Detroit ‘67

A Play
By Dominique Morisseau

Contact:
Johnathan Mills  Dominique Morisseau
Paradigm Agency  dominiquemorisseau@yahoo.com
360 Park Ave. South
16th Floor
New York, NY 10010
212-897-6400
jmills@paradigmagency.com

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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…. (hmph)… 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.

I don’t sound like that.

CHELLE
I don’t feel so good, Sylvester”

SLY
I don’t say that!
“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?

FINE, SYLVESTER.

CHELLE

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.