

HOUSEMATES

Truth is the pain of a million bee stings. I'm talking about the earth shattering kind that brings you to your knees. Well, I got stung last night. Got the marks to prove it, but I'll get back to that in a minute. Best to know the cast of characters and our time together leading up to the moment the bees began to swarm.

Last fall, my boyfriend, Cisco, pulled his mint condition 1973 Oldsmobile up to a gothic rowhouse in the stately Mount Vernon neighborhood. I felt like a foreigner in my own city. I was only a few miles from my childhood home in West Baltimore, where most of the houses on my street are shells, no longer waiting for rehab, but destruction by ball and chain. I stood in awe at my new rented residence. It was a prestigious piece of history with black iron stair rails artfully patterned after tree limbs and a large circular front window that revealed a very wealthy 19th century interior. A place untouched by neglect or soiled dreams. Baltimore a tale of two cities.

"Girl, what's your problem? You act like you never been over here before. Come on, let's get your stuff in. Oh snap, is that one of your roommates?" And just like that I turned from one dream to another.

A woman's high heels hit the sidewalk with a fast, flouncy gait causing the hem of her belted turquoise dress to flutter like the fan of a peacock. Dangling silver Africa shaped earrings hung from her ear lobes. With pure deep chocolate skin, blond cropped afro and designer Coach bag, she was runway ready. Just before she reached the rowhouse, I asked God to let her keep walking. Another prayer unanswered.

"You're our roomie?" she said so quick I had to slow down the words in my mind before I answered. New Yorkers.

“I sure am. I’m Kelly”, I said, while pushing a mesmerized Cisco up the steps before he dropped the box he was carrying.

“I’m Jade. I ran to get a smoothie, but the others are inside. Wait ‘til you see the place. It’s wondrous. I thought I’d miss my home in Bed Stuy, but this is so much like it.”

Inside the elegant living room, enhanced by gleaming deep mahogany woodwork, I met my housemates for the school year. Dana, a white girl from Denver with a nasally twang and a bra size that prompted us to call her Double D. Chantelle, from Louisiana, “light, bright and damn near white”, as my mother used to say. Her southern drawl and petite hour glass frame brought all the boys to the yard, as the song goes, even though she’s didn’t bat for that team. Jade, well you already know about the six-foot ebony goddess. And me? I have waist long dreads, a tight body and an “Baltimore” attitude that can go from 0 to 60, if you catch me wrong.

Our time together as twenty something roommates has been one small skirmish after another. Some, the usual fare of different souls from different places and different backgrounds trying to cohabitate. Dana, as a Public Service major was always trying to keep us civil. Shantelle working on her J.D. in law broke everything down to legalities and rights, while Jade, seeking her MBA organized us. She was the one who got us to do our assigned cleaning chores, mark our food in the refrigerator, and give prior notice of overnight guest. I, as a MFA student in creative writing, maintained the logs of our exploits. Approaching the end of our first year, we had learned to keep in sync like a well-maintained clock, until last night.

In the middle of prepping for finals and making plans for the summer, Baltimore decided to light it up. People were in the streets protesting Freddie Gray’s murder. Despite the mandatory citywide curfew, that we were abiding, the television provided proof many others

were not. I was making a poster for a student rally the next day. Jade was writing in her journal. Dana was staring out of the window as if she were waiting for someone and Chantelle was clacking away on her lap top.

I looked up at the screen to see a news reporter standing a few feet away from a car on fire. Pops and crackles were the chorus behind the him saying, "Please heed the curfew. It's very scary out here in these streets tonight."

"It's scary every night if you don't live in the right zip code and you ain't the right color. What the hell?" I said trying to quell the worry I had for my family and Cisco.

"It's stupid to demonstrate, what good does it do, tearing up stuff in your own neighborhood. Doesn't change anything. Just makes it worse," said Dana.

"What the hell do you know about being black in Baltimore. Miss White Ass Denver Colorado?" I responded.

Dana's face bloomed a deep bottomless red, as Shantelle said, "I'd say she knows a little something."

Jade yelled, "Shut up Chantelle", and the room went quiet, except for the television.

"What does that mean, Chantelle?" I asked, as I surveyed all their faces until I stopped at Dana's. Tears had begun to fall down her cheeks, but her chin was set in such a defiant manner, I still couldn't figure out what was happening.

"Chantelle, you're a mean dyke," said Dana.

"At least I am not a lying, sideways b," she replied.

Jeez! What's going on?" I hollered.

Again silence. Finally, Dana walked over to me, “I’m sorry Kelly”.

“Sorry for what?”

“Cisco and I have been seeing each other.”

“What?! Cisco ain’t into white girls,” I said, just as I recognized one of the tiny cluster of dice that dangled from Cisco’s car mirror on a chain around Dana’s neck.

And just like that, righteous indignation over Freddie Gray’s murder veered away from our immediate concerns to a “meet me after school” girl fight of epic proportions.

Four intelligent, strong, and ready women used words, arms and legs as primitive weapons until a moment of clarity struck. In the frenzied melee, Chantelle’s butt knocked against the table top television, toppling it over. The falling screen showing people with twisted faces and angry mouths was caught by Jade’s long arms. In that moment of intercession, it became clear to me, as we all wearily collapsed on the floor, that even though I was hurt to my core, I was alive with a protest poster to finish. Truth is, some bee stings are worse than others. Some bring momentary pain, others bring death.