

The Beard

Margaret

Belle come downstairs and ask me if I want to go to the bar with her. I tell her I don't feel like it, that I rather stay home and watch *Twilight Zone*, but she start in on me.

"Margaret girl, you gon dry up like them turnips you forgot you had in the bottom of your refrigerator."

"I just don't feel like sitting up in no bar half the night, listening to loud music while some drunk dude breathe his stale beer breath in my face," I tell her.

"Come on," she push. "We'll have a couple of drinks, listen to some music, and maybe dance some. When the last time you danced?" she ask and then add, "You might even meet somebody good."

I know Belle just want me with her as a shade, a cover to hide her real purpose. She just take me or Diane, the girl that live upstairs, to keep the bartender from catching on. But I figure, maybe I *might* meet somebody. Besides, I spend too many nights with Rod Serling. Listening to Smokey or Little Stevie and maybe dancing sound kinda good; I ain't danced since before I had Belinda.

Anyway, about ten, she come downstairs. I'm in my room getting dressed, but I hear her as soon as she come through the door talking about, "Girl, we gon miss everything. You better come on." Then she in my room rushing me, talking about ain't gon be nowhere left to sit if we get there too late. I got her number; she just don't want to miss none a that money.

The straight green dress she got on is hugging her hips so tight I can see the line of her panties. She must not be wearing

no stockings cause I cain't see no garter belt. But the V-neck look kind of nice and won't show too much if she don't lean forward. She look a lot better than when she first came up here from down south wearing them high heels and anklets. Belle was a sight with a baby on her hip, three stair steps tugging on her skirt and that trifling husband trailing up behind her.

Smoothing down the back of her skirt, she sit down on my bed, knees together and legs slanted to the side, real ladylike, like in one of them magazines. I just smile and shake my head cause I know she practicing her part. I keep on getting dressed.

"Girl," she start in again. "You know them mens like them some yellow women. You could probably have your pick." I ignore her, pull my dress over my head, and tug the skirt part into place. "And you look pretty good when you get dressed up. You could really make some money if you would just make half a effort."

I laugh it off and finish putting on my stockings, making sure the last garter clip is secure before smoothing my skirt back down. She still talking, but I'm only half listening. I'm mostly trying to hear whether my girls is getting ready for bed like I told them to. I can hear Barbara showing Belinda how to brush her teeth. "Not so much toothpaste. Momma said just a little dab a do." I laugh and Belle's eyebrows go up in a question. Barbara saying, "Up and down, up and down, like this."

We hail a cab up on Woodward and head over to the Apex on Oakland. It's just a neighborhood bar, but the jukebox is always up-to-date and full of quarters. The music is loud, the drinks cheap, and they keep the lights low so you cain't see the dirt or the worn edges and split seats of the red leather benches in the booths. Belle say it's a magnet for working mens.

When we get there it's pretty crowded. All the little round tables in the front is full, and folks laughing and talking loud. B. B. King on the jukebox singing "The Thrill Is Gone," and a few couples is grinding on the tiny dance floor. Some mens is in

the back paying up at the pool table, counting out dollar bills, while the next set is racking up the balls. I want to find a booth and just sit back and watch the folks, but Belle grab my elbow and drag me toward a couple of stools at the bar.

She take her time sliding onto the stool slow, deliberate-like, her back against the bar and her body aimed at the crowd. Then she pull out her Pell Mells, plop the pack onto the dark wood of the bar, and tell me to order us a couple a Buds. I walk down the bar a ways so I can catch the bartender's eye. The bottles are cold and wet; I set them on the coasters and put the glasses down next to them. Then I take my seat next to Belle, but I'm facing the bar.

