

Cheap Perfume

It was midly cloudy spring day with that buttery Miami light that made things look gentle or sexy and traffic was steady as Michel drove. His neck felt tight and when he looked left a young man stared him off. He quickly looked ahead, then checked his right sideview mirror before focusing on the road again. A slew of creole insults rushed through his head before he dismissed them with a straightening of his head.

"Don't worry about that asshole," the man in the back seat said.

"I never worry about them," he said in his accent and the man in the back seat turned his head away while Michel was still looking at him, a white man with greedy eyes and a set face in a black suit. Sentences and tonal nuances were sometimes lost in translation when he spoke English and he resigned himself not to bother with it. He was now 36 and couldn't really see the difference between that and 40. For 17 years he had been living in Miami. Through a long and painstaking process of paperwork and continuously submitting proof of employment, even having considered marrying for citizenship, he had managed to get his working visa, then his green card. When he eventually became a citizen, he felt as if Haiti was finally behind him. Though difficult, his path to citizenship was still a lucky break when compared to that of his fellow countrymen, many of whom couldn't get papers and suffered the humiliation of deportation. Here he was, an American. He dropped the man off at MIA international and when he looked at his rearview to say goodbye, the words couldn't leave his mouth, stuck somewhere under his Adam's apple like phlegm. Michel coughed. The man didn't bother to look back. He lowered his eyes, got his luggage and left as a new slew of creole insults crossed Michel's mind. On his drive back to the beach, his hand felt sticky and a little numb on the wheel. He noticed a smooth breeze brushing the palms on the road and lowered his window to catch some air on his face. He decided to park around North Beach and think about his day and things he had to do but was interrupted by the smell of his car, the smell of bodies, of salt and sweat and sugar and shit. He put a face to a smell, that older woman that kept trying to tell him what to do and where to go

and he knew that she had farted in the car. Her Hispanic accent gnawed at his memory like the mosquitoes back home that would tear his feet apart at night from his sheets rising up and kill his sleep with that awful buzzing. It felt funny to remember that, a feeling he hadn't felt in so long. He picked up the bottle of Febreze he kept by his side compartment and pulverized the car with the artificial smell of "Happy Spring" then pulled back his seat and started thinking about home, Haiti how he sometimes missed his native language, the ease with which it turned and twisted in his mouth. And there was the aggression, the proverbiality and that insulting quality to it that his English lacked. English sounded very different, less phonic, less guttural. He played his "Klass" cd on the radio to the track "Manmi Tanpri" which furthered his nostalgia. But he was building his American Dream, working to buy this house he was aiming for in Homestead, the possibility of a decent life and retirement still very real in his mind. And things were different back home, harder. Then he thought of Natasha and what she might be cooking for them. A woman walked by on the sidewalk in workout clothes and he checked his phone for messages. Natasha had texted him.

"I want to go out," he read on his telephone screen. "Café Moca"

He had been avoiding the Café Moca crowd for a while. His plan was to come home, watch the Heat game and go to sleep. He decided to wait before he answered and checked his earnings for the day. The app showed \$200, which made him happy enough. Home it was. As he got closer to home, a shabby dusty pink apartment complex in the Opa Locka area they had managed to decently amenitize, he caught a thin crescent of a moon in the twilight sky that shaped his eyes. His exposure from work to the diverse living places of the city and often some of the most luxurious, made his complex look dismal; the ugly peeling paint, the cracks on the street, the lack of parking, his loud and nosy neighbors, the smell of rot on the street and around the complex became vivid stains antithetical to the reasons he became an American. The place was dump for city's unwanted, the poor, low lives and bums, drug dealers, welfare and section 8 dependents, with a growing population from the gentrification that came from the new Midtown, Design District and Wynwood constructions, blooming districts that catered to the young, the rich and the new Miami middle class. The older, mostly African American, with some West-Indian nascent populations of those districts was being muscled out and pushed to closer to Opa Locka and Little Haiti, and their frustration showed in higher drug related crimes. But the rent was cheaper than other places in Miami and Opa Locka was close to little Haiti which was convenient. Michel was the kind of man who tucked his shirts in his slacks and polished his shoes. He had been taught by his father and in his youth he made a little money shining his neighbor's shoes. Michel was the kind of man who valued labor, so it pained him to be waived at by Shaunte Junior, one of the neighborhood drug dealers, amped up by a lamppost on the sidewalk, sizing everything in sight with a quick indiscretion.

