

Ray Charles Seattle 1974

It doesn't threaten my masculinity to tell you that sometimes I see a woman that just the look of her intimidates the hell out of me. Maybe you're too macho for all that. But sometimes you just spot somebody and feel your hair kind of start to stand up. You're attracted, big time, but then you just have to wonder how you could deal with somebody like that. Men barely deserve being able to touch women anyway, and you get out there on the top end and it's scary.

Especially if she doesn't just look as ravishing as some sort of fan art fantasy, but also feral and dangerous.

And there she was. On a Capitol Hill bus of places. Just sitting there. I managed to keep my eyes off her, sitting right across from me, but couldn't pry my attention off her for a second. Obviously I can't explain why, what I was seeing there, but I'll toss out some generalities.

For one thing she was very, extremely black, like straight out of Africa. And her skin was very smooth, with a sheen almost like a fine coat of oil. But I've seen that before. I was a fashion photographer at the time and had seen some pretty fine black girls in various stages of undress.

But not like her; there was her posture, or poise, or whatever you want to call the quality of sitting on a worn bus seat in a way that made you think she was just coiled for a pounce, every movement with the studied economy of an athlete or killer warrior or beast of prey. If she'd jumped up and ran down a leopard and ate it, I wouldn't have been shocked.

Ate it with those sharp, gleaming teeth. In a face full of ever-changing angles, mostly arranged around those deep-set, huge, always-moving black eyes. Her hair was a fright... bewitching. She was wearing some stuff sort of hanging off her. Doesn't matter because it was just an irrelevant temporary shroud tossed over that glorious body, whose every move revealed new and disturbing shapes and motions.

I guess that's about enough of that. She disturbed the hell out of me. Nobody else on the bus seemed to notice her. I was starting to think I'd run afoul of some juju spell and was in for cosmic trouble.

I wanted to stare at her for a long time. I wanted to see her moving around without the tawdry sham of that clothing mucking up the works. I wanted to reach out and touch her: stroke, weigh, test, investigate, marvel. Get pictures. I swear to God I wasn't even really thinking about anything like getting it on with her, or even trying to ask her out. You don't when you're truly intimidated. Forces of nature, all that.

But we got to talking. How about that? Because she was interested in some records I was carrying. I went up on the Hill to buy them in a specialty jazz shop. She could see Sonny Rollins and asked about them and I showed her. In the course of the conversation, I mentioned that I'd seen Sam Rivers the week before, and he'd done some Rollins covers. Which she found interesting. Lots of people do: I got paid to go hear music and have a drink with great musicians. She was looking at me with some interest and maybe respect. Go figure.

So who had I seen recently? Well, Barry Manilow for one, and Manhattan Transfer and Leo Kottke and the Ice Capades. So I decided to mention the upcoming week, instead. Involving an interview with Tower of Power and an evening with Ray Charles. *That* got her full and undivided. If I'd been a wildebeest and saw some sleek predator like her staring at me like that, I'd have jumped out of my pelt.

Cut to chase: she invited herself to go hear Ray with me. Yes, *she* asked *me* out. And I had two tickets, but no interview slated. I awaited the day like a zit-faced pre-teen who stumbled into a date with the head cheerleader who was rumored to be a vampire. Yow. I didn't tell anybody about it: you have to be careful with that juju stuff.

Except a buddy who owed me big from our dope-dealing days, pursuant to borrowing his Trans-Am rather than pick up Ms. Panther in my battered Econoline van. That's how far I had fallen.

I'm going to say something that I hope doesn't get people jerking knees and yelling and tossing stones. But I don't much care for black women at the intimate level. I have dated my share, and a bit more, and while I can appreciate their unique secondary racial characteristics as a viewer or photographer, up close and personal I'm not nuts about the hair texture, particularly certain hair, if you don't mind a little indelicacy here. Skin texture, nipple color… the little arbitrary things that make up our taste. I've heard people say the same things about redheads. The first black girl I dated broke it off because of some nasty peer pressure about going out with a white guy. From some guys, she told me, who bragged about dating white women. The next black chick in my life, I was the one who got racist pressure. Not a real problem in those days, when I was a dope dealer prone to pulling things out of an underarm holster, sticking them in the mouths of threatening jerks, and cocking the hammer. But still. A shame. Gets complicated, is the thing.

But that had nothing to do with my date with the young woman in question. I didn't even think of her in terms other than One Of A Kind. She showed up and swiveled into the muscle car dressed in a sort of scarlet barrage, the way a streetwalker might have dressed out if they had them in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar. It was like walking into the club with a prairie fire on my arm.