Junior Walker's saxophone sound like he right here in the room. He start singing, "Shotgun, shoot 'em 'fore he run now," and some couples head to the tiny dance floor and start doing the jerk. Me and Belle sit awhile sipping our beer while Belle point out men who look like they might have some money. When one look her way, she smile, suck on her Pell Mell, and blow the smoke out real slow. Then she cross her legs trying to hold his attention. When he move on without stopping, she turn halfway back around to the bar and take a long swig of beer. I ask her why she drink her beer out the bottle, and she say it taste better that way. "Ladies supposed to drink out of a glass," I say. But she just twist her lips at me, shake her head, and make a sucking sound with her teeth.

The bass is bumping and the music sound good. Belle cracking on the dudes, talking about how this one need to buy a jar of Vaseline to grease his ashy arms or how that one need to either comb them naps or cut 'em off. She say, "Some mens just don't think they even have to try." She shake her head and tap her cigarette over the orange plastic ashtray.

I'm starting to feel the effects of the beer, a low even buzz that made Marvin Gaye sound like a angel when this big ole dude come up to me and start talking trash. He not exactly old, but he ain't too young, and he a big one. He ask me if I'm

having a good time. I just nod, but he keep on talking like a gnat buzzing in my ear. I want to swat him. Belle giggle and whisper something about yellow being like honey to a bee. I shove her a little, warning her to behave. Not wanting to be rude, I smile back at the big fella and nod like I'm listening to what he saying. He ask me do I want another drink, and I say that me and my friend was just about to order another one.

Raising his long arm to catch the bartender's eye, he hold up two fingers and wiggle them over our heads. Then he tell me his name Richard. I tell him mine and introduce him to Belle. He say he a truck driver, own his own rig. He say, "I'm celebrating making the last payment on my rig. Took me ten years, but I did it." I look at him, trying to read him. I ain't so good at reading men, but he look real. I nod, letting him know I'm listening. Then he tell me he live with his momma and daddy. "For the time being," he say. Just since him and his wife separated. I just nod again and let him talk. He looking less and less good, but listening is the least I can do since he buying us drinks.

He talk a lot, but I'm beginning to get interested. I like his warm, homey, open way, and he make me laugh. I like the way he feel standing over me, like a big, tame, cuddly bear.

I'd just about forgot about Belle when she ask did I have a quarter for the jukebox. Richard dig down in his pocket and come up with a handful a change. He hold a palm full of nickels, dimes, and quarters out to her. She take three or four quarters, say thanks, and sashay over to the jukebox.

Richard leaning over me; his big body all around me. The soft wool of his Italian knit sweater is brushing against my cheek. I don't mind because his broad chest is radiating a cozy heat that make me feel safe, and his voice is a soft hum in my ear. I feel a little guilty about liking it so much and for ignoring Belle. So, I peek around Richard to check on her. She over there hugging that jukebox, leaning so far over the glass that anybody who interested can peek up that short dress. And she grinding her hips to the music like the jukebox is her lover.

"Let's get that seat over there," Richard say, pointing to a booth near the back where the man is helping the lady with her sweater as they getting ready to leave. I nod, grab my beer, and let him take my hand and lead me through the crowd.

Belle

I shove the quarters into the slot, wait for the box to realize that I gave it some money, and then I lean in to pick my songs. I told that silly yellow bitch that what she got is like honey. She over there nodding and giggling at that big dude, and he all wrapped around her like he want to climb up inside her. She playing games. Cain't she see he got a pocket full of money, and just dying to give it away. I swear some folks so stupid it make me mad. But hey, ain't no skin off my nose. I just brought her here to keep the bartender off my ass. Besides, I knew that innocent act of hers would draw these mens out. Now I'm gon pick something slow and sexy and reel 'em in.

My girl, Etta James, always do the trick. I punch the buttons and step back to watch the record as it tip up and then slide onto the spindle. Besides, the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice, and I know this blackberry look good tonight. I lean in to pick another record as Etta's words float out slow and sultry, "At last, my love has come along." I lean into the box; its glass hood is hard and steady against my stomach, and the music is a throb, trembling through my body. "My lonely days are over, and life is like a song." Etta wailing.