"Looser," Shaunte said after quickly eyeing him.

"What," Michel answered in his accent, indignant, thinking he had heard "Loser."

"Loosen up. You lookin' mad tight."

"Why you tell me wat to do. Go sell drugs."

Shaunte laughed at Michel's accent.

"Just trying to help a man getting' old."

"Help yourself."

"You keep up like that and she'll be fuckin somebody else in no time. You a Zo, act like it."

Michel kept his head straight walking to his apartment. More than second generation Haitians, more than Hispanics, more than even Jamaicans, what Michel hated the most was the new generation of young African Americans. The irony is that they looked up to Haitians, or what Haitians represented. To Michel they all belonged in rap videos, objects to distant for him to care for or understand. He hated being called a Zo which was now also a term of affection among second generationers, kids who barely spoke Creole and boasted about their origins, few of them having ever seen or smelled the motherland. He hated being associated to biggest gang in Miami, a gang that began from young Haitians being abused in schools by African Americans for having conservative appearances and immigrant mindsets. The stairway smelled like dog piss. Something else he hated. That bitch with curlers and her tacky blond hair, a *ras kaka*, piece of shit, who let her dog out freely without even watching him. He slow stepped to his door clenching his teeth from fatigue and anger and behind apartment 26, Natasha was waiting and expecting an answer for their plans for the night. She was already dressed, her plump skin, dense and smooth. As he held her by the arms and kissed her, her body soften to his touch, and his grip on her loosened as he breathed her in, the perfume he had bought her, Chanel No 5. He liked to buy her the good things, the fine things. With Natasha in his arms, he felt slightly monstrous as he glanced at his big hands and wondered how something so soft could be his. A pleasant surprise he thought to himself. She had him feel better. They were both squinting looking at each other.

"Michel get dressed so we can go," she suggested in Creole.

He felt his brow tighten, his resolve to take her in shaken. He felt manipulated.

"Not tonight *cheri*."

"You never want to do anything," she complained. "*Ou pa vle fe anyen*. You don't want to do anything."

"I want to make love."

"So that you can fall asleep..."

His face was tightening from the lack of answers he could summon. Through the corner of his eye he could see the remote on the table in front of the couch and the Food Network on the Television. He looked there long enough to forget about her, traces of her resentment lingering in his weakened hands, her feminine violence felt through her impatient steps towards their bedroom. It dawned on him how her eyes, almond shaped and dreamily narrow went well with her long nose. Then as he thought about Dwayne Wade, about the basket-ball game and this year's season without Lebron James, the smell chicken, and of rice and beans cooking, grounded him back to the present, to a sense of sacrifice.

He was looking at himself in the mirror after his bath, how his face had hardened over the years. Where he had once thought of himself as handsome, he now just thought of himself as a man. He wiped the vapors on the mirror. *Lakay*, back home he had to boil his water for a warm bath. That was another good thing about living in the United States. Comfort. And no matter how poor an American neighborhood might look, it would be luxurious set in Port-au-Prince. God was good, he thought, even if he was going to miss the Heat game. As he wiped the mirror again, he could feel Natasha's excitement as she moved around the house, and he grew resentful. Dressing himself in the bedroom, he saw her eyeing him with a smirk and his movements quickened. She came around and kissed him on the cheek and he felt better. On their way out, he caught the neighbor's dog out without a leash. It barked at him then peed next to him.

"Hey," he yelled at the dog who quickly ran away. "*Gade*, Look at this!" he continued. "She can't even be responsible for her own dog."

"*Kimelem*, who cares..." Natasha said, rolling her eyes at him. He turned a quick glance at her and she shook her head in affectionate criticism, like members of couples have of each other. As they walked to the car, Natasha and Junior exchanged glances and he looked at her then mumbled to himself. She wrapped her arm around Michel's and lowered her head chuckling.

