

Coming Home

by

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Ah, the joys of the midwest! Give me midwest pollution over west coast smog any day.

I sat in the back of a cab looking at the once familiar sights that now looked like a photograph that had been altered since the last time you saw it. People, I was coming home.

I could have received a hero's welcome. I had recently become a semi-super star in the world of rock-soul music. Four hit singles and two top selling CDs had put me at least near the top of the international music world. Instead, I opted to spend a few quiet days at home with my parents.

"Is this it?" the cab driver asked.

I had been so caught up in thought that I hadn't noticed we had arrived at the rather small red brick house where I grew up, and my parents still lived. When I hit big I had wanted to get my folks a big time expensive house, but they balked at the idea. We compromised. The entire house was redecorated, and a laundry room addition was added.

I paid the driver and left the cab, suitcase in hand. I marched to the front door and rang the bell. Oh Yes. My name is Rock Brand. Really it's Roland Brand, but my manager thought Rock Brand sounded like rock band, despite me being a single act.

My mother was about four foot eleven and weighed eighty-five pounds. She didn't come close to looking her age of fifty-two. When I got inside the living room I lifted her off the floor and spun her about.

"Put me down, fool," she laughed. I did. "So how was your flight?"

"It was okay. I'm starting to get used to flying all the time."

We moved into the living room. I sat my suitcase down beside an easy chair.

"Come on in the kitchen. You've got company."

"What? I thought I said not to tell anybody I was coming."

Audrey Hayes had been my first bona fide for real girlfriend. At seventeen she had a cute face, small breasts, and a kind of a stick figure. Now her face was still cute, but her breasts were much fuller, and her hips had rounded out nicely.

I observed all this when she stood up from her seat at the kitchen table. She rushed forward and gave me a smacking kiss on the lips.

"How are you Roland. Or should I say Rock?"

"Roland, baby. This homecoming," I said jokingly. "My gosh you're looking good."

Audrey blushed. “You not so bad looking yourself.”

I found a seat at the table. Audrey sat next to me.

“You two look nice together,” my mother said. “You always did.”

My mother had the bad habit of seeing every woman I dated as a potential daughter-in-law.

“Yeah, uh. What you got in the frig, ma?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“I ask about you every time I see your mother,” Audrey said.

“It’s some cold chicken in here,” said my mother. “I’ll warm it up for you if you want me to.”

“That’s okay. You know I like it cold.”

She placed the dish of chicken before me. Glancing at the clock on the wall, she said:

“Oh my goodness. I done missed part of one of my stories.”

My mother scurried out of the room.

We were silent for awhile as I chomped away at the chicken.

“So how do you like it out in California with all the sunshine and hot women?”

“It’s all right. It’s all right.”

“Why haven’t you asked me about my baby boy?”

“Oh, that’s right. My mother told me you had a baby. Can I come see him?”

“Of course you can. We can walk to my place. It’s funny. I went away from here. And then I came back here and ended up two blocks from where you used to live.”

Audrey had attended a black college in Alabama. In the middle of her junior year she found out she was pregnant.

We went into the living room. My mother had her eyes glued to the television set.

“I’m going to see Audrey’s baby.”

“Good. That’s good,” she said distantly.

I shook my head, smiled, and we left.

Audrey’s place was a small, aging frame house three doors down from the street corner. She rang the doorbell and a girl around fourteen answered.

“How’s the baby?” Audrey asked once we were inside the cluttered living room.

“He’s asleep. Can I go now?”

“Yeah. I’ll give you your money, Monday.”

“Okay.”

The girl went out the door and shot across the yard.

“It’s a nice little place you have,” I said.

“No it’s not. But it’ll do for now. Come on to the bedroom.”

The light brown-skinned curly haired baby was lying on a light blue blanket in a dark green crib.

“He’s cute. He looks a little like you,” I said as enthusiastically as possible.

“He’s got his……I mean thanks. It’s a nice thing to say.”

I looked down at the sleeping baby and tried to forget how being alone with Audrey was affecting me.

“I dug up that old picture,” she said, pointing to the dresser.

It was an 8x10 color photograph of Audrey looking radiant in a pink formal gown, and of me ten pounds thinner, three inches shorter, and three percent uglier due to a mild case of acne.

“Damn. We was two good looking Negroes that night, wasn’t we?”

Audrey smiled, but it quickly faded away. “I bought your albums, Roland. Actually, I won one from a radio contest.”

“Did you like it?”

“You know I did.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“Why did we ever break up?” she asked suddenly.

“I don’t know. You got mad cause I didn’t take you somewhere, I think.”

