

ONE

With Michael Jackson's "Human Nature" reverberating through the Bose speaker system, Juniper Hawthorne sang off-key to the lyrics of the CD. The exotic dancer by night and martial arts instructor by day drove her inferno red Pontiac Sunfire through the cool April winds on Columbus' newly tarred roads.

On a usual day, she could collect anywhere from a hundred to two hundred dollars an evening in tips from the horny patrons. However, on this particular evening, a group of Finnish businessmen was visiting and Juniper made close to five hundred dollars. Apparently, this group of yuppies loved their women short and boobs as large as your face, because June had both physical qualities.

The five-foot-three dancer, like many in her industry, had her breasts filled; however, in her case, it was not for size but for shape. A rounded look was more arousing than that of an elliptical shape. When the Finnish businessmen arrived to the club, they specifically asked for Juniper, Esmeralda—who was Juniper's best friend—and three other women for special private dancing. June, as everyone knew her, was surprised in the choices of women. She, like many others, stereotypically believed that men from Finland would only want blondes and blue-eyed women. However, her dark complexion, that made many people believe she was a native of Italy or the Mediterranean area, did not stop her from being chosen. June could not believe that they choose Esmeralda, who was a caramel-colored black dancer, nor the one Hispanic and two Japanese dancers that completed the five.

Juniper was excited as she raced through the city to get home and spend some quality time with her man, Clarence Green. The only thought that consumed the electrical interaction of her brain cells was what she and Clarence could do that night at three o'clock in the morning. He'll probably say bowling, she thought. June would rather go to a late nightclub or a bar, but whatever he cared to do was fine with her.

As she pulled into the slumber-looking apartment complex driveway, a deep saddening feeling slithered throughout her body. The dancer could not confirm its origin but she felt as if something was wrong. Whispers began to creep into her thoughts as they had been for years now.

"Not now," she shouted. "I'm still in control here." The whispers crept away, except for one feathery faint voice still making its presence known.

June pulled up to her spot, next to Clarence's Cavalier and stepped out of the newly polished vehicle. She took a moment to gather her things and looked at the place she called home.

Each building was home for forty small apartments, spread vicariously throughout three long hallways. The corner apartments were larger and the ones Juniper had anticipated. Nonetheless, Clarence, her boyfriend of three years, thought otherwise.

Clarence wore his title, 'the man and controller of this relationship,' like a five-star general wore his medals. There was no democracy under his jurisdiction. If he agreed to it then it was settled. If it looked good in his eyes then it was beautiful. If the cost was out of his budget, then it was too high for their budget. Clarence seldom asked June on anything when it came to the relationship and anything affecting their bond.

June stroked her thick ebony hair from blocking her gray-colored eyes. The harsh April wind was relentless as she struggled with gold and diamond ring-covered fingers through the snakeskin purse for her keys. She shuddered from the onslaught of cool weather conditions as a skintight lavender dress covered her soft body. While entering, she noticed not only Clarence's black with yellow stripe car, but also a crookedly parked rusty green Skylark. She knew it was Clarence's friend Kit Lando, the man she loathed with every rhythmic beat of her heart.

Countless times in the past, Kit suggested crazy ideas for Clarence to do to her or just ignorant things to do for enjoyment. Once while getting high, Kit suggested they go pee alongside a co-worker's fence they hated. The men were too high to realize that the fence had an electrical current running through it to keep the burglars out of the co-worker's small farm. After Kit and Clarence was released from a week of recovery at the hospital, the two were forced to work 100 hours of community service to clean up all vandalized buildings in the city. Another time Kit filled Clarence's head with thoughts that June was cheating on him. It was expensive, but June had to pay for four new tires after Clarence slashed away at the old ones in anger. The smudge-ridden glass door slammed after June stepped into the warmth of the complex. She took in a deep breath and inhaled the nauseous smells of urine, popcorn, and sour underarms. The once blue, now stained and gray, carpet felt coarser than the concrete outside. June immediately went for her mailbox and hoped that the Skylark was someone else's.

