

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPECIAL

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"SEE?"

"See, what?" I asked Fortune, snatching the soggy dollar off the bar and dropping it into the tip jar. I wished it required more effort, more than a drop as if dollar were coin, but instead needed to be finagled — stuffed — into a crowded cash pit. But that wasn't the case. This was the first tip of the night. And it hadn't come from Fortune. Fortune never tipped.

"That white man left you a tip," Fortune said, pointing at the door as if the man he was referring to could be seen through the wall.

"So"

"So, he didn't have to, and he did." Fortune shrugged.

"He left me a dingy-ass dollar on a twenty-dollar tab." I cleaned the spot where the single tipper sat, wetting the wood, folding the rag, wiping it dry. "They'll take whatever they can. He could've left two. Ten percent is at least a tithe, and you know better than most that this place might as well be a church."

"Oh, is that right? And who you 'posed to be, Jesus?" A smile crossed Fortune's face. "Cause I ain't *never* known Jesus to cry about not being praised enough. See, that's what's wrong with us now. We think they owe us something."

Fortune adjusted his weight on the stool, his body curved like the handle of an umbrella, leaning into the walnut like a plant to sunlight. He sat on the same stool he'd been sitting on for well over a decade. The keys that always dangled from his belt loop had scraped scratches into the right half of the seat, a marking, a coded inscription that this stool was reserved for the one and only Frank Fortune. Half-man, half-mash, whole mess.

"Like, just the other day" Fortune continued, "somebody was giving me some bullshit 'bout white people this and that, white people that and this. All this 'bout white people taking over everything. And I'm like, *Taking over what?*" Fortune scowled and patted himself as if he was looking for a lighter in his chest pocket, which he couldn't have been, because he knows it ain't no smoking in my bar, and furthermore, his shirt didn't have a chest pocket.

"Yep, still me." He smirked. "They ain't take over me yet. Some young boy talking this smack. What's his name? You know him, too, 'cause he come in here all the time getting on about how he can barely afford his rent, and it's getting higher and higher, crying pity in his pint glass. See, that's the problem. That's the damn problem right there. We coddled these kids, and now they weak. We done mommy'd they asses to death. Now they don't got the...the ... the gumption to figure some shit out without blaming everybody else for they problems. What's his name?" Fortune ticked tongue to teeth. "Lord. I'll tell you what, getting old ain't no fun, but if you ask me, being young these days is a damn disability in and of itself. Their brains broke. I swear. These young'uns got broke brains thinking somebody coming to take something from them."

"That's not from having broken brains," I shot back. "That's from having broken hearts. A lot of these kids know what it feels like to get a dollar tip on a twenty-dollar tab." I leaned against the counter, folded my arms. "Trust me, I know. Like a four-year education, a fifty-thousand-dollar debt, all for a job that'll barely afford them" — I caught the metaphor — "a couple of fish and a

40 few loaves. Meanwhile, the white kids they go to school with, their daddies own the damn bread factory, and ... you already know they got boats!" I slapped the bar, shook my head, murmured, "And even if they don't, they do. Yeah...a dollar tip."

I turned around to make Fortune another drink. I know better than to respond to him. Usually I just keep his tab open and let him rip till he's ripped, then I ease him off the stool and
45 walk him back to my office — the only place in the bar that don't smell like sixteen-year-old hormone and sixty-year-old hardship — where he can lie down on the couch and sleep it off. Every night. Same thing. But tonight...I don't know. I just couldn't resist the banter. The white guy who had just left, who hadn't really done anything wrong, for some reason was like a shot. Not quite a gunshot, though maybe that too. But I mean a shot as in a swallow of something harsh. An
50 overproofed, overpriced moonshine shoved down my throat, burning all the way to my belly, and now my opinion — which I usually keep to myself — was belching out of me.

"Anyway, this is pint number three," I announced, setting Fortune's drink down in front of him.

His drink — his concoction — is a simple one, and he's the *only* person who drinks it.
55 Kentucky bourbon mixed with a strong Nigerian lager I get sent over here by my wife's folks. Been doing it for years. All kinds of international beer and spirits before it was a thing. Now people call it *craft*. Back in the day, I just called it options. Always felt like the folks in my neighborhood deserved the same things as everybody else. Why not have some Nigerian beer? Or maybe something from Trinidad. I don't know. Let's mix it up — which, by the way, has always been
60 Fortune's favorite thing to do.

