

BLOOD KIN

We sat in the dark, as has always been the custom in our family, even though a brand new 40-watt bulb dangled from the porch ceiling. I knew the latter to be true because earlier in the day I'd been the one drafted into the job of putting it there. My hand still stung from where I'd cut it removing broken bits of the old bulb prior to screwing in the new.

I'm sure the pastor who'd assigned me the task had done so with the best of intentions. He had no way of knowing that for us switching on a light, even on the darkest of nights, served little purpose beyond the drawing of bugs and the illumination of things we'd all decided a long time ago we didn't really want to see.

And while the absence of a porch light helped keep some of the more persistent insects at bay, it did little to curb the sweltering presence of summer. The heat was a bear whose crushing embrace threatened to squeeze the very essence of life from my lungs if I dared inhale too deeply. Rather than fight, I sought to pacify the beast with short breaths, small talk, and constant refills of my sister Sandra's lemon-flavored ice-tea.

Drink in hand, I lounged in my usual spot at the bottom of the porch. While my lips kissed the caffeinated coolness, my ears courted the conversation going on behind me--most of it macho musings of who'd done what or wished they had with what woman, spun in time to the wail and whine of a porch glider passed down one generation too many.

I had closed my eyes, loosened my tie, and slipped off my wingtips when my brother Everett upset the flow of the bad boy's boast and bull with a question I knew to be aimed at me. "Yo man, can't you do something 'bout this dog?"

Something like what? In search of clues, I turned toward Everett's shadow-cloaked figure and watched as he pushed Champ's panting snout from his crotch and shoved his bothersome butt in my direction.

And why me? Six of us sat on the porch that evening. All male, all able-bodied, all seemingly sound of mind, including my cousin Luke who could easily pass for fifty, but who by most accounts, excluding his own, has to be pushing up on seventy-something.

While my twenty-one years certified me as the baby of the bunch, that fact didn't automatically make Champ my responsibility any more so than any of the others. In my mind he was, and always would be Daddy Caesar's crotch-sniffing, flea-scratching, stank-breath dog. Big Daddy Caesar, the patriarch of our family, the man whose wake we'd all just attended.

Rather than protest, I snapped my fingers at the mutt we all joked was one-part blood-hound, one-part hyena, and two parts wildebeest. "Here Champ," I called out. "Here boy."

Whimpering at what he knew to be a dismissal, Champ tucked tail and plodded to the porch's edge where he stopped and dropped on his haunches. He stared at me for a moment before snorting and turning his head as if to say, "I ain't 'bout to take orders from likes of you."

His voice still reflecting his lowly opinion of me as resident animal trainer and zookeeper, my brother Everett said, "What's wrong with him anyway? Why don't you make yourself useful and go get him some water or something?"

As his razor-wired tone reached out and wrapped itself around my neck, I felt my vocal cords swivel into a tight, protective knot. Trapped between the heat and the growing pressure on my windpipe, I knew I could ill-afford to raise my voice, let alone scream, even though I'd alternately felt on the verge of doing both ever since my return home to assist in Daddy Caesar's home-going.

I am the youngest of the seven my mama and Daddy Caesar raised. And I know my place. But something buried deep within the folds of that moment strengthened my resolve not to be cast as anybody's boy that night.

I'd licked my lips, wiped my brow, and sucked together enough spit and wind to tell Everett where to get off and what to do once he got there, when a grunt bearing all the authority of a judge's gavel slammed into the space between us. What followed was either an explanation of Champ's present disposition, an attempt to come to my defense, or knowing Cousin Luke, a clever rendering of both.

"Let 'em alone. He got a right to mourn just like any of the rest of us."

Having said his piece, the old man, who was seated on the step just above me, made one of those clucking, "come hither hound" sounds. Champ, quick to pick up on the fact that this was someone genuinely sympathetic to his plight, scurried over and immediately commenced to jumping, wiggling and slobbering all up in Luke's face.

Leonard Junior, my eldest brother and Daddy C.'s namesake, grunted and said, "Well fellas, I guess what we've long suspected is true--it takes an old dog to know an old dog."

The chuckling, which first broke out between my Aunt Sarah's two sons before spreading, took the teeth off the tension I'd felt pressed against my throat. With Junior

leading the way, and my cousins providing a chorus of ‘yeah man’s and ‘uh-huhs,’ the conversation resumed, as did the porch glider’s perfectly timed rust on metal chafe and grind.

