

Conversation Pieces
Volume 45

Back, Belly, & Side
True Lies and False Tales

by
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To all my loved ones who were, are and will be again. Thanks for spending this lifetime with me. Thanks for pushing, guiding, and uplifting me. And thank you for welcoming me into this wonderful Circle.

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Single Entry

Carnival time come, and I a single entry. I not in any troupe or nothing. I just parading in me costume, all by meself. Everybody asking me what song dat is and where me music coming from. I tell dem I write de song, which is true, and it coming from a iPod and dese liddle speakers ringing me North and South Poles, which not true. I projecting de song from me core, but dey ain't need to know dat.

De sun hot, just like I like it, and no clouds dressing de sky. De crowds of people is like from before, when people didn't used ta be 'fraid of crowds. All de children dem being told ta keep still, but dey can't, from de excitement in de air. Grown folks drinking all kinda rum and eating with dey fingers. Water and ice giving way for free ta keep people from passing out in de heat. De music blasting, bumping, blaring so as ta make de ground shake. Heart and hips can't help but keep de beat, de groove growing to encompass all a dem like wet cover water.

It start ta happen when I finish in Post Office Square. Dat's de big demonstration place. You balance you high wid you sober and do you best dance dere. Try ta remember you routine if you have one. Impress de judges and give people a good show. Make de camera dem like

you so de people at home could feel like dey dere bamboushaying wid you.

Before Post Office Square is de start of Main Street where it have de old warehouses, which make inta expensive stores lining both sides of de narrow street. It hard for some of de bands and costumes to pass through cause it so narrow. But I like it cause it intensify de sounds and all de colors feel like hot pepper in you eye, so bright. But den when you pass out inta de Square de vibes change, because it so big, like swimming from a river inta de clean blue sea. I blow up me presence ta fill de whole Square.

Single entry me 'rass. I was everybody and everything. I was de whole friggin' planet. De globe I telling you, de world dancing on two feet. Course you couldn't self see me feet. And I no touch de ground.

On Main Street de people push back, push back ta make me pass. Everyone grinding pon one anodda. Is smiles, cheers, and waves. De children hush quiet wid awe, de grown folks rushing me, trying ta touch, ta see if me water wet. Try find de string between de sun and me. De moon and me. Try see how a cloud what seem ta be above Cruz could have de frangipani trees dem dripping in old Tutu. How I bright where de sun reach and dark when I turn 'round. You like it, eh?

When I reach de Square is blow I blow up. Before I was 'round twenty-five feet at me equator, but I was fifty by de time I reach de Judges Stand. Ole Lady Stinking Toe petals drippin from me steada sweat. Jasmine petals drifting in me breeze scenting de whole Square. I have volcanos erupting on de bass and trade winds blowing loud like horns. Earthquakes trembling de drums. Is de earth song, you see. It's de earth. And dey loving me.

De crowd gone wild. Dey never see nothing so. De oceans sloshing and Rock City really rocking. Camera-men zooming in, capturing a single live guana sunning on Coral Bay. Let 'em look dey look. We all here, Every-treerockstoneandflea.

I could dance too, you know. And not only spin, neida, though me bounce ain't so high and does take quite a while. Every now and again I does let off some sparks in de air. Stars burning bright.

Dey loving me and I loving dem too. Feeling all de liddle souls tickling me, tickling me, and I glad.

When time ta move on I shrink down ta fit again. Less people here and dey more watching each odda dan me. I feeling little pains, like a drilling and a cutting and a breaking up. Shrinking faster dan I want, and I can't stop atall. Time I pass Joe's Bar I hardly de size of a big car. By Senior Citizen's Viewing Stand I coulda fit into a black plastic garbage bag. On de way ta de Field de people dem clap and smile, but I could tell dey seen too much ta pay special mind ta me. Is de crowd energy dat let me blow up so. Make all me beautiful intricacies flow just so. Now only a few people studying me, and I dripping and losing form. Mud sliding and whales beaching. I turnoff and head back ta de parking lot ta go have a drink in de Village.

Wellsir, I can't self see de counter. I smaller dan a greedyman's dream and can't make no arms again neida.

People tripping over me, cussing, and is smaller and smaller I getting. Little boy try ta pick me up like I was a toy throw way in a gutter. I make thunder, he ain't hear. De most I could do is get up some lightening, and he drop me. I roll under a table and hunch up next to a leg.

Parade done. Sun gone down. People streaming into de Village for Last Lap. Last drink, last dance, last chance

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ta have big fun. Everybody in a frenzy ta get and ta have.
Nobody ain't see me. I hear dem talking 'bout me, dat
single entry. So pretty. So magical. So sure ta win. And I
deydey, kick under de bar. Huddling in de dark, rum and
hot grease dripping down through me mountains.

Now I Got Girl

Fitting into the costume wasn't hard. Making myself believe I looked sexy as a construction paper and felt sunflower was hard.

Sunshine and flowers ain't my thing. I prefer mood lighting. Strobe lights look good in my hair. My natural setting is behind a bar where I get to use my fast hands and slow smile. I'd rather have bad sex in the back of a raggedy Corolla than get out of bed before three.

