

Cyril Dabydeen

A Plan is a Plan

Is a funny thing with certain fellas when they see a black man walking down the street with a white chick. Immediately they'd start eyeballing him. Well, I guess that ain't too surprising 'cause most of the time these fellas only grown up seeing black people being by themselves on the islands, with white people as tourists or managers on the sugar-estates, or simply being big executives driving around in fancy cars or motor cycles—all of which they might have read about or seen on TV. So they're marvellin' now when they see a poor-arse black man having a white thing leaning on his shoulder. Another thing, too: many of these same black fellas spending all their time at a disco, trying to pick up a white thing, as if that's all that matters in life as soon as they come to Canada.

I guess it's the same with my friend Roland, who used to be one of the shyest fellas around, spending all his time behind books; then once he started going to the discos...bam! He change! Now he's no longer spending day and night dreaming of becoming a doctor as he uses to do on the island before coming to Canada. Roland's a different cat now: he's spending all the money he has on fancy clothes, looking really well-dressed, looking like the smartest cat around. Sometimes I'd wonder where Roland got all the money from. You see, Roland's full of guile, too. For instance, Roland, upon seeing me, smiles widely as if he was born with that smile on his face; as if, too, to say that money is as easy to come by, as if it comes into a man's pocket like manna from heaven... once a man arrives in Canada! I guess also it's because this time he has his blonde chick leaning on his shoulder while he's looking up at the sky like master an' king all in one!

I figure that Roland's really workin' hard, or how else could he be wearing the fancy three-piece suit he has on now, gallivantin' around with his chick for other fellas to gawk an' stare at and muttering that he, Roland, is one helluva lucky fella; that God really blesses some folks, black as they are!

Roland, seeing me, waves—just a little wave mind you, his head held high up, reserved sort of, like he's one special dude. An' it's all on account o' this chick. I sayin' to myself, Roland, you'll suffer because of her. Wait an' see! But I dare not tell him this to his face 'cause Roland, suave as he looks now, could become really ignorant all of a sudden when island-madness takes over, which is a strange thing, too. I imagine Roland swearing at me—a thing he never uses to do, 'cause he used to be a God-fearing, non-swearing Christian boy back home, thanks to his serious-minded holier-than-thou mother.

But I'm still saying to myself that Roland's in for a hard time all on account o' this chick.

Other fellas looking at Roland and thinking the same thing. I notice a couple of white cats along the street eyeing him now. I guess they're saying that a black fella has no right going out with a white chick—especially one as blonde as she—because the races were never meant to mix—as if that was written in holy ink itself. I guess, too, some fellas think they're still in places in the far south of the US of A where they have folks still running around with white sheets over their heads and joining up with Neo-Nazis an' such like who are interested in the purity of the human race. Which race it is is a different matter, I say!

I also say some fellas don't understand that opposites tend to attract each other. I mean, a really black dude could be stronger attraction for a blonde-white thing 'cause that's how nature works sometimes, if you understand what I'm getting at. Besides, there's something really colourful about it, too (pardon me!). Don't get me wrong: it's Roland I'm really concerned about; after all a friend's a friend—even though Roland now acts as if I'm merely an acquaintance by the way he holds on to the chick and waves.

So as I'm thinking about this, I'm telling myself that Roland must be some sort of a stubborn mule. But what if the fella's really in love? Yeah, I guess it's no sweet island-thing for him now as he uses to say, talking all the time about only going out with women who have the sun deep in their skin and laughter in their bones which maketh the earth to blush. No siree! My boy Roland now prefers a woman white like chalk, whose blood is pure ice by the looks of it, who could lift her head high up in the air, hardly looking down or around—but looking only uppish! What surprises me, too, is how such a classy woman could fall for a fella like Roland. Don't get me wrong—Roland's not an ugly fella (definitely not one o' them orangutangs I see idling around sometimes at Selwynn's Bar). He's a handsome dude, especially now in his fancy suit. But Christ, something else about that blonde makes her different, that puts her in a class all her own.

I guess Roland doesn't realize this yet as he holds on to her, putting his arm about her waist and pulling her tightly to himself while looking all moony-eyed and love-lorn.

Other fellas still looking and talking.

"He sure is the luckiest cat around," I hear one say.

"I wish I was as lucky as he," declares another. "I mean, to have a thing like that leaning on my arm. Imagine him on top of her. It's bound to be like sweet heaven!"

The others laugh.

"Is a black ram tuppung a white ewe!" another burst out. I thought then that this fella has a classical frame of mind, quoting Shakespeare like this as if he's familiar with great learning, even though I know for sure he hasn't been farther than Grade Nine. But we's fellas is like that sometimes—full of surprises, if you know what I mean, 'cause I hearin' these same fellas quoting the Bible and the classics all in the same breath, which men with a string of degrees behind their names don't do. But we's fellas have a special gift when it comes to oratory.

I keep thinking about this as I'm heading for home. I'm thinking, too, that I'd be seeing Roland the next day, and he'd be telling me everything about this chick. Maybe he'd even boast a little. What gall and guile that man now possesseth!

