

AFTER THE DANCE
by
Lori D. Johnson

HER

I had never really paid that much attention to him before, even though he lived right next door. Usually when we ran into each other we'd nod, speak our hellos, and keep on 'bout our business.

Nora, my roommate, was the one who told me his name was Carl. She'd talked to him on several different occasions. She also told me he'd tried to hit on her--like I wouldn't have guessed it. Nora's got this, well this sluttish quality about her. And I'm not trying to talk bad about the girl or anything, it's just that I don't know how else to describe it. She kind of puts you in mind of some of those girls you see dancing on Soul Train. You know, the ones who look like their titties are about to shake outta their clothes? Or, the ones who are always turning their asses up to the camera? And that's cool when you're twenty-three and under, and don't have the good sense to know any better.

Anyway, according to Nora, our tall, dark-skinned, bearded neighbor was sweet, but not her type. I kind of looked at her sideways when she said that, but I didn't say anything. Me and Nora go way back. I know all about her

"type." It's dog. Straight up and down, dog. I'm telling you, she's not satisfied unless some guy's smacking her upside the head, taking her money, whoring all over town or some combination of the three.

Problem with Nora is that she's still under the impression that there's actually something called love out there, and if she searches long and hard enough, she'll eventually find it. I don't have any such illusions. See, I know ain't nothing out there but game. And having played hardball with the best of them, I also know the secret to winning is knowing how not to get played--something Nora has yet to learn. That's why every other month, just like clockwork, you can find her sitting up in the living room of the condo we share trying her best to kill off a fifth of scotch, looking crazier than Bette Davis did in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and playing them same old sad-ass songs, over and over and over again. And Lord knows I'd go to bat for my girl Phyllis Hyman (God rest her beautiful soul) any durn day of the week, but listening to "Living All Alone" fifty times straight, on a Friday night, with no interruption, is enough to drive even the sanest sister out her cotton-picking mind.

And that's how it happened that Carl and I had our first real conversation--if you want to call it that. I

had just stepped outside for a break from the music and the madness and was settling comfortably into my patio chair with my package of Kools, a chilled glass of wine and a romance novel, when he opened up his back door, stepped outside, and noticed me sitting on the other side of the fence.

He said "Hey" and I said "Hey" and I thought that was gonna be the extent of it before he went on his merry little way. But noo! He decides he's going to be sociable.

"Must be Nora in there jamming to Hyman."

I said, "Yes. If it's disturbing you, I'll ask her to turn it down."

He said, "No, I was just wondering 'cause you don't exactly look like the 'Hyman type' to me. No, you look more like a--let's see--Millie Jackson. Yeah, you look like the kind of woman who could really get into some Millie Jackson. Am I right?"

I guess he was banking on me not knowing about Miss Millie, the late 70's and early 80's trash-talking forerunner to the likes of today's Lil Kim and Foxy Brown.

No, you ain't right smart-ass, and you must be blind is what I started to say, but didn't. Instead, I blew my smoke, swirled the wine in my glass, cut my eyes, and said

in my coolest 'don't mess with me, man ' voice, "Is that suppose to be funny?"

HIM

I knew I was taking a risk when I opened my mouth. My Uncle Westbrook was the first to warn me, way back in the day. "Son," he told me. "You never know how a woman's gonna react to what you say. Sometimes you'll get a smile, sometimes you'll get an attitude."

But really, I should have known better 'cause every time I see this chick, she looks like she's got her jaws tight about something. I mean, we've been neighbors for nearly six months now, and she still acts like she don't hardly want to speak.

Some women are like that, man. If you didn't know any better you'd swear they were born with permanently poked lips. Have to say though, I've noticed it more in fat women. Not that I have anything in particular against fat chicks. Matter of fact, I've gotten right close to one or two. But a fat chick with an attitude, hey, that's something else altogether.

Yeah, she's one of them feisty big-boned girls, man.

She's got a pretty face though. Actually, she'd probably be a stone cold fox if she lost, say, thirty or forty pounds and smiled every once in a while. But I guess that'd be asking for too much, huh?

So, I'm standing there, right, trying to figure out how I'm going to work my way out from under this Millie Jackson comment, when Nora comes out and gets me off the hook by informing the fat would-be-fox with the pretty but unsmiling face that she has a telephone call.