But I was doing it for Girl, of course.

I got Girl like this.

About a year ago I was strolling home. The moon was practically at eye level, so I knew it was about ten after four, teetering just a little in my blue leather thigh highs with the seven-inch heels. Mind in the gutter, head in the clouds. And there she was, right in the middle of the sidewalk, like one of those orange danger cones. At first I thought she was a gargoyle. The man I'd just left looked a little like a gargoyle himself, and with my head not right I thought this was his little gargoyle love child. She was so still she coulda been a statue that fell off a building and forgot to break. But her crying hit the kind of high notes that sent arrows straight through my eyeballs.

I looked around to see who was tending to this, but no one was paying her any mind. I'd just passed the regular block watchers, but they'd acted like they didn't see

me. They'd been there all day and all night, so I knew they knew something. Maybe she pitched a fit and is crying it out. Can't have any more candy or whatever girls cry over. I'd just walk on by, minding my own business. I don't like children, the sneaky little beasts, so I kept an eye on her the way you would watch a rabid dog. Nice doggy. Stay back.

I gave her plenty of room. I was practically in the street. Then the little pit bull, and that's exactly what she looked like, with a wide fat face and ears set way up high on her head, springs up from the sidewalk like a splash from a puddle and clamps herself to my hips.

It ain't the first time my hips been clamped. I've had men who use their hands for a living clamp onto me and I can buck 'em off in two shakes, if I want to. But this little crumb-snatcher had a grip like a lug wrench. I tried to stomp her feet with my stilettos, but it wasn't easy. My teeny weeny purse came down on her head at least three, four times, but it only rebounded and hit me in the titties. I really didn't want to touch her at all, who knew what kind of chiggers she had? But I got one hand around the back of her skinny little neck and tried to yank her head off. All that did was force her snotty face off my white sequined hot pants, leaving a shiny string of spit from her lips to my hips.

"What's the matter with you?" I shrieked, "What the fuck you think you doing? Get offa me!"

She looked about four. Braid extensions hanging all down her back. Little orange halter top, pink shorts. Cheap green high-heeled sandals. Very inappropriate. Covered in goose bumps. Wailing like a banshee.

I looked back at the men on the corner. Men I'd just passed. Passed every night. Deadpan faces. Not seeing or hearing a thing.

"Hey, Looney!" I yelled, louder even than the little creature. "Looney, Spite, Michael! Get this thing offa me! Whose is this?"

They all looked at me. But that's all they did. Any other time they'da been all up in the happenin. They got my back. Normally. But this time they acting like I gotta handle the little street urchin by myself. Guess they thought it'd be no problem for me to drop kick the little animal. Or something.

I turned around and tried walking. I couldn't punt her away, her body center was too high and too close. Maybe a roundhouse would send her flying, but probably me too. I was determined to lose the little carpetbagger before I got to my building.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she said, clear as Bobby Blue Bland, then she started bellowing again, along the lines of James Brown.

"So? Go home," I screamed, kinda in the Patti LaBelle hysteria vein.

"I really have to go bad."

By this time I'm outta breath. Felt like I was fighting the devil's granddaughter. I turned the corner of my block, cutting it close to the filthy bricks, hoping to scrape her off, but she swung around my ass like a lasso twirling around a horse's neck.

"Where's your mother?" I asked. These things have mothers don't they? They ain't supposed to be walking around at the crack of dawn accosting people. "Where do you live?"

That's when she chose to shut up. Just whimpered and wiped her nasty face on my dry-clean-only pants. Threw her big head all the way back and looked up at me. Her jaw hung open like it was unhinged. Looked like a bird waiting on a worm.

Oh, God, I thought, suppose the little squirt's lost? All kinds a bad things happen to kids. I barely escaped myself. My grandfather raised me. Well sort of. He took me from my mother and I lived with him. We ate together and he smiled at me at least once a day, so that was okay. Mama's brain didn't sit right in her head, and there were plenty days and nights when I'd hear Grandpa chasing her from around our door. Some folks, be they kin or not, he'd said, just don't mean you no damn good whether they want to or not.

I should turn around and take her straight to the police, I thought.

And there they were. Squad car had rolled up on us quiet as a hearse. Little Bit slid behind me like a shadow, and I clean forgot that I coulda been glad to see them. We both froze, tryna be invisible until they were gone.

"OK. Now," I said, pulling myself together and snatching her around in front of me, "How'd you get here? Where're you supposed to be?"

Again she didn't answer, but she took a few of those shuddering deep breaths, and I knew she was gonna let loose with another set of bawling and all kinds a pain would knock me to my knees. So I did the only thing I could.

Flung myself against the wall of the building, too fast for the little brat. Knocked the wind right out of her.

I took a couple of steps.

“I really gotta go bad,” she said, and almost pulled my pants off as she latched onto me again. “Oh, no, it’s starting to come out!”

“You better not!” I screamed and tried to pry her off like a scab. “Pee in the street! What the fuck do I care?”