"*Sispann Michel*, Stop Michel," she said rubbing his belly. "He jokes around a lot. And believe it or not, he cares about you."

He looked at her after she said this, at her neat, straightened hair, her face, her pearl earrings, her fitting dress and realized that she could indeed have another man if she wanted, but she was here with him, with both engagement and wedding ring on. He took a deep breath and felt himself get fuller with relief and comfort.

When they got to the Café, familiar heads popped up here and there. Natasha signaled that she was going to talk to some friends of hers gathered at a table. Michel, on his side, saw a group of his friends by the bar. He had been neglecting them for a while and as he was walking towards them a wave of anxiety and excitement caught him. When he finally reached them he made his hellos as quick as his glances before he found some space for himself and looked around. Natasha looked at him and smiled before she walked over. Paul, one of Michel's friends was the first to greet her with his prominent and tall body, leveraging his torso against her. She gave him a bit of attitude, made quick hellos, then whispered in Michel's ear that they didn't have to stay long if he wanted to go.

"We can stay," he said. "Paul doesn't scare me."

She tickled his belly before she went back to her friends. Michel went over to Paul.

"You always have something to prove," he said to him in creole.

"And you can never play," Paul answered back.

They exchanged a serious stare down that quickly dissolved to laughter and they hugged each other. After Paul went on bragging about his conquests Michel quickly turned to the others then got himself a drink. He looked for Natasha and saw that she was still interacting with her friends. He glanced around his surroundings catching all the social games that had once pleased him and the place began to annoy him, grating at his sense of journey and achievement. He finished his Barbancourt on the rocks and got another one. He caught a speck of hair on the second glass, watched it float for a few seconds and suddenly remembered that Paul owed him some money, a couple hundred dollars he had borrowed him for a new car battery. It angered him to have to remind Paul and he also felt tipsy from the Rhum, regretting not having chased it with a coke. He noticed that Paul wasn't around and decided to go to the bathroom and find him after. When he got there, the line was so long that he almost got in a fight with a guy and hit a woman with his shoulder trying to get out, after having waited close to 10mins. On his hurried walk out, he looked, but couldn't find Natasha, so he texted her and told her he was using the rest room. He figured she was on the other side of the club with some friends so he went outside to do it old-fashioned way. When he walked out of the club, he attentively looked for a safe spot, drink still in hand. The farther end of the parking lot looked good and so he walked over there and began unzipping his pants in front of a palm tree. The moon was still a crescent and smartened his eyes again. He heard a breeze against the palm leaves, then voices a little farther away and identified a silhouette by a wall that separated the club from a small shopping complex. Focusing his gaze there, he recognized Paul, his back turned, looking like he was fondling a woman. Michel decided to wait a while and see how he'd approach him. He noticed Paul's hands hanging lower than the woman's hips probably pushing on her buttock. Probably another one of these stupid girls of his. He moved closer, decided not to waist anymore time,

and, as his attention narrowed, he heard the woman speaking in a tone that was reproachful, but not condemning. Then he saw her eyes over Paul's shoulder and his glass fell and broke and Paul turned, shocked, his eyes a little wider than necessary, looking at him, mustering for words, while Natasha let out a loud gasp.

"She was just telling me a story," Paul said. He kept his natural smile but turned with his hands far apart, and Natasha lowered her head after their eyes met.

"Do you want to go," she asked him with a look of shame.

Michel stood silent for a moment, the pulse in his neck getting stronger, his eyes frozen on them before he bolted for the car. Natasha followed him but couldn't keep up and as he drove off with rage, he could see her run towards the car in his rearview mirror, getting smaller and smaller before she disappeared as he made his turn for I-95. Not knowing where to go, he saw the sign on the highway and decided to go south, exiting on Miami Gardens Dr.