Now, me and Nora, we're cool. She kinda puts you in mind of a young Lola Falana with a double dose of spunk, you know? Though, I'll be damned if she ain't always crying the blues over some dude. And this particular evening was no exception. Before I can even get out a proper hello, she'd launched into an all too vivid, blow-by-blow account of her latest hellacious affair. I don't know man, I guess it's just something about me that brings out the worst in a woman. But being the polite fool that I am, I stood there nodding, grinning and grunting in all the right places, until both boredom and curiosity get the best of me and I walk over and pick up the book left by her roommate.

Call me a proper bourgeois if you want to, but I still say you can tell a lot about a person by what they read.

And it wasn't like I was expecting the big sister with the bad attitude to be into something as heavy as Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* or anything, 'cause I'd seen her sitting out on the patio enough times with her head propped up behind a Harlequin to know better. But yet and still, I wasn't at all prepared for anything on the level of a *Jungle Passions* either. I mean the title alone was a bit much, but on the cover is this crazy Tarzan looking character who's got this even crazier looking, big-breasted blonde wrapped up in one of those back-breaking, humanly impossible embraces. And you know me, I wasn't about to let something like that pass without comment.

"Excuse me for interrupting Nora," I said, "but might this be the type of relationship you're looking for?"

She glanced at the book and rolled her eyes. "Honey, don't even try it! I'm into real life, flesh-and-blood romances, not paperback ones. But yeah, Faye, she's always reading that junk. And then got the nerve to tell me I live in a dream world. Ain't that a blip?"

HER

I heard them out there talking about me. Didn't faze me any more than him taking the book did. Yeah, girl, when I went back out there the next morning, the book had

mysteriously vanished into thin air. Nora tried to play dumb, and acted like she didn't know what I was talking about when I asked if she had seen it anywhere. I guess the way they had it figured, I'd eventually get around to asking him--you know--Carl about it. Give me a break. Like I said before, I know all about games and anybody with half a brain could peep that one a mile away. And as far as my indulgence in romance novels is concerned, let it suffice to say that I read them purely for their entertainment value, and I'm perfectly capable of distinguishing the carefully drawn lines between fiction and reality.

I didn't bother to listen long enough to find out, but I'm pretty sure their trite little conversation concerning *moi* ended somewhere along the lines of "Poor, poor Faye, if only she had a man . . ."

Yeah, I've heard it all before and really couldn't care less. It's not hard to get a man--if that's what you want. I just don't happen to want one--not to keep anyway. To me, having a man is about as emotionally satisfying as having a fish in an aquarium or some other kind of pet. I'm not into pets. That's not to say that I don't have, well, certain needs and desires. Yes, there are those times in a woman's life when all the tender finger stroking

in the world just ain't gonna get it. Okay? But I've yet to meet the man whose stuff was so good I wanted to trade my heart in for it. Uh-huh, when I go out, I do what any sensible woman would--I leave my heart at home, locked away for safekeeping.

Really it's better that way. It evens out the exchange. And in my book that's about all a *relationship* boils down to anyway--a simple exchange of goods and/or services, a sexual contract, if you will. I think my deal's a pretty simple and fair one. I don't expect them to take me out to expensive places or buy me gifts. I don't expect any displays of affection outside of the bedroom. And they don't have to worry about any discussions having to do with commitment, babies or the like. In turn, I fully expect them to come equipped with adequate protection. I expect them to make an honest attempt to satisfy my sexual needs. But most important of all, I expect them to exit my life promptly after the contract's expiration, which with absolutely no exceptions is after the third lay.

Why three? Well, to be perfectly honest, after the third time, the thrill of it all has begun to dissipate. And if you think about it, that's about the point at which most guys want to try and take the game to another level.

I don't play that. So I'm very careful about whom I choose to negotiate with.

HIM

We've bumped into each other a couple of times since the night of the infamous Millie Jackson comment, but she has yet to say anything to me about the book. I know she knows I have it. The chick really baffles me, man. There's something 'bout her game I haven't quite figured out. As it stands now, I'm putting my money on split personality because the last time I saw her she did an almost complete about-face.

