

Before Something Bad Happens

Cedrick was from Louisiana. He was tall and slender, his large, almond eyes supported by strong, yet supple cheek bones. A thick mustache rode his full lips, and a small afro capped his lithe and always stylishly dressed body. He was funny, smart, supremely sweet, sensitive, and kind. He could talk about anything, all with an easy-going, genuine radiance. And he could sing beautifully. Magic spawned from his mouth and lips. Song poured like infinite melody from his deep, inner being. He was like Andre 3000, Eryka Badu, Marvin Gaye, all in one body, mind, and soul. He quickly became a dear friend to me, closer than anyone had ever been.

You would probably be right to say I was in love with him.

We both frequently sang while we worked together. Cedrick thought I was a good singer and had a good voice. Given his true vocal talent, I believed him. So what if he was flattering and flirting with me? No one had ever complimented my singing voice. Being in Cedrick's presence, getting his attention, felt good. All the war protests, poetry readings, late-night philosophical conversations, drugs and sex, had become more than I could manage. Cedrick helped ease it all.

One night I invited Cedrick to the The Black Dog. We pushed through the crowd toward the bar and a young man said, "Look at this ni**er-freak."

"Don't hate, asshole!" I yelled into the guy's face, and pulled Cedrick along, who was not so sensitive and tender as to ignore such a horrific insult.

I fought the urge to punch the guy in his racist, bigoted mouth, but the night had just started, and I didn't want either of us to go to jail.

“Oooh, just let me hit the motherfucka. One time, please,” he said while I tried to hold him back. He was stronger than his lithe body seemed.

“Let it go, Cedrick. He’ll get his, sometime,” I said and pushed him toward the bar. “He’s not worth it. The Fort Worth jail is awful. Trust me. Let’s get a drink and forget about it,” I said.

“Easy for you to say! I deal with that shit all the fucking time, man!” Cedrick shouted over the music. He was right, of course. I had no answer, could only look in his big brown eyes and try to feel his pain.

“Come on,” I said as I slid my arm around his shoulders and pulled him close. “Drinks are on me tonight. How about a beer and a shot?”

“Alright,” Cedrick said. “But if I see him later I’m gonna beat his *honkey ass*. No justice, no peace. That’s what I say.”

The music that night was soulful, less disjointed than the experimental jazz played by the usual all-white student band. During one particular stretch of instrumentalism, Cedrick set his beer down and was pulled to the stage, drawn by some mysterious nexus. He grabbed a microphone and began to hum. The horns and guitar swelled with the upright bass and drums, and Cedrick, his voice building and rising from hums to lyrics, released his soul like hymns into the night, the musicians looking at each other in delighted wonder. Entranced drunkards swayed and vibrated the room. It was one of those beautiful and powerfully spontaneous moments only music can create, a near church service. And in that moment, surrounded by beauty and song, we drank, danced, and smiled. Cedrick pulled me on stage. We shared a microphone.

“Every boy and girl, woman to man. When you feel you’ve done the best you can. Motherfuck the wagon, come join the band. Vibrate...vibrate *HIGHER!*” We sang until my embarrassment rushed me offstage.

We left the The Black Dog, me having drank more than I should have, and started our drive home. We drove through neighborhood streets to avoid the police, and turned down a side street as a shortcut. An American flag dangled and fluttered gently in the late-night breeze from a metal bracket screwed onto the wooden porch of a house. I stopped the car and darted out, took the flag from its holder and ran back to the car. I gave it to Cedrick who wrapped it over his shoulders like a shawl and we took off down the road.

I should not have been driving, but Cedrick couldn’t, didn’t know how. The longer I drove the more desperately I tried to focus on the road. This meant ignoring Cedrick and the music playing on the stereo, Peter Tosh’s “Downpressa Man”. The last thing I needed was to get pulled over by the police. I stared and drove straight forward, steady and unswerving. Lights blurred and swirled and my head flashed.