“That’s funny, I don’t remember either.” She trailed off to the window. “It seems like I mess up everything. I got pregnant. I can’t find work. I’m on welfare. I just don’t know.” Audrey turned and faced me. “Roland. Rock. Would you do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Make love to me. Just this one last time. Please.”

I was glad she was on the other side of the room. It made it easier for me to resist. “I can’t, Audrey.”

“Why not? I’m not good enough for you now.”

“Look uh,” I said slowly. “Nobody knows it yet except my folks. I’m engaged.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” she said semi-hostilely. “But she’s where she is. And I’m here.”

I didn’t know what to tell her. She stared at me with an expression of half anger and half desperation. She moved to the crib, gripping it tightly.

“You done saw this damn baby, now go!”

“Audrey I.”

“Go!”

I went.

When I returned to the house my father’s car was parked out in front. I rang the doorbell. Wilbur Mason, my father’s partner in three laundromats, answered the door and let me in.

“Well, well, well, it’s my main man, Rock.”

He shook my hand vigorously and patted me on the back a couple times.

“What’s shaking, Wilbur?”

“Everything’s cool. Everything’s cool.”

My father was sitting in his favorite overstuffed easy chair, a can of beer in hand. He was a darker, heavier, gray haired version of me. Or I was a lighter, dark haired version of him.

“How’s it going, Dad?” I said.

“Okay, son.”

“How is the laundry biz shaking down?”

“People are still getting their clothes dirty. So it’s going fine. How’s the singing business?”

“People still love good music. So I’m cool.”

I sat on the sofa next to Wilbur.

“Your son here is something else,” Wilbur said. “He’s a star. A shining star.”

After a big dinner I sat around and watched the boob tube with my folks. Finally jet lag got to me and I went to bed early.

I didn’t get up until fifteen after eleven the next morning. A little after Noon my mother called me to the phone. By the look in her eye I knew it was some of her doing.

I recognized the voice immediately. It was Gloria, another old flame. The funny thing about old flames is that they can either heat you up or burn you down.

“How’s it going, F.G?” I asked.

I used to call her that all the time. It stood for Fine Gloria.

“I’m doing okay. Your mother told me about you coming.”

“She’s great at keeping secrets,” I said jokingly.

“I haven’t told anybody. Well, not too many people. Roland, will you have lunch with me today?”

Although I was a little wary, I agreed.

“I would ask you over to the house but my husband is a little jealous. Can you meet me at Leno’s?”

“Okay.”

“Is in an hour okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll seeya.”

Leno’s was located downtown. I had dressed conservatively and wore dark glasses to make me less potentially recognizable.

Leno’s had made its reputation being a no frills diner that served up very good basic food. The place was moderately filled when I walked in. Gloria was sitting at a center table. She was on the tall side, slender, cute and light-skinned with small boobs.

Gloria spotted me and stood. I hugged her and she gave me a smacking kiss on the lips.

We sat down opposite each other at a black wooden table.

“You’re looking good behind those shades.”

“Fine Gloria is still fine,” I replied.

A pretty black waitress came over to take our order.

“I’ll have a fish sandwich, vegetable salad, and a glass of orange juice,” Gloria said.

“Just let me have a piece of pecan pie and a glass of milk.”

“Is that all?” the waitress asked.

“Yeah.”

She wrote the order down. Then that look came into her eye.

“Hey, don’t I know you?”

“Have you ever been to Buffalo?” I quipped.

“You’re Rock Brand, aren’t you?”

“You’re right,” I confessed.

She was all giggles. “I buy your records. Woman Child is my favorite song. Is there anything extra I can get you? To eat I mean.”

“No.” I touched her hand. “But keep it quiet about me being here. I don’t want any hassles while I’m eating.”

“Oh, I understand.”

She walked away with a cut in her strut.

Gloria shook her head and smiled. “It must be great being a singer. All those women coming on to you.”

“Coming on?”

“Yeah, I saw the look in her eye. If I hadn’t been here she would’ve offered you more than something to eat.”

“No kidding. You still have time to leave. But seriously folks, how is teaching the third grade these days?”

“It has its moments. I have a bright class overall. Of course you always have a couple trouble makers. But I manage to keep them in check.”

“I couldn’t be no teacher. I would end up cracking one of them little jokers in the mouth.”

“I’ve thought about it a couple times myself.”

After dinner Gloria suggested we should take a stroll through a city park located across from Geno’s. We reached a wooden bench and sat next to each other.

“I read about you in the fan magazines,” Gloria said. “How do you like dating all those actresses and singers and starlets?”

