

Detroit '67

A Play

By Dominique Morisseau

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Act Two. Scene Three.

Chelle cleans up in the basement.
Sweeping, dusting corners and cobwebs.

Outside – the occasional sound of a tank
rolling by. It continually jars Chelle.

“It’s The Same Old Song” by the Four Tops
plays on the record player. It skips a couple
of times. Chelle smoothly moves the needle
past the skip without being jarred, and
continues cleaning.

Sly enters the basement with a newspaper in
his hands.

SLY

Hey there, Chelle. Where Lank?

CHELLE
(dryly)

He’s not here Sylvester.

SLY

We got us a meeting at Sheps today. Four o’clock. Furman got somebody bringing us
the papers in our name. I figured I’d stop by to see if he wanted to go over there together.

CHELLE

Well he’s not here.

SLY

I’ll wait for him. Better I don’t be hanging around out there. (beat) You know where
he is?

CHELLE

No. (beat) Woke up this morning and he wasn’t here. Just me cleanin’ and Caroline up
there fixin’ a bite. No Lank.

SLY

Hope he ain’t go down by Grand Boulevard. Folks is gathering to throw rocks and all
kinds of stuff at them police. Mayor Cavanaugh got them big tank boys rollin’ in. Say
he done called in the National Guard.

CHELLE

Heard it on the radio this mornin’. Had to turn it off.

SLY

What you turn it off for? You ain't scared is you, baby?

CHELLE

You wanna talk about scared? I stepped out on the porch this morning to a cloud of smoke. Look like we in some kinda war picture. Mean lookin' guards come down this street, hunting us like we're the enemy.

SLY

Don't you be scared, Chelle. It's gonna get cleaned up soon. President Johnson himself gettin' involved. Say so right here in the paper.

Sly holds out the newspaper to Chelle.

SLY (cont'd)

"Govenor Romney today asked for 5,000 Regular Army Troops to reinforce 7,000 National Guardsmen and 2,000 policemen in quelling Detroit's race riot." See there? These pigs can't control us good enough. Gotta bring in the Army for some order.

CHELLE

Race riot? That's what they sayin' this is?

SLY

That's what they say so. Makin' like we just hate honkies and burnin' shit up. But I wish they'd come askin' me some questions. I tell 'em- if this is about niggers hatin' honkies, then you tell me why white folks down there gettin' they lootin' in too. Naw... this is about pigs hatin' niggers. That's what this fire is about. (beat) Be glad when we get this bar though. Soon as this stuff clears, it'll be good to start over.

CHELLE

Start over.... (hmp).... that's what you call it.

Chelle moves away from Sly and continues cleaning.

SLY

Why you bein' so mean to me today, Chelle?

CHELLE

I'm busy, Sylvester.

SLY

I know why you bein' mean. You mad about me and Lank and this bar.

CHELLE

Well if you know everything, then what you askin' me questions for...

SLY

Come on, sweet Chelle. Don't be such a bitter candy.

CHELLE

Don't call me sweet Chelle.

SLY

I always call you sweet Chelle.

CHELLE

And I always hate it.

Beat. Sly is hurt. Tries to recover.

SLY

It was partly me, I'll admit. I wanted him to join me on this thing. Me and Lank, we like brothers, y'know.

CHELLE

He's my brother.

SLY

I just...I just know we both tired of all this hustlin'. Dough that comes fast one day and don't come at all the next. Got you dressed nice enough to smile at some fine woman this day, and dressed like a wino on Woodward the next. We just tired of the up and down. Of not havin' nothin' we can really put our hands on. Put our time into. That ain't a bad thing to want, is it now?

CHELLE

What if it get burned to the ground by these fools out here? Ya'll even been thinkin' 'bout that? You sign this deal and then you lose everything. What about that, hunh?

SLY

We been thinking 'bout it Chelle. We done put up signs say Soul Brother in the window.

CHELLE

So did Teddy Rollins and they still burned him down.

SLY

Teddy ain't us. Folks 'round here know us. They know what we tryin' to do. I done got a lotta folks over here some of they best stuff. Helped 'em find cheap cars. Take their numbers and give 'em a chance to have some extra money in their pocket that ain't gonna get taken by Uncle Sam. We good to our folks, and that counts, Chelle. But even if it burn to the ground... we still did somethin'. We tried.

CHELLE

You and Lank... ya'll both go dreamin' with your noses wide open. So wide I could run one of them tanks outside right through your nostrils.

SLY

You know your problem woman?

CHELLE

I'm sure you gonna tell me.

SLY

You don't never let nobody hold you long enough to believe in nothin'.