I saying to Roland, "You better be careful, brother."

Roland eyeing me sort of, then smiles; I guess he knows what I'm thinking. He says, "Don't worry, man, Suzan's just a piece o' tail." Well, to tell you the truth, I was surprised to hear talk like this cause I done believe that Roland is madly in love; but now it's as if this chick is nothing better than a hooker or some such.

"It's the truth, man," Roland grins.

"But Roland?"

"Don't worry, man. Suzan is fun, too. I mean, I could do anything I want with her." Roland laughs now, crazy sort of, as if he's in some kind of a fit—you know how some people can laugh so much they can't stop; some even dying like this. Well, Roland is in one of these fits right now. Suddenly I'm afraid for him, cause I'm wondering what a silly way it would be for a man to die, especially a fella like Roland. Just imagine the word getting back to the island: and people wondering how such a healthy fella like Roland passing away on account of laughter and wondering what a strange place this Canada must be.

"You sure, Roland?" I press, serious.

"Yeah, man. Suzan don't mind at all. I mean, she's in for all the fun I could give her."

"But..I mean, Roland...she's different!" I reply, cause right then I'm

thinking what a beautiful woman she is. "She's someone you could fall in love with"—I guess I wasn't sure what I was really saying now.

Roland claps me on the shoulder, as if I was the strange one now, saying that I don't seem to know much about women, even though I'm a few years older than he—and better educated too! I mean, I've been to college right here; it's not like a man being born in Barbados and not being rich enough to afford going to a proper school.

"No, man, I'm not in love with Suzan."

"What about marriage?" I press quietly.

Roland is about to kill himself with laugh. "She isn't the marrying sort, too. Yeah neither of us is the marrying kind," Roland saying, his mouth opening and closing like clothes flapping on the line.

"Really?" I ask, astonished sort of, and looking at Roland as if I'm seeing an entirely different fella. It's incredible how all this is happenin', all this being the result of his meeting this blonde. Christ! I'm having a helluva hard time figuring out Roland now. Just then he says he has to go 'cause he's meeting Suzan for lunch and he doesn't want to be late! In vain I mutter, "Christ, what's the matter, Roland? I mean, you don't have time for me anymore! Remember how we used to play dominoes every afternoon, man!"

Roland laughs and walks off, waving to me now as if I am miles away, saying he'd give me a ring, when I done know that I am the one who will have to do that; to hear him tell me, "Hold on a minute, man. Suzan's here. I guess I'm busy right now, man. Could you call another time..?"

I watching him running off, looking really happy too.

Right then I suspect that Roland's madly in love; but that he's really trying to put me off the trail. It's gotta be! How else could he be acting like this. No siree, I could see through Roland's guile. And at the same time I'm thinking of Brother Selwynn, wondering how he feels about all this, cause he too have Roland's interest at heart; at least that's what he says.

But as I keep thinking about this, I am more suspicious than ever.

So I find m'self heading for Selwynn's Bar on Spadina cause that's where a lot of cats hang out. Selwynn, a big, bearded Jamaican dude, is trying to prove to everyone that black people too could collect money from across the counter.

I see a bunch of other cats there playing dominoes. Sometimes that's all they're doing: playing and talking politics at the same time, especially since the police in Toronto began treating black people badly, killing them off at the wink of an eye while City Hall's suggesting all kinds of solutions to the racial problem. I remember Selwynn once saying that it was all our fault, that the police were merely trying to

closely at the chick, really envying Roland. I guess they're even more eager to discuss racial harmony now, especially when they see this blonde thing smiling as if she was born with a smile on her face, chewing gum and still smiling as if she's a sweet angel from heaven.

I guess I began to feel silly sort of, cause I was the only one disagreeing now. The chick too is looking at me and still smiling and chewing gum, occasionally blowing it at me, which causes the other fellas to laugh. Roland laughs loudest too, cause he's proud as hell.. what for? It's not too hard to tell.

"It's gonna work," says Selwynn now, his eyes bright as neon. The others chorussed approval. And while the chick is still chewing gum and looking around indifferently sort of, Selwynn continues, "Toronto's goin' to be a different place." Roland grins widely as Selwynn continues. "This isn't going to be a black-and-white country. All of us are going to be one people!" I guess Selwynn is echoing a long-forgotten Kitchener or Sparrow calypso now to impress the fellas listening to him cause I know very well how we's people could get off on a thing like a little oratory.

I look at the blonde smiling and then blowing out more gum as she turns to look at Selwynn, causing the other fellas to burst out laughing again. But Roland, being a smart fella—especially when it comes to women—leads his chick out by the arm and walks out, cause he done realize that Selwynn's eyes are canting each time the chick wriggles her endowments—as if for his satisfaction only. I quickly say to m'self, "She's bound to cause trouble, man." But Selwynn's tongue stretches out like a salivating dog as he still looks at the chick and attempts to blow gum himself. "Give poor Roland a chance, man," Selwynn says loudly, then not so loudly while the other Rasta fellas present laugh loudly again.