“A lot of stuff that gets thrown out there isn’t true. It was fun in the beginning. But when push comes to shove, they’re pretty much like any other women. But that’s over with now. I just got engaged.”

Gloria’s face lit up. “That’s wonderful, Roland. Who’s the lucky girl?”

“Connie Spencer,” I said proudly.

“The actress.”

“Yeah,”

“Not bad. Not bad at all.”

Gloria stood and moved to a nearby tree. I followed her. She looked me straight in the eye and said:

“I think I’m pregnant, Roland.”

“No kidding, I always knew you had it in you.”

“Oh shut up, fool,” she exclaimed playfully. “Hey. Look over there.”

When I looked she hit me with a quick kiss on the cheek.

“What was that for?”

“Nothing special. Do you remember the first kiss you gave me?”

“Yeah. I hit you with a sneak attack. And then I backed off because I had heard the story about you throwing hot chocolate on a dude that tried to kiss you.”

Both of us cracked up laughing.

“There he is!” I heard someone yell, “It’s Rock Brand!”

I looked over and saw a group of teenage girls charging after us. I grabbed Gloria by the hand and we dashed for my car. We beat them across the street. I was pulling away by the time they reached the curb.

I insisted on driving Gloria home since she had come by public transportation. She wanted me to let her out a block from where she stayed.

“I don’t blame your husband for being jealous,” I said. “You’re still Fine Gloria.”

Gloria cut her eye at me and then looked away quickly. “My husband beats me. He comes home drunk and beats me.”

Why did I have to bring it up? Why didn’t I just let her get out of the car? Now she sat very still, probably expecting me to lay some heavy words of wisdom on her. Unfortunately, I didn’t have any.

“Do you want to leave him?”

“Well I. Since the baby. Maybe that’ll change him.”

“Yeah, you’ll work it out. I know you will.”

“I’ll try.” Silence for several seconds. “It was nice seeing you again, Roland.”

She mustered up a smile, left the car, and walked out of my life for another undetermined amount of time.

Later that evening, Hector Rice, one of the few friends I had from school that hadn’t blown town, made a stop at my parent’s house. He came to invite me to a party he was throwing. I didn’t feel that up to it, but I knew Hector wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Hector made a damn good living as a graphic artist and computer and video game designer. He lived in a split level two story house. The party was held in his basement, which featured a fully stocked bar and a sixty inch television that was used to play music videos and performance clips of hot dance acts.

As I came down the stairs into the basement I guessed there were about twenty people present, not counting me, Hector, and his wife, Jan. I knew four of the guests from high school. Hector insisted on introducing me to the rest as his old buddy who had made it big in the entertainment business. Most knew who I was. Some appeared to be more impressed than others, especially the babes. I low keyed my reaction. Even though it appeared to be an upscale crowd I didn't want some half- drunk brother hopping mad about me wanting the swipe his woman.

One well-built sister in a low cut lime green dress suggested I should sing a song.

“What do you do?” Hector asked her.

“I'm a social worker.”

“Is anybody asking you to social work at this party?”

“I'm sorry. I was just.”

“Don't worry about it. I'll play one of his CDs.”

Later on I was introduced to a girl that was flying solo. She wasn't exactly beautiful or well built. But she had boobs that looked like two big brown watermelons. We danced a couple times. Once to a party song, and once to a ballad

where we were pressed close together and those babies were stabbing me in the chest. I concluded that they were fake. When the song ended Miss Watermelon said:

“You know what. I never screwed a famous singer before.”

My engagement had become a great test of will power for me. I had a shot at a pair of huge hooters and would have to turn them down. I managed to politely decline the offer.

I went to the downstairs john to take a leak. Somebody knocked on the door just as I was finishing. It turned out to be a tall slender chick.

“Stay here a minute,” she said as she entered the bathroom.

I didn't have the guts to ask her why. A few seconds later she returned carrying a pair of yellow thong panties.

“Sign these for me,” she requested as sweetly as an angel.

She handed me the panties and a felt tip pen. Believe it or not I had experienced stranger requests. When I handed her the signed panties she stuffed them in her purse. She was apparently a Britney and Paris fan.

All in all, I had a good time at the party.

The next morning my mother interrupted a dream I was having in which I was being presented a six foot high Grammy award by a naked hot girl with a sixty inch bust. My mother yelled for me to get up. I said:

“I’d like to thank all the people responsible.”

“What? What are you talking about, Roland?”

I shuffled about in bed and grunted. “Oh. Uh. Uh. Nothing.”

