

Detroit '67

A Play

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Act One. Scene Five.

Lights up on Chelle. She stands at the bar and counts out money.

CHELLE
(to herself)

Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine... two hundred.

Caroline enters from the washroom, drying her hair.

CHELLE

We did good last night.

CAROLINE

Did we?

CHELLE

Sure enough. You worked this room like a little butterfly. Luring them fellas into your cocoon. Got Harold and Peanut spending more money in this place then I've ever seen.

CAROLINE

Just doin' my part...

CHELLE

You served up those drinks faster than Lank ever could. I should keep you around and send him on.

Caroline laughs. Chelle looks at her.

CHELLE

How's that gash coming?

CAROLINE

Oh. (beat) It's fine.

CHELLE

Healing okay?

CAROLINE

I suppose so.

CHELLE

You ought to keep putting that ointment on it 'fore it gets worse.

CAROLINE

Oh right.... Okay....

Beat.

Chelle counts out money and hands it to
Caroline.

CHELLE

Here you go.... Twenty dollars. From the tip jar, like we agreed.

CAROLINE

Thanks.

CHELLE

I'm goin' out to run a few errands for tonight's joint. You hear Lank come in, just tell him for me.

CAROLINE

I'll let him know.

CHELLE

Don't know if it's my decorations or Lank's 8-track player or Mama and Daddy's house... or you.... But one of them four is real good for business around here...

Chelle folds her money and puts it in an
envelope.

CHELLE

Be back soon...

Chelle exits up the steps. Caroline looks
around herself. She counts her money over
again.

CAROLINE

Fifteen Twenty....

She moves to the clothes-line and finds a
safety pin. She pins the money to the inside
of her bra. It is meticulous. She's done this
before.

Caroline looks around the basement, slightly
bored. She heads to the 8-track player.

Filters through the cassettes. Choses Marvin Gaye. "How Sweet It Is..." plays.

Caroline dances to the song with reckless abandon. She finds a pole. Goes to it. Dances with it like a lover.

Lank opens the door to the basement and stands at the balcony. Caroline dances-oblivious. Lank watches with a smile and enjoys Caroline's moves.

Finally – she turns and sees him staring.

LANK

Hey there.

Beat. Caroline is frozen. Marvin sings on. Lank smiles. Caroline moves over to the player and stops the cassette as Lank approaches.

CAROLINE

Shit- I'm so sorry/ for bothering with-

LANK

No need for sorry/ you ain't did nothing-

CAROLINE

I shouldn't have/ been messing in your things-

LANK

It's alright. / I'm not protesting-

CAROLINE

I'm so embarrassed.

LANK

Don't need to be embarrassed. Just dancing.

CAROLINE

I had no business in your music. I was just...curious- that's all....

LANK

Curious is okay with me. I like curious. (beat) You like Motown?

CAROLINE

Yeah.... I like it.....

LANK

Yeah? Who you diggin' on?

CAROLINE

I don't know, um...all the groups you have here. Temptations. Four Tops. Gladys Knight and the Pips.

LANK

You know about Gladys Knight and the Pips?

CAROLINE

Sure. The Supremes. Martha and the Vandellas.

LANK

You diggin' on Negro music?

CAROLINE

Somethin' wrong with that?

LANK

Maybe not. (beat) What you dig about it?

CAROLINE

Depends on who's singing.

LANK

What about the Temptations?

CAROLINE

The Temps? Their dance moves – total synchronicity. Their harmony...their bass....it's what all music should be made of...

LANK

Mary Wells.

CAROLINE

Voice like cashmere. Real sweet sounding....

LANK

Listen at you! - Marvin Gaye?

CAROLINE

Now Marvin is something altogether different. His voice can just sort of...pull on you...

LANK

How you mean?

CAROLINE

Like....I don't know....like tug at someplace deep in you. Somewhere no one else can touch and just... moves you in a way you didn't even know you could be moved, you know?

LANK

Yeaah....moves you real good....

Beat. Getting a lil' hot in here.

CAROLINE

Yep it's... good music...

Lank approaches the fuse box. Opens it.

LANK

Hope I'm not intruding on you...

CAROLINE

Not at all...

LANK

Just wanna check the fuse box. Almost shut the party down last night when I blew that fuse. Worse thing in the world is to be the DJ when the music stops playing before quittin' time. Folks'll be ready to chop off your neck.

Lank flicks switches on the fuse box. Goes to his 8 track player.

LANK (cont'd)

Think I'm gonna change that extension cord, too. 8-track player is a new breed. My sister don't get that. I try to tell her, this is changin' the way we hear music. And we got to change with it. (beat) You heard the difference? The cassette sound? Real smooth, wasn't it?

CAROLINE

It was. Sounded really good last night. Folks were dancing so hard, I swear I saw the walls sweating.

LANK

Yeah...now that's what a party is supposed to do. You ever dance til' the walls sweat?

CAROLINE

Not dance....

Beat. Getting even hotter. Need to cool down.

LANK

I wouldn't have picked you for a lover of Negro music.

CAROLINE

What's wrong with Negro music?

LANK

Nothin's wrong with it. Just seem like you'd listen to those ol' classical cats. Beethoven or Chopin. Them piano dudes.

CAROLINE

What's a Beethoven?

LANK

What's a Beethoven?!

Caroline laughs and shakes her head. Lank looks at her.