“I can’t!” she screamed back, “I’m a lady!”



She started doing the pee-pee dance in the elevator. Worked into the Watusi while I was unlocking my door and was damn near doing the Philly dog by the time I pointed down the hall. She went first.

She was quick. I’ll say that for her. And didn’t leave a mess. Had washed her hands and rinsed off the soap, and didn’t use my towel.

When I came out the kid was standing in the hall looking around at my apartment. Which is nice, even if I say so myself. I got lots of plants and good windows and a “music is my life” stereo. I got a white rug too, which I’m glad she ain’t standing on.

Not that she’s dirty. I can see now that she ain’t dirty. Even those long fake braids, which I think are too grown-up for little girls, not to mention bad for the ego, are fresh and neat. Child got on pink nail polish, I see, as one hand goes up to play with her ear and she shoves her other thumb in her mouth.

I went to the kitchen to get a drink and she followed me, those ridiculous plastic heels making more noise than mine.

Beer in hand I went back to the door and opened it wide.

“Out,” I said, “Go back where you came from. Out! Out!”

She made a move like she was going, but it was just a feint cause she launched herself at me like a torpedo and we both fell to the floor. She was crying and I was cussing.

She didn't know who she was. Not really. Said her name was Chardonnay and her mother's name was Keisha. They used to live in a big building. Not around here. But her mother told her they didn't live there no more, and now she don't know where she live. Phone number was four six two. Last name? Alize. Chardonnay Alize. Uh-huh. Grandmother?

"You mean Annabelle?" she said. "Keisha mother? She don't like me. She don't like Keisha neitha."

"Of course she likes you."

"No she don't," she said, talking around her thumb. "She told me. Told Keisha she shoul da got rid of me. Told Keisha she don't care where we go, just get outta her face."

I had another beer to steel myself for calling the police. I didn't know what else to do. Lost and Found for people is the police, right? So that's who I had to call. I ain't done nothing wrong, what I got to be scared of? Still I was shaking so much I could hardly see the numbers on the stupid little phone. The girl was standing in front of me watching my every move. Her knees were buckling she was so tired. But I refused to tell her to sit down. When I got through to them they didn't give me a hard time, but they didn't give a damn either. Not that I cared, but they supposed to act like it. Said call Administration for Children's Services. They said they'd come and get her, but wouldn't say when. First they wanted to know all about me. What's my middle name? What's my social security number? Where did I work? What's my phone number? My cell phone number? Was I on wel-

fare? Food stamps? Shit wasn't about me! They pissed me off. Child in trouble, they supposed to be on it. Faster than a speeding bullet.

I even called Animal Control. They came right away, but they wouldn't take her. I fell asleep with the phone in my hand. When I woke up Girl was curled up on my lap. I gotta take those damn braids out, I thought. Wait. What?



I, we, went looking for Looney right away. He told me that Keisha dropped Girl off a little before I got there. Said she stopped by, on her way to Greensboro she said, with some guy in a 1966 brown and cream V-8 Thunderbird. Told him Chardonnay was his daughter and he could have her. Looney said it could be true, but hell, this the first he heard of it. He patted her on the head like a puppy. I thought he was gon' scratch her behind the ears.

I, we, went back upstairs. I had rum in my coffee. She had scrambled eggs and milk.

Grandpa had put rum in his coffee when he was talking himself into something, or out of something. When he was finishing something or starting something. When he needed to make the bumpy smoothe. For me, for him, for anyone. He drank a lot of rum.

I take better care of my shoes than some people take of they children.



I ain't never had nothing this long. Now I do all kinds of unimaginable bullshit. I make no-lump Cream of Wheat at six a.m. when I should be just dozing off. We been to every children's museum and craft-making hoodoo bullshit in this city. I seen more storytellers and

puppets than Corolla's, I'll tell you that. And all of them in the daytime. I already knew she could dance and suspected she could sing from the way she wailed that first night, but she's really good with numbers and math. She counts my tips while I make breakfast and understands some, more, less, and share, which other people call fractions, addition, subtraction, and division. She's learning to read too, not just words, but people, which I think is just as important so she doesn't get caught up in other people's mess.

I had to give up beer to buy a good birth certificate to prove the little leech existed. And clothes. Looney helps me with the clothes and such. Girl likes dresses. She the only little girl I know likes dresses. Says she wants to look like a lady so she'll be treated like a lady.

"Little girl lady," I remind her.

"Okay," she says "little girl lady, but still everybody gotta be nice to me."

"Uh-huh," I say.

I only cuss at work now, and I don't hit her at all. Anymore. I got Mrs. Bryan from 12B watching her while I work at the bar. She's the only one I trust.

I still can't stand the little Post-It. Got me all dressed up like a damn sunflower for a kindergarten play. Girl, of course, looks good in her bumble bee costume that I made her, with that big ole smile, while me, my petals are all droopy and my leaves look like I got worms. Next year I'll probably be a fire hydrant. By the time the little wart graduate from college I won't have no dignity at all.