

A Hip-Hop Story

5 Flawless lived in a decent home, on a fairly peaceful block, in a rather modest part of Queens, New York. On the steps leading to the house, his sister Erika and her date stood talking. She was nineteen then, beyond beautiful and had a hypnotizing smile; as such, the young man stood mesmerized in her presence. He was dark-tanned, thug in appearance but a kitten at heart. He attempted to be suave and respectful while trying to conceal a growing nature, seeing her through
10 X-ray vision, imagining the firm of every curvature. He spoke with enamored timidity:

"So we're here," he said.

And she responded, as was her custom, in a very quiet, subtle, almost seductive but never forced tone, "Yeah we're here." Simple words seemed so much more palatable coming off of her tongue.

"I had a really good time tonight." "Yeah, I had a really good time as well."

15 "Yeah, yeah, that's really good. 'Cause y'know, I mean I really would like to y'know, maybe we can go out again."

"Yeah, why not. I think I would like that." "Good shit, good shit."

Feeling a bit more confident about himself he stepped in, closing the gap between them. This was the closest that he had been to her all night. He could smell the shampoo in her hair, the engaging
20 scent of her perfume, and look into the brown depths of her eyes. He lost himself there in her presence. He lathered his lips and dreamed of a kiss, hoping that his translucent attempt at seduction was enough of a clue; and that Erika too was of like mind.

As he mulled over his approach a car pulled up to the house, music playing loud; but not enough to wake the neighbors. Flawless was in the passenger seat while his best friend Tommy drove.

25 Tommy was Flawless's peer in both age and taste, of the same build and just a shade lighter than Flawless's brown complexion. They had been friends from freshman year in high school unto manhood. They had been through it all together: Flawless and faithful Tommy, always by his side. Tommy drove but Flawless led. This was never an outright rule. It was a relationship implicitly arranged, subconscious and as natural as an instinct.

30 "Yo, you did your thing tonight, man. I'm mad proud of you," Tommy congratulated his friend.

"Thanks, I really appreciate that."

"So you on your way, man. You won the deal, nothing but the big time for you now," Tommy said with pride and the slight apprehension that he may be losing his friend to the gravity of success.

35 Flawless quickly dissuaded his fears: "It's big time for us. Wherever I go, you coming with me. Like it always been, like it always will be. I mean that, we gon' take over this whole world, change the game."

With his fears eased, Tommy's pride showed through more clearly. "Blessings, god, blessings." His light heart then strayed to the doorstep, where he saw Erika and her date. "Yo, I see that Erika got herself a little boyfriend." Flawless, being so engrossed in his glow from earlier, was ignorant to all
40 things outside of the tinted glass.

"What?" he asked. Tommy then gestured with his head about that which he spoke. Flawless turned his eyes in that direction and became silent.

"So, when are you supposed to meet wit' dem cats and make the deal official?" Tommy spoke but
45 Flawless did not hear him. "Yo, you hearing me, man?"

"What was that?" Flawless reacted, sharing his focus between Tommy and the doorstep.

"I was asking you when you was gonna meet wit' dem cats from Crown and sign the deal?"

"Oh yeah ... I'm supposed to meet with them tomorrow," Flawless said, for a moment letting go of his preoccupation.

50 "You need a ride over there?"

"Yeah, that would be cool. We'll roll over there together."

The two friends then exchanged their goodbyes and their love the way that men do; through the use of a pound, more fervent than a handshake, but not as intimate as a straight hug. Flawless waved goodbye as Tommy drove off. Upon seeing her brother, Erika and her date pulled away slightly; and slightly Erika smiled at him, already intuiting what he was thinking.

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"Michael, you're back," she greeted.

Her date, at seeing Flawless, showed him the respect due to the older brother of a prospective mate; also, being aware of Flawless's gifts on the mic, there was a mix of awe in his tenor. "Yo, what's up, Flawless?" he greeted with outstretched palm. Flawless shook it without any real

60 sincerity. "I seen you do yo' thing over on One-oh-six. You nice, god, you nice."

"Thanks," Flawless replied as lifelessly as his handshake. "So you was in the finals tonight. How did that go?"

"It went all right." Flawless spoke with his attention squarely focused on Erika, seeing her date only as a peripheral annoyance. "Hello, Erika. I see that you're getting in late tonight."