CHELLE

Move on, Sylvester.

SLY

Naw Chelle, I mean it. See... you so worried about gettin' to tomorrow, you don't never conceive of the days and weeks and months after. Tomorrow's alright. Keeps you livin'. But if you look far enough ahead, you start to see tomorrow ain't all there is. It's plenty of days after that. And when you got somebody close to you... somebody to hold onto and slow dance with... you wanna believe in everything. You wanna believe stuff can happen that'll make you smile. You wanna dream... And even if the dream don't work out... even if it don't last... at least it felt real good tryin'.

CHELLE

I ain't said it was nothin' wrong with ya'll dreamin'.

SLY

You ain't said it was nothin' right with it neither. (beat) It'll be somethin' Chelle. We gonna make you a believer. I been thinkin' of names to make it sound good. Sound like a place even you gonna wanna visit. Call it.... Sly and Lank's Feel Good Shack. That's the one I settled on. Course, Lank probably gonna want his name first... but see, that'll just mess up the good rhythm of it. Lank and Sly's Feel Good Shack don't really make you feel that good.

Sly moves close to Chelle.

SLY (cont'd)

First night we open, I'm gonna play a special song for you.

CHELLE

Move on from me, Sylvester.

SLY

What's your favorite? Miracles? Temps? Cuz mine... it's the Four Tops.

CHELLE

I don't care what your favorite is.

SLY

You say you don't... but I think you lyin'.

Sly touches Chelle on the arm.

CHELLE

How many times I got to tell you to get on?

SLY

Tell me you didn't like my slow dance.

CHELLE

Sylvester, I ain't in the mood.

SLY

Tell me you didn't like for just one minute.... my arms holding you tight...

Chelle shakes her head no. Sylvester moves closer to her...pulls slowly and carefully on her arm. She moves toward him in spite of herself.

SLY

Lemme hold you, Chelle.

CHELLE

Go'on now, Sly.

SLY

I like it when you call me Sylvester. Can't nobody say my name like you. (mocks her)
 "Go'on Sylvester" "Don't slam my doors, Sylvester" "Don't touch me Sylvester".

Chelle laughs faintly, in spite of herself.

CHELLE

I don't sound like that.

SLY

"Don't feel so good, Sylvester"

CHELLE

I don't say that!

SLY

“Don’t be so handsome, Sylvester”

CHELLE

Now you just talkin’ crazy.

SLY

“Don’t love me Sylvester”...

Beat.

CHELLE

I don’t... I don’t say that.

SLY

You know my favorite Four Tops song?

Chelle shakes her head no. Sly grabs her into a slow dance.

SLY

(singing badly but sincerely)

Now if you feel that you can’t go on

Because all of your hope is gone

And your life is filled with much confusion

Until happiness is just an illusion

And your world is crumbling down, darlin

Reach out...come on girl, reach on out for me....

Chelle stops dancing and looks at Sly.

SLY (cont’d)

I sound good to you, baby?

Beat.

CHELLE

Yeah Sylvester. You sound real good....

Chelle smiles. Sly smiles back and holds her. They slow dance in silence for a moment.

SLY

We can be somethin’ Chelle. You an’ me. I can make you feel like things is alright, even when they ain’t. And you can do that for me. We can be that to each other.

Chelle pulls away.

CHELLE

I got to finish cleanin' up, Sylvester.

Lank comes into the basement with haste.

LANK

Sly?! There you are. We got to go'on over to Sheps now.

SLY

It's almost four? (checks his watch) Oh yeah... yeah, I'm ready.

Chelle cleans and tries to mask her worry.
Sly notices Lank's urgency.

SLY

What's the word?

LANK

Some boys in blue...Peanut say they been nosin' 'round over there. Askin' folks our whereabouts.

SLY

What they nosin' 'round for? Place is ours, fair and square.

LANK

Don't know but we got to go see. Somethin' givin' me a funny feelin' about it.

SLY

What kinda funny feelin'?

LANK

Think we better get over to our spot.

CHELLE

Lank...Sylvester...please....don't get into nothin' this time. Please

LANK

We be fine Chelle. Gonna get our papers and we be fine.

SLY

That's right, sweet Chelle. Don't worry your pretty face, baby. You just save Sylvester a dance for later. Reach on out for me, and I'll be there...

Lank and Sly head up the steps. Sly looks back at Chelle.

SLY (cont'd)

Four Tops. You an' me?

CHELLE

Fine, Sylvester.

Lank and Sly disappear. Chelle sweeps and sweeps and sweeps.....

The sound of a tank rolling by.

She stops sweeping. Looks at the basement door.

A moment of worry.

Lights fade.