LANK (cont'd)

Ohhh...I see.... You pullin' my leg. Havin' a little fun with me....

CAROLINE

Maybe.

LANK

So you like Negro music. I like Negro music. But only one of us is a real Negro.

CAROLINE

Maybe.

LANK

Maybe?

Caroline laughs and shakes her head again.

LANK

Ohh...you like to joke a lot. Like to play with me, hunh?

Caroline shrugs. Lank looks at her with intrigue. She returns his look. Quick beat.

Lank finishes at the fuse box. He moves over to the 8-track player. Changes the extension cord.

Caroline mosies across the basement floor. She brushes past the walls. The little brown girl. The four-pointed star. The black fist.

CAROLINE

Who's the artist?

Lank looks up. Caroline points to the star.

LANK

Artist? You mean that thing?

CAROLINE

It's interesting.

LANK

Chelle drew that... long time ago. My ol' man – he used to have me and Chelle down here all the time. Gave us permission to write on the walls. "Mark your territory" he used to say. So... we did.

CAROLINE

She like stars?

LANK

Did she? Would make stars outta everything. Christmas lights. Dominos. Pencils. Whatever.

CAROLINE

And this?

Caroline points to lumpy-faced brown girl.

LANK

That's supposed to be Chelle. I drew it for her. Six years old. Tryin' to be thoughtful. But she started crying and told Mama I was trying to make her look ugly on purpose. She tried to make me wash it off.... but Pops convinced Mama it was art, and that we'd laugh about it one day. (beat) Chelle still ain't laughed yet.

CAROLINE

You draw the fist too?

LANK

Nah. Pops drew that. Said it was Joe Louis' fist. Said the Brown Bomber was gonna always be a champ in this house. "That Black fist is gonna set us free." That's what my ol' man would say.

CAROLINE

You were close to your folks.

LANK

Pretty tight knit. Whole family. You?

CAROLINE

No, I...no. My folks split when I was a kid. We don't really talk much. I'm kind of a loner.

LANK

Oh....

CAROLINE

But your folks...they gave you lots, hunh?

LANK

Didn't have much, but they had this house. That's one thing they had. Both of 'em- hard workers. Mama would fry hair right upstairs in that kitchen-

CAROLINE

Fry hair?

LANK

You know...with the hot comb on the stove? (beat/ nothing) Anyway, Pops was an auto man. Ford Motor Company. Served 'em til' his death half a year ago. He tried to get me in there... but that auto stuff ain't for me. I ain't never been one for a whole lotta up and down when my heart is into somethin' else.

CAROLINE

Somethin' else like what?

LANK

Doin' for myself. Finding somewhere to really be somebody and have something that no one can take from me. You know?

CAROLINE

Yeah, sure....(beat) But how.... I mean... how do you get that, you know?

LANK

Me- I bought some property over here. Gonna open up my own business.

CAROLINE

Yeah?

LANK

That's the plan. Just hopin' it's the right one. Ain't settle in me easy yet.

CAROLINE

Maybe that's good. If it was too easy, it probably wouldn't be worth much. At least you got a plan. That's good to have. Keeps you believing in something.

LANK

What you believe in?

CAROLINE

I... (beat) I don't really know anymore. Things I thought I believed- changed. It's like I woke up and suddenly I'm not the same person I thought I was. I'm just in this moment and... everything before it is bullshit. (beat) It's good you found something for yourself. I wish.

Lank looks at Caroline.

LANK

Say- what happened to you?

CAROLINE

Oh... um...

LANK

Somebody hurt you.

CAROLINE

Langston, I-

LANK

Lank.

CAROLINE

Lank. I just... think it's best to leave that night in the past.

LANK

You sure it's gonna stay there?

Beat. Lank approaches Caroline slowly.

LANK

When I saw you out there that night... somethin' happened. I saw you look at me. Heard you without no words. You know what I mean?

CAROLINE

You heard me...

LANK

It don't make a lotta sense, I know...me bein' what I am and you --- --- but in that moment, all the trouble could come on me ain't matter. Only thing mattered was that I felt you needin' somethin'. Couldn't pull away.

Lank steps closer to Caroline. She inhales.

CAROLINE (nearly breathless)

What'd you feel...

Lank doesn't answer. Instead, he takes another step closer. They stare at each other for an extended moment ...dangerously close...on the brink of a kiss...

The door to the basement flies opens as Chelle enters.

CHELLE

Hey Caroline – is there any more ice in that freez-

Caroline quickly moves away from Lank.

Chelle stops when she sees Lank and Caroline alone. The silence is revealing. Chelle looks to Lank with instant disapproval. Her eyes bore holes through him.

Uncomfortable Silence. Air. Tension. Thickness. Long long beat.

Finally:

CAROLINE

I ... think we're out of ice....

Chelle's eyes remain on Lank. She makes no contact with Caroline as she answers.

CHELLE

Freezer in the garage....got plenty....

CAROLINE

Should I go out back and bring some in?

CHELLE

That'd be good...

CAROLINE

No problem....

Caroline walks past Lank and moves toward the steps. She passes Chelle who remains focused on Lank.

CAROLINE (cont'd)

Be right back....

Caroline leaves.

Chelle glares at Lank for like an eternity. Disapproval and disgust shoot from her eyes.

Lank feels the impulse of shame at first, and then suddenly looks back at her defiantly.

Finally Chelle turns and leaves.

Lank remains still...contemplative...