65 "So are you, Michael," she responded in downplayed sarcasm.

"Well, I had a reason." "And so did I."

Noticing that she was neglecting her date, Erika returned her attention. "Yeah, so I had a really nice time tonight. So just give me a call and maybe we can hook up again."

"Yeah. I'll definitely do that."

70 It was time to go and he knew this, though his affections urged him to stay. He thought to give her a customary kiss good night or at least get a hug. However, he looked over at Flawless, who looked back at him as if to say, Why are you still here, and he decided not to. He headed down the steps and toward the gate. Erika opened the door to the house and went inside. Flawless watched her enter and made a motion to do so himself. But then he turned and called to her date. Her date at

75 hearing the call veered back.

"Yo, what's up, Flawless?" he said.

"Yo, listen. You a man, and I'm a man, so I'm gon' keep it as real with you as possible."

"All right."

"I know what you're trying to do. " "What do you mean?"

80 "Nigga, don't play dumb with me. You trying to fuck my sister!"

"Wait, hold up, man. I'm not trying to do nothin'," he reacted. "Oh, so you telling me that you don't wanna fuck my sister? "

"Yo, I'm not saying none of that. I'm just saying that I like her." "So then you do wanna fuck her?"

"Yo ... you, you putt in' words in ma mouth."

85 "Naw. You see I'm not really concerned with the words coming out of your mouth; it's the ones in your thoughts that I'm interested in. See, I know that my sister is a very beautiful girl. And every nigga around here is trying to get a piece of her. But you see my sister is different, she ain't like all them other tricks and hos around here."

"I know that. That's why I like her."

90 "Why, because you wanna be the first one to turn her out?" "Naw, man, that ain't it at all."

"Yeah, that's exactly it. And that shit ain't gon' happen. So you know what? Do yourself a favor and don't call her or come by this house again. Ever!"

"Yo, man, you ain't serious."

95 "Fuck yeah I am. Now I'm done talking. Good night!"

Before her date could get another word in, Flawless turned away and walked inside. Her date was left alone standing at the gate stupefied. He stood there for a moment in disbelief and then walked away.

100 Inside, it was a nice home; a handsome floral-patterned sofa set encircled a wooden unit. Flawless entered the house into the living room to find his mother sleeping on the larger of the two sofas. To the immediate left was the red-carpeted stairway leading to the second level. To the left of the living room was the dining area and straight ahead a door led into the kitchen. As soon as Flawless entered and locked the door behind him, Erika came at him from upstairs.

105 "What did you do, Michael? What did you do?" Erika attacked.

"What are you talking about? " he replied with a smirk.

"You know what. You were out there talking to him, about what?"

"I was just wishing the brother a good night."

"Yeah, right. Mom! Michael scared off another boy again!"

110 Their mother rose groggily, fixing her nightgown beneath her. This was one of her few nights off. Working two jobs at a time at times made sleep a luxury. Her forty-something face looked more drawn and fatigued for it. Being so accustomed to constantly being up, she found it hard to surrender herself to somnolence. Annoyed at her insomnia and half-asleep she said, "Michael, I told you about you and them boys. Leave your sister alone. Let her live her life."

115 Flawless, still playing the game, answered, "Mom, I didn't do anything, I swear it."

"Yeah, well, we'll see," Erika added, then forcefully walked upstairs while looking back at Flawless.

120 Flawless now directed his attention to his mother. He was proud of himself and his night's accomplishment and he wanted his mother to share in his joy. He was twenty-three years old and one year out of college. He hadn't graduated. He left during his junior year due to a lack of passion. He had sat in class after class for over two years crunching numbers, all for the purpose of becoming an accountant. He did this while daydreaming of rhyiming. With his head down alongside his notes of charts and figures, the words flowed through his pen. This was his passion. He played accountant for his mother. It was a respectable profession and the responsible thing to do. However responsibility was seldom liberating. In truth, the only liberating thing about campus life were the biquarterly talents shows; which he always won. His gift of gab had made him a star on campus, though campus celebrity was not his aspiration. His vision was grand and so the city called him back from upstate.