“Deep breaths,” I said to myself.

“You’re gonna run to the sea, but the sea will be boiling. When you run to the sea, the sea will be boiling. All along that day,” Peter Tosh crooned.

Then Cedrick moaned in the passenger seat. I glanced over and his penis was out, his mouth open and his eyes half-closed as he gazed in my direction and masturbated, the American flag still draped around him. In that drunken, dazed moment, my thoughts on the road and driving straight, I didn’t fully process what I’d seen. He stopped and reached a hand across my lap. He rubbed my crotch and unbuttoned my pants. In my mind everything moved incredibly slow: the lights, the

buildings, the cars next to me. A moment later I looked down and Cedrick had taken my penis into his mouth. I registered what was happening, my brain acknowledged that, yes indeed, Cedrick was giving me blowjob. But my mind couldn't handle that information while trying to drive and avoid a DUI at the same time. Inside my brain, my thoughts said, "This is happening. Do I like this, or not? No, no. This isn't right. I don't like this," but I couldn't bring myself to say the words. I don't know how long went by before I finally reacted.

"Cedrick, no. Stop it, man."

"What, Johnny? You seemed like you wanted it." he said, an edge of indignation crept in.

"I'm sorry, man. I just...I can't. I love you and everything, *as a brother*. I'm just not gay. That's all." I was now, suddenly, almost completely sober.

"Well, take me, then! Just take me home and fuck me. Pretend I'm a woman! You can't tell the difference in the dark," he said, his indignation gave way, to what seemed to me, a lonely desperation. "What's wrong? Don't you like warm, wet holes? Doesn't it feel the same as some girl's pussy?"

"I'm sorry if I've led you on, Cedrick. I really am. But no, I'm just not into it, man."

I felt foolish as I said this. What did it matter, really? If I loved Cedrick, why couldn't I also love him this way, sexually? I was confused, and my confusion grew the closer we came to Cedrick's apartment. Part of me, deep down, wanted to try, was curious what it would feel like to be with him. But I was scared. Fearful about what it would mean.

At a stop sign about two blocks from Cedrick's place, red and blue lights flickered on behind us. We both sat upright as a Black police officer came up to Cedrick's window.

"What are you boys doing out so late?" he said.

“I’m just taking him home, officer,” I said. I swallowed hard and tried to bury my nervousness.

“Let me see some I.D.” he said. He looked at me, then Cedrick, then back at me as we handed him our I.D’s. “Where’re you two coming from?”

“Fort Worth. We were hanging out with some friends,” I said.

“Is that right?” the officer said as he looked back at Cedrick. I had difficulty figuring out his tone. I couldn’t tell if he was angry, skeptical, or friendly. His face betrayed no emotion. I was sure though that I was going to jail.

“You two been drinking?”

“No sir,” Cedrick said slowly. He sounded distant and injured. He swallowed hard as the cop stared into him, then went back to his police car. After an eternal series of silent, agonizing, and relentlessly merciless moments, the cop returned and tapped our I.D.s against the car windshield.

“It’s late. You boys get on home now, before something bad happens,” the officer said. He handed Cedrick our I.D.s and walked quickly back to his car. He turned his lights off and quickly flipped a U-turn, and was out of sight.

Cedrick and I let out a long, heavy simultaneous sigh. I turned left onto his street and guided the car to a parking space next to his unit. I was disgusted and disappointed, mostly with myself and my inability to be open and accepting—of universal love and freedom. I could feel Cedrick looking at me in what I could only imagine to be pity and humiliation. And all I could do was look down at my still unbuckled pants.

“Come inside, just for a little bit?” Cedrick said. I could feel his loneliness, couldn’t bring myself to look at him, and wanted to cry.

“Goodnight, Cedrick. Thanks for the fun night. I’ll see you later.”

He gave me a grim look that mirrored my shame, then opened the car door and closed it softly behind him and disappeared into the hurt, lonely night.