I swallowed what was left of my tea and drew a couple pieces of ice into my mouth before tossing the rest into the yard. I’d stood up, stretched, and was thinking about going inside to check on Mama when the big red Lexus parallel parked in the vacant spot beneath the streetlight.

It wasn’t like we weren’t expecting company. Cars full of friends and relatives bearing condolences had come and gone all night. But something told me the person who’d driven up in this particular vehicle wouldn’t be just any ordinary visitor. Given the SUV’s tinted windows and customized trim, the driver would be a young man, I figured. Some hotshot relative I’d heard mentioned, but had never had the displeasure of meeting.

I sat back down only to discover I couldn’t have been more wrong. The man who stepped from the pretty ride and whose form shimmered and glowed in the streetlamp’s yellowish tint was neither young nor a stranger.

Like Cousin Luke, he was an older gentleman of the salt and pepper variety, well-seasoned and full of flavor. And while his Marine-like posture, straight-ahead gaze, and shoulder-dipping gait marked him unquestionably as a member of the Caesar sect, it was his attire--the shoes mirroring the full moon’s reflection; the sharply-creased slacks; the silver pocket watch chain; and most of all the shirt, a brilliant lavender in color, which readily identified him for me as the most infamous outcast of our grudge-nourished clan.

“I’ll be damned,” Junior said, voicing my silent sentiments aloud. “If it ain’t the one and only Frank Caesar.”

The name ripped the dead air like a jolt of electricity. Everyone felt the charge, including Champ, who took the calling as his cue to launch into a series of howls.

The front door flew open and a broad beam burst down the porch’s middle, like a spotlight in search of either a subject or a scene. From it emerged my brother Terrance, whose preference for female company and unwatered whiskey had until then kept him inside the house cozying up to both. “Get a load of this,” Terrance said, stumbling toward the porch rail. “Wonder what hen house he slithered out from under?”

Cousin Luke’s, “Hush up and settle down,” worked for all of the two seconds it took Champ’s moon-lit serenade to segue into a boisterous selling of wolf-tickets, the likes of which would have made George Clinton, Snoop Dog and all the men of Omega proud. With Mr. Frank already half-way up the walk, I didn’t want to guess wrong about Luke’s ability to restrain the hound, so I jumped up, grabbed a hold of Champ’s collar and drug his barking butt back over to my side of the steps.

A groan and the popping of various joints accompanied Junior’s rise from the glider. “I guess I oughta say something to him,” he said, sounding every bit the dutiful son.

“Uh-uh,” Everett said, waving Junior back. “Let me handle this.”

I sat transfixed, Champ’s collar biting into my palm, and the naps in my armpits moist with sweat as Mr. Frank strolled into the limelight, a bouquet of flowers swinging from one hand, and a plastic cake container clutched in the other. While not a big man, he was in every other way imaginable, the Paul Robeson of the moment, the star of a

show that had been a long time in coming.

A legend was in our midst. And everyone present seemed more than willing to give the man his proper due, everyone except my big-head brother Everett. In a move that was pure Bruce Lee and Muhammad Ali all rolled into one, Everett leaped off the porch and into Mr. Frank's face with a spit-riddled, "What you want here?"

"No more than to pay my respects," the old dude said as his gaze fell from my brother's face to the dog snarling at their feet.

"Like hell," Everett said. "Daddy Caesar ain't even good and buried yet and already you over here trying to start some mess."

Mr. Frank raised his eyes and treated Everett to a taste of whatever was smoldering in them before he said, "I hate to be the one to tell you son, but some folks' mess is other folks' unfinished business."

Had I penned the script, that's where Everett would have hauled off and pegged dude's jaw with a solid right. Instead, my brother backed up and said, "All I know is you'd best take your business somewhere else tonight, unless it's worth a beat-down to you."

Terrance's boots hit the plank floor with the resounding thump of a bass drum as he took leave of his perch on the porch rail. "That's enough, man," he said in a soft, but clear voice, which suggested he'd either sobered up or wasn't as drunk as I'd originally thought. "You ain't got nothing to prove," Terrance went on. "Let it alone."

But advice wasn't something Everett was trying to hear. "I don't want to hurt you Mr. Frank," he said. "But if you force me to go there, I will. And rest assured, ain't a damn thing any one of these here hard-legs can say or do that's apt to stop me."

Mr. Frank stared at Champ again, smiled and said, “This how you treat kin boy? I know your Daddy must have taught you better ‘n that.”