130 He wanted more. He didn't just want to study; he wanted to be studied. When he was in school, he took a far greater interest in literature classes. He learned about all of the greats: from Shakespeare and Wordsworth to Hughes, Angelou and Sanchez. He admired their works while believing that he could do better. It was the ultracompetitive nature of hip-hop to be the best that always ate at him.

135 Far beyond the naked word, the beat was much a part of his consciousness. He was married to the two in a polygamy of rhyme. He loved what he did and saw school as a waste of time. So he left, to his mother's chagrin. In the year since she had made nagging him her daily harangue. He asked for patience and faith. She told him to go back to school. And many times, after he had won battle after battle but still had nothing concrete, he questioned if his decision had been folly. Now that

140 he had the deal he saw that it had not been, and he wanted so much to share his news with his mother, so that she would look at him once again with pride anew.

"So Mom, I got some news for you."

"Yeah, well, Michael, if it's not about you going back to school, I'm not interested. I don't know, boy. You're just sitting here wasting your life and your education."

145 "I'm not wasting my life, Mommy. I'm just trying to live my dream."

"I tell you this, son. If you always do only what you want, you will always be unhappy. Believe you me, go back to school, grow up and take care of your responsibilities. All this rapping nonsense is not going to get you anywhere."

Flawless smiled to himself. The words still stung even though he had already won the deal. His

150 mother's disregard curbed his enthusiasm, so he chose not to share his news, at least not for now.

"Yeah, Mom. I guess it won't."

"Trust me, you're a smart boy, go back to school. Go back to school," she repeated. "Now be a dear and get me a blanket."

Flawless went upstairs, retrieved a blanket from the hall closet and returned and covered his

155 mother. He kissed her forehead, turned off the living room light and headed quietly upstairs. He began to go into his room when he decided to go to Erika and tell her the good news. She would understand. Unlike his mother, Erika had always been supportive of his vision. She listened to him. He shared his thoughts with her. He expressed to her those thoughts that he would not share with Tommy, for the simple fact that men never liked to appear weak among other men;

160 and still those thoughts that he felt were too intimate to share with the other women who came in and out of his life. He felt close to no woman save his sister. Now he couldn't wait to see the expression on her face as he told her the news.

He was about to knock, only to find her door slightly ajar. In her room some distance away he was able to see a full-length mirror. In the mirror's reflection was Erika, half-dressed, in the process of

165 putting on her sleepwear. This caught him by surprise. He stepped back, waited a few moments and then knocked at the door. He looked only for a second; the image lingered for a few moments longer. She had truly grown into a beautiful woman.

"Who is it?" she called from inside. "It's Michael," Flawless answered.

"Okay, come in," she said after a moment.

170 Flawless entered her room. It was much like Erika was, sweetly feminine without being overly girlish, save for the vanity bureau and mirror. As Flawless stepped in he noticed the mirror from before. He turned his head so as to get away from the thought. He saw her now dressed in a matching fuchsia pajama shirt and shorts. He felt weird about what he had seen and almost wanted to leave so as to get away from the image.

175 "What, you came to see if I had any boys up here so that you could run them off?"

"Yeah, I did. You got any hiding under the bed?" Flawless then jokingly went and looked under the bed. For this, Erika swatted him with a pillow.

"Stop playing. I'm upset with you. Why did you do that?" "I just thought that you could do better than him." "Yeah, but you do that with every guy I bring."

180 "Well, I thought that you could do better than all of them." "Yeah, whatever. If I listen to you I would probably end up as a nun."
"That wouldn't be so bad." She hit him again.
"Don't take it out on me because you had a bad night." "That's funny. Who told you that I had a bad night?"

185 With a half-excited expression she asked, "What do you mean you won?"
"Well, maybe I did."
"Don't play with me, Michael. Tell me, did you win or not?" "Yep," Flawless said with contained exuberance.
"You won the contract? You got the deal?" "Yeah I did."

190 She ran and hugged him, closer than he would have liked her to at the time.
"Oh, I'm so happy for you! How come you didn't say anything?"
He broke the hug and stepped back. "Well, I'm telling you now."
"I mean before, why didn't you tell Mom?"
"Well, I was going to but then she got on me about school again, and y'know"

195 "So what, you're not going to tell her?" "No, I am, I am. I'll tell her tomorrow."
"Oh man, you won. You finally got the deal," she repeated. "Finally."

(2003)