In his rage, the thought that had prior just been just a curiosity planted by some passengers and friends, an idea he'd toy with in wonder, became his mission that evening, and after a short drive, he caught the giant sign of Tootsies Cabaret. He parked by a small shopping plaza before the club on 183rd street and after making sure there was no one around, he slammed his fists on the steering wheel multiple times, cried, then nurtured himself before he started the car and parked by the club with resolve. The walk toward the entrance felt more and more like a test as he neared it until he was eased by the lady at the front.

"You fucked up or somethin'?"

"No," he replied, making himself nimbler. "Hard day," he then said, not finding anything else.

"We'll cheer you up," the woman said and made her breasts wobble and got a laugh out of him.

He wasn't sure how much to carry, and when he noticed the money being thrown on the dancers from his angle, he got his credit card and took three hundred dollars from the ATM.

"You need dollar bills?" The lady at the front asked him.

"Yes," he said, realizing that it would only make sense to throw dollars on the strippers.

He got himself a hundred dollars in ones.

“Don’t spend it all on one girl,” the woman at the front said smiling and Michel felt like he got the drift.

He kept the other one eighty in his pocket and paid for a beer with a twenty at the bar. He put the remainder of the change with his stack of ones. The Club was huge, everything he had heard of, the red, blue and yellow lighting setup that promised lust and live intimacy, the beautiful naked women everywhere. Even the rap music didn’t bother him as the beer helped him ease an awkward mixture of lust and residual anger. It felt like the loud music in his eardrums was guiding him towards the seats by the poles. He heard the DJ introduce a woman named Cherokee and he sat at the closest table to her pole station. He was surprised to find himself slightly shy, though he recognized the scent. It was scent of prostitution, and it was the same everywhere: a heavy dose of cheap perfume followed the smell of a body, and he remembered that he loved it. That he had always loved whores. He had been introduced to the workings of prostitution by his grandfather at the age of fourteen. The smell took him back home and he felt more comfortable.

The men around him were throwing dollar bills at strippers watching them dance and pick up the money, round after round. There was ass moving all around and the man next to him had a stripper pick up a dollar bill from his mouth with her cleavage. Another guy not too far away was tickling a stripper's ass with a bill. She clasped her ass hard on the money before letting it fall gently by her knees next to the other bills that had been thrown. But this kind of prostitute, this kind of scene, was foreign to a conservative man like Michel who had always thought of the direct transaction between customer and whore for sex. When attempting to mimic his peers with Cherokee, he watched the bill fall of his shaky hand miserably next to the stripper’s knees, her glorious, wobbling ass bent so closely to his face he could smell it. Before anyone saw him, he picked up the bill and slipped it clumsily in her purple panties that had slid down to her thick and packed thighs. She turned around and saw him smiling awkwardly, his face a little tight. She smiled herself and wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

"What happened baby? A lapdance will make it all go away."

He looked at her trying his best to keep a straight face.

"Come on, get a private dance with me. Get things off your mind."

He looked at her and nodded wondering how obvious his discomfort was. She took him by the hand and walked him, unsteady as he was, to a secluded room full of booths. There, a mixture of odors, of cheap perfume, ass, sweat and damp rug overwhelmed him. He had heard laughter he believed was aimed at him on his way to the room and had thrown some quick, violent glances around in response, noticing heads dropping or looking away. The DJ switched the tune to Ty \$'s "Paranoid."

"We're gonna get you nice and comfortable," Cherokee said as she sat on him in the private booth, undid one of his shirt buttons and rubbed a hand on his chest.

He rested his unsteady hands on her ass that felt warm, soft and lustfully absorbing. He had never seen or felt one so big. She kissed him on the cheek.

"What happened?" she then whispered.

"I don't know how to explain," he said in his accent.

"You can tell me anything baby," she said, dancing slowly on his lap.

"I don't know," he said in his accent. "My best fren fuck my girlfriend."

As she was grinding on him, she caressed the back of his ears that she then sucked gently.

"It's ok," she said. "I'll make it better. Do you want to feel my pussy?"

"Yes," he said.

She took his hand and did it for him. He could feel her moisture before he smelled his fingers. He closed his eyes and cried silently.

"She dun did a numba on you didn't she."

"Yes," he said.

"You want to do another round?"

"I don't know."