It was another Friday evening, right, and I was just getting back from the video store with a weekend's worth of entertainment--a soft porn flick, a couple of Eddie Murphy movies and something educational for the kids to watch when they came over Saturday night. I'm getting out of my ride with my goods when I see homegirl hunched down beside her car trying to change a tire.

So, thinking man that I am, I paused and deliberated on the situation a moment before deciding upon an appropriate course of action. Like, should I (a) do the honorable thing and offer my humble assistance. Or (b)

keep on walking and pretend like I don't see her big ass all pressed up against the curb. Yeah, you know me man, sucker city all the way, I went for (a) and ask the chick if I could give her a hand.

Instead of thanking me with a big pretty smile and a few kind words, she says, without even looking up mind you, "I'm perfectly capable." Can you believe that?! "I'm perfectly capable." You know I wanted to cuss, man, but hey, I played it off like a gent.

I said, "Well, I can see that Ms. Fix-It, but it certainly wouldn't hurt to have a couple more hands on the job. Or would it?"

Chick hoisted her big butt off the ground, tighten her grip on the wrench she'd been using, looked me dead in my eye and said, "Look, the name's Faye, okay?!"

Now, I can see the sister was 'bout ready to go into this nut act on me, so I backed up a bit, but I wasn't about to be deterred from my program. I say, "Okay, Faye. Okay! I'm Carl. Nice to finally make your acquaintance. So, tell me Faye--are your planning on handing me that wrench or smacking me with it? No offense intended, mind you, just thought I'd ask."

So, I'm standing there waiting for her take a swing at me, when the miracle happened. I'm not lying man, the

chick actually smiled. Came right out of nowhere! And it was so quick I almost didn't catch it. But it was definitely a smile. Okay, if that wasn't strange enough, after we'd finished the job, she actually thanked me and invited me inside for some lemonade.

Heck, yeah I accepted. Though, out of curiosity more than anything else. I think deep down a part of me really wanted to be there when she morphed back into Dorothy's wicked witch of West Tennessee. But no, she was cool. We even chit-chatted a bit--general stuff like car repairs, the weather, our jobs. And get this man, I was helping the sister take her things inside when I noticed the "Dr. Abrahams" name tag pinned to the front of the lab jacket she'd given me to carry. Come to find out ole girl is a pharmacist, of all things. She's only been out of a school a little over a year and she works up at the Veteran's Hospital. The fact that she deals with old and crazy, doped up vets on a daily basis might certainly account for her funky little mood swings, huh?

Anyway, I followed her inside, had a couple tall glasses of lemonade and had more than a few slices of some of the best carrot cake I've ever had in my mouth. But not wanting to overstay my welcome, I got up to leave after 20 minutes or so. I was in the living room and almost out the

door when I realized I'd left my videos in her kitchen. While she went back to get them, I moised on across the room and started browsing through the bookcase that housed a huge CD and album collection and covered one of Faye and Nora's living room walls. Now as you well know, what a person listens to says as much about them as what they read. So I'm busy trying to figure out how all these Al Jarreau, Cassandra Wilson, Dianne Reeves, and Rachelle Ferrell numbers fit in with Nora's round-the-way-girl personality when Faye comes back in with my package of videos. Completely forgetting my previous musical misinterpretation, I say right off the top of my head, "Nora's got quite a selection of music here."

Faye gave me one of those looks sisters are famous for around the world and said, "Those aren't Nora's. They're mine. And if you look closely I'm sure you'll notice, there's not a Millie Jackson, a Lil Kim or a Foxy Brown in the bunch."

So to get out off it, what do I do? Quite naturally the next fool thing that comes to mind, which for some reason was to invite her over to watch the flicks with me. Of course she promptly refused with one of those "thanks, but I don't think so" lines and ushered me out the door. But get this man, later on that evening when I was going

through the tapes trying to decide which one to watch first, I noticed my porn flick was missing. Now, what do you make of that?

HER

Yeah, I took his ole nasty flick--*Wanda Does Watts*-- just to even the score and show him that two can play that game. Now, I'm wondering what he's got up his sleeve to do next. I told you about his latest ploy, right? How he's been inviting me over to watch videos with him?