"Hey, momma, it got to be a sin for one woman to look as good as you do." The words come from behind me. They pull me away from Etta, but I take my time lifting myself off the jukebox before I say, "Why thank you, baby," and let him talk a little more shit. He go on about how I smell sweet as the flowers in his grandmother's garden and how I look good enough to eat. Then he ask how come a woman as fine as me standing here all by myself.

His suit kinda cheap, but his shoes got a shine on 'em. He steady nudging me up against the wall, pretending like we

dancing, all the time smiling, showing his two gold teeth that he got right in the front of his mouth. I smile too, lowering my eyes shy-like, playing the game. All the while, I'm wanting to laugh at this country fool. He talking about I look like the kinda girl make a niggah fall in love. He close enough to kiss me now, but I turn my head, and he tell me again about how sweet I smell.

We dance to another slow one, and this niggah so hard, I hope he don't come while we dancing. I won't let him slow drag like he want to. Instead, I make him move his feet.

He talking plenty shit now while he try to lead me into the back near the pay phone where it's darkest. Telling me all he want to do to me.

I say, "People in hell want ice water."

He say, "Baby, don't be so cold," and start kissing me on my neck.

My dress is kinda low in the front so he headed that way. His lips tickling me, and I want to laugh cause he trying so hard, but I just bear it and even moan a little. He amp it up, telling me how soft I am, and how good he know I must be.

I nod and say, "Yeah, baby, I'm good."

Then he ask do I have a man, and I tell him that it don't matter, but I got kids, and I don't fuck for free.

He stop kissing for a minute and look at me with a little sneaky grin. Then he kiss the crease between my titties and ask how much. I tell him twenty the regular way, and he say, "Let's go."

We go over across the street. I got this arrangement with the lady who rent rooms over the hardware store. It's just a bed in a empty room, but she change the sheets before they get too bad, and it's cheap. Besides, she don't make you sign your name or nothing, and she mind her own business. Anyway, we get there and this niggah try to get his and a couple a other folk's money's worth. I mean, first he rush in and claim I got him so hot he

cain't wait. Then he on me for what seem like half the night. Finally, he come, and then he just flop down on me like he got cement in his ass. I push him off me, and he roll over, acting like he sleep. I sit up and light up a Pell Mell.

After a while, I ask the trick for my money, and he look up at me with this shit-eating grin and tell me he ain't got no twenty dollars. He tell me he know I liked it, and then he say I probably should be paying him. I look at this mothafuckah, and I get cold. I mean, for real. My toes and fingers start icing up. I say, "What did you say, mothafuckah?" Cause I know he joking. But he still laying there grinning up at me.

"You gon do me like that?" I look at him straight-faced so he know I'm serious. "Steal from me like that and expect me to just take it?"

He laugh and shake his head like I'm the funniest thing he ever seen.

Well, I don't even have to think about it. There is only one thing I can do.

So, I get up, put on my clothes, not too fast, not too slow. Give him time to make things right. He don't, so I reach for my purse. It's sitting on the windowsill. I don't say nothing else to him. I just pull my straight razor outta my purse. He try to sit up then, try to raise his arm up to protect hisself, but I'm too quick. I try to slit that son of a bitch's throat. He look up at me surprised and start bleeding right away. His hand go to his neck, try to catch the blood. He choking, not gurgling. I don't think I cut him deep enough, but I don't stop to see for sure. I just get the fuck outta there.

Then I'm back at the bar looking for Margaret. She hugged up with that big dude in a back booth.

"Let's go," I say, catching hold of her arm and trying to hurry her along. "We gotta get outta here, now."

She try to shrug me off, saying, "Shoot, I'm having a good time. Why don't you come sit with us awhile?"

I drag her off to the side and tell her what's up. "I might a killed a man," I whisper. "We gotta go."

She look at me all bug-eyed and shit, but she go tell the big fella that we got to leave. He offer to drive us home, say his car is in the lot behind the bar. I say, "Good," and lead the way as we slip out the back door.