I braced myself and gripped the lunging dog’s collar even tighter. Still no punch rose out of Everett’s hambone sized hands, just a shove, followed by a terse, “Get off our property Mr. Frank. You got ten seconds.” He started counting, “One Mississippi. Two Mississippi . . . “

Mr. Frank laughed outright, then said, “Come on now son. Is that all you got? That the best you can do?”

“Three Mississippi, four Mississippi,” Everett shouted before giving Mr. Frank an even harder shove. And on it went. At six Mississippi Everett snatched the flowers from Mr. Frank and flung them into the yard. At eight he knocked the cake out of dude’s hand. And at nine--at nine a deafening second of silence descended before a human tornado wearing the angry face of my sister Sandra blew by me.

After slapping Everett upside the head, she spun him around. “Boy, are you crazy or what?!” she said, spewing her fury into his face. “If you’re looking to pick a fight tonight, you’re gonna have to start with me.”

“He ain’t got no right here. None at all,” Everett yelled, like some snot-nose brat on the brink of tears.

“He’s got every right,” Sandra yelled back. “They were brothers for God’s sake.”

Everett looked dead at me and said, “Half-brothers,” spitting out the word, hyphen and all, like a rotten chunk of fruit he’d accidentally bitten into.

Saundra smacked him again and said, “Stop it doggone it. I ain’t playing with you.”

I flinched in anticipation of the not so accidental kick I fully expected from Everett as he stomped up the porch. But the tap I took on the arm came courtesy of Junior, who inadvertently bumped me on this way into the yard. He picked up the now empty and broken container and with a heaviness in voice said, “I don’t mean no harm Mr. Frank, but maybe the best thing would be for you to leave now.”

“Is that right?” dude said. The smile dimpling his barely bearded face suggested he thought the drama in which we’d all just participated nothing more than a joke, and a bad joke at that. Rather than take the container, Junior held out to him, Mr. Frank crossed his arms over his chest, widened his stance and in a loud voice said, “What you think Luke?”

Cousin Luke raised his bent head and removed the unlit cigarette he’d at some point poked into the corner of his mouth. “I don’t know Frank,” he said. “A hard head is one thing, but a hard heart? I always knowed you to be a bigger man than that.”

The humor fell from Frank’s face like a loose load of bricks and when he finally spoke the hard undertones in his voice revealed their smooth undersides. “Yeah, well, time breaks even the best of us ole boy. You ought know that better ’n anyone.”

When Cousin Luke declined a response in the pause granted him, Mr. Frank picked up where he’d left off. “Anyhow, if memory serves me correctly, you still owe me a favor or two, don’t you?”

“Probably so, Frank” Cousin Luke said as he tapped his cigarette against the porch step and removed a lighter from his shirt pocket. “Probably so.”

“I want you to deliver a message for me,” dude said. “A message to the widow.” He unfolded his arms and clasped his hands in front of him before unleashing the softly worded request. “Tell Miss Grace . . . Tell Miss Grace I was here.”

The lighter clicked and a dancing flame flooded the rugged terrain of Cousin Luke’s face with a brief burst of light. He brought the cigarette’s butt to his tightly drawn lips, took a deep drag, and with smoke circling from his nostrils said, “For sho’ Frank. Anything you say. But go on home now and let these here chillren alone. They got a Daddy to bury.”

Mr. Frank nodded and took the broken container from Junior, then with his face engulfed in a smirk identical to the one he’d worn while jousting with my brother Everett, he turned.

And that’s when it happened; an event that even now I hesitate to confess was totally spontaneous and unplanned. The fact remains though, when Mr. Frank turned to leave, I let go . . . I let go of the dog’s collar.

The reasons why are multi-layered and complex. Since I’ve been away at school, I’ve come to realize that in every family there exists one or more unspoken elements, things, that while known by just about everyone, are seldom openly addressed for fear, I’m inclined to believe, of all hell breaking loose. The big unspoken amongst my kin seems to be that Daddy Caesar’s half-brother, a man who lived across the street from us until his house burned to the ground one night when I was five, may, in fact, be my real father.

Given the time-tempered bonds of rumor and innuendo, I felt, if nothing else, Mr. Frank owed me at least the courtesy of a sideways glance. But far as I could surmise, the

stupid, stank-breath dog had garnered more of his attention. And in that startling moment of realization my anger had been such that nothing would have pleased me more than the sight of Mr. Frank falling face forward onto the sidewalk, his lavender shirt bloodied, his proud back full of teeth and claws.