You know, the first time he asked, I didn't take him too seriously. Videos? I mean really, hasn't everybody with an extra ninety-nine dollars to spare gone out and bought themselves a DVD player? Still, I figured he was just trying to be nice and what have you. But then he asked a second time the following week, and again I politely declined. Well, last night he up and asked again. He was like, "Check it out Faye, it's gonna be a Spike Lee night tonight--I'm talking classics like, *She's Gotta Have It, Do The Right Thing, Crooklyn*--better join me."

Girl please, who wants to sit up and look at all that old, tired mess? It's not that I've got anything against Spike, I'm just saying, if the brother had really been out to tempt a sister he would have skipped the *Forty Acres and*

A *Mule* section altogether and come at me with something along the lines of a Taye Diggs, Boris Kodjoe and Morris Chestnut kind of sampler? You know what I'm saying?

Anyway, I told dude I had laundry to do--a couple of loads as a matter of fact. He gave me one of those, "Yeah right, tell me anything" looks and said, "Well, showtime's at eight if you change your mind."

Really and truly, I had no intentions of going. But it just so happened that Nora came home that evening in one of her Friday black and blue moods. Walked in the door reaching for the Vodka with one hand and my Aretha albums with the other. Yeah, I could tell by the looks of things it was going to be another one of those "Ain't No Way," "Chain of Fools," "The Thrill Is Gone" nights--and I was most definitely not in the mood.

See, what you have to understand about me and Nora is--even as night-and-day different as we can sometimes be--we've been hanging with each other since durn near kindergarten. Over the years, not only have we seen each other through the good and the bad, but Nora was once there for me when I absolutely had nowhere else to turn. And for that alone I owe her and will forever be truly grateful.

So sure, I tried to be a friend in this particular instance and talk sense to the girl, but to absolutely no

avail. Between the sniffing and the snotting, she started telling me about these three gray hairs she found the other night. And I was like, three gray hairs? So, what's the big deal?! Hell, we're both well within that thirty-and-over age bracket. It's not like we're still teenagers or anything. But before I can get my lecture off the ground and to the podium, she says, "Not just any three gray hairs, Faye. Three gray pubic hairs."

Now, don't get me wrong. I love Nora like a blood sister, but I'll be damn if I'm gonna sit around with her crazy ass and discuss pubic hairs--much less count them. I poured sister-girl another drink and told her she needed to get some professional help and quick, because there wasn't a thing I could do for her. That's when I decided to go next door and ask Carl if his invitation was still open.

HIM

I almost fell out when I opened the door and saw her standing there. Even though I had invited her over a couple times, the fact that she might actually take me up on the offer was something I hadn't really banked on. The shock must have registered on my face because she asked if I was expecting someone else.

"No, no," I said. "Come on in and have a seat." And

all the while I'm thinking to myself--*now that I've got this chick over here, what am I going to do with her?*

You know what a creature of habit I am man, and how I hate being forced to make a sudden change in plans. Not that I had made what you might call major plans for the evening. These days a typical Friday night for me is one where I kick back with a video or two, pigging out on popcorn, chips, soda or beer until I conk out in front of the tube. Yes, sad but true. And I'll thank you to save your snide commentary concerning my social life until you've signed over your share of triple digit figure child support and alimony checks.

Anyway, I'd sort of halfway planned on watching *She's Gotta Have It* that evening. That was my first choice. And simple reason being that it was the sole one of the bunch I had only seen once as opposed to a couple times already. But being that Fay was my guest and all, I went ahead and let her choose which flick we'd watch. Naturally she said she'd watch anything but, *She's Gotta Have It*. Anything, but that.

"Hold on a minute, Faye," I said. "You mean to tell me you actually wanna pass on a movie that deals with the exploits of a sexually liberated Black woman?"

She looked at me like I was a fool and said, "Liberated?! I guess that depends on how you choose to define the word. Rape is not exactly my idea of a liberating experience. And lest you've forgotten, that is unquestionably what happens to the female lead at the end of this quote, unquote funny, light-hearted flick. Man, you and Spike both need to quit. *She's Gotta Have It* wasn't nothing new. The message is essentially the same ole mess we've been hearing since the day y'all stumbled outta the caves and realized you'd lost a rib."

See, a lesser man might have tried to hurry up and move onto another topic. But me? I couldn't resist. I had to ask, "And what message would that be?"