The diminutive-size apartment was exactly how Clarence wanted it. The sunflower yellow and white kitchen was to the right of the door whereas the living/dining/multipurpose room was to the left. Five unmatched pieces of what Clarence called furniture rested in the multipurpose room. A 25-inch television sat on a blue plastic end table near the window, while the partially torn green chair sat perpendicular to the idiot box, yet it faced the screen. The plaid black and red couch boasted the stitched-in Chicago Bull emblem into the back, as it looked upon the front of the TV. An oak coffee table became the footstool, which sat in between the couch and the television. A large halogen lamp leaned in the corner to radiate the room with light.

Clarence lounged on the couch and absorbed the uplifting smoke stemming from the marijuana stick he held between his oily fingers. He released the smoke as slow as possible while passing the weed to Kit who sat in the chair.

"Man, you need to get with it," Kit said with his voice squeaking. He took a puff himself. His white muscle shirt and faded jeans showed his slim yet ropy muscles from loading and unloading trucks at the J.C.Penney catalog center. He passed the blunt to Clarence who took another puff and thought about their present topic of him possibly leaving June.

“You’re right, man, I think she’s back to that whoring,” said Clarence. His idea of exotic dancers was that they prostituted themselves as if it were part of their job description. In reality, most did not sleep with clients, and would use the money gained from dancing to help with schooling or pay bills. However, the few who did sleep with their clients brought on the stereotype that all strippers were mindless whores.

“What do you think I should do?” Clarence asked. He sat on the couch and stared at the lightly decorated ceiling. The white base color had a hint of powder blue streaking through it, bringing on thoughts of clouds on a bright sunny Memorial Day afternoon.

Kit coughed and studied the blunt between Clarence’s fingers. He wanted another puff but his actions were slowed by the previous inhalation. Kit chuckled to himself as hunger began to strike. This brought up memories of visiting his grandmother’s home in the deep red hills of Georgia. She was his only connection with the fact that Kit was a black man. Kit believed he resembled that of a white guy with pale skin and had straight brown hair as proof. He dyed the ends of his hair blond simply because of the belief that it made him look sexy. Even the pointed nose and thin lips made many believe he was fully white. Kit never corrected anyone who made that mistake, but just smiled and took pride.

“Kit, Kit, I asked you a question,” Clarence said.

Kit shook his head and focused on his best friend. “What was it again?”

“What do you think I should do about,” Clarence paused for a second and passed the weed to Kit, “about my relationship with June? I’m tired of this...this-I don’t know.”

“Leave her,” Kit said while inhaling the last of that piece. His hunger began to consume his body as he tossed the bit of weed in a trashcan.

“I think, no. I love her.”

Kit laughed and leaned forward slowly.

“What’s so funny?” Clarence asked. He was hurt by his friend’s sudden burst of humor.

“You’re high, man,” Kit said. He leaned back in the chair and could not control the grin on his face. “You always get emotional when you’re high. Leave her.”

“Naw, this is for real. I remember when I first saw her at, at...”

“The Platinum Palace,” Kit answered for Clarence.

“Yea, where she works. And I approached her with my khakis and some type of blue shirt and the tips of my hair used to lie on my back. She liked that outfit.”

Kit noticed that Clarence’s grungy blond hair hung just above his broad shoulders.

“Clarence, I know this story. You talk to her about the weather, she thinks it’s corny, ya’ll laugh. A week later of your untiring persistence you get that number, six months later you’re living together.”

“And now three years, we’re still together, in spite of her weird changing attitudes.” Clarence rested into the couch with his arms folded as if he had just proved his case for why he loved June.

“She’s loco, man,” Kit said humorously Clarence’s head snapped over in Kit’s direction with a wrinkled brow and flushed red skin.

“June has been visiting a shrink for years now. I’m speaking as your best friend since high school. You need to leave her. Besides she’s changed ya.” Kit’s stomach growled but he ignored it.

Clarence blew out a sigh and snatched up the remote control from the coffee table. “No, she hasn’t.” He pressed the power button and flipped through the stations until an infomercial came on. “I’m still the same old me.”

