin. Of course, that wasn't to be, and my heart sank right along with my hopes as I came to grips with the sad reality of the matter: the best Gina could do was sigh, pull the covers up to her chin and close her eyes.

Two weeks came and went, and then it was April 1st-- April Fool's day, Gina's birthday and the anniversary of Marvin Gaye's death. I didn't know if I'd be able to stand the tragic irony of it all.

I tried to get Gina to go and see an old movie at the dollar theatre with me, *Daughters of the Dust*, but she wouldn't budge. "Maybe some other time Gail. I'm really not up to it."

When Terrance offered to go with me, I told him it was a Julie Dash movie, real artsy-type stuff, and it probably wouldn't hold his interest. I don't know whether he honestly thought he wanted to see the movie, or whether he

felt a need to keep me company, or whether he just didn't want to miss an opportunity to fill up on junk, but whatever his real motive, he insisted on going. In all, I think he probably watched a good solid fifteen minutes worth of the film--that's about how long it took him to finish off a Cherry Coke, a large bucket of buttered popcorn, a box of Milk Duds, and then fall promptly to sleep.

When we got back to the house a couple of hours later, Luther's car was parked in the drive. Upon spotting it, Terrance slapped a hand to his forehead and said, "Oh Mom, I forgot to tell you. Pops said he was coming over to drop off the fish food and clean out the aquarium."

I shook my head, looked at my son and said, "You know Terrance, some of this shit I think you do on purpose."

The sound of music greeted me as I entered the house. But it wasn't coming from the living room where Luther sat licking stamps amid what looked like the scattered contents of a dozen or so sweepstakes packages. I waited until he and Terrance had finished their father-son ritual of fist bumps and high-fives before addressing him. "You didn't say anything nasty to Gina, did you?"

Luther smiled sweetly and gave me a sticky kiss on the cheek. "Come on now love, give me a break why don't you?"

I've been nice. I even wished the old girl a happy birthday, and brought her a present."

I left Luther, in search of the music and my sister, and found them both in the den. The music blaring from the stereo was a sad, jazzy tune. But it wasn't Marvin, it was Dianne Reeves's tearful rendition of "I'm Okay." Just as I had expected, Gina was seated on the couch with a cigarette dangling from her lips, and a blank expression stretched across her face. But what I hadn't anticipated, and what almost buckled my knees, was that which sat on the coffee table in front of her--an ice bucket, a capless, half-empty bottle of vodka, and a glass with two cubes of partially melted ice.

I didn't keep liquor in the house, so right away I knew it was my sick husband's doing--his idea of a birthday gift and an April Fool's gag all rolled into one. Damning his soul to all eternal hell, I walked over to the stereo and turned down the music. Before I could make it back over to where Gina sat, and conduct a proper assessment of the damage, Luther and Terrance bounced into the room.

"You just had to be an asshole, didn't you? What the hell are you trying to do--help her kill herself?" I said, as I pushed my way past Luther, and sat down at my sister's

side.

Instead of answering me, Luther laughed and patted Terrance on the back. "Son, did I ever tell you about the first time I met your ole Aunt Gina, here? And how the sweet, innocent, absolutely adorable seven-year old, walked into the room and by way of introduction cut a big, loud, funky-ass fart?"

I would have expected Terrance to laugh at something like that, but he didn't. Instead, he moved away from his father and walked over to the aquarium on the other side of the room. But what surprised me even more a few seconds later was the sound of Gina's soft voice as she interrupted the brief silence and said, "Yeah Terrance, and you know what? Your father still gives me gas. Funny how some things never change, isn't it?"

Terrance tried to choke back a chuckle and then laughed outright before he caught his breath and said, "Yo Pops, I don't mean no harm man, but looks like the joke's on you."

I stared for a moment at the fish tank where Terrance stood pointing and laughing, and at first I didn't see anything, but just as I was about to shift my attention, my eyes tripped and fell upon what had so tickled Terrance's funny bone--the aquarium was full of ice-cubes and fishes

floating belling up.

While Terrance laughed even harder at his father's curse-laden efforts to save his precious pets from the ravages of the vodka and ice, I turned around and looked at Gina. Her eyes were wide and sparkled with amusement as she leaned back against the couch, lit up another cigarette, and then said to me with a smile--a nice, old-fashioned, slow-moving Gina smile--"Girl, go put on some Marvin and some coffee. And be quick about it will you? We got lots of catching up to do."

**THE END**

Published by Lori D. Johnson in the *Emrys Journal*, Vol. 11,  
Spring 1994.