Without so much as a blink of the eye, she said, "That any woman who dares to exercise the same sexual freedoms taken for granted by men is honor-bound to 'get it' whether figuratively or literally 'in the end.'"

Well, need I say the conversation took off from there? Yeah man, we got into this real heavy discussion about Black filmmakers, pop culture, the depiction of women and minorities in various media--all kinds of heady type stuff--and ended up not watching anything. I found out the chick is capable of conversing quite intelligently on a whole range of issues. Not that I was in total agreement with

everything she had to say. But still, it was kind of nice talking to a woman whose worldly knowledge and educated opinions extend beyond whatever happens to be in *Jet* or on *Entertainment Tonight* this week.

And if that wasn't tough enough man, toward the end of the evening, I even got her to slow dance with me. Now, tell me I ain't smooth! No, I'm not going to get into any of the dirty little details. A brother's got to keep some things to himself. I will say this though, much as I hate to admit it, we actually had a pretty good time. Really. Or maybe I should speak for myself.

HER

Far as I can tell Carl's pretty much your typical middle-aged divorcee, with a rapidly receding hairline, an old school rap and a smug settled look about him. And his personality fits somewhere in that tight space between nerd and intellectual. But on the other hand, he's got a boyish quality about him, that's almost, I don't know, charming, I guess for a lack of a better word. And keep in mind, I said almost. The jury is still out.

The first thing he did that night I went over to watch videos was introduce me to his cat. You know how I feel about pets, especially cats. And this Negro's got the

audacity to have one named Sapphire. Yeah, girl and I know he was just waiting for me to make some kind of comment or inquiry as to why this silky black feline with her sidity, cattish ways was called Sapphire. Huh! I let him keep that trip all to himself. His comments concerning *She's Gotta Have It* told me all I needed to know about his level of enlightenment when it comes to Black women.

We never did get around to watching any videos. We talked most of the night. And while I deliberately steered around his repeated attempts to get me to talk about myself, he was quick to volunteer all kinds of unsolicited info about himself. I found out he's a manager in one of FedEx's courier divisions, he's a couple semesters shy of earning an MBA, he's divorced and he has three kids whom he absolutely adores.

At some during the course of the evening the topic got around to music--that seems to be a particular favorite of his. When I asked what kind he liked he told me he was into love songs. Or as he put it, "Those old slow dance tunes we used to bump and grind to when we were kids." Then he jumped up, put on "Baby I'm For Real" by the Originals and said, "Now, tell me that doesn't bring back memories of sweaty palms, bangs gone back, and youthful nights of innocent pleasure?"

Then girl, he turned his back to me, wrapped his arms around himself, and launched into this solo slow dance routine that was absolutely hilarious. After he'd finished tripping he looked at me real funny like and said, "That's nice. You oughta do that more often."

I said, "What? What are you talking about?"

He said, "You know, smile. Something happens to you when you smile. Your personality, your whole aura softens when you smile."

After he laid down that line, I figured it was about time to call it a night. I said, "Yeah, well, it's getting late Carl. I think I'd best be going."

But before I could make a clean get-away, he said, "Wait, I bet I've got something you'll like." He fumbled through his records while I stood there thinking to myself--if this man puts on some Millie Jackson, we're going to fight. And get this girl, he put on some Luther. And not just any ole Luther, mind you, but one of my personal all time favorites--"Make Me A Believer." Uh-huh, tell me about it chile, Luther V. know he be *sanging* that song!

Then Carl did something that totally threw me--he asked me to dance. Yes, dance. And, well--I did. But don't go getting any ideas. Dance is all we did and dance is all we're ever going to do. Carl's just not the kind of

guy I'd want to get involved with. I mean, we're neighbors for goodness sake. It'd cause too many problems. Anyway, I haven't decided whether he was actually trying to come on to me or whether he was just trying to see how I'd respond. You know how some guys like to see just how far you're willing to go. It's one of those male ego things. The trick is to only give them so much. They want a mile--you give them an inch or two. A yard if you're feeling generous. So sure, I gave the brother some leeway and the benefit of the doubt. And when he asked if I was going to join him next Friday, I told him maybe. Maybe . . .