“No, you’re not.” Kit’s attention was off his friend onto the infomercial spewing from the television. He looked over at the grill-a-chicken and could not believe how good the food looked. “Remember when we used to go hunting for chicks, bring them back to your place. Make out and then send them back home.”

“Cause we don’t love them hoes,” they sang in unison. Clarence laughed and sighed.

“You’re right,” Clarence said and shook his head in disbelief. “I have changed, a little.”

“It’s not your fault; she got you hooked with her whoredom powers.”

“There’s no such thing.” Clarence laughed and continued staring at the ad on television. A minute passed when Clarence stood to put some old pineapple-topped pizza slices in the microwave for himself and Kit. After the ring of the microwave, he went to the couch and handed Kit his three slices while he ate his own. Both were so into devouring their food that neither heard the slight jingle of keys right outside the door.

June walked into the apartment and saw Clarence with his friend consuming the last of the pizza. She could tell by the stench of marijuana that both had been smoking. June fanned the cloud of illegal smoke away from her face and blew out a soft sigh. She abhorred drugs and disliked alcohol.

“Hi, Clarence honey,” June said. She dropped her purse on the floor, skipped to the couch, and hugged her boyfriend. June looked over at Kit who rocked nervously in the chair while wearing a crooked smile. He stopped and opened his arms towards her for a sarcastic hug. June flicked him off and sashayed into the kitchen.

“Right back at ya, babe,” Kit said. He laughed and Clarence licked his teeth from the leftover pizza sauce. June stood on the linoleum-floored kitchen and got herself some 2% milk; her semi-lactose intolerant body could not handle the other types. She drank it while looking over at the two men

flipping through the channels on late night television. Her eyes trailed off to the emptiness of the room. June hated how bare the living room looked and wished she could do more.

“Honey, would you like to go out tonight?” June said. She wiped her mouth of the milk and set the glass cup in the sink. “My treat.” She had hoped for a yes and him kicking Kit out the apartment. Who knows, a little power of sex before they began their late night evening as they had done years ago when they were a new couple. For Clarence’s wretched personality, his best attribute was his amazing stamina in bed. June wondered if that was the reason why she put up with his usual intolerable behavior.

“You got that money from whorin’ again?” Clarence asked. June blew out a sigh knowing that Kit had filled his head with something.

“It’s not whoring, I dance.” June walked from the kitchen and sat on Clarence’s lap. She rubbed his chest, which still pulsated with definition from his high school weight training days from the basketball team. The sixfoot-four man consistently worked out so he could lead his team to a division championship. He loved the game but did not think to pursue it as a career while Kit loved the game of baseball and planned to go pro. However, Kit’s baseball dreams of playing in the MLB ended after a fight at a nightclub tore his knee ligaments beyond playable repair.

Kit noticed a piece of lint on June’s leg and rubbed it off. June thought Kit was trying to get fresh with her as he had in the past when Clarence was not around and kicked him in the leg.

“Hands off, bastard,” she yelled.

“Why you gotta be mean to my friends?” Clarence exclaimed. Before she could answer, he shoved his girlfriend off his lap and June bounced her head against the edge of the coffee table. The dancer rolled over on the ground and held her throbbing head so the pain could subside. June looked up to see Kit holding his leg while Clarence had his arms folded with disgust.

“I mean you so nice to your customers,” Clarence said. With a raised eyebrow and a reddened face, Clarence glared at June for a response.

“You used to be one of those customers,” Juniper retorted. She got off the floor and walked past the two men until Clarence grabbed her wrist and flung her back to the blue-carpeted floor. June’s back met the coffee table knocking the wind out of her.

“I’m not finished,” Clarence yelled and twisted June’s wrist while she tried to act as if she were not paying attention. Nevertheless, the whispers, which she knew all too well, were surfacing. The whispers, as she referred to them, had always been there and were nothing new but she had decent control over them while she was around Clarence. One of the ‘whispers’ would be trouble if allowed access to June’s abusive boyfriend. This one made the most noise and began to make its presence known, regardless of the outcome towards Clarence and Kit.