“You better get your behind up and come to church with me.”

“Aw ma. I don’t feel like going.”

“You felt like going to that party last night, didn’t you?”

“No. But I went on any way.”

“Yeah. I thought you done had your fill of them crazy fast girls. But then again, you call yourself wanting to marry one of them.”

“Ma. Why are you so down on Connie when you’ve never met her?”

“I see all them TV stories about them actress gals. If they ain’t getting arrested, or in rehab, they prancing around with no draws on.”

“Ma, that ain’t Connie. How can you judge her without ever meeting her? Will you at least wait that long? Can you do that for a brother?”

My mother shook her head and smiled. “I can do it for a son I love. You. You go ahead and keep your lazy butt in bed. But the next time you’re here, you’re going to church, mister.”

I spent the early part of the afternoon watching a baseball game with my father. As always, his cheapness only allowed him to bet me a dollar on the outcome. When his team fell behind by four runs he went outside to water the lawn.

A couple minutes later the phone rang.

“Hello”

“Hello Roland. Or should I say Rock? Do you know who this is?”

“Yes I do, Crystal. How did you know I was in town?”

“I have a spy system at the airport sometimes.”

“Why did you wait until now to call?”

“I didn’t want to force myself on you. And I. I wasn’t sure I wanted to call you.

Will you come to see me tonight?”

“ No. Uh. I can’t. I’m leaving early tomorrow.”

“What about now?”

“Look Crystal. I.”

“Don’t get all messed up, baby. I have some friends here. I sorta promised them they would get the chance to meet you.”

“Are you sure you’re being straight about all this?”

“Sure baby. You know me.”

“I’ll uh. See if can get there in about a half hour.”

Crystal St. John was an entertainment journalist that had worked for several local newspapers, and written for some national music and entertainment publications. When I was working clubs in the area she saw my act and became a champion in the area of getting my name out there. She interviewed me a couple times and then pow; we were suddenly a couple of sorts. I hadn't known she was separated from her husband. He also had been still very much in her life.

I arrived at Crystal's apartment and discovered she hadn't changed much from the last time I saw her. She was still extremely beautiful. A little on the short side, she had long jet black hair. She had a stylish and classy demeanor, and moved with a sensual flare. Something she knew how to work the max.

"Hi, come on in," she said coolly.

I stepped in and found that we were alone. "What happened to your friends?"

"Oh, something came up and they had to leave. Come sit down. Do you want a drink?"

I felt like taking off. Instead I stayed. "No. No thanks."

Crystal sat on the sofa and crossed her legs. She turned something as simple as that into a near sexual act.

"So. How are things going for you?" she asked.

"Oh. Pretty damn good. And you?"

"Fair. I'm doing fair. I saw you on BET the other week. You were great."

“Thanks.”

We fell silent. I gazed around the room. She had changed the art work she had hanging on the walls.

“We never did talk much, did we? We just hopped into the steamy action. You are my all time best. How did I rank with you?”

“Uh, Uh.”

“Never mind. How’s your love life right now?” Crystal asked.

“It’s good. In fact I’m uh.”

“What?”

“Engaged Crystal. Engaged.”

The revelation caught her off guard. She tried to hide it by twisting away from me. “Oh, you are. To who?”

“Connie Spencer..”

“Oh, the little actress.” Standing, Crystal stepped away from the sofa, her back to me. “I’ve heard some good dirt on her. She’s been a super hooch. Dabbled in drugs. Been into group sex. Not to mention she’s not that good of an actress. And she’s been in mostly crap movies. But I guess it doesn’t matter to you. Since you’re so much in damned love!”

She scampered to the window. I got up and followed her.

“Look Crystal. We had something once. But now.”

“But I blew it,” she added. “I didn’t drop everything and come with you. Well I had a job. And a……a husband. You don’t understand how I was brought up. I thought a marriage should last forever. I couldn’t let go then.”

I was unable to get my mouth to say anything back to her.

Suddenly Crystal whirled around, laughing hysterically. “You bought it, didn’t you? You really thought I still cared. I fooled you, didn’t I?”

With my head down I slowly walked to the door. “Yeah, you fooled me,” I said flatly.

That night, I found myself in bed thinking about the people I had run into during my visit. Audrey, Gloria, Hector, and Crystal. None had behaved like I had expected. I tried to fall asleep, but was finding it hard to do so. Instead, an idea for a song flashed into my mind.

They say you can’t go home

Well maybe that’s true

But you sure won’t find

What you had in mind

Because of the changes that things have gone through

Oh yes

The changes that things have gone through