"Yes or no?" she asked in a tone that affirmed that she'd have hustled any other guy into another song by now.

"No," he said. "I feel strange."

"You Haitian," she said.

"Yes."

"I like me some Haitians. Know how to treat a lady. Not like the grimey niggas out here, grabbin' yo ass like it's they mamas."

He looked at her not knowing what to say but nodded his head quickly in agreement.

"What's your name baby?"

"Michel."

"Michel, my real name is Devon."

"Hello Devon."

"Michel take my number quick fo' the bouncer sees me. You can call me anytime."

He took her number down.

"I give ya that good pussy," she said and kissed him on the mouth this time and he kissed her back, passionately.

After a long drunk piss and an affectionate conversation in Creole with the bathroom attendant, he walked away from Tootsies less confused. Men carry the burden of power, his grandfather had told him once in stern and severe Creole. The thought of this emboldened him. Men get to have their way in Haiti. A Haitian man in Miami was very different than a Haitian man in Port-au-Prince. He thought of his grandfather and could see him smoking his pipe, the smoke rising over his charcoal and grey hair after he'd sparked his match, a look at once menacingly authoritarian and cruelly playful over his face, stretched eyes and dark, purple lips, sitting on his rocking chair, reminiscing the days of Papa Doc, a white linen shirt on over his brown slacks, legs crossed, moccasins pointing upward, the top of a piece of paper and a pen visible through his shirt pocket. *Everything is permitted to a man except faggotry and thievery.* He was 14 when he was given this lecture on life and manhood, and though he fervently believed in an honest, disciplined life and hated homosexuals, he was never sure how freely he should take absolute permission, the permission many of the men back home took, inspired by a history of masculine violence. Even in his criticisms of people, of Americans, he believed in letting people be. And he had always been good to Natasha. He loved her in character and body and his sweetness to her was sincere. Though he had always felt that she had a leg up on him, a gift for manipulating him, it most often endeared him. But tonight... Busting his ass all day for this reward... Paul was the reason she had wanted to go all along. He held back tears as he was opening his car door, wondering how deep what he had seen ran before he decided to put it away and smelled his fingers.

He took off on 95 South. It was 2 a.m and he was speeding like the devil. It pleased him to be moving forward; he could push his way through and make all things evaporate, like the sun did water. Heat was speed. That little flame on his team's basketball jersey. It didn't matter if he knew where he was going in the end. No obstructions. As he converged to the 826 South, he got to see all the left-over construction, the orange cones, the sand, the tractors with that invisible force that seemed to possess them. At first glance, they seemed like monsters. Yet what was

more helpful. Yes, labor was a force of latent violence and how much sweeter for machines. Like this symbiosis of his car and cellphone that earned him a living now. Machines cured us. Machines helped us keep records. Machines kept us connected. Machines helped him masturbate. All that glorious porn. It was this knowledge of machines that had made the white man conquer the world and today a timely finger can outdo a sturdy hand. But he also remembered that the grass that had grown how and where we wanted it to came from a river of ancestral blood. Forward motion never easier and still possibly meaningless. Machines, still unable to solve the problem of love, the problem of sex. This thought vibrated through his bones. What was pride, he thought. 1804. Haitians against the French. The black man against the white machine. Look at Haiti now, a dirty vestige of an outdated victory, resting on a pride that justified all other lacks. This victory, if he could call it that, the one thing that Haitians prided themselves in, was this same pride that kept them from being a part of the future. The future. He couldn't see himself going back. Wasn't America home now? A green sign on a highway indicated the next exit on the upper right. Kendall Drive. He had made it pretty South and was feeling hungry, so he stopped at a Checkers on 117th avenue. He didn't know what to order, and the clerk, noticing this, named a list of things.

“Just get a chili dog, and chili cheese fries,” he said.

“They good?” he asked in his accent.

“Yeah, it's what I always get. For three bucks, can't go wrong with that.”

And so that's what he got, happy to gorge on his food after he parked. Yes, he was an American now and as he headed back home, he felt calmer. Cheap perfume and a chili dog had gotten him through the night. And now, like a good American, he would go back home and accept Natasha's apology.