So, I did it. I let go of the snarling dog and bid him on with a silent, "Sic." But what I hadn't counted on in the seconds it took for dude to turn, and the suddenly freed canine to stop scrambling and regain his footing, was Cousin Luke's calloused fingers stretching forth like the hand of God Almighty in Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam." He snatched Champ's collar so hard the poor hound nearly choked on his own holler.

"I've got him," I said, feeling an immediate sense of remorse at having let my pent-up angst get the best of me. I pressed my hand over Luke's. "It's okay. I've got him," I said, hoping to reassure him, I think, as much as myself.

Luke looked at me, his eyes seeming to search my soul for something, I suppose, that closely resembled the truth. Yeah, he knew, but he eased his grip and allowed me to re-establish my hold, nonetheless.

I watched with the others as Mr. Frank strode back down the concrete path, oblivious to how close he'd come to being mauled, the empty cake container dangling at his side, and all of the energy he'd brought into our midst trailing behind him.

But no sooner had his car door slammed shut that Sandra broke our collective trance. "Y'all ought to be ashamed of yourselves," she said. "I guess you were just gonna sit up here and watch an old man get whapped on."

Besides a grumble or two her accusations yielded little from the fellas, who following her lead began filing into the house, one behind the other, until the only three

somebodies left outside were me, Champ and Cousin Luke.

I turned the dog loose and watched him bound into the yard and pounce on the fallen cake. My ears burned as I awaited the lecture, the scold, the “Why in the hell would you do such a fool thing?” I so rightfully deserved. After a long stretch of smoke-filled silence Cousin Luke cleared his throat and said, “You all right?”

“Of course I am, “I said. I turned to him and thumped my chest Tarzan style. “Man, don’t you know I’ve got Mandinka in my blood?”

“Yeah, you hard all right,” Cousin Luke said. “Matter of fact, it wouldn’t surprise me if you turned out to be the hardest of ‘em all.”

I smiled and said, “I don’t know about all that. But I do appreciate you having my back.”

He laughed and shook his head. “See son, that’s your problem. You just don’t get it do you?”

“Get what?” I asked.

He said, “Look here boy, it’s not that I don’t have any love for you, it’s just that in this family, it’s always been and always will be, every Caesar for himself. The sooner you get a jump on that, the better off you’re gonna be.”

I scratched my jaw and was about to ask him to explain when Sandra stuck her head out the front door and called my name.

“Del? Fidel, I need to talk to you when you get a second.”

There’s a story behind my name, a mystery. And even though no one’s ever bothered sharing the details with me, I think it’s safe to conclude that a tribute to the Cuban revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, wasn’t something that figured into the original

score.

“Faithful” is the Latin translation of the name Daddy Caesar blessed me with. To some, that fact alone might be statement enough. But I’ve always wondered about the Big Man’s motives. What exactly had he been out to assert in his insistence on a name my mama is said to have wanted no part of? Dominance perhaps? A measure of revenge? Or just his own warped sense of humor?

Unfortunately, I’d forfeited every opportunity to ask while he was alive. Now he’s dead and gone to hell, no doubt, taking with him all the answers only he could have given me.

This much I do know--I’m the product of a triangle, the elementary school, textbook type with two seemingly equal sides. To Daddy Caesar belonged the bold line on the right. The line on the left went to Mr. Frank. To my poor mama fell the short line at the bottom, while I laid claim to all the empty space in-between.

The metaphor is one bequeathed to me by my sister Sandra. She’s the only person I’ve ever felt comfortable pressing for information, and even her responses over the years have come stingily and with an undue degree of snappishness. In true Caesar fashion she insists I buck-up and get over it already. Rather than sulking and whining, Sandra says I ought to view Daddy Caesar’s death as the long-awaited opening of the triangle’s trap door. According to her, I’ve finally been set free to wander through the wonder of it all.

But in as much as I’ve always concurred with my sister’s diagnosis and gone along with her prescriptions for healing, these days, more than anything, I feel like a blister that’s just been burst. And like any pus-filled sore, I’ve got to ooze some before I

can heal.

“Better go on in,” Luke said. “You know if she have to call you again she gonna be mad.”

I sighed and collected my shoes. “You coming?” I asked on noticing he hadn’t stirred.

He nodded and said, “Yeah. Soon as I finish my smoke.”

I left Luke and Champ sitting outside in the dark. But the first thing I did upon entering the house was turn on the porch light.

THE END