"You ain't gotta tell me what number drink it is. I know what the hell number it is. I can count. I can see. I can do all that. It ain't me you need to be checking up on, anyway. I don't care what you say, it's these young folks like that one I was just talkin' 'bout. What's his name? His
65 mama used to run that little fish place 'round the corner. How 'bout that for *boats*. You know the one. The one with no menu. Just come in and say 'Plate' or 'Sandwich' and walk out with a little bit of heaven in a big piece of Styrofoam. You know the joint I'm talkin' 'bout? Right 'round the corner, over where, um, what's in there now? Shit, I don't know. Something else in there now, but that woman who used to own the fish spot — it might've even been called 'Round the Corner — it's her son that I saw the other day going on and on about white people. This fool done grew up with a
70 mama who was a businesswoman, and got the nerve to tell me white people buying up property and making it hard for folks round here. And you know what I told him? I said, 'Maybe if we would've bought more fish plates, you wouldn't be whining like this.' I told him maybe if his mama had them gates up on Sundays, and if they'd figured out how to do breakfast, and stayed open past ten o'clock so that I could slide through there and put some grease over top of the best damn
75 drink on earth, the *African-American Special*" — Fortune lifted his glass, toasted no one, took a big swig, then continued — "maybe we wouldn't be having this stupid-ass conversation."

"And what he say to that?" I asked.

"He said his mama died" Fortune set his glass down. And to that, I said, well... *damn*. Told him I was sorry to hear it. But as soon as I said I was sorry, you know this chump tore right back
80 into the hides of whites, and I had to stop him again and ask him if he took over the business, 'cause it seemed like the natural follow-up."

"And?"

"And he said he did. Then I asked him what the problem was, cause as far as I know, white folks love themselves some fish just as much as we do. And I doubt they were coming in there

85 complaining about not getting their grouper on *ciabatta* bread or whatever the hell it is, so I don't
wanna hear this bullshit about them taking from us. Not now"

Fortune lifted his glass again, took a few more gulps, wiped his mouth, and trapped a burp
behind puckered lips. "Now, if we talkin' 'bout history, then okay, I'll hear you out. Shit, ain't no
90 doubt about that. They've taken and taken from us in the past. I mean, we built this whole damn
place and ain't get a damn thing for it. I'm old enough to remember some of the things these kids
read about in school. Old enough to know what it means to *really* be taken from. My daddy was
murdered by a white man in Georgia, which is how I ended up in DC in the first place. Me and my
mama was on the damn run, chased from the red clay by the white sheets. I was at the march.
Fortune pointed at the bar. At the bottles lined along the wall like holy figurines, backlit for effect.
95 He wasn't actually pointing at the booze, but rather in the direction of the National Mall. Then he
continued, "*And* the riot" He now pointed in the opposite direction.

"I joined the Army and got stationed down in Virginia. I remember not being able to be
served a beer, and if I was, having to worry about who might've done spat in it. I fought in
Vietnam, lost my friends, seen their insides on the outsides of their bodies, seen the life disappear
100 from their eyes like their spirits being sucked down a dark hallway, and came home to a parade, a
protest, and a warm plate at the fucking back door of a restaurant." The one hand that was free,
the one not clutching the glass, was balled into a fist, Fortune digging his fingers into his own
palm, gripping his own hand so tightly that the veins in his wrist pressed lightning patterns through
his skin.

105 And I seen the inside of an iron box too," he stammered on, his eyes wild and distant.
Looking at me but seeing something else. "Served years for some bullshit, trumped-up charge,
wrong place, wrong time, caught up in a drug sweep in the late eighties. Some shit I ain't have
nothing to do with but couldn't afford a lawyer to get out of." And then he was back. I could tell
Fortune was talking to me — to *me* — again. I had seen him take this trip before. "So if you wanna
110 talk about that — *history* — then maybe I'll listen. But that's fact. That's what I *know* is true. That's
real, not a bunch of crying and whining about white people moving into the damn neighborhood. I
owned property here, too, so ... miss me with the nonsense." He pounded back the last bit of his
pint and slammed it down on the bar. "One more 'fore I hit the road." But I knew there was no
road to hit. Not for Fortune. That the house he'd owned around here was gone. Long gone.
115 Foreclosed on after he went to prison. But he had this bar. He had this drink — his drink — the
African-American Special, a four-count antidote that would lead to his inability to venture out into
the street in search of a home that was no longer his. He wore his memory and his anger like a top
hat, and that stool, scraped and cut by keys that led to door- less locks, was his stage. This bar, a
whiskey-soaked slab of wood, his lectern. The old couch in the back, a post-show respite. And me,
120 though often frustrated by the performance, his biggest fan.

I made his final drink and set it down in front of him, the foam from the lager oozing down
the sides of the glass. And as he dipped his top lip in so that the head foam could make a frothy
blond mustache, he mumbled, "White folks these days can't take nothing we don't give 'em."