"But Roland shoulda be sticking to his books—not tryin' to be a playboy in Canada," I counter. "Foolin' around and showin' off like that, wasting his poor mother's hard-earned cash which she's been sending to him ever so often!" In a way I was incensed now.

I left Selwynn's place, cause I couldn't get this thing solved; maybe I'm thinking too much of Roland's welfare, I tell m'self. So I press on, deciding to mind m'own business.

But for days after I still keep thinking about Roland and his girlfriend; I've been thinking, too, of Selwynn's plans, which the more I think about the more I am now beginning to feel would work. Maybe Roland's well on his way to becoming one hell of a successful man. I wasn't sure why I felt this way; I guess I'm thinking positively as I'd heard Roland once say. With this realization I find myself going down Spadina to tell Selwynn that I've had a change of heart.

the entire barrel," he announces sort of. I feel like laughing then, but restrain myself.

Roland looks around foolishly. Suddenly he says, "Yeah, man, it's a personal thing! Suzan and I"—he doesn't say more; he's still bitter.

The others turn around and look at each other. Then at Selwynn, who still keeps insisting that racial mixing is very important. But Roland, as if to himself, adds, "I done say it's a personal thing. See what Suzan done to me: you can't trust a woman! And there's plenty like her—that's what my aunt Edna would say if I were to tell her this.. Yeah, she was right—never trust anyone these days! Not even your best friends." Roland was sounding very bitter now, and I began to feel really sorry for him. His face was deeply drawn, and I figure that maybe he was genuinely in love with her. How could he not be? His mouth was set in a tight grimace next.

Selwynn finally hands him a draft. Roland downs it quickly and looks at the empty glass with a forlornness as if he's a regular alcoholic. I feel even more sorry for him then. I know now he wouldn't agree with any long-term plan Selwynn might have. Or the others might come with for social mixing; I guess he'd feel like this as long as his bitterness continues. I know, too, that if Roland continues to feel sorry for himself it'd be bad for him. In a way I wanted him to laugh, to be his former self—especially when he clapped dominoes with the rest of us.

"It's not the end of the world, Roland," I say to him.

But Roland ignores me, as if he doesn't want my advice. And he's still talking about Suzan running off on him, saying it with more venom each time. Then he walks out of the bar, looking more dejected than ever.

Selwynn rubs his face; I guess now he wasn't thinking seriously of his plan anymore. Maybe he's only thinking about Roland's sad state, just as I.

Selwynn says, "Maybe I too should have warned Roland about her."

"You knew her?" I ask quickly.

Selwynn doesn't answer my question. "It would've have been of no use."

I look at him, wondering about his plan once more, while he mumbles to himself that perhaps Roland and the chick just happen to be different; ah, it was really a personal thing as Roland himself said—even though I felt Roland meant more; how much more it was hard to tell.

Selwynn mutters loudly, "I guess Roland will become a woman-hater now."

"What about racial harmony?" I quickly interpolate.

Selwynn's in no mood to answer this, even though he says, "I guess we just can't give up easily. We just can't, man! After all, we're here to stay!"

I nod. I walk away from Selwynn's Bar, not sure what to think about. I guess, though, more than anything else I know that this wasn't the end of Roland. Then I saw him a week later. Behold! This time I see Roland with another chick. I couldn't believe my eyes. Roland sees me now. Immediately he holds on to her very tightly as if this brunette with him was for keeps. He's smiling, too—once more with gladness of the heart.

I look at her carefully; she seems the bookish type with her glasses and all. She appraises me as I walk up closer and greet Roland with a handshake. She's still looking at me with intelligent eyes, and smiling. Right away I begin thinking once more of Selwynn's plans of racial harmony.

"How do you do?" I mutter to her.

She smiles warmly; I smile also.

Roland grins a little sheepishly, looking unlike when he was with the blonde. Then he takes me aside, privately sort of. "Man, she's been after me a long time," he boasts and teases in the same breath: still with guile.

"But?" as I sense hesitation.

A little nervously now, Roland continues in the same breath, "I won't let her leave me, man. I mean it! Wait an' see. Ask Selwynn, too—"

"Selwynn?"

"Yea, man. It's a plan alright. It's this harmony thing—she's all for it! She's a socio—"

"You mean that?"

"Yes, man. That's what Selwynn says. What's the difference anyway?" he shrugs. "A chick's a chick." I figure Roland was still thinking of his former girl-friend. But just then she turns and looks at him, and Roland's colour fades immediately.

Again I'm thinking of Selwynn; maybe he had a hand in this. But as I look at Roland more keenly, I sense a new purpose in him cause his eyes begin to gleam like a man who's just received salvation. And she's still looking and smiling at me with ease sort of—as if she's beginning to have a strange power over me as well.

I nod to her. Suddenly she seems to understand what's going through my mind. But Roland immediately takes her by the hand and starts walking off. Alone, I start wonderin' about harmony in a different way than before. Without realizin' it I begin walking back to Selwynn's Bar to drink myself a couple of rounds—and to keep thinking.