I doubt she intimidated anybody in The Trojan Horse. It was the ritzy, downtown Black club in Seattle. Not the only place like it, just the top end. Seattle isn't as whiteboy all over as one might think. Black hoods, a music scene (produced a bigband funk group called Cold, Bold and Together, for one--the only white guy in the band somebody you might have heard of--the young Kenny Gorlick) and some traditions in a very musical town that always gets musical fame for bands that don't have much to do with the local ambience. Like that Hendrix guy. Mr. Charles was not unfamiliar with the scene--he did a lot of developing in the Jackson Street scene of the forties/fifties in the company of Quincy Jones, who was at Seattle University on scholarship. But anyway, the Horse was the blackest audience of the dozens of venues where I plied my trade. Very swank. Tablecloths. A tuxedo or two on the staff. Like that. I was one of about eight white faces that night, for some reason. I knew two of them to be reviewers for other papers. I gathered their eyes walking in and taking a seat in a curved booth with the Scourge of the Veldt, you bet.

Ordered drinks and checked out the house. She vaporized her drink and got another--the first of many. Did I mention she was a big girl; my height, rangy, and muscular? She could torch off alcohol like a Bunsen burner. And each drink drew her a little closer to me. She was a source of deep, musky heat. I had a feeling I might get implausibly lucky, or unfeasibly demolished at some point in the evening.

I was able to start not thinking about her when the house lights went down and some musicians took the stage. They came on with some coming on music and my date was riveted on the stage. Again with the "run them down and gobble them up" stare. Her hand idly fell on my thigh, an effect somewhat like contact with a bare electrical cable. Neither of us moved, listening to some guys taking their little time in the night to show their thing before they became background. Then the Raylettes vogued out and the crowd whoomped its pleasure.

Not that many performers can get away with having their backup singers named after them, like that. But then they aren't The Genius, are they? That little trio could have replaced the Supremes or The Ronettes or the Chiffons in a hot second. And they were dressed like a million bucks. Next to my date they would have looked like boys. White boys. They knocked me out. My companion was deep in the spell, swaying and/or jolting back and forth on her incredible hind end, washed over by the music. Eyes wide as wonder, nostrils flared, every muscle moving in combo.

Then Ray came out, and the place panicked. You could understand at that moment just who this blind cat with the funny moves was, what he meant. Screw Michael Jackson. Forget Barry White, or Marvin Gaye or Smokey Robinson. Not to mention any given rapper. This man was The Man. He didn't just top soul and R&B charts; he topped pop charts, *country* charts. He'd taken down the world. I was a little white boy in El Paso in the Fifties singing his songs. Singing "Born To Lose" in TAIWAN. World class, is what I'm saying. And he showed it immediately that night in the Trojan Horse. Knocked us all out.

Meanwhile, my date was getting more restive (as she knocked back overpriced drinks). Kind of heaving and wide-eyed and twitching. Won't even try to claim it wasn't turning me on, big time. But I had a bad feeling.

As soon as The Genius sort of bounced off stage, still jived from his last set, she was up and stalking through the place like a hungry panther. I followed her, as much out of curiosity as out of being a gentleman or hoping to get lucky when she imploded. She headed right for the backstage doors and stopped there, demanded that I light up another joint. Which I refused—not just because Seattle wasn't legally pot-friendly in those days, but also because I only had one left and it was in the car. She immediately started hitting up any guy who came in reach: nailing them with her raptor-eye and commanding that they get her off. Pissed off a few highly intimidated female escorts, I'll tell you that.

Getting nowhere with her aggressive copping technique, she latched onto the next guy who came out the door. She wanted to meet Mr. Charles. Right fuckin' now. I guess the word (and description) got back, because this bodyguard-looking guy came out the door, looked her over and very politely asked her if she'd like to come to the green room for a drink. She sashayed through like the Queen of Sheba and he followed her like a footman. But first caught my eye and smiled. I laughed and he shrugged eloquently and passed to the inner sanctum behind her numinous butt and barely-clinging gown of flame.

So I left. The tickets were free from my newspaper, but I'd spent way over a hundred bucks on her drinks. And maybe given her a ride to the Hookup With Destiny. A hookup I couldn't help thinking was kind of ironic, if that's the word. Here's this girl who looks like the ultimate sex Goddess. In spades, if you will. With those bigbore eyes loaded for bear… and the guy she wants to slap it on can't even see it. But he couldn